

# IN THE LAND OF GOD

A Novel



Adam Jones

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*To my parents, who always encouraged me.*

*To Shanice, Andrew, Micah, Kevin, and everyone else who supported me.*

&

*To Drs. Jeff Kelly Lowenstein & David Alvarez for inspiring me*

*A luta continua*

“If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.”

-Galatians 5:15

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# I

In southern Illinois, near the great artery called the Mississippi and the wooded hideaways of the Ozarks, in a region called Little Egypt, there once lay a town named New Canaan. It's gone now, just a collection of abandoned buildings, overgrown dirt roads, and the decaying reminders of a time when people lived there. It can no longer be found on a map, and it is never mentioned in public records.

In another time, New Canaan did exist, a sanctuary in the wilderness. A small collection of buildings and shops formed its main street; a post office, a library, a church, and a town hall that doubled as the only school along with various shops that served the citizens' basic needs. On the edge of town there was an old bar, probably one of the first things built in New Canaan. It served as a second town hall where the farmers gathered to share information and opinions.

A collection of farms made a patchwork of the surrounding countryside, some of them owned by the descendants of original settlers, and others more recently developed. Shortly after that great national calamity known as the Civil War, a man came to New Canaan looking to make a new life for himself. He had been made a scarred victim of industrialized violence, and once he recovered he decided to leave the city in search of tranquility. He planned on going west and starting a farm, but instead he wound up in New Canaan.

Despite his unluckiness, his family had been very lucky, and as a result he inherited a great deal of money. He laid claim to the unclaimed land around town, established a property business in town, and began selling to anyone choosing to settle in the area. Years passed and his wealth grew, but money doesn't prevent aging. He grew older and

the amount of land he owned shrank. Nobody would remember him after he died. As a young man the thought didn't trouble him much, but with the passage of time it haunted him. There was one piece of land that he wanted to make sure went to the right buyer.

It laid a few miles out of town, and he'd grown attached to it. He had no practical use for it. He didn't hunt, he didn't fish, and he never thought to build on it or farm it. Still, when he spent too much time alone in thought, or when he just needed to get away, he would walk to this land and take refuge there. He spent many afternoons sitting on a fallen log or a stump, basking in the glorious peace of the place, listening to the chirping birds, the hum of insects, and the bubbling creek that ran through the property. It was the kind of place that a good man would live and die for, it deserved more than to be worked until it could produce no more.

As the century ended he sold off most his remaining land except for that one piece he couldn't bring himself to part with. He wrote to his living relatives, asking if they knew anyone interested in buying the land. They responded, saying that a young man from a wealthy family in Chicago might be interested in it, and they had given him the necessary contact information. The old man received a letter shortly thereafter from this potential customer who explained that he was interested in making the purchase. They decided on a date to meet in New Canaan once the winter passed.

In the spring of 1900, there was one of those halcyon days that held the promise of tremendous things to come. Farmers came and went from New Canaan, buying material in preparation for the new sowing season. In a rural community like this, sowing season marked the start of the new year, not some date on a calendar. The old man had risen before dawn so that he could walk out to the

property and be with it one last time. This was the day the young man was coming down from Chicago, and the old man accepted that by the day's end the land might no longer be his.

After returning from the property he cleaned up, and dressed for the meeting; a white shirt, dress pants held up with suspenders, and black, shined shoes. He looked at himself in the mirror, the wrinkles on his face seemed more pronounced, his belly a little larger, and his eyes more tired. At noon, he walked downstairs to the office and sat, watching the clock, waiting for the future to come through the front door. Outside, farmers bustled around buying new tools, making deals, getting things arranged. The old man chuckled, because these men that despised city life acted so similarly to the thing they hated.

The farmers stopped, and there came a low rumbling that rose to a roar outside his office. The old man jumped to his feet and ran outside just in time to see a young man and a young woman drive up to the front of his office. They rode in a black, square machine somewhat like a cross between a tractor and a carriage. The two people were dressed in clean, metropolitan clothing, but modest enough to offset the ruckus they had caused. Still, the farmers eyed them with suspicion. The couple left the machine and walked toward the office, hand-in-hand exuding an air of nervous positivity. They nodded and smiled at the farmers near them, and received glares, scowls, or curt nods in return.

The young man walked to the old man, offering him a genuine smile and extending his hand for a shake.

“You're the man I've been talking to, right?” the young man asked.

The old man shook hands with the young man and returned the smile, “Yes, I am.”

“I'm Abraham,” and pointing to the young woman, “This is my wife, Sarah.” She smiled, and the old man gave

her a light handshake.

“Pleasure to meet the two of you.”

“Y'know, I don't think I ever caught your name in any of the letters, and I'd like to know a man's name before I start doing business with him,” Abraham said without suspicion, but with honest interest in knowing the old man's name.

The old man smiled and laughed a little bit, “I suppose that was rude of me not to tell you who I am. The name's Elijah King, but you can just call me Eli.”

Abraham smiled, “Well, in that case you can just call me Abe.”

Eli opened the office door, “Here, let's all come inside and get out of the sun. I'm sure you'd like to rest after riding down from Chicago in that contraption.”

Abe gave a hearty laugh, “Oh, no, no we didn't come down here on that. We took the train and had it shipped with us, we just drove over from Quincy.”

Eli laughed back, “Oh, of course, that makes a lot more sense.”

The trio walked inside, the shoes' clicking making an echo as they struck the hardwood floor. They walked over to a large, beautiful desk that somehow also possessed a humility. Behind it sat a leather chair that seemed to be more of a throne than a chair. The office smelled of ink, coffee, and pipe smoke along with the faint smell of food. Eli pulled back the chairs in front of the desk so Abe and Sarah could sit. He walked around to the other side of the desk and sat down in the luxurious chair, his hands folded in front of him on top of a pile of papers.

“So! You're interested in buying my last bit of land.”

“Yes, from what you've told me it would be more than enough to have a farm.”

“Are you thinking of farming it?”

“Well, yes, but I want it to be more than a farm. I

want it to be the kind of place I can hand down to my children, and my grandchildren, and God willing my great-grandchildren.”

Eli smiled upon hearing that, “I think this land is exactly what you'd like, and I can already tell I'd be comfortable selling it to you, and that's not a light decision for me. This is my most treasured property.”

Sarah cleared her throat and spoke up, “I don't mean to be...*intrusive*, but if it's so important to you, why not give it to your children?”

Abraham frowned at her, and Eli chuckled, “You may not have noticed, but do you see any pictures of a family?”

Sarah shook her head.

“There's your answer.”

“Oh, I'm sorry...I just assumed, I thought...” Sarah stammered, her face turning red with embarrassment.

Eli laughed, “It's alright. No, when I moved here...” he thought about how to best explain himself without giving away too much information, “Well, a wife and children just weren't part of my plan I suppose.”

Abe and Sarah nodded, and he gave her a pat on the leg.

“Now, are you two thinking of starting a family?” Eli asked.

They perked up and smiled. Abraham said, “Actually, we learned right before we left that we're expecting our first child.”

“That's marvelous!”

Sarah smiled, “Yes, and that only made Abe want to come here even more. He doesn't think the city would be a good place to raise a child, but he forgets we were both raised in the city.”

Abe cleared his throat, “It was different then.”

“Well, I can't argue with you Abe,” Eli said to break the tension, “But how about we all take a look at the

property before we make any agreements?” He glanced at Sarah and gave her a knowing smile, letting her know that he understood her reservations.

“How far is it from town?” Abe asked.

“Not too far, if an old man like me can walk there in a couple hours I'm sure it won't take us long at all to get there in that gadget of yours.”

They walked outside and the town had fallen silent. Most of the farmers had gone back to work their land, and only a few older men sat on porches and stared at the trio emerge from Eli's office. Abraham stopped for a moment. Even in the town there was a natural, calming quiet. The sky not only seemed, but *was*, bluer, clearer, and everything had a purity and simplicity like it had been built just after the world had formed. He walked over to the automobile and helped Sarah and Eli up into their seats, then he started the engine.

It came to life and the whole car surged with energy. Abe turned to Eli and said, “Show me the way.”

Eli pointed to the road that led west out of town and into the country. Abraham nodded and pressed down on the accelerator. The car rumbled down the road, and Sarah placed a hand on her stomach. These new beginnings, the passengers in the car unaware that the life growing in Sarah, and Eli's land already intertwined, set to unfold an inevitable series of events.

## II

Outside of town the land flattened out. A bird could look down and see the patchwork of farms separated by lines of trees, places where men had made the untamed, virgin earth into places of order and productivity. On each farm stood a barn and a house. In the fields, the men and the sons of those men put seeds in the ground. Despite their cleverness, despite their machines, these people still relied on the bounty and mercy of the earth.

One square of land stood out from the rest. There was no brown field in this square, instead a tangle of strong trees, wild flowers, and tall grass dominated everything. The trees provided a haven for the birds, while the brush made a shelter for small animals that hid from the eyes of predators. A creek ran alongside the land's western boundary that connected to a sizable pond on the north side of the property. Just beyond the southern line of trees ran a dirt road, and on the other side of the road laid marshland.

From down the dirt road a cloud of dust rose from the earth accompanied by a roar. Some of the birds flew away, and some of the ground animals fled to their holes, but the courageous animals stayed and watched with curiosity as this beast passed by. A young man with black, short hair, and a trimmed black beard sat in the driver's seat. He had green eyes that radiated with a childish excitement, taking in all the details of this brave new world. Beside him sat a young woman with a soft face, blue eyes, and coils of blonde hair. She too looked at everything around them with a slightly more analytical gaze than a voracious one. Behind the two younger people sat an old man who leaned forward and pointed to a spot on the side of the road.

Abraham maneuvered the car over to a flat spot on



the side of the road, the wheels flattening the tall grass and the tires settling in the mud. Abe killed the engine and jumped out of car. He helped down Sarah first then Eli. The smell of exhaust passed away, and the fresh, intoxicating smell of flowers and dirt replaced it. Abe breathed deep filling his lungs with the natural aromas. A wall of healthy trees before him blocked his view of the clearing beyond them. A narrow well-worked path of grass and trampled dirt passed between two trees.

“I’m guessing that’s from you?” Abraham asked Eli.

“Oh yes, I figured I might as well stick to the same path to get on and off the property. It’s just more convenient that way.”

“Is it all tall grass in there?”

“Mostly tall grass, but there’s a little plot of land where you don’t have to worry about ticks or anything.”

Abraham swept his hand in a half-circle to tell Eli to lead the way. Abe and Sarah followed Eli along the path. Eli touched each tree he passed, his fingertips grazing the tops of the blades of tall grass. Abe helped Sarah navigate the path, ensuring that none of her clothing snagged on vegetation or got caught on a tree branch. The trees gave way to an almost endless sea of yellow-green tall grass, pockets of dark green bushes freckled with berries, and in the middle of it all an island of dirt. Two other tree lines marked the other borders, and on the far edge of the property Abe saw a shimmer of water. Beyond the water a field.

A gentle breeze washed over the clearing making the tall grass roll like waves. The leaves in the trees rustled making a chorus of oak, maple, beech and the odd pine. Eli walked over to the patch of dirt and sat down on a stump. A smile crept onto his lips, and he looked around at the property, then lifted his head to look at the sky. Abe and Sarah stood back, allowing the old man to have his moment. He realized his lapse of attention and jumped off

the stump as if a shock passed through it.

“I'm so sorry about that, folks,” he apologized, dusting off his pants, “This place, it just...” He trailed off and shook his head, “Well, that doesn't excuse me being rude, and to think I didn't even offer it to the young lady with child!”

“It's alright Eli,” Sarah said with a smile, her voice telling of her sincerity.

Abraham knelt down and ran a hand over the dirt, his fingers probing the earth. His hand came back wet, he pinched and rubbed his fingers together. It smelled rich, it felt soft but durable. Perfect for growing.

“It's good soil, isn't it?” Eli said to Abraham, “I've had so many people ask me to sell them this land, but I just couldn't do it.” He around at the trees, the vegetation, and stopped when he faced the adjacent farm. Eli closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Abraham stood up and wiped his hand on his pants, “This place really is special to you isn't it.” He worded it more as a statement of fact than as a question.

Eli opened his eyes and continued to look at the other farm in the distance, “Yes, I suppose it is,” he replied just above a whisper. He turned to Abraham, “I like to think of this place as something...well something holy I guess. Like it's God's own land, and that no matter who owns it someday it'll have to go back to him,” he paused, “Does that make sense to you Abraham?”

Abe considered how to respond to the question. His family had been nominal Christians, in his opinion. They went to church to keep up appearances and maintain business connections, not out of belief in some higher power. His family worshiped one god, but it wasn't the one Eli meant.

“It means you don't know how long you'll have it, so you should treat it like a gift that you'll have to give back someday.”

Eli nodded in approval. He walked back to the stump and sat down.

“I don't know how much longer I'll be around, and I don't really have anyone to inherit this land, or any of my belongings.” He thought for a minute then said, “How much did I say I'd sell this property for?”

“To be honest, I don't recall.” It was true, Abraham couldn't remember the price.

Eli looked at Abraham and Sarah with a thoughtful gaze, he leaned forward on the stump and said, “What if I give this farm to you? I have no use for more money. I have enough to keep me comfortable until my time comes, so I don't want any money from you.”

“What is it you want?” Abe asked trying not to show his suspicion.

“I want to help you build your life here.”

The two men stared at each other, unflinching, trying to figure out if the other one told the truth.

Sarah touched Abraham's arm and whispered, “Abe, let's think about this, it's a big decision for everyone involved. Are you sure this is right for *everyone*?” As she stressed the last word she gently tilted her head toward Eli.

Abe looked at the old man, this lonely old man who just wanted to be included in something besides a simple transaction. A deep wellspring of empathy opened inside Abe and he whispered to Sarah, “I'm sure.”

She didn't say anything in return, but squeezed his arm and stepped back.

Abe walked over to Eli and said, “I'd still like something in writing, just so everything's formalized.”

Eli's face stretched with a warm smile, “Yes, of course, of course we can do that.”

Abe smiled back at him, “Alright then.” He stuck out his hand for a shake, but Eli stood up and wrapped his arms around Abraham instead. Abraham let his hands rest on the back of Eli's shoulders, and as soon as he did Eli

pulled away, deeply embarrassed.

He cleared his throat and looked away, but Abe patted him on the shoulder. In a strange way, this man felt more like a father-figure than his own father had. He didn't cry at the funeral, not out of a show of masculinity, but because he truly couldn't make the tears come. With this old man, this *stranger*, he knew that when the time came he wouldn't be able to stop the tears.

Eli slapped Abe on the arm a couple times and said, "Let's go back to town and get everything done. You two are welcome to stay with me if you're planning on staying overnight."

"We'd appreciate that Eli," Sarah said, "You're the only person we know for miles around."

She hadn't meant for it to be touching, but to Eli it came off as so trusting and faithful that how could he not be moved by the sentiment?

They walked back to the car, repeating the process from when they left town. Abraham climbed back into the driver's seat, overcome with an exhilaration he hadn't felt since he made the decision to come to this town in the middle of nowhere. How could this place, barely mentioned on maps, mostly unknown to the outside world, have such an impact on him? Maybe Eli was right that this land was sanctified touched by something divine, or maybe it was all in his mind. He knew it to be the latter, but wanted to believe the former.

Racing back to New Canaan he placed a hand on Sarah's thigh. She looked over and smiled at him, but her eyes betrayed her nervousness. Abe squeezed her leg, and she placed a hand over her stomach while staring at him. Without realizing it, Abraham had set in motion a series of events that would last for decades and span continents.

### III

After the group returned to town, Eli transferred the deed over to Abraham, making Abe and Sarah the newest residents of New Canaan. At first, Abe and Sarah discussed going back to Chicago for the rest of the summer to get their affairs in order. They planned on returning in the fall and starting work on building the farm.

“You've never built before, have you?” Eli asked Abraham, “Because you don't want to start building in the fall, even down here.”

“So where can we stay?”

“You're welcome to stay with me in town. You two can have my room and I'll sleep downstairs.”

“We couldn't put you out like that,” Sarah protested before Abe could agree. “Besides, we still need to go home and get our things, and get the money to build the farm.”

“Well, if it's money you're worried about I've got that covered. A lot of people around here owe me some favors, so I'm sure I could get our hands on equipment and *some* building materials.”

Sarah mulled it over, and Abe jumped back into the conversation, “That's very kind of you Eli, but Sarah's right: we do need to go home, get our belongings, and say our good byes.”

Eli nodded, understanding, “While you go back to Chicago and take care of all that, I'll go around and call in my debts. To be honest, it's probably best if you two aren't here for that part.”

While Sarah and Abe made the trip back to Chicago, Eli collected tools and lumber from the farmers and business owners of New Canaan. Every conversation went the same, “Why're you helping them two?” and his response was always the same, “Why shouldn't I?”

A week later Abe and Sarah returned to New

Canaan by way of Quincy. They had rented a man and his horse wagon to haul the belongings into town. To Abraham and Sarah, it wasn't much, but to the people in New Canaan it seemed like a king and queen had descended on their small town. How dare they come in here with all their fancy furniture and suitcases full of uppity clothes! When they pulled up in front of Eli's office he stepped outside and said under his breath, "You two sure know how to make an entrance." He noticed the New Canaanites scowling at all of it.

*They're good, hardworking people, but their ignorance is exhausting,* thought Eli.

No matter how much time passed, how many friends he had made, Eli believed the townspeople regarded him with suspicion. They believed he would turn on New Canaan if an opportunity presented itself, and many of them wondered if Abe and Sarah were *that* opportunity.

Abe and the wagon driver hauled the furniture into the office while Eli collected the bags and suitcases. Once they completed that, Eli pulled Abraham aside.

"You two need to be a little more inconspicuous. These people don't take kindly to outsiders, especially not ones as obvious as you two."

Abe pursed his lips and looked out the window at the dusty main street.

"I'm not telling you this to scare you off, but you need to be careful. I have a place for you to put that automobile. If it's left on the street, then someone is gonna wreck it."

Abraham wanted to charge out of the office and start raging against the New Canaanites for their unwarranted hostility. Sarah saw Abe's temper flare and she placed a hand on his arm, "Abe, just listen to Eli."

"Once they get used to you, and start to see you as *people*, then this won't be a problem. It's just better, *for now*, if we all keep to ourselves. I've probably upset my fair

share of people just by helping you.”

Abraham complied and moved the car to the hiding place. Over the next few days Abraham bought more material to build the house and the barn. The shopkeepers didn't know much about this newcomer or his wife, but he paid in cash, and that was better than most of the farmers in New Canaan.

Before dawn, Eli and Abe loaded tools into the car and drove out to the property. First, they dug up the bushes and moved them to plots near the creek. The berries could provide a quick snack, and Abraham intended to get as much out of the farm as possible. Next, Abe and Eli tried to cut the tall grass with scythes, but the work proved harder than it seemed. After a few hours of work the sweat soaked through their clothes and both men gasped for air. Eli sat down on the stump and took out an old pipe, he packed the bowl and lit the tobacco. He cast the match aside, it landed in the grass, and soon a small fire started.

At first, Abe and Eli tried to stop the fire, then realized it could be used to clear most of the land. They dug a dirt perimeter around the tall grass to keep the fire contained, and by late afternoon the fire had consumed most of the worthless vegetation. The field had become a scorched wasteland of dried and burnt grass, and much to Eli's delight his stump had survived.

The two men walked through the smoldering remnants of the field.

“It's good for the soil. Fire can destroy, but it can also renew. This will be good for when we start farming next year.”

After the day's work, they returned to town. Abraham hid the car and walked back to the office. The next day the men rose at dawn and drove back to the property. They cut down the southern line of trees and made a long, high woodpile back from the road.

“Why are we saving this wood?” Abraham asked.

“We can't use it for building.”

Eli chuckled, “You'll want it when it gets colder.” The conversation about saving the wood ended with that statement.

With the land cleared, Abe and Eli cleared a spot for the future house, a place to set the foundation for future generations. An older farmer, one of Eli's friends, helped bring out some of the building supplies. He stood by as Abe and Eli began to build the house, but the simple gesture of using his horse and wagon to haul material helped Abe realize that at least one other New Canaanite accepted him.

As the house grew, so did Sarah. She radiated with a motherly glow as if she had already given birth to a beautiful child. Despite the hard labor of the day, the sight of Sarah bolstered the spirits of Abe and Eli. They ate dinner in Eli's old office, went to their separate places to sleep, and the next day Abe and Eli went back to work on the property. By the end of May Abe and Eli had completed the bulk of the house. It still needed a roof, windows, and paint, but the walls and rafters were up and it resembled a living space. Sarah begged Abe to take her out to see the house, but he declined. He didn't want her to see their new home until they could live in it.

On the ground floor a living room with a flight of stairs leading to the second floor, it waited to be filled with life, the fireplace cold and dark waiting for the winter. In the back of the house a large kitchen waiting to be filled with the smell of good food and the sound of happy meals. Sarah had insisted on a simple outhouse being attached to the house, since she refused to trudge out to one in the middle of the night or the cold. The second floor had four bedrooms each one waiting to be occupied. At the end of June Abe and Eli completed the house. It was a simple, white clapboard farmhouse with a porch on the front. They called on Eli's old friend and he helped move the furniture. For the rest of the summer, and for the rest of their lives,



Abe, Sarah, and Eli would live in this house.

Planting season had passed, but it didn't bother Abraham; the summer had been productive enough already without worrying about a field of crops. Plus, he had his sizable inheritance to fall back on if necessary. Eli advised him not to make such information known. While Abe and Eli had built the house, some of the nearby farmers had stopped by to view the progress. None of them approached the working men, and the working men never stopped to talk to the small audience of farmers. The farmers appreciated the uniformity of the house, it looked like the rest of the farmhouses; nothing ostentatious or arrogant and it didn't come as a challenge to their own homes.

With the house complete, Eli reached out to people he knew to sell his business. They dealt in land-speculation and were happy to buy an outpost in Illinois, especially considering the price Eli offered them. It not only added to Eli's account, but truly finalized his moving in with Abe and Sarah.

In July, some of the farmers came to Abraham and told him they would help him raise a barn. The men worked without speaking, and with the project complete the farmers returned to their own lands. Nevertheless, it had been a diplomatic moment, an initiation that welcomed Abraham and Sarah as fellow New Canaanites. The significance of the act was not lost on Abe or Sarah or Eli. The rest of July and August brought great storms that swept over New Canaan. Harsh rains threatened to make the creek overrun its banks while harsh winds jeopardized the new buildings on the farm. The house groaned under pressure, and on some nights Abe, Sarah, and Eli retreated to the safety of the cellar. They huddled in the dark hoping that the house did not collapse on top of them.

The storms washed away the dead vegetation and ash, exposing clean, fertile ground ripe for farming next season. On the calm nights, Abraham sat on the stump in

the field. He stared at the open land before him believing that it held unfathomable promise. How could he be so lucky to own all of this? Perhaps God *had* blessed him and readied him for success, or perhaps it had just been fortunate circumstances that led him to this place. Sometimes Sarah came outside and sat beside him, basking in the fading light of the day, watching the stars come out one by one.

On the peaceful nights, Eli stood in the backdoor and gazed at the farm on the other side of the pond. How long before he could tell Abraham about it? Abe had found peace, and after all the sweat and dedicated work did he deserve to have his peace shattered? Still, it was only a matter of time before that outside force from beyond the pond came to intrude on the tranquility whether Eli warned of it or not. For the time being he left it alone, allowing Abe and Sarah to enjoy the stillness of the farm. He didn't dare disturb the innocence of the moment. It would be like a gunshot in a church, a kick to a hornets' nest, a trauma for a young couple that didn't deserve it.

## IV

Since they had moved to New Canaan, Abraham and Sarah had planned on returning to Chicago for the birth of their child. Near the end of the harvest season Sarah's belly had grown to the point that she didn't believe it could grow anymore. When Abe wasn't tending to Sarah he was making preparations for the next sowing season. He had bought the necessary equipment, but lacked a crucial part: the seed.

He could have bought from a supplier in town, but he had a better idea. One night after dinner he turned to Eli and said, "How would the people around here feel about selling me seed?"

"That depends. How much are you willing to pay, and how much do you need?"

Abe showed Eli the projections he'd scratched on a piece of paper.

"Well Abe, you need quite a bit, that much is plain to see. That part shouldn't be a problem, most of these farmers have a surplus after the harvest. The real problem is they're going to charge you a lot."

"I'm willing to pay it."

Eli shook his head, "No, you'll pay more for their seed than you would pay the supplier in town. They'll do it out of spite, try to send you a message, it's not financially responsible."

Abe leaned toward Eli, "The money's not an issue, this is about building friendships. I can't have an entire town of people hate me and my family. I thought if I did this, maybe it could build some trust."

Eli leaned back in his chair, "Even so, they're going to sell you the lowest quality seed they have."

"It doesn't matter. I believe that if I show them I'm willing to work with them, then maybe they'll work with

me.”

Eli sighed and handed back the paper to Abe, “I’ll tell you one thing Abe, you’re a Romantic and an optimist. Fine, I’ll write up a list of people. We’ll go out tomorrow and see what happens.”

“Thank you, Eli. Maybe if you come with me it’ll look better.”

Eli smiled, “Well, for most people, but I can think of one person that won’t want to see me.”

“Who’s that?”

“Don’t worry about it. Go, be with Sarah, I’ll write up that list.”

After Abraham left the living room Eli went into the kitchen to begin working on the list. He started with his closest friends in New Canaan, then worked down to acquaintances, then farmers he knew by name, and at the far bottom of the list he wrote one name: Phil South. He considered scratching it out, or tearing off the bottom of the paper, but decided to leave it. Abe needed to learn sooner or later, better this way than through conflict.

Phil South had moved to New Canaan shortly after Eli. He came with a wife, a young son, and a drinking habit. He came from a wealthy family, and unlike Abraham that privileged lifestyle imbued him with a pernicious laziness. When Phil arrived in New Canaan he bought some land from Eli, the same land that Abraham and Sarah now occupied.

The New Canaanites had tried to welcome him into the community, but he rejected them. Their poverty, their ignorance, and their work repulsed him. He came to New Canaan with the hope that with a little money and influence he could build an empire, then employ the locals to do the work *for* him. This never happened. The New Canaanites, despite their lack of education understood disdain and arrogance. Phil rejected them, and in turn they rejected him.

Phil and his family became pariahs, left alone to either die, flee, or make amends.

Phil never swallowed his pride, so the shops in town never worked with him. His tools became rusted and useless, so it became hard to work the field. He knew nothing about farming, so most of his crops died or grew up weak and shriveled. On top of all of that his drinking problem never abated. The only shopkeeper that dealt with him was the owner of the general store, and that was because Phil bought a fifth of whiskey every other day.

All of these things caused Phil to be unsuccessful. He tried to sue Eli, claiming that Eli had sold him fallow land, but given the circumstances nobody believed him. He lost the case and became a laughingstock. At best known as the town drunk, and at worst known as the rich, arrogant city-boy that couldn't have a single, good harvest.

After a while his wife left him. She fled in the night while Phil was in a drunken stupor, at least that's what people said. Nobody knew *exactly* where she went, but there were rumors that she'd gone back to the city to be with some rich suitor. Phil and his son lived together on the farm after that, but once the son turned eighteen he left too, never to return. Most assumed he had run away from home, off to join his mother in the city, but two men knew the truth: the postmaster and Eli.

Any hope for Phil vanished after his son left. He didn't bother growing any crops and in short order the house fell into disrepair. As Phil collapsed, so did the integrity of his property. Weeds sprang up, thorns choked out the other plants, and he rarely left his house except to get food and drink. He took no interest in the outside world, except one summer when he heard the growl of a motor in the distance. Over the next few weeks he peeked out his windows or watched from the backyard as an old man and a young man cleared the land south of him and built a farm.

The next day, Abe and Eli got into the car and began making the rounds. They zoomed from farm to farm, negotiating with each farmer. None of the men seemed receptive, but they couldn't turn up a good deal. It didn't matter to Abraham that the farmers marked up the price, what mattered is he was establishing connections; a name with a face, a human attached to a concept. It didn't hurt that Eli came with him.

By the afternoon, Abraham's car struggled to haul two grown men and the bags of seed in the back. They had to stop back at the farm a few times to unload the seed, refuel, and check on Sarah. Near the end of the day they had only one name left on the list of farmers.

"Looks like Phil South is the last name on the list, who is he?" Abraham asked Eli.

Eli kicked the dirt with a boot and said, "Eh, he's the farmer to the north, just across the pond."

"Let's go talk to him, I've talked to everyone else, might as well get him too."

"We have enough seed Abe, I don't think we need to talk to Phil."

"This isn't about getting more seed, I'd just like to meet him *and* if he's willing to sell then I'm willing to buy."

Abraham walked toward the car and Eli grabbed Abe's arm. "Abraham, are you *sure* you want to meet him?"

Abe studied Eli, wondering what the old man hid from him. "Of course I want to meet him, he's my neighbor. Why *shouldn't* I meet him?"

Eli sighed. "No reason Abe, no reason."

Abraham went inside and told Sarah about meeting with Phil, while Eli paced outside hoping for Abe to change his mind. Abraham returned and noticed Eli's anxiety.

"You ready Eli?"

He nodded and said, "Let's drive there. I don't think

Phil would appreciate us walking across his property.”

Abraham shrugged and prepared the engine. He climbed into the driver’s seat and Eli into the passenger’s seat. They drove away from the farm, across the bridge that spanned the creek, and up the next road. When they arrived at Phil’s farm, the first thing Abraham noticed was how sad everything looked. The farmhouse’s peeling paint and broken window on the second floor. The barn threatened to collapse, its roof sagging and defeated. Rusted tools and farm equipment were scattered around the dusty, weed-infested yard. The field beyond the house contained nothing save dirt and a few withered stalks of dead corn.

“Doesn’t seem to farm much,” Abe stated.

“No, no he doesn’t.” Eli paused, “Park on the road, Abe, it’ll be better if we do.”

Abraham shrugged and agreed. They stepped out of the car and began walking up to the decrepit house.

“We don’t need to do this, Abe.”

“I want to, he’s my neighbor and he deserves to know me.”

Eli shook his head and said no more.

Before they reached the house, the front door swung open. In the doorway stood an old man. His face worn, wrinkled, and tired. His hair was white and patchy, and he squinted his eyes even in the late afternoon light. He appeared weak and ready to collapse like everything else on his property, but he also seemed ready to fight; a beaten dog filled with enough will to hate. The old man leaned against the door frame and scowled at the men approaching the house.

“Who the hell are you and what do you want?” he growled, his words dripping with whiskey.

“Phil, it’s me, Eli,” he responded with caution.

“Your new neighbor, Abe, came with me. He wanted to meet you.”

The two men walked up to the front porch. Abe

extended his hand to Phil, but Phil scowled at the gesture. Abraham let his hand fall to his side and he stepped back.

“Eli...” Phil said, his voice trailing off. His eyes grew tighter as he probed his brain trying to attach a memory to the name.

His eyes widened as he recognized the name, “You rotten, old bastard,” he growled. “What business do you have being on my property? Coming for more of my money?”

“That’s not what we’re here for,” Eli responded, keeping his voice even and calm. “Abraham here just wanted to introduce himself, and see if you wanted to maybe sell him some seed.”

Phil laughed, “You think I’ve got seed to sell *you*? Hell, does it look like I’ve got seed to sell *you*?” His humorless smile vanished, “Besides, I wouldn’t sell to you two anyway.”

Eli glanced at Abraham hoping he kept his mouth shut, and Abe stayed quiet. He raised his eyebrows and folded his arms over his chest.

“So, you wanna be a farmer, city boy?” Phil asked Abraham. “You gonna be a *farmer* like the rest of us?”

“That’s the plan.”

Phil scoffed, “Why the *hell* would you wanna do something as damn stupid as that?”

“I didn’t want to raise a family in a city. I thought it’d be safer, and easier to raise a family in the countryside.”

“*Safer*?” Phil said with an incredulous laugh. “Oh, that’s *funny* city boy!”

Abraham pressed his lips into a thin line and took a sharp breath through his nose.

“You think it’s so bad in the city, so *trying*. Wait until your crops fail, wait until you get a debt you can’t pay off, and wait until these people turn their back on you.” He pointed at Eli, “This one sure will, I’ll tell you that. You



won't last a season down here."

"Is that so?" Abe retorted.

Phil smirked, "I know so, I bet Eli here sold you bad land like he sold me bad land."

"Listen here you lying son of a bitch," Eli snarled. "I didn't sell you bad property. You're just a miserable drunk that was too lazy to make a go of it." Eli looked into the house seeing the filth and piles of garbage, "I'd be surprised if you could wipe your ass on your own. I thank God your wife and son aren't here to see what you've turned into."

"*Don't you dare talk about my family like that!*" Phil screamed. "Don't you *ever* bring up my wife or son!" His voice broke as he spoke the words. "You'd never understand that kind of suffering..."

"You don't have a monopoly on that suffering!" Eli shouted back at him.

Phil roared and hurled himself at Eli. The two men slammed onto the porch, clawing and punching at each other. Phil flailed around, his drunk swings no match for the directed, powerful assault unleashed by Eli. Phil kicked Eli in the stomach and broke free. He scrambled inside, reached around the corner, and grabbed something out of sight. Abe rushed over to help Eli to his feet, and as he did he heard a metallic click from the doorway.

Phil stood in the doorway, pointing a double-barreled shotgun at Abe and Eli. Abraham ducked and tackled Phil throwing him back into the house. The gun dropped to the floor and discharged with a thunderous boom. Both slugs went into the ceiling raining down dust and debris on the two men. Abe landed three quick punches on Phil's face; the young man's strength and adrenaline a vicious combination.

Abraham jumped up while Phil laid on the porch clutching his battered face. He moaned as blood poured through his fingers and he sputtered unintelligible curses.

Abe and Eli ran back to the car, looking over their shoulders every few seconds to see if Phil had regrouped. Abe cranked the engine while Eli stared at the porch, waiting for Phil to get back on his feet.

The old man rolled onto his knees, then slowly stood up.

“Abe, he’s back up!”

The engine roared and Abraham swung into the driver’s seat. He and Eli looked at Phil, and Phil glared back at them. Blood soaked the front of his shirt due to a broken nose and punched out teeth. He stood still, a grimace on his face, allowing the haunting silence to fill the distance between them.

Abraham shifted the car’s gears and drove away from the farm, retreating to the relative safety of his farm, leaving behind a cloud of dust, tire tracks, and the genesis of a future conflict.

When Abe and Eli got back to the farm, Abe helped Eli inside and sat him down at the kitchen table.

“*What happened?* I heard gunshots!” Sarah asked as she entered the kitchen.

“We’re alright, just get us some water and a damp cloth,” Abe responded.

Sarah returned and as Eli collected himself they told her what happened at Phil’s farm.

“Shouldn’t we do something, Abraham?”

“Go to the sheriff?” Eli asked. “No, they don’t get involved with feuds like this. They’d tell us to stay away from him, and him to stay away from us. They’d probably be annoyed that we bothered them over this.”

“He sounds dangerous though!”

Abe shook his head, “I think he’s just a crazy old drunk. Nothing worth being concerned about, right Eli?”

“I think you’re right Abe, but nevertheless it wouldn’t be unwise to take some precautions.”

“What kind of precautions?”

“We’ll put up a fence on the other side of the pond. Nothing too complicated, just a barbed wire fence to let him know he’s not welcome on this property.”

Abraham nodded, “Alright, we’ll go into town tomorrow.”

Later that night, while Abe and Eli sat at the kitchen table having a couple glasses of whiskey Abe confessed to Eli, “I wish we could just kill him and get it over with.”

Eli’s eyes widened. He never knew Abe to be a violent or drastic man, and the confession came as a shock. Rather than chastise Abe he said, “It would be easier, but it wouldn’t be justified.”

“When would it be justified?”

Eli took a drink and considered his response. “Well, if you caught him trespassing on your property I suppose then that wouldn’t raise too many questions.”

Abe nodded, satisfied with the answer.

“But Abraham, listen. It may not seem like it right now, but taking a man’s life, even the life of a man you hate as much as Phil, it’s not a trivial thing. Even if you believe it to be justified and righteous, you still took a man’s life, and *nothing* can bring that man’s life back. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

Eli gave Abraham a sad smile and said, “Have you killed a man?”

“I haven’t.”

“Then you don’t understand.”

The following day, Abraham and Eli went into New Canaan. In the months that had passed since Abe and Sarah’s arrived in town the general attitude toward Abe had changed significantly. None of the farmers or shopkeepers scowled at the first sight of Abraham. Instead, they smiled and nodded or at the very least tipped their hat in greeting.

He had yet to grow anything, which meant he wasn't their complete equal, but they at least saw him as a fellow human being.

They entered the hardware store and it smelled of wood, metal and oil, clean and grounded aromas. An old man sat in a chair holding a newspaper, and the owner stood behind the desk.

"Abe, Eli, what do you need?"

Eli approached the counter, "Do you have fence posts, barbed wire and two pairs of leather gloves?"

"Thinking about getting livestock?"

"No, we're just...making sure a neighbor knows his boundaries."

The owner smirked, "Having problems with Phil South?"

Abe stepped in, "No problems, just some extra security."

"Heh, well I doubt a *fence* is gonna stop him, but if you want to build a fence then I'm happy to sell to you."

The owner gathered the materials and Abraham moved to pay him.

"You don't owe me anything," the owner said. "You're an alright city boy, and I don't wanna see anything happen to you. Phil South has been trouble since he moved here. Maybe if the drunk sumbitch'll think twice about causing trouble if he slices himself trying to get through a fence."

Abraham put his wallet back in his pocket, "I appreciate that."

The owner waved his hand dismissively, "It's not a problem. We have to take care of our own, don't we? Besides, who else will?"

Abe smiled and nodded, "No one, I suppose."

"If you want some extra protection I can sell you one of these," the owner said, motioning to the various polished revolvers in the glass case.

“That’s alright,” Eli said, “I have something already.”

Abraham and Eli left the store and on their way back to the car Abe turned to Eli and asked, “What did you mean back there, about having something already?”

“I’ll explain after we get the fence set up.”

Back at the farm they hauled the wire and posts to the northern edge of the property. Eli held each post while Abe hammered them into the ground. The echoes sounded like gunshots ringing across the empty field. Once they set up the fence posts they unrolled the razor sharp barbed wire with care and attached it to the posts.

In the distance, they saw a figure emerge from Phil’s house. The figure began walking across the open field, stopping every few steps to watch Abraham and Eli, a dark specter haunting their work; watching, observing, and planning his next move against the farm.

“Just let it be, Abe. There’s no point starting trouble if he isn’t causing trouble. He’s just watching us.”

“I don’t trust him.”

“As you shouldn’t, just ignore him. If we don’t bother to notice him then maybe he’ll go away.”

Abe and Eli returned to their work, trying to ignore Phil’s slow advance toward them. With the fence completed it stretched from the west tree line to the east tree line forming a defined northern border.

Phil walked across the tall grass on the other side of the fence and approached them. He leaned on one of the posts and said, “I see you put up a fence, hope it’s not on my property.”

“It isn’t, Phil. It’s a good twenty feet behind the property line. That means you’re on *my* property.”

Phil shifted his weight from one foot to the other, looking past Abe and Eli at the farmhouse.

“Suppose your woman’s pretty much ready to have

your kid.”

“Phil, what the hell do you want?” Eli asked, stopping Phil from goading Abe into conflict. “You don’t want anything to do with us, and we don’t want anything to do with you. So, unless you have a good reason for being here, I suggest you leave.”

Phil laughed and held up his hands in mock surrender. “I didn’t come here to start a fight, I just came to investigate what you two were doing near my property.” He paused then added, “A man’s got the right to do that, don’t he?”

Eli and Abe stared at him without replying.

Phil chuckled, “Are you two still sore about our little altercation yesterday?”

“You attacked Eli and tried to shoot us,” Abe said through clenched teeth.

“Well, you two did barge onto my property and got me all agitated.”

“We came over so I could introduce myself!”

Phil leaned back and said, “Huh, you city boys have a funny way of introducing yourselves.”

He smiled, waiting for Abe’s reaction. The heavy silence begged for a reaction. Someone needed to break the tension.

“Phil, get the hell out of here,” Eli said in a commanding voice.

“What are you gonna do Eli? Take me to court? Or maybe you’ll run away if things get too tough like you done before. What are *you two* gonna do to *me*?”

“I’ll kill you,” Abe said, his eyes fixed on Phil, his left hand gripping the sledgehammer. “If I see you on this land again, I’ll kill you, and I won’t think twice about doing it.”

Phil’s mouth spread into a toothless grin and he squinted his eyes, “Fine, that’s fair.” His grin turned into a scowl and he snarled, “But if I ever see you, or anyone

from this farm on *my land*—”

“Just go, Phil,” Eli said.

Phil stopped talking and gave a slight nod to Abraham and Eli. He turned to walk away then spun around and kicked the nearest fence post. Abe lunged forward, but Eli grabbed his shirt to stop him.

“Better fix that post,” Phil muttered as he walked back to his house.

Abe and Eli watched him leave, repaired the fence post, then walked back to the farmhouse.

## V

After eating lunch, Eli said to Abe, “Go out to the barn and I’ll meet you out there.”

Abe did as instructed and went out to the barn. It still smelled of new wood with the earthy aroma of the dirt faintly accompanying it. He sat down on the ground and leaned back against the wall. It was cool in the barn, and only a little light came in through the loft window and the gap between the barn doors.

A few minutes later the barn door swung open and Eli came inside carrying a small, polished wooden box. On the top of it was an etching of a bald eagle clutching arrows and an olive branch. Eli walked over to Abe and sat down beside him. Eli opened the box and extracted a shiny revolver, the kind issued to a young officer in the Grand Army of the Republic.

Eli held the gun in his hands, examining it, turning it over, opening the chamber and giving it a gentle spin.

“Did I ever tell you I fought in the Civil War?”

Abe shook his head.

“I was a lieutenant in the Army. My parents had money and they knew the right people. They got me a position as an officer and because of that I got one of these.” He held up the revolver for Abe to see it better.

“I never even shot the damn thing. I...ah, got hurt before I could even shoot it.”

Abe cocked his head, “The war ended before you recovered?”

Eli shook his head, “No, I got discharged once I recovered. The Army decided I’d given enough to my country already.”

“How did you get hurt?”

“I got hurt in such a way that it didn’t kill me, but it killed my future.”



Abe thought about what Eli meant, then finally understood. “Oh, that explains why-”

“Why I never married? That’s right.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you, Eli.”

Eli shrugged and said, “Me too. But that’s not why I wanted to talk to you.” He handed the revolver over to Abe, “I wanted to talk to you about giving you this.”

“*What? Why?*”

“I’m not exactly young, Abe, and farming won’t make me any younger. There’s no telling when I’ll go, and I wanted you to have something to protect yourself and your family with. I’ll teach you how to use it, so in case something happens you’ll know what to do.”

Abe let the revolver sit in his hands, he treated it like a holy relic too delicate to be touched.

“It won’t break if you hold it by the grip,” Eli chuckled.

Abe’s fingers curled around the grip and he put his index finger on the trigger. Eli took Abe’s hand and said, “First lesson: don’t put your finger on the trigger unless you intend to pull it.”

Eli stood up and said, “Come with me outside, I’ll show you how to shoot it.”

The two men exited the barn. The sun had already made its way toward the horizon, a clear sign that fall and the winter approached. Storm clouds moved in from the west, the massive thunderheads gray and reaching high into the sky, one last storm for the season. Abe noticed the approaching storm, and despite not being a superstitious man he found it unnerving and symbolic of something. Storms could renew, but they could also destroy, and he wondered if the storm foretold of renewal or destruction.

Eli led Abe over to the line of trees next to the creek. He pulled a knife from his pocket and etched a target into the trunk then stepped back to inspect his work.

“It wouldn’t be good enough at West Point, but it’ll

do for us.”

He walked back over to Abe and took the revolver from him. Eli pulled six shells from his pocket and methodically loaded them into each chamber. He held the gun with two hands, his forearms tensed, but relaxed at the elbow, his feet shoulder width apart. Eli exhaled and squeezed the trigger. The gun’s muzzle erupted with light and smoke and sound. He worked with the recoil allowing his arms to become parallel with his body. A bullet slammed into the tree sending splinters of wood flying in every direction.

He lowered the revolver and handed it over to Abe.

“It may look easy, but if you’ve never fired a gun before it’ll take some getting used to.”

Abe mimicked Eli’s stance, took aim, and fired. The bullet skipped off the side of the tree and hit the tree next to it. He lowered his arms and said, “Helluva kick on this thing.”

“You’ll get used to it. Try again.”

Abraham did as commanded. He took aim and fired again, this time the bullet struck one of the outer rings of the target.

“Better, at least you got inside the target this time.”

Abe fired two more shots, each one closer to the center of the target. The clouds darkened the sky over the farm, and a few errant rain drops hit the leaves at the top of the trees. Abe took aim one last time, centered on the target and pull the trigger. The bullet hit the center of the target causing a spider web of cracks to form. As soon as the noise of the gun dissipated, the sky seemed to return fire with a loud crack of thunder.

Eli inspected the target. “Good shooting for your first time. Now let’s get inside before the storm really hits us.”

They walked back across the open field toward the house, Sarah stood in the back door with both of her hands

on her round belly. She ushered the two men inside and sat them down for dinner. With the dishes washed, and Sarah in the living room, Abe and Eli went out on the porch to enjoy the last storm of the season.

Eli turned to Abe and said, "I never really told you about my life before New Canaan, did I?"

"No, you haven't."

Eli rubbed his cheeks with one hand and said, "I guess I owe it to you to tell you about that."

He leaned back in the chair and began his story. "I grew up in an old mill town in Massachusetts. My parents were wealthy people, claimed they could trace our lineage back to before the Revolution. Phil's parents were..." he paused, mulling over how to continue the story, "They were wealthy people too. Phil and I were best friends. We did everything together, went everywhere together, and shared just about everything."

He sighed before continuing, "The only thing he ever knew was out of bounds was this land, and my fiancée. She and I loved each other, Abe. That's a rare thing in wealthy circles, but we did. We had plans to marry, but the war interrupted us.

My parents thought it would be *fashionable* for me to be an officer in the Army. It'd impress their Abolitionist friends, they'd look like good patriots sending their son off to fight the rebels." Eli shook his head, "They didn't give a hoot in hell about any of that, they just knew it would be good for their business. So, like I said, I became a lieutenant and went off to war."

"What about Phil?"

"He was too young, his family...cared about him. I made it to the front and the first time I saw combat I got hurt, like I told you. Once I recovered and got home, I broke off the engagement. After that, I couldn't stand to be around and have that constant reminder of what I'd been denied. I took my inheritance money and headed west.

On the way, I stopped in New Canaan, and thought it'd be a good place to settle down, so I did. Time passed, I started my business, and Phil contacted me. Said he'd gotten married and wanted to move here, so I told him I'd help him. I'm sure you'd understand my surprise when he showed up his arm around my former fiancée."

Abraham sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"I wanted to stay professional about things, but I just couldn't. I sold him the property, but I refused to help him. As a result, his farm failed. I guess it was my way of getting revenge. When he started telling people I'd sold him bad land that was it. I took him to court and won the case, but by then our friendship had already ended. That was just me twisting the knife a little more."

Abraham nodded and looked down at the floor, listening to the gentle roll of thunder and the raindrops hitting the puddles. "I'm sorry Eli. It's one thing to be betrayed by a stranger, but a good friend? The only thing worse would be a family member."

"I always felt cheated. Like his life was supposed to belong to me, like his son was supposed to be my son, like I was supposed to share my bed with his wife." Tears formed in Eli's eyes. "After his wife left, people said she got sick of Phil and walked out, but I know the truth. When his son left, and didn't come home, people said the same thing. I knew the truth and it damn near killed me."

Abe paused for a moment before asking, "So, what happened to them?"

Eli patted Abe on the knee and said, "I'm sorry Abe, I've dug up enough skeletons tonight. I'd rather not dig up those too."

"I understand...and I finally understand why this land meant so much to you."

"It felt like, if I could just be close to them it would be like I was a part of their life," Eli said in a choked voice.

The two men sat on the porch listening to the rain

and the thunder and watching the flashes of lightning.

Eli turned to Abe and said, “Why did you come to New Canaan?”

“Sarah and I came from wealthy families in Chicago, bankers and industrialists. I never saw it, but I knew how they ruined lives, cared for people like they were just accounts, and how they cared more about their accounts than they cared about people. I knew that I didn’t want to raise my child around that.

I heard there was property for sale down here, and it seemed far enough away from that terrible business. I know it’s not perfect here, Eli, but at least down here I feel like I can be human, and more importantly my child can grow up feeling human. I always felt like an *asset*, and I know Sarah felt the same way. We didn’t want that life anymore, and we didn’t want that for our family.”

“I think you made the right choice coming down here. You, and Sarah, and I, we all grew up in the same kind of environment, and no child deserves that. It may not be easy for them, but it’ll be better for them.”

## VI

The storm continued late into the night and grew in intensity. When Sarah got into bed she winced from the sharp pain that radiated through her abdomen. She hid it well, and dismissed it as a strong kick from the baby. Sometime around midnight she woke up from a peel of thunder and an agonizing pain that shot through her body. She sat up in bed and clutched her stomach.

Abe sat up beside her and asked, "What's wrong?"  
"I don't know."

The lightning flashed and the thunder roared and she groaned.

"I think the baby's coming. My water broke."  
"I'll send Eli for a doctor."

Sarah cried out then caught her breath, "No, the baby's coming *now*. I need you to help me downstairs."

Abe helped Sarah out of bed and onto her feet. Eli appeared in the bedroom doorway.

"What's wrong?"  
"She's having the baby."

Eli's face turned white, then he said, "I'll go downstairs, boil some water, and put down a clean sheet."

He retreated from the doorway, ran down the stairs and into the kitchen. Every few feet Sarah bent over and cried as new pains rippled through her body. They reached the bottom step and Sarah almost collapsed.

She moaned, "Just let me have the baby here."

Abraham hoisted her up and half-dragged her to the kitchen. Eli waited in the kitchen, his sleeves rolled up, and a pot of boiled water next to him. He helped Abe to lie Sarah down on the kitchen floor. She hiked up her dress and spread her legs.

Outside the storm raged on. Wind shook the house and rain lashed at the windows, the force of it threatening

to destroy the house and everyone in it. Sarah's cries matched the thunder, and every time she screamed louder the thunder rose to the challenge. Eli held her hand and wiped her brow while Abe knelt between her feet. Sarah tried to focus on staying calm and leveling out her breathing. She wasn't sure if women had heart attacks during child birth, but she didn't want to risk it.

She looked up and said between breaths, "I didn't think it would happen this soon, is it too soon?"

Abe shook his head and said, "I don't know."

Eli tightened his grip on Sarah's hand and said, "Don't think about that, just focus on having the baby."

She pushed, and pushed, and pushed until she thought she might pass out, then relief washed over as the baby left her. A small creature coughed then began crying. Before she had time to smile fresh pains gripped her body. She dug her fingers into Eli's arm and pushed again, this time unconsciously, followed by another tidal wave of relief. Another miniature cough followed by more crying.

Abe wrapped his two sons in the same blanket, gently wiping their faces with a wet, warm towel. They squalled, their faces contorted and mouths agape. Eli helped Sarah to lay her head down. She wanted to see her children, but she needed the rest. The wind died down, becoming a gentle breeze, the thunder became a dull rumbling in the distance, and the rain a light tapping on the roof.

"Sarah, we have twins," Abe said in a breathless voice. "They're boys, two sons."

Abe, usually not an emotional man, allowed tears to flow down his cheeks and catch in his beard. He held the babies to his chest and wept. Eli came over to him and patted him on the shoulder, and he cried too. He cried out of happiness and sorrow, overjoyed to be here for the birth of these beautiful things, and grieving that they could not be his own sons.

In a weak voice Sarah said, "I want to see them."

Abe brought the two babies to her. She placed them on her chest. Their crying had lowered to a whimper. She placed one on each breast and they suckled. Each boy looked the same: black hair, softness around the eyes like their mother, the rest of their face strong like their father. Despite their sameness, something set them apart. When the first boy came he cried, but it seemed out of a known necessity. When the second boy came he cried, but it seemed to be different than instinct. It seemed like an outpouring of emotion before any human knows emotion, a primordial wail.

"What should we name them?" Abe asked. The question directed at Sarah, but it also included Eli's opinion.

Sarah caressed the first boy's head and said, "Isaac." She switched hands to touch the second boy, but she frowned, "I don't know about him."

"Ishmael," Eli said. Sarah and Abraham looked at him. "Ishmael. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Ishmael." He shrugged, "Just seems appropriate."

Abe and Sarah looked at their sons.

"Isaac...and Ishmael," Abe repeated in a whisper. Sarah smiled and said, "The sons of Abraham: Isaac and Ishmael."



## VII

In the days following the birth of Isaac and Ishmael, Abraham and Sarah wrote letters to the family back in Chicago. They wrote to say they would visit for Thanksgiving, and maybe for Christmas too. Abe and Eli told the other farmers, some of them simply offered congratulations, while others came to the farm bringing food, good will, admiring the babies and praising Sarah. The only farmer never to be told was Phil, but he knew. He watched through his back windows, saw the coming and going of happy people and he knew. The pariah kept away from the joy and purity. He scowled and retreated from the sight. Winter was coming and he had bigger things to concern himself with.

The last, shimmering bits of summer vanished with October. Eli and Abe hauled the bags of seed to the cellar, and made other preparations for the winter.

One day near Thanksgiving Eli came to Abe and said, "You know Abe, if you didn't want to do too much traveling with the boys, you could always stay in Chicago for the duration."

"What would you do?"

"I can stay here, and watch over the place."

Abe nodded, "You could do that." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a train ticket. "Or you could come with us to Chicago."

"No, no I couldn't impose on you like that."

"Well, it'd be more of an imposition for you to stay since I already bought you a ticket," Abe responded with a smile.

Eli took the ticket and held it, "I don't understand why you'd have me come with you. I'm not family."

Abe looked like Eli had struck him, "Eli, you

helped with the delivery of my sons, you helped build my house, you *gave us* this land. Why wouldn't you be family?"

Eli looked down and shrugged.

"You are the closest thing to a good and true grandfather my boys will ever have. I want you to believe that, Eli." Abraham paused then said, "You have become more of a father to me than my own father."

Eli continued staring at his feet, and when he looked up at Abe he said, "Alright Abe, I'll go to Chicago."

At Thanksgiving, they took the train from Quincy to Chicago. Abe and Sarah introduced Eli to the family. The family members regarded him with suspicion and contempt until Abe explained everything Eli had done to help in New Canaan. It's easy to see an idea or a formless group as the enemy, but when you see an individual some of that animosity goes away. It vanishes entirely when that individual *helped* people you care about. If people had more time, then maybe all conflicts could be gradually resolved by just one person doing a handful of good deeds.

When Christmas approached, Abe, Sarah, Eli, and the boys returned to Chicago. This time around the family welcomed Eli like an old uncle or a distant cousin, someone they knew existed, but had never seen. For so many years Eli had lived his life as a satellite that orbited families. He had been involved with so many families in New Canaan, but had never been a part of them; a public fixture, and nothing more. With Abe, Sarah and their relatives he felt a sense of belonging he didn't realize he had missed. He couldn't remember a holiday he hadn't spent alone.

Still, when the festivities ended and he was left with his thoughts, Eli thought about Phil, the other old New Canaanite. Eli, the adopted father and grandfather, with Abraham and Sarah who loved him, and with Isaac and Ishmael who would grow to love him.

Across the pond, across the property line, and across that dead field there was Phil. Alone in his house, filled with bitterness and regrets. It didn't seem fair, but maybe it did? Eli, who had suffered so much, now getting his reward. A modern Job. Sometimes in the middle of the night, Eli would go out the backdoor and stare at Phil's house in the distance, so dark and cold. He never saw smoke rising from the chimney and often wondered if Phil planned on freezing to death.

In the morning, the haunting thoughts left him. He would help Abe chop firewood or tend to some other chore, or he aided Sarah around the house or played with the babies. Eli found himself thinking, not in a morbid or depressed way, but in a matter-of-fact and gracious way: *If this is the end of my life, that would be alright.*

## VIII

Spring came and the sun warmed the earth. Greenery and color returned to the fields and farms around New Canaan. Farmers emerged from their houses like the animals in hibernation. Abe and Eli went out to their own field to break the soil and sow their seeds. For the first few months they waited with anticipation. Then the sprouts burst through the soil and the men rejoiced. It was a small victory in a larger war, and they knew it, but that didn't matter. At dusk, as the light faded the field glowed with the life of the vegetation. The farm seemed to turn into a fantastic realm where the body and the soul of the land seemed not of this world, where good and magical things happened and could happen.

The creek and pond helped bring water to the crops, and the sunlight fed them. Each day the men rose at dawn to tend to this endeavor. As the crops grew higher, so did their spirits. Sarah listened to Abe and Eli talk at night about their expectations at harvest, and their complaints of being tired. On one hand it amused her to hear these two men complain about the hard work. They had never known such labor! On the other hand she admired their energy and loved them for it. They sounded like little boys filled with naivete and optimism before they became hardened and cynical in adulthood.

One morning, Eli rose before Abe and went on a small expedition to find something special, something that could serve as a symbol for the farm. It seemed outdated for a family to have a crest, but the romanticism of the idea compelled him to look for the thing. Once he found it he moved it to the backyard where it could get plenty of sunlight and be seen anytime anyone went to the field for work.

He joined Abe and Sarah for breakfast, and after

that brought Abe outside to see the thing.

“Did you put this here?” Abe asked Eli.

“I did, it seemed appropriate.”

“What kind of tree is it?”

Eli knelt down and said, “It’s an oak tree, a small one, but an oak tree nonetheless.”

“Why did you do this, Eli?”

Eli stood up and said, “The oak tree is powerful and strong. It stands against storms and it means unity. I’m not very religious, but I remember in Genesis, Jacob buries the old gods by an oak tree; renewal, and the start of something new. This oak tree means power, strength, unity, and the burial of the old. It seems appropriate, don’t you think?”

Abe knelt down by the sapling and held the small branches in his hands.

“It does seem appropriate,” he stood up and put a hand on Eli’s shoulder. “Thank you for doing this Eli.”

“It wasn’t all that much trouble, but you’re welcome.”

“I’m not saying it just because of the tree, but for all of this.”

“I did it because I believe in this land. I believe in you, and Sarah, and now your boys too. When I’m gone, you’ll carry on. After you’re gone, your boys will carry on, and their children, and on and on.”

Harvest time approached and a heat wave rolled over New Canaan. As Abe and Eli worked in the field, sweat poured out of their bodies and soaked through their clothing. In the heat of the afternoons they gasped for breath. Sometimes Eli retreated to the house or the barn, taking gulping breaths and drinking all the water handed to him by Sarah. He was a strong man, and a good worker, but the fact remained: he was an older man. He’d spent most his life with a relatively easy job, and the sudden burst of hard labor put a strain on his body.

After the sun went down and the men could work no more, they went inside and ate dinner in silence, too tired to have a conversation. They ingested the food in front of them like threshers; mechanically and without feeling. Their bodies powered down like machinery, and they fell into the kind of sleep that hard-working men know well.

Every night, Eli fell into a deeper sleep, and in the morning he had more trouble waking up. Abe and Sarah had never addressed Eli's mortality. He was like time or the universe; a constant. His death seemed as distant and unfathomable as the end of the world. Despite only knowing him for such a short time, a world without Eli seemed inconceivable.

On the final day of harvest the men worked hard, faster, in the hopes it would be their final day of work, and after it they could rest through the winter. Both men launched into their work in a near frenzied state. They fixated on completion, forgoing longer breaks and never pausing to rest. In a single day they did a few days' worth of work, but despite that they knew their reward would be waking up to less work to be done.

By the afternoon the field laid bare, and the crops were stored in the barn waiting to be brought to market. Both of the men stood in the barn in a daze looking at the fruits of their labor. They said nothing and just stared, allowing their bodies and minds to relax. Eli clapped Abraham on the back and nodded with a faint smile on his lips. Sweat poured down his face and his mouth hung slightly open.

These men had given the earth their labor and hope and desperation to prove themselves, and in turn the earth gave back a bountiful harvest. For two men that had never farmed before, they had done alright. The crops took up much of the barn's space giving it a fresh, verdant smell.

They left the barn after basking in the glory of the

work. Abe had finally mustered up the strength to say, "I've never worked that hard in my entire life."

Eli nodded without responding and kept shambling forward. When they reached the oak tree, Eli fell onto Abe, his face white and small drops of sweat beading on his forehead. Abraham caught him and eased him down to the ground. He dragged him to house and leaned him against the wall.

"Sarah! Get some water!"

Abe pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped off Eli's face. The old man's head lolled and his eyes drooped.

"Must've been in the heat too long," Eli muttered.

"Or you worked yourself too hard."

Sarah came out the back door with a bucket of water and handed it to Abraham. He dunked the handkerchief in the water and rubbed Eli's face with it. Rivers of sweat and water ran down the valleys of his face and dripped onto his shirt.

"We need to get him inside, Abe," Sarah said when she truly saw Eli's condition. "He needs to get out of the heat and lie down."

"I'm fine, just a little tired is all," Eli said ignoring the concern. He motioned to Abe, "Make sure he gets some water too. He'd let himself go thirsty if the rest of the world needed a drink."

"I'll get one after we get you inside." Abe helped Eli to his feet. He went to put Eli's arm around his shoulders, but Eli gently shoved away Abe's arm.

"I can get there on my own, I'm alright, just need to get inside..."

Sarah said, "I'll go make sure his bedroom window is open and that his bed is ready."

Abe nodded, "Thank you Sarah."

She walked through the back door while Abe and Eli followed behind. They stopped in the kitchen so Eli

could lean against the table. He took shallow breaths and closed his eyes as sweat dripped onto the wood surface.

“Will you able to make it up the stairs alright?”

Eli swallowed and said in a hoarse voice, “I can, just make sure you’re behind me if I fall down again.”

He stood up and walked through the living room to the flight of stairs. Halfway up the stairs Eli stopped and placed one hand on the wall and one hand on the railing. Abe rushed up behind him and put his hands on Eli’s shoulders.

“I’m alright, Abe. I just needed to catchy my breath is all.”

He kept going, bent over and using the railing to pull himself along. When he reached the last step he fell forward landing on his hands and knees. Abe jumped up the last few steps and helped Eli to his feet. Sarah stood in the hallway and watched as Eli shuffled toward his bedroom. He walked over to the bedroom Isaac and Ishmael shared. They slept in their cribs, unaware of the tension and grim mortality that hung over them.

“They’ll grow up well, I know they will,” Eli said in a whisper. He turned around to face Abe and Sarah, “Let them see what they can accomplish if they work together, if they love each other. It’d be too awful to let this place go to waste.”

“We will Eli, we’ll raise them right.”

Eli put his hand on Abe’s shoulder and said, “I know you will.” It seemed to be a blessing from Eli, ensuring that the farm continued after his death, after Abe and Sarah’s deaths, and even after the boys’ deaths in the distant future.

When they got to Eli’s room, Abe and Sarah eased Eli onto his bed. He took slow breaths and stared at the ceiling. Sarah stood behind Abe and leaned forward to say, “Should we get the doctor?”

“I don’t need a doctor, I just need rest,” Eli said.



“Don’t worry yourselves getting me a doctor.”

Sarah walked over and knelt at Eli’s bed. “If this is about being weak or not looking like a man-”

Eli waved his hand, “No, no it’s nothing like that. I just want rest is all,” he closed his eyes and continued.

“Getting old wears on a man. It wasn’t the work we did today, but the work of being alive. Breathing, feeling your heart beating, it becomes work on its own. It tires me, and I think I just want to rest.”

He opened his eyes to look at Abe and Sarah. Tears rolled down Sarah’s cheeks, and Abraham clenched his jaw trying to remain strong for his wife. Eli reached out and squeezed Sarah’s hand then Abraham’s hand. He smiled a little and said, “As selfish as it sounds, I’m glad someone’s crying for me. It’s nice to know someone will miss me when I’m gone.”

Sarah walked over to the bed and took hold of Eli’s hand. He smiled at her and placed his other hand on top of her hand. He looked to her and then Abe and said, “I didn’t think I’d be this lucky.”

Sarah let herself go and flung her arms around Eli, openly sobbing. Eli patted her on the back and said, “I’m not dead yet.”

She regained her composure and returned to Abe’s side. He put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to him.

“I’m not dead yet,” Eli repeated, “It’ll be alright when I do go, because I know that you two, your sons, you’ll all take care of this land. You two will remember me, and I know you’ll make sure the boys know *of* me.”

Abe and Sarah nodded, knowing Eli’s imminent death was at hand.

“That’s not my biggest concern, though. This land, this farm, all of it is your legacy now, and someday it can be your sons’ legacy too. Don’t let them take it for granted, because they might. All good things deserve sacrifice, toil,

and the belief that they are good. Promise me you'll make sure they know this farm is a good thing."

Abraham and Sarah choked out, "We promise."

Eli reached out and took Abe's hand. He said in a quiet, but forceful voice, "Don't let this be an empty promise."

Abe shook his head and held onto Eli's hand. "It won't be," he replied in a whisper.

Eli nodded, "I know it won't, I just want to make sure you believe it won't be." He laid his head back and closed his eyes. "Now, if you don't mind I'm going to get some rest. If you could just wake me up for dinner, I'd appreciate it."

Abe and Sarah made their way to the door, but before they left Eli said, "Abe, don't go looking for trouble with Phil, he isn't worth it."

"I won't."

There was a pause, then Eli said with his last bit of strength before falling asleep, like a man's gasping breath before going underwater, "I love all of this, and all of you. I just wanted you to know in case..."

Sarah broke in before he could say it, "We love you too Eli."

Abe wanted to return it, but couldn't find the words to speak. Eli nodded without opening his eyes. Sarah went out the door first, and Abraham looked at Eli one more time before shutting the door. The sound of the door meeting the frame echoed down the hall, its finality deafening.

Later in the day, while Sarah put the finishing touches on dinner, Abraham went upstairs to wake up Eli. He opened the door and saw Eli lying in bed. His chest didn't rise or fall and his body looked stiff, but relaxed. The color had retreated from Eli's face, and the skin appeared waxy and gray.

"Eli?" Abraham said from the doorway. "Eli!"

Abraham took quiet steps over to the bed. He put a shaking hand on the old man's chest, expecting to find warmth and a heartbeat, but found neither. Abe pulled back his hand, then with both hands shook Eli, crying his name, "Eli, Eli, Eli!" Abraham sobbed and blood pounded in his ears.

Sarah heard Abraham's cries, and she went upstairs to be with her husband. Throughout the afternoon she had prepared herself for this, the act of making only two dinners instead of three had helped her process the coming tragedy. When she went into Eli's room she found Abe kneeling at the bedside, his head on the bed, and his body heaving with the cries.

Sarah stroked Abraham's hair, and let her hand rest on the back of his neck. She leaned down and pressed her ear to Eli's chest to confirm the reality for herself. There was no heartbeat, or raspy breaths, or rumblings coming from this body. The symphony of life had stopped playing, and now all there was, was haunting silence.

She knelt down beside Abe, and said in a shaky, saddened voice, "You need to go let the sheriff and doctor know."

Abe either didn't hear her, or ignored her.

"He knew it was coming, and at least we got to say good bye."

Abraham raised his head and faced her. "I just didn't think it would be so soon."

She put a hand on his cheek, and allowed herself to cry too.

The harvest had been achieved, but at a price. Like Eli said, all good things require toil and sacrifice, and in this case Eli had given work and his body to the earth. Crops filled the barn, enough to sell some and keep the rest for themselves. Was the trade worth it, though? Eli would have said it was worth it, but that was no great comfort for Abraham and Sarah.

Abe went into town and came back with the doctor

and sheriff. After only a few moments upstairs the men returned to the living room. The doctor and sheriff shook their heads.

“I started to think he’d be around forever,” the sheriff said. “The way some of these people talked about him you’d think he was practically God himself.”

The doctor, only a little younger than Eli, said, “He was good to this town, gave people good land at fair prices, and remembered every person he sold land to. You’d have to be a real son of a bitch to not like him, or a real son of a bitch for him to not like you.”

After a pause the doctor said to Abe, “What do you plan on doing with the body? There’s a cemetery in town where he can be buried.”

Abe shook his head, “No, he loved this land and deserves to be buried here.”

“Well, how far will he be buried from your field?”

“I’m sure it’ll be far enough away from the field,” the sheriff interjected. He turned to Abe and said, “That’s fine Abraham, it would be the right thing to do for him.”

Word spread throughout New Canaan about Eli’s death the day after it happened. On that day Sarah prepared the body, and Abraham went into town to get materials to build a coffin. When he arrived at the general store the owner greeted him at the door.

“I’m guessing you’re here to build a coffin?” the owner asked Abe.

“Afraid I am.”

The owner waved Abe inside and led him into the back workroom. A mostly complete coffin sat on the ground. It needed sanding and some lining, but it was basically ready for Eli’s body.

“It’s pretty hard to keep things quiet around here as is, and when you came into town like that I knew something had happened. It’s a damn shame to lose him. I

thought I could do him one last favor by making this for him,” the owner said motioning at the coffin.

Abe shook the owner’s hand and said, “Thank you.”

“It could still use some touching up, but the bulk of the work is done.”

“I appreciate that, and I know Eli would’ve appreciated it too.”

The two men loaded the coffin into Abe’s car, and before Abe left another man approached him; the town’s minister.

“You’re Abraham, right?”

“That’s me.”

The two men shook hands.

“I hope this isn’t too forward of me, but I haven’t seen you on Sundays, so I assume you’re not much of a religious man?”

Abe smiled a little bit and said, “No, not really. Are you going to try and convince me to be one now?”

The minister waved his hands and said, “No no no, that’s not what this is about. I’ll always welcome a lost sheep back to the herd, but that’s not why I wanted to talk to you. I know Eli wasn’t very religious either, but he meant a lot to this town. I’ve heard you’re planning on burying him on your land?”

“I think it’s what he would want.”

“Of course. Would you mind if I said a few words at it? I’ll keep the focus on Eli, and nothing else.”

Abe considered the proposition for a moment then agreed to let the man speak.

“When will it be?”

“I was thinking tonight around sundown, no use in putting it off.”

“Then I’ll make sure to let people know. Expect a large crowd.”

When Abe returned to the farm he walked around his property searching for a fitting place to bury Eli. His

gaze fell on the small oak tree and decided it only seemed right to make that the grave. He began digging, and after a while a few neighboring farmers and their wives arrived. The men helped Abraham dig the grave while the wives helped Sarah prepare Eli and take care of the boys.

By the late afternoon, every New Canaanite that could be there had gathered near the oak tree, all except for one man, but nobody expected him anyway. Abe and a few of the men brought the coffin out to the grave. The minister spoke honestly and briefly, celebrating Eli's time in New Canaan and all the good he had done with his time on Earth. A few of the farmers and shopkeepers echoed those sentiments before Abraham's eulogy.

Abe stood beside the coffin, and the way Eli looked took him by surprise. The old man appeared alive, but it was fake life; too clean and too polished to be real. Abraham placed a hand on the edge of the coffin, then began his eulogy.

"I didn't know Eli for as long as many as you did, and part of me feels like I don't have the right to say this eulogy, but Eli made a powerful impact on my life, on my family's life, in a short time.

I don't know how many of you know this, but he gave me this land if I agreed to let him stay with us and help us. Where we came from that sort of trade is unheard of, impossible even. He barely knew us, yet he trusted us enough to make that deal. I think that speaks to Eli's character *and* this town's character. This is a good, decent place and Eli was a good, decent man.

Eli helped build this house, helped bring my sons into this world, and as his last good act helped this farm have a bountiful harvest. I can't think of too many people that would do so much for people they haven't know that long."

Tears formed in Abraham's eyes, and he wiped them away with the back of his hand.

“Everyone here loved him, I know it. Sarah loved him, I loved him, and my sons will grow to love the man they never met. He loved New Canaan too. He came from a wealthy family and he could have stayed there growing bitter and angry, but he didn’t. Eli came to New Canaan and gave up his old life.

I don’t know much from the Bible, but there’s one verse that always stuck with me: ‘Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, and be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.’ Eli embodied the spirit of those words, and because I loved that man and have grown to love New Canaan, I will too.”

Abraham and a few of the other men placed the lid on the coffin. They lowered it into the grave and covered it with dirt. In due time the coffin would rot along with Eli’s body, and it would be returned to the earth to feed it. After the burial the crowd stood around for a bit then left to return to their homes.

One well-dressed man stayed behind and approached Abraham.

“Are you Abraham?”

“I am. What do you need?”

The man pulled an envelope from his coat and presented it to Abe.

“I’m with the bank in New Canaan, and this belongs to you.”

Abe took the envelope and opened it. He read the contents and his eyes widened.

“When did he do this?”

“A while ago when he sold his office. He came in and wanted to make sure you were his heir. He didn’t have any complicated accounts, but if you have any questions feel free to come in.”

Abe didn’t know what to say. He stood there holding the envelope and responded with, “Yeah, I’ll do that.”

The bank man nodded and said, "Sorry for the loss. He was a good man." He turned around and walked away.

Sarah read the amount on the paper and put a hand to her mouth. Abe had tears in his eyes, and he used his sleeve to wipe his face. Sarah put her hand on Abe's arm and said, "He really must have cared about us to have done that so long ago."

Abraham broke down and sobbed. He held onto Sarah and allowed himself to let go.

With everyone gone Abe and Sarah stood by the grave holding each other. They missed Eli, but at the same time tried to stop mourning. Eli's body had gone into the ground he loved, and he would continue to help the farm. His body would feed the oak tree, and his body would feed the soil to make the harvests strong and continue helping the people of New Canaan.

A calming breeze whispered across the farm. It rustled the leaves and gently disturbed the water. Abe thought he heard Eli's voice on the wind; comforting and reassuring. A reminder that Abraham and his family would go on without Eli.

Around midnight the moon hung in the sky bathing the land in white light. A figure crept around the pond and along the eastern edge of Abraham's property. He broke away from the tree line and walked across the backyard to the freshly dug grave. The man looked up at the house and scowled at the dark windows. He decided it was safe to stay a moment.

Phil stood by the grave then sank to his knees and cried on top of it. He whispered apologies, regrets, and begged for forgiveness. His body shuddered and he tried to stifle his cries. He pounded the ground and whimpered like a lonesome ghost left alone in the world. Phil took a few deep breaths and rose to his feet. He pressed the palms of his hands to eyes then wiped his nose on the back of his



hand. He shoved his hands into his pockets and began the long walk back to his farm.

Once he reached the pond he turned around for one last look at Abe's farm. He saw Abraham's house, the new barn, and the harvested field. In his mind's eye he saw Abraham's children asleep in their beds, and Abraham in bed with his arms around Sarah. Phil hated Abraham because he envied him.

"Hope the whole damn place burns down someday," Phil muttered. He spat on the ground and continued back to his farm, to an empty bed and a house occupied only by him and his memories.

## IX

After Eli's death Abe brought the crops to market. They sold well and insured Abe would have enough money for the next season. The winter passed, and the next spring Abraham worked in the field on his own. Every night he stopped by Eli's grave to inform him of the day's progress and life's little events; Isaac's first words, Ishmael's first steps, a funny joke he heard in town, or a petty complaint.

Abe confided in Eli almost as much as he confided in Sarah. He asked Eli for guidance and in response the leaves rustled, the pond stirred, and there seemed to be extra life on the farm. Eli wasn't there, but at the same time his spirit seemed to linger. Not in a haunting way, but like something ancient people used to recognize and thank for its presence.

The next harvest was successful, and every harvest after it was also successful. Abe and Sarah knew the harvests were simply the rewards of hard work, but sometimes they couldn't help but attribute some of their prosperity to Eli's perceived presence. He was the force that spurred the crops to grow stronger and faster. He was the extra rain and the wind that pushed the clouds away after the rain. He was the fertility of the soil and the eruption of color that happened every spring. Abe and Sarah knew it wasn't Eli, but they couldn't help but hope that maybe it was.

As the years went on the boys grew. Ishmael walked first, but Isaac talked first. Ishmael grew up enjoying the world while Isaac became curious with the world. Isaac asked questions and demanded answers whereas Ishmael was content with his existence. Isaac's knowledge grew, even at a young age, and he began seeking applications for his knowledge. He formed great plans, confident in their outcome, and enlisted Ishmael's help. Most of the time

these plans failed, and Ishmael tried to convince Isaac of the predictable results, but when Isaac believed in a plan he refused to back down. Once he had an idea he charged in and expected Ishmael to join him.

If they failed, or got in trouble, Ishmael immediately began the process of apologizing and asking for forgiveness. Isaac, even as a small child, tried to work his way out of problems. He argued with Abe and Sarah, gave them reasons for the actions, and knew just how far he could go before he needed to relent. Despite their differences, Isaac and Ishmael loved each other. They thrived because of their individual traits, not in spite of them. The only significant problem was that sometimes Isaac had contempt for Ishmael's obedience and complacency, and Ishmael felt that Isaac used him as a pawn in his schemes and not a partner. This only became an issue when a plan went awry and severe consequences seemed inevitable.

One hot summer day during the seventh year at the farm Abraham decided to take the day off. Isaac and Ishmael were young, but old enough to help their father, so when their father took a day off they got the day too. They gathered their fishing poles then filled a can with dirt to store their worms.

The two boys walked out to the pond and sat down on the shore near the fence. They sent their lines into the water and hoped for a bite from a fish that had fought its way to the pond. As the afternoon wore on their focus shrank.

"There aren't any fish here," Isaac finally announced.

"Maybe we're just in a bad spot?"

Isaac stood up and wiped the dirt off his pants. "I don't think there's any fish in this pond."

Ishmael frowned and said, "It's a big pond, Isaac.

There might be a big fish sitting on the bottom waiting to come to the surface.”

“It’s a big pond, but not that big. We might as well go home.”

“Let’s just try on the other side of the pond, closer to the house. If we don’t get anything then we’ll pack up and go home.”

Isaac sighed, “Ishmael, I’m hot, there’s no fish, and come to think of it pa wouldn’t want us this close to the fence anyway.”

“So we’ll just go to the other side!”

Isaac placed a small hand on Ishmael’s thin shoulder and said, “It’s a waste of time to keep staying out here.”

Ishmael threw off Isaac’s hand and shouted, “It’s not a waste of time!”

“You’re being dumb and not listening to me.”

Ishmael balled his hands into fists. He looked down and said, “Don’t say I’m dumb.”

“Well, you sure are acting it.”

Ishmael shoved Isaac onto the grass. Isaac picked himself up and shoved Ishmael back. The brothers usually got along well, but their petty and insignificant disagreements always escalated into fights. Isaac bent down, picked up the fishing poles, and threw them onto the other side of the fence.

*“What’d you do that for?!”*

“You were being dumb about the fish, so I decided the matter for us.”

“Those were our fishing poles Isaac...” Ishmael said as his voice trailed off.

“Well...that’s too bad, I guess...”

Ishmael sat on the grass on the verge of tears.

Isaac took a deep breath and relented, “Fine, I’ll jump over the fence and get the poles back if it means that much to you.”

“Wait, you’re going to jump the fence? After you were worried about being near the fence now you’re going to *jump* it? How much sense does that make?”

Isaac shrugged and walked over to the fence.

“Pa said to never go over the fence.”

“Pa isn’t here, and I’ll be right back.” Isaac grinned at his brother then said, “Besides, I’m not going *over* the fence, I’ll go around it.”

Isaac ran parallel to the fence until he reached the tree line where the fence ended. He ran along the fence until he was across the fence from Ishmael. He rummaged around in the brush and once he found the poles he tossed them over the fence. No sooner did he find the fishing poles that Phil South appeared.

“Gotcha little bastard,” Phil growled. “I’ve been watching you two waiting to see if you’d come onto my property.”

Isaac yelped as Phil grabbed him, and he tried to struggle out of the old man’s grip.

“I told your pa to keep himself and his family off my property. Guess he forgot to mention that included you.”

“Let go of him!” Ishmael yelled at Phil.

Phil glared at Ishmael, “What are you gonna do?”

Ishmael stared at Phil and Phil tightened his grip on Isaac’s arm. He walked over to the fence and broke through the wire, ignoring the barbs shredding his clothes and skin. Phil threw Isaac onto the ground and glowered at the two boys.

“What right you think you got to come onto my property?”

“I just wanted to get our fishing poles back, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Phil slapped Isaac across the back of his head hard enough to make Isaac’s ears ring.

“You think that’s a good reason to trespass? I guess I need to teach you boys respect since your pa didn’t teach it.”

Ishmael charged at Phil and headbutted him in the groin. Phil doubled over, and as he was bent over Isaac grabbed a fishing pole. He swiped it at Phil, the hook slicing across his face. Phil bellowed and clutched his face while screaming obscenities at the boys.

Ishmael grabbed Isaac’s hand and shouted, “C’mon!”

They ran around the pond and through the field back to the safety of their home.

Isaac and Ishmael burst through the back door and ran into the living room. They both tried to tell the story and the words blurred into a loud mess of sound.

“Boys!” Abe yelled, holding up his hands. “Tell me what happened, one at a time.”

“We were fishing at the pond and we got into an argument,” Ishmael started.

“I got angry and threw the poles over the fence, but I felt bad about it and went around the fence to get them back,” Isaac continued. “I don’t know where he came from, but after I found the fishing poles Mr. South grabbed me.”

Abraham stood up and clenched his jaw and said, “What happened?”

“I tried to tell him I was just trying to get our fishing poles, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“He hit Isaac, and I hit him back-”

“*What?!*” Abraham roared.

The boys recoiled and Sarah came down from the second floor.

“We’re sorry we got the fence broken and went on Mr. South’s property-” Ishmael said, but his father stopped him.

“That’s still our land, Ishmael. Did he follow you?”

The boys shook their heads. Sarah came over and said, "Are either of you hurt?"

"Not really, he slapped me in the back of the head, but I'm alright."

Sarah looked at Abe with hate in her eyes and he returned the sentiment. She took the boys by the hand and led them out of the living room and upstairs to get them into different clothes.

Abe walked into the kitchen, and just as he pulled out a chair to sit down there was a pounding on the back door. Abraham took a deep breath to calm himself and he walked over to the door knowing who he'd find standing behind it.

"Open the damn door!" Phil screamed.

Abe took a breath then opened the door. He braced himself, expecting Phil to lunge at Abe and start throwing punches. Instead he just stood there, seething. His eyes were wild and he had a fresh, thin cut across his face.

"I know why you're here Phil," Abe stated.

"So, does that mean your boys are gonna apologize for trespassing and attacking me?"

"*Apologize?*" Abe laughed, "If anyone should be apologizing it should be you. You trespassed on *my* land and hit *my son*."

"You listen here-" Phil started as he tried to step across the threshold into the house. Abraham shoved him back and Phil stumbled backwards and almost fell over.

"I made it clear to you that if you ever came on my property I would kill you. Not only did you come on my land, but you struck one of my sons."

"You won't kill me though, you're a coward," Phil said. He tried to sound confident, but his voice shook and all of his strength had left him.

Abraham grabbed Phil by the collar. He smelled the whiskey and sweat and grimaced.

"If I'd had my gun on me I would've shot you

where you stood. I'm not a coward, you just got lucky."

Abe threw Phil off the back steps and he landed with a solid thud. He got on his hands and knees and scowled at Abraham.

"If I see you on my land again, I will kill you, Phil South."

Phil said nothing in reply. He stood up and glared at Abraham, his eyes filled with hate. He spat on the ground and began the walk back to his farm. Abraham hoped he'd never have to see Phil again, but he knew fatal violence was coming and all he could do was prepare.



**X**

Sometime around midnight there came a clicking sound from the back door. Abe sat in the dark living room with Eli's loaded revolver sitting next to him. His breath caught in his throat when he heard the lock being worked, and he felt the blood pounding in his ears. Abraham wrapped his hand around the revolver's handle and felt the coolness of the metal hammer on his thumb.

Earlier that night when he made the decision to stay in the living room Sarah had tried to reason with him.

"Abe, I know you're worried about him coming here, but you can't stay up all night with a loaded gun next to you."

"Why can't I?"

Sarah sighed, "Because it's not reasonable." She sat down next to him and put a hand on his lap, "I know you just want to protect us, but how long will you do this? You can't let this fear consume you. It'll take you away from the farm, it'll take you away from your family."

Abraham said nothing as he studied the revolver.

Sarah stood up and said, "Stay up if you feel you need to, but Abraham?"

He looked up at her.

"If he comes here, do not hesitate." She kept her voice stable, but it possessed a raw power. It was the kind of order that could not be ignored, and Abraham took the words to heart.

When he heard the noise at the door he flew upstairs into his and Sarah's bedroom.

"Sarah!" he said in a harsh whisper.

She bolted upright in bed, "What's wrong Abe?"

"Get the boys in here and lock the door."

Before Sarah could ask any questions he ran down the hallway then down the stairs. The person at the door

threw their body against it. Abe pointed the gun at the door and cocked the hammer. He waited for the moment the intruder crashed into the kitchen. The pounding on the door matched his heartbeat; earnest and throbbing. He gripped the revolver's handle and slid his finger around the trigger.

The door burst open with a crash and Phil South stumbled into the kitchen brandishing his shotgun. Abe's body reacted unconsciously to the sound and he pulled the trigger. Phil cried out as a bullet hit him in the shoulder. The pain caused him to pull the trigger on his shotgun and fired one of the barrels into the wall above Abraham's head.

Abe squeezed off another round that hit Phil in the leg. Phil screamed and gripped his wounded limbs, hurling curses at Abraham and his family. Abe took cover behind the wall as Phil fired again, the shot peppering the wall. Abraham's ears rang from the gunshots in the small space, and smoke filled the kitchen. He heard the click-clack of two shotgun shells hitting the kitchen floor. Phil was reloading and Abe needed to act.

He popped out from behind cover. Phil looked up at him, his eyes wide and full of terror, like an animal looks at a predator it can't escape. Abe pulled the trigger and the third round hit Phil in the chest. The shock faded and Phil realized he'd been mortally wounded. He grunted and dropped onto the floor, the shotgun breached and almost ready to fire.

It registered with Abraham and he ran over to Phil and yelled his name. Blood pooled beneath Phil's body, and there was a black and red hole in the center of his chest. Abe knelt beside him frozen with shock, but his mind raced to find a way to save Phil.

Phil looked at Abe, his eyes filled with hatred and sorrow. He grabbed one of Abe's hands and pressed it against his chest, the warm blood coming up between Abraham's fingers. Phil began to tremble and blood

bubbled from his mouth. He stared at Abraham, demanding that he watch Phil die. Phil's grip loosened, his eyes glazed over, and he died on the kitchen floor.

Abe stood and went upstairs to let Sarah know he was alright.

"Sarah?"

"Abraham?"

"It's over now, you can open the door."

He stepped back from the door and Sarah entered the hallway. She looked at his bloody hand and the revolver in his other hand.

"It's not mine."

"Is he...?"

Abe nodded without looking at Sarah.

He walked downstairs and Sarah followed him.

They went into the kitchen and she gripped Abraham's arm when she saw Phil's body in the kitchen. The blood had made a large black stain on the floor and his skin had already started to turn pale. His eyes were glass orbs reflecting the moonlight coming through the window.

Abraham made a sound in his throat upon seeing the corpse and Sarah grabbed his arms. She turned him away from the corpse and said, "Look at me." He complied and she said, "Don't you dare think you killed an innocent man. He was going to kill you, *he was going to kill us*. You did what you had to do."

Abe nodded, but said nothing in reply. He broke away from Sarah's grip and walked over to Phil's body. When he'd thought about this situation he always imagined himself feeling triumphant, standing over Phil's body, with a smoking gun in hand. Instead he felt pity and sympathy. Phil had been a man, drunken and aggressive, but a man nonetheless. Abe closed Phil's eyes and returned to Sarah.

"I'm going to go into town to tell the sheriff what happened, I won't be gone long."

"I'll send the boys back to their rooms."

Sarah kissed Abe and squeezed his hand. She watched as he turned around and went outside, and she continued watching until she saw him return.

The sheriff made no formal investigation, and he took Abe at his word. After Abraham explained the situation the sheriff simply shrugged and said, “Sounds like he offered you no other choice. I can send out the doctor to pick up the body.”

Perhaps to redeem himself Abraham suggested, “What if I bury him on my land?”

The sheriff regarded him with a strange look and said, “You trying to start a graveyard on that farm of yours?”

Abraham shook his head, “No, I just thought...well, maybe since I...did what I did then I could at least do that.”

“Huh, well if you want to you’re more than welcome. Seems a little funny though, burying your attempted murderer on your property.”

When Abe was done with the sheriff he went to the pastor, told him of what happened, and requested that he be at the burial. The pastor rubbed some of the tiredness from his eyes then scratched his chin, “I won’t lie to you Abraham, I didn’t care much for Phil, and I don’t exactly believe he deserves a proper burial. But if it would mean something to you then yes, I’ll come and say a few words.”

Abraham thanked him and returned to the farm. He and Sarah hauled the body out of the kitchen and laid it beside the oak tree in the light of the moon. In seven years, the oak tree had grown and become much more than the scrawny thing Eli had planted. The next day, Abe busied himself with gathering material to make a coffin while Sarah cleaned the kitchen. Isaac and Ishmael watched from a distance and occasionally stole glances to look at the dead man in the backyard.

At one point Ishmael turned to Isaac and asked,

“Did we make that happen?”

“No Ishmael, I don’t think so,” Isaac replied, but he said it more to comfort himself than to comfort his brother.

Abraham returned to the farm and built the coffin in the barn. He hadn’t done a good job with it, some of the nails stuck out in odd places and it looked uneven, but it would suffice. He had also purchased a cheap sheet to wrap around Phil.

In the heat of the afternoon he dug the grave next to Eli’s and a few of his neighbors came over to help him. The consensus being that they came to confirm Phil’s death and to help Abe with the digging. The pastor came and performed a short sermon that focused more on the capacity of forgiveness than on Phil. Nobody else said anything. They lowered the coffin into the ground, shoveled dirt on top of it, then departed. Most of the farmers held the belief that Phil should have been left to rot in the wilderness and their brief attendance was already more than he deserved.

With all the farmers and the pastor gone, Abraham stood beside the grave. At certain points in the day it would be bathed in sunlight, just like Eli’s, and at other times it would enjoy the shade of the tree. Abe knelt in the dirt and wept over the grave. Perhaps it was just the breaking of tension produced by hate, or simply the heartfelt reaction of a good man, but either way he cried. He whispered to the dirt, “I’m sorry,” then stood up and returned to the farm house.

## XI

For the next few days Abraham worked mechanically and spoke little. Despite his decision to bury Phil on the farm he still felt a lack of closure. It wasn't until one morning when he went out to the field that he realized what it was: Phil's farm. The house in the distance stood as a haunting reminder of that farm's vacancy, and it accused Abraham for the vacancy. It threatened to drive him mad, and he couldn't wait for the house to succumb to the forces of nature and time.

He drove into town and went to the bank to ask about Phil's farm: who, if anybody, owned it, and how much would it cost? Once he dealt with that he made his decision: he would buy the farm and destroy Phil's house. He would always have that guilt, but one less glaring reminder would make it more manageable.

After buying Phil's farm he returned to his own farm to let Sarah know about his decision, and she understood. She didn't say much about it, but she didn't need to. She knew it would put his mind at ease. Abraham went out to the fence and tore that down first. He pulled up the stakes then rolled it into a bundle on one end of the property line. With that done, he walked across the dead field toward the house.

The dirt was hard and dry under his feet, kicking up small puffs of soil each time his foot stuck the ground. It may not be fertile ground, but it was more land at least. He approached the house and realized the extent of the dilapidation. Only small patches of paint remained on the side of the house, and most of it was faded and brittle. Some of the siding hung loose, and all of the windows had some kind of damage; a crack here or a hole there.

He jostled the back door and it gave way with almost no effort. Upon entering the house, a musty and

unclean smell greeted Abraham. Empty bottles of liquor and trash covered the floor, and all of the furniture was broken. A thin layer of dust coated everything, and nothing had been organized in a very long time. Abraham picked his way through the empty bottles and ran his fingers over the dusty kitchen table. He pulled back his fingers and grimaced at the residue left behind on his fingers.

Abe explored the house and went into what must have been Phil's old room. He found some clothes and various items that held no value. There was a locked door across the hall from Phil's room. Abe tried the handle, but it wouldn't give. He threw his body against the door and it slammed open with a crack, causing him to stumble and fall into the room. The room still had a musty smell, not caused from filth instead caused by years of being locked. The bed was made, a toy chest sat in one corner, and a dresser sat on the other side of the room.

There was a larger chest that sat on the floor at the foot of the bed. Abraham went to open it, and to his surprise it was unlocked. He pulled out the contents and found a collection of items: a wedding dress, photographs, letters, and an Army uniform; all of it in pristine condition. Abe began sorting through the photographs: one of Phil and his wife on their wedding day, one with a baby, one with the boy a little older, and another with the boy wearing the uniform.

He sat on the floor and read the letters, some began, "*My dearest husband...*" while others began, "*Dear pa...*" For the majority of the afternoon Abraham sat and learned the tragic story of Phil's wife and child. His wife hadn't left him, she had come down with some illness and returned to Massachusetts for treatment. It didn't work. The son hadn't abandoned his father, he had joined the Army with the intention of fighting in the war with Spain. One letter stood out from the rest, and it began, "*Dear sir...*" The rest of that letter explained the son had died in Cuba due to yellow

fever.

Abraham leaned back against the bed and let the information soak in. Here was a man who had been viewed as a villain by the New Canaanites, but in reality had been broken by the loss of his entire family. His wife and child hadn't left him, they had been taken from him by powers far beyond his control. Abe went to put the letters, photographs, and clothing back in the chest, but when he looked in he saw a smaller stack of letters he hadn't noticed before.

He pulled out the stack of letters and began reading those, each one beginning with, "*Dear Phil...*" and ending with, "*Your loving brother-*"

The name that followed made Abraham suck in a sharp breath and his heart stop. He reread the name a few times just to make sure it wasn't a mistake, a trick of the eyes. It sounded in his brain like a deafening rifle crack or a ringing bell.

Eli. Eli. Eli.

He ran through each letter, just to see if the name was a coincidence, but the evidence mounted, confirming the stunning revelation: Eli and Phil had been brothers, and Eli had used his mother's maiden name to distance himself from Phil and the rest of his family. The shock of information rolled over Abraham like he'd been thrown into a freezing river threatening to steal his breath. It all made sense: the anguish over Phil marrying Eli's fiancée, Eli keeping the land next to Phil's farm, and Eli wanting to live on Abraham's farm.

Abraham put the bundle of letters back together and placed them into the chest along with the other items. He carried it out to his car, then returned to the house and set fire to it. The flames reached high into the summer night sky as the fire consumed the ruined house, the garbage, and everything it symbolized. The roof collapsed onto the upper floor, and the upper floor collapsed onto the ground floor in



a cascade of sparks. Abe covered his face with a handkerchief as the smoke grew thick and poured over the fields and woods. After a few hours, the last remnants of the building were a smoldering pile of wood and ash, and by morning it was nothing but hot ash. Phil and his house fed the earth finally making a great contribution to New Canaan.

When Abe came home he unloaded the chest from the car and brought it into the barn. He resolved himself to not tell Sarah about his discovery. He didn't want to keep something like that from her, but speaking the words would be too painful. It made it seem even more real. Abe entered his own house, so quiet and possessing the faint smell of smoke from Phil's farm. He slipped upstairs, took off his clothes, and got into bed next to Sarah. She didn't wake, but gently stirred when Abe laid down beside her. He kissed her on the cheek and made his decision final: he would not tell Sarah about what he learned.

For the rest of the summer Abraham and his sons worked the field until harvest season. Phil's field laid untouched, and the remnants of the house made a black smudge on the horizon. Every few days Abe went out to the ruins and moved the debris into the woods, finding the occasional glass bottle or charred remnant of clothing among the burnt beams. By the end of the summer only a few small piles of detritus remained, and Abe brought the trash to the woods and mixed the ash into the earth; the winds in fall and winter scattered the rest.

The next summer Abe tilled his original field and Phil's land too. During sowing season he broke the old soil and brought new life into that land. He moved the fence to the furthest end of the field creating a new border and solidifying his position as the owner of the largest farm in New Canaan. When that summer came to its end, and harvest season approached, all of Abraham's property glowed with the fruits of his and his family's labor. For the

first time in a long time, even Phil's old property was covered in green and gold crops, and all of New Canaan's sprawling farmland was prosperous.

## XII

Years passed and Abraham's farm became the most prosperous in New Canaan. The other farmers envied his success, but appreciated that it came from hard work and dedication. Isaac and Ishmael continued to grow, and although their young lives were fraught with brotherly conflicts they developed a deep and loving friendship.

Subtle differences developed between the brothers too. Isaac became more of a pragmatic rebel that balked at his father's orders and needed a reason for everything. He saw everything through a rational lens, but believed in higher, loftier ideals than most of the people in New Canaan. Ishmael, on the other hand, was obedient and followed Abraham's orders without a second thought. He was prone to outbursts and rash impulses, and Isaac often used these traits to manipulate Ishmael.

On the surface they looked the same, a combination of Abraham's and Sarah's features, but the older they got the more pronounced their differences became. For the most part they continued to get along, but sometimes the intensity of their dissimilarities turned into conflict.

One summer day, another hot one that blanketed the area in oppressive and unrelenting heat, Abraham decided to give himself and the boys the rest of the day off. The boys had made a habit of going fishing when they weren't working on the farm, and this day was no different.

They walked to the creek on the edge of the farm and cast their lines in the water. The shade of the trees filtered out the heat and they sat there tending to the poles and enjoying the coolness.

Although the days had been hot, the nights had been filled with torrential downpours. The creek's water rushed and threatened to overflow. On the other side of the road

the marshland, usually nothing more than a mess of plants and mud, swelled with water and became a more dangerous version of the pond; deep water filled with plenty of things to get snagged on.

The afternoon dragged on and the boys fell asleep, bored into slumber by a lack of activity. The sun crept across the sky toward its resting place on the horizon, and just as it was about to set Ishmael felt his pole move against his foot. He snapped awake and eased himself up on his shoulders. A massive trout nibbled on the hook on his line, the sun made its back glisten and it begged to be caught.

“Isaac, wake up!” Ishmael said in a harsh whisper.

Isaac blinked his eyes a few times then sat up.

“What’s going on?” he said, still groggy from sleep.

Ishmael pointed at the water and Isaac looked at the large fish poking the hook.

“What should we do?”

Isaac watched the fish’s movements, studied its motions, and began to formulate a plan to catch it. He picked up his fishing pole and gently removed it from the water, and removed the line from the pole. Isaac snapped off the top of the pole and made a jagged point with his pocket knife.

“Here’s what we’ll do: you move the line around enough to keep the fish distracted, and once it bites the hook I’ll get it with my pole.”

Ishmael thought for a moment then said, “Wouldn’t it just be easier for me to pull it onto shore *then* you spear it?”

“No! This way we don’t risk it getting away when you pull it up.”

Isaac crept over to the creek’s edge then lowered himself onto the ground. He aimed the spear at the water, poised to strike like some ancient fisherman desperate for a meal. Ishmael watched Isaac and watched the fish, waiting for his cue to help catch the fish. The trout danced in the

current, poked at the bait on the hook, but never took a bite. Its movements captivated Ishmael along with the beauty of the colors and dots on its back. He didn't want to kill it, but watch it until it swam away.

Isaac wanted to kill it, to accomplish his latest goal. It didn't matter if Ishmael found it beautiful and worthy of living, all that mattered was Isaac completing his mission. Ishmael saw the focus in Isaac's eyes, how they shined with calculated cruelty and lacked boyish innocence. It was times like these that Isaac spoke like a man and acted like a man, but treated Ishmael like a child or not as an equal. Ishmael loathed what Isaac could become at times like these and dark thoughts filled his head.

Ishmael's trance broke as the fish latched onto the hook and Isaac lunged at it with the spear. He drove the point through its head, twitched with nerve spasms, then died. The current tried to carry it away, but the hook and spear prevented it from leaving.

Isaac whooped and screamed, "We got it!" He turned to Ishmael and said, "Help me get it out of the water."

Ishmael complied without speaking. They put their hands on the line, pulled the fish out of the water, and laid it on the grass. Out of the water it didn't look beautiful, it just looked dead. Its skin didn't look as green and the water on its skin looked like slime. Its mouth hung open and its eyes stared into oblivion while a trickle of blood poured out of the fresh wound on its head; another victim of one of Isaac's plans.

Isaac clapped Ishmael on the back and said, "We got the fish!" He beamed at Ishmael expecting to see his brother smile back.

"I guess we did," Ishmael said with a sad smile and a quiet voice.

Isaac took his hand off his brother's back and asked, "What's wrong?"

“It was just a nice fish, that’s all. Maybe we didn’t have to kill it.”

“Don’t be dumb, it’s just a fish.”

Ishmael frowned and looked at the fish, “I’m not dumb...”

“Then stop talking like you are. Now help me figure out a way to get this thing back to the house. Boy, I can’t wait to show pa.”

“You mean you can’t wait until *we* show pa?”

Isaac stopped, cocked his head at Ishmael then looked away, “Well...how about I tell him about it, then you can fill in the details.”

Ishmael stepped up to Isaac and poked his finger into his chest, “So you can take all the credit as usual and act like I was just your sidekick?”

“It was *my* plan, Ishmael, you just helped. Doesn’t that make you a sidekick by definition?”

Ishmael glared at Isaac then turned around and began to walk away from him.

“Where are you going?”

“Back home, I’m not helping you with the stupid fish.”

Isaac shrugged and knelt beside the fish, deciding the best way to get it back to the house.

“Suit yourself. If you want to be a big baby about it, that’s your choice.”

Ishmael stopped and whirled around. He charged at Isaac and shoved him onto the grass.

“*Go to hell!*”

Isaac leaped to his feet and pushed Ishmael, then Ishmael shoved Isaac again. Isaac punched his brother across the face, and Ishmael’s rage boiled over. He hurled himself at Isaac directing all his energy into Isaac’s torso. Isaac tumbled backwards with enough force to roll end-over-end, off the edge of the creek’s bank, and into the rushing water.

Under normal circumstances Isaac could have stood up and climbed back onto the grass, but that was not the case this day. The current latched onto Isaac and yanked him downstream toward the deadly marshland.

Ishmael's anger evaporated as he ran to the creek. "Isaac!" he screamed, his voice cracking with panic.

Isaac's head broke water and he screamed for help before getting sucked under again. Ishmael ran alongside the creek trying to keep pace with his brother, hoping that Isaac kept his head above water. The branches of the trees and the thorny bushes tried to hold him back, but he kept running, ignoring the scratches on his arms and legs.

Isaac saw a branch protruding from the creek's bank and he grabbed it nearly dislocating his arms. He cried out as his arms strained against the current, but he held fast and gripped the natural life preserver.

"Don't leave me!" Isaac yelled to Ishmael, all his fake maturity gone.

"I have to go get pa! Just try to stay afloat until we get back!"

Isaac looked down the creek to the space under the bridge, and the marsh beyond the bridge. In the twilight, it looked dark and foreboding, like a hungry mouth waiting to gobble him up and leave nothing behind. The water rushed toward it threatening to tear his arms from the branch and suck him into that watery void.

Ishmael tore through the tree line and sprinted toward the house. He burst through the front door and ran into the living room where Abraham sat with his newspaper.

"Isaac...fish...fell...creek," Ishmael said between gasps.

Abe threw down his newspaper and barked, "Catch your breath then tell me what happened."

Ishmael caught his breath then yelled, "Isaac fell in

the creek and he's down by the bridge!"

Abraham cursed under his breath then ran for the door while Ishmael followed him. They ran out to the barn where Abe grabbed some rope.

"Lead me to where he is!"

Ishmael and Abraham ran to the tree line and found Isaac where Ishmael had left him. His face looked strained, and there was sweat on his forehead from holding so tightly onto the branch. He looked up and saw his brother and father standing near him and he visibly relaxed.

"I'm going to throw a line to you and you need to catch it!" Abraham shouted.

He turned his body and threw the rope with all of his might. It landed with a splash in the water, but sank before it reached Isaac. Abraham pulled in the soggy rope and held it in his hands as he racked his brain for a solution.

Ishmael looked at the rope, then looked at his father, then looked at a strong tree near the creek. He grabbed the other end of the rope and tied it around the tree.

"What are you doing?" Abraham said, his voice thin and nervous.

"I got an idea. Tie the rope around yourself then jump into the creek. That way you can grab Isaac and pull yourself to shore."

Abe thought about Ishmael's plan. He wasn't a stupid boy, but he tended to lack foresight. Abraham looked at Isaac just as Isaac began to lose his grip on the branch. That was all the convincing Abe needed. He tied the rope around his waist, secured it, and tugged the rope to make sure it held on the tree.

"Once I get him, you'll need to help get us to shore. Can you do that?"

Ishmael nodded urgently and Abe gave one quick nod back.

Abe went to the creek and jumped in, allowing the current to carry him over to Isaac. He opened his arms and



grabbed Isaac around the middle.

“Hold onto me!”

Isaac threw his arms around his father like the frightened child he was.

“Now Ishmael!”

With all of his might, Ishmael began to pull Abe and Isaac toward land while Abraham moved up the rope, hand-over-hand up the length of the rope. Once they reached the bank, Ishmael ran over and helped Isaac up then Abraham. The three of them sat panting on the ground, Isaac and Abraham soaked in water and Ishmael soaked with sweat.

Abraham caught his breath and stood up. The intense worry he had felt about Isaac became intense anger, but he wanted to stay calm until after he heard the full story.

“How the hell did this happen?”

Isaac and Ishmael looked at each other, then looked to their father. If they lied, Abe would know, and they would be punished. If they told the truth, they would be punished, but perhaps less severely for telling the truth. Abe could deal out punishments, but he dealt them out fairly.

Isaac began, “We were fishing and we fell asleep. Then Ishmael woke me up because he saw this fish, so we both started working on catching it, and I caught it-”

“We *both* caught it, Isaac,” Ishmael interjected.

Isaac ignored the interruption and continued, “We got it ashore, and Ishmael started getting emotional *about a fish*, then he started arguing with me about who caught it-”

“Because you were going to take all the credit for it!”

Isaac looked at Ishmael then at Abe, “You see? You see how he gets emotional. Well, he pushed me, so I pushed him back, and then he pushed me in the creek.”

Ishmael jumped to his feet and pointed an accusing finger at Isaac, “I never meant to push you in the creek and

you know it!”

Isaac shook his head, “Now because of Ishmael the fish is probably spoiled.”

Ishmael shoved Isaac and Isaac pushed back harder than before. The two boys rolled around in the dirt, hurling insults and punches at each other.

“*Enough!*” Abraham roared. He grabbed each boy by the collar and threw them apart. Abe walked over to Ishmael and slapped him across the face, “That’s for starting a fight with your brother!” He went to Isaac and slapped him too, “And that’s for provoking your brother!”

The two boys sat in stunned silence. Abe had punished them before with a switching or a spanking, but it was always done after the fact and with deliberate levelheadedness, like an executioner carrying out a sentence. Never had he yelled at them like that and struck them in the face like that.

“Where’s this damned fish?” Abraham barked.

Isaac and Ishmael led him to the spot where the fish lay. Abe squatted to inspect the fish, and saw that it was a good fish. His boys had done well in catching it, and it would have made for a good dinner, but they needed to be taught a lesson. He stood up, kicked it into the water, and watched as the creek carried it away from them.

“But-” Isaac began, but silenced himself when Abe spun around and glared at him.

“Follow me,” Abraham said.

The trio walked away from the creek, through the tree line, and along the perimeter of the field. They passed the barn and approached the oak tree Eli had planted a little over ten years before. It was still young and skinny, but its trunk had thickened and healthy, green leaves covered each branch.

“Sit down boys, you need to learn something,” Abraham commanded.

The boys did as they were told and sat down by the

oak tree and the graves near it.

“I know neither of you remember Eli, but he was a kind man, a wise man...a good man. He loved your ma and me like children, and loved both of you like grandchildren. He planted this tree after you were born, to serve as a symbol of unity, a reminder of what our family can accomplish if we work together.

That’s impossible if you two continue fighting, Someday, when your mother and I are gone, you will both inherit this farm, and you *must* work together then. You can’t be selfish about your accomplishments, but also can’t be petty and let your emotions get the better of you. I know you’re brothers, and you’ll fight, but you must avoid it; otherwise the bad feelings will consume you. The bad feelings pass, they always do, but if you *act* on those feelings then the consequences will not pass.”

Abraham paused to see if the information had sunk into his sons.

“I hope you both marry, raise your children here, and continue making this farm a beautiful place. You can do it together if you work together, but that won’t happen if you’re at odds with each other! Too many people have worked to make this farm the place it is. there is too much to be lost because of stupid arguments. Do you understand?”

The boys nodded in unison, ashamed at how upset they had made their father, and how childish they had acted. They were on the cusp of becoming young men, and they needed to stop behaving like children.

Abe studied the boys for any sign of insincerity, and in his mind’s eye he saw two futures: one where his descendants ruled a small empire of farmland, working together and making the family prosperous. While the other future was filled with chaos, tears, rage, and violence. He saw barren fields, a broken barn, a burning house, and his two sons were to blame. Even the oak tree burned.

He snapped out of his trance and said, "Let's go inside, it's time for dinner anyway."

Abe helped the boys to their feet, and placing his hands on each of their shoulders smiled at them. He didn't want them to see the worry in his face, but his anxiety reared its ugly head and hiding it felt impossible. It made him feel naked.

They entered the house and Sarah gasped when she saw Isaac and Abraham standing in the kitchen in their soaking clothes.

"What happened?"

Abe kissed Sarah on the cheek, "Nothing, the boys were fishing and Isaac fell in the creek. They're fine."

Sarah knew her husband had just lied to her, and she would pursue the truth later, but for the time being she said, "Well, go upstairs and change into dry clothes, then come have dinner."

After dinner and the boys had gone to bed, Abraham and Sarah sat in the living room. A tense silence had descended on the room while Sarah drank her evening tea and Abe read the newspaper. She set down her cup and cleared her throat prompting Abe to set down his newspaper.

"Is something wrong?"

"What really happened today, Abe?"

"The boys had a little mishap, it happens."

Sarah sighed, "Abraham, more happened today than you're telling me. I know you have your own secrets, but don't hold secrets about our boys. So what really happened?"

Abe considered the best way to tackle the story, to spare Sarah the most worry, but he decided the truth would be the best. "They got into a fight over some damn fish."

"Did Isaac start it?"

Abe wanted to chuckle at the motherly intuition, but

he couldn't bring himself to laugh. Instead he nodded without response.

Sarah groaned and shook her head, "That boy thinks he's so smart, but he's not smart enough to avoid a fight."

"Ishmael pushed Isaac into the creek..."

Sarah's eyes widened and her mouth slightly opened.

"I don't think he meant to do it! It just happened."

"That's beside the point Abe, one of our sons almost killed his brother."

"I'm aware of that, *Sarah*, and I immediately punished them," Abraham snapped, "I brought them to the oak tree and told them they needed to stop fighting...and after I did I had some kind of vision."

Sarah cocked her head and furrowed her brow, "What do you mean?"

Abraham got out of his chair and walked across the living room, running a hand through his hair. "I don't know, there was a good future where the family outgrew the farm and controlled more land in New Canaan than anyone else..." He paused before continuing, "But the other future was filled with destruction, and tragedy, all of it senseless and avoidable."

Sarah went to Abe and turned him around, she saw tears in her husband's eyes and the deep, haunting fear behind his eyes.

"It doesn't have to be that way, Abe. There's nothing saying things will end like that."

"But what if some things can't be reversed once they're set in motion? What if they've already been set in motion?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe...maybe because I killed Phil I tainted this land, and now all it will know is violence and loss."

"Like a curse? Abraham, this land isn't cursed. I know, you're nervous about them growing up, and someday

soon they'll need to make their own choices. If they choose wrong, and give up all of this, then that will be their decision and there's nothing we'll be able to do about it. If they choose wrong, then they'll have to live with those consequences."

Abe nodded and thought about his wife's words. She was right. Someday the boys would have to shape their destinies on their own without him or Sarah to guide them. The outcome totally dependent on their actions, for better or worse.

He breathed deep and smiled at Sarah, "I suppose you're right, you're always right when it comes to these kinds of things."

Sarah gave a little laugh and kissed Abraham, "I know I am, now let's go to bed."

As they made their way upstairs and passed each son's room Abe thought about what Sarah had said and about the vision he'd had. There was a reason he'd seen two futures and not just one. One of those futures would come true, and it was up to the boys to decide the future they wanted.

### XIII

The seasons passed with each harvest better than the last, and the farm's prosperity seemed infinite. In 1914 the war broke out in Europe, but it seemed like a distant thing that would have little to no impact on the farm. Let the Europeans kill each other for all the New Canaanites cared, they'd fought in the past and they'd fight in the future; this time was no different.

Isaac and Ishmael grew up nearing the point of adulthood. They continued to attend school each fall and winter, but as Isaac's interest in school increased Ishmael's interest decreased. Isaac fell in love with education, or at least the idea of being educated and worldly, and to Ishmael it seemed irrelevant: why bother when he would live and die in New Canaan?

Isaac became more independent and wanted to leave the farm especially with an exciting adventure unfolding on the other side of the world. He voraciously read every news article he could about the war, and anytime anything happened he excitedly shared the information with his family; the invasion of Belgium, the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and all of the major battles raging in these foreign lands.

News of the war filled his head with romantic notions of warfare. He imagined himself charging out of a trench, rifle in hand, with an orchestra of artillery and machine gun fire urging him forward. He imagined himself jumping into German trenches, bayoneting enemy soldiers, and coming home a war hero; marching in New York City showered with fanfare and adoration from beaming, eager women.

Whenever Isaac talked about the war, Abraham listened to him, but he always made sure to remind him that war wasn't as good, or as clean, or as safe as it seemed in

the newspapers. He tried to remind Isaac that, yes, sometimes it's necessary to stand against injustice, but sometimes it's better to not get involved. Abe's advice and reflections fell on deaf ears, and Isaac would give a noncommittal shrug and move onto a new topic.

At night, the brothers sat in the barn passing a mason jar filled with some "misplaced" whiskey back and forth. They discussed their respective futures and what they planned to do in the coming years. One night in the fall shortly after their sixteenth birthday Isaac brought up something he'd been mulling over for a while.

"I think I want to join the Army."

Ishmael set down the mason jar and wiped his mouth, "Why would you wanna do that?"

"We're going to get involved with the war sooner or later, and I want to do my part to help fight the Germans. Besides, it'd be a chance to see the world."

Ishmael shrugged, "I just don't see the point. Like pa always says, the Europeans have been killin' each other forever, how is this time any different? And on top of that, how much different is the world outside of New Canaan? People are people no matter where you go."

"It's a lot different, Ishmael! The Germans are going to take over all of Europe, then England, and what's to stop them from coming here?" He paused and added, "And the world's a lot different outside of New Canaan. Do you really want to stay here your whole life?"

"Don't make too much difference to me."

"Well I don't want to stay on this farm forever. I love all of you, but I feel like I'm supposed to leave here and do something important?"

"Like what?"

"I dunno! Fighting in the war--"

"And coming back a big war hero?" Ishmael said with a smirk.

"Maybe! Just...something big that doesn't involve



this place.”

Ishmael leaned back and said, “At least you’ve got a chance of making it big in this place. You’re smarter than me...hell, you’re smarter than *most* of the people here. You could stay here and make a name for yourself; that’s not guaranteed out in the ‘world.’” He thought for a moment and said, “We’re not even in the war yet, who do you plan on fighting with, the French?”

“Some of our guys fly planes for the French...”

Isaac muttered.

“You can barely drive the car!” Ishmael laughed.

Isaac frowned and said, “Be that as it may, I bet we’re going to get into this war really soon and I want to say I did my part when it happens.”

Ishmael rolled his eyes and picked up the mason jar, “You do that Isaac. You wanna help me finish this?”

“No, thanks.”

“Suit yourself,” and Ishmael downed the rest of the mason jar’s contents in one gulp. He wiped the remnants off his chin, burped, and asked, “Don’t you have to be eighteen to join the Army?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, we’re not eighteen yet; we got another two years before that.”

Isaac kicked the dirt and said, “I know...maybe pa will cover for me if I want to go.”

“I doubt it, Isaac. I see him saying no and you’ll just have to wait ‘til you’re old enough.”

Isaac muttered, “Then I’ll find another way.”

## XIV

The following April, the United States declared war on Germany. Even in a removed place like New Canaan the news caused excitement and a surge of patriotic feeling. Although Abraham supported the war effort he wasn't swept up in the tidal wave of nationalist fervor that seized the rest of the country.

Abe remembered how Eli had told him of the horrors of war, about how nothing could ever remove the memories of the smells, sounds and sights of combat. He remembered what war did to Eli and what it took away from him. He didn't know how long the war would last, but he knew he didn't want his sons to experience it.

With America's entry into the war, Isaac knew it was the perfect chance to talk to his father about enlisting. Sowing season had begun, but if he gave his father enough warning then maybe it wouldn't be too much of a problem for him to leave the farm. If his father was a true patriot, a lover of democracy then he would let Isaac join the Army to fight the Germans. It would require a bit of lying, just a white lie in the grand scheme of things; justifiable, really.

Ishmael knew the argument was coming, and he would stand by his father when the argument came. His opinion on the matter was that Isaac was being a damn fool and needed to come back to his senses. If it upset Isaac then so be it, but that was better than being dead.

A few days after the declaration of war, and as Sarah cleared the kitchen table, Isaac cleared his throat and said, "Pa? I've got something I want to talk to you about."

"Yes Isaac?"

"You know...our country's finally entered the war, and it's a fight for democracy."

Abe leaned back in his chair, "I suppose it's something like that."

Isaac swallowed and continued, "Fights like these need a lot of young men to...fight."

"Young men are misguided and easily convinced."

Sarah stopped clearing the table and watched, along with Ishmael, as the argument began. Tension filled the room and threatened to burst each time Isaac and Abraham spoke.

"What I'm trying to say, is our nation's at war, and I'm going to be eighteen soon-"

"You're not even seventeen yet," Ishmael interjected.

Abe held up a hand at Ishmael to allow Isaac to continue.

"What I'm trying to say is I want to leave and-"

"Join the Army?" Abraham said.

There was a heavy pause. Isaac inhaled sharply, surprised that his father preempted his question and responded, "Yes, that's exactly what I want to do, but I would need you to cover for me."

"You mean lie for you? Just so you can go off and fight in some pointless war?"

"It's not pointless!" Isaac shouted. "It's...it's about protecting smaller countries from bigger countries, and about democracy, and about stopping the Germans."

Abraham shook his head, "You don't know anything about war, and clearly you know nothing about this one aside from what the papers tell you. What do you think you'd be fighting for? This war will end and in another few years they'll be at it again over the same things. You die over there, or become a cripple, what it'll be for? I'll tell you what it'd be for: making old, rich men more money."

Isaac stared at the table and muttered, "You're wrong."

Abe jumped out of his chair and leaned across the table and shouted, "*I'm wrong?*" He threw up his hands and

walked away from the table. “If you were so smart Isaac you’d realize what a waste this war is.”

Ishmael finally stepped in and said, “Listen to pa.”

“Yeah of course you’d say that.”

“He’s right Isaac and you won’t listen to him because you’re obstinate. Those Europeans are killing each other because they can’t figure out how to carve up the land. Why should we even get involved?”

Isaac laughed and shook his head, “You just don’t get it Ishmael. I’m not surprised though.”

Ishmael leaped out of his chair and went nose-to-nose with Isaac. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” he growled.

“What do you think?” Isaac said in a quiet voice with a small smile.

“Stop it, both of you!” Sarah yelled, and all three men in the kitchen jumped. “Isaac, you’re not even seventeen years old, and even if you were your father and I *still* wouldn’t lie for you. You aren’t going. Period.”

Isaac said nothing in return. He glared at Sarah, but couldn’t bring himself to scream at his mother. He could demean Ishmael and argue with Abe, but he just couldn’t yell or mock his mother. Instead, he stood up, looked every member of his family in the eyes and left the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” Abraham yelled, but still, Isaac said nothing. He walked up the stairs and went into his room to see if there was anything he needed. Deciding that he didn’t need anything he went back into the hall and down the stairs only to be greeted by Abraham and Ishmael at the bottom.

Isaac looked at them and said, “Move.”

Neither man budged and they dared Isaac to push them aside. Isaac had two options: retreat up the stairs and regroup, or push on ahead and hope for the best.

“Isaac, just go back upstairs, *please*,” Sarah protested. “Don’t do something you’re going to regret.”

Isaac looked at his mother and saw the tears in her eyes, the pleading look of a mother begging her boy not to do something rash. He looked away from her to avoid the guilt, to bury it deep within himself, he would have enough to be guilty about for a long time.

He jumped over the railing and hit the ground running. He tore through the front door and ran out into the night, away from the house, away from the farm, and down the dirt road toward New Canaan.

Abe and the rest of the family rushed out the front door as soon as they realized what had happened.

Ishmael started to run across the front yard toward the road, but Abraham shouted, “No! We’ll take the car!”

They ran over to the car and started getting it ready for a long night of driving around the countryside, but as they did this Isaac’s feet carried him down the road already making great distance between himself and the farm. The trees passed by in a blur, the farms brief yellow flashes on his periphery. His lungs burned and his heart throbbed, but he ignored that pain overcome by the joy of his escape. He was on his way.

The engine finally came to life, and Ishmael and Abraham jumped into the seats and took off down the road toward New Canaan. By the time they reached New Canaan, Isaac was outside of the town, picking his way through the brush along the side of the road. Not too many cars passed him, but whenever he heard one pass he ducked and waited until the vehicle passed. It already felt like he was evading the enemy and he loved every minute of it.

Ishmael and Abe drove out of New Canaan, and Abraham gripped the steering wheel and stared furiously at the road in front of him while Ishmael scanned the sides of the road looking for any sign of movement. The animals in the brush tricked him, and every time he saw a rustling in the dead leaves and twigs he gasped which forced Abraham to brake the car. After a few times of this, Abraham ordered

Ishmael not to say or do anything unless he saw his brother. They drove around for a few hours, stopped and talked to farmers to ask if they had seen Isaac, but there search turned up nothing. They drove home weary and defeated and frustrated.

Abraham shook with rage and fear. His mind spun with what to do next. He had not felt this disoriented since the night he killed Phil, but now it was much worse. It felt like one of his children had committed suicide, but at the same time it was worse than that because there was a complete lack of closure.

Sarah greeted her husband and son, and she saw Abraham's state. She placed a hand on his arm and said in a low, calming voice, "I'm sure he just needed to get away for a while, and he'll be back by tomorrow morning."

Abe nodded, but he couldn't calm down. Sarah led him inside, sat him down at the kitchen table, and fixed him a drink. He took small sips from the glass, but no amount of whiskey would make him feel any better about one of his son's running away from home.

He looked at Sarah and said, "Did I do this?"

"Oh Abe...no, no, no, don't you dare think you did this." Sarah took her husband's face in her hands and said, "If he doesn't come back it's not your fault."

"I just hope he comes back..." Abe responded, and he meant it in the long term, knowing full well that they couldn't stop Isaac from joining the Army, and they couldn't stop him from going off to war.

"Me too."

They held each other and cried in the dark kitchen. Ishmael walked in and saw his grieving parents, but said nothing to alert them to his presence. He turned around and went upstairs, promising himself he would never forgive Isaac for what he'd done to their parents.

Isaac walked until daylight ruptured on the horizon

and he realized he'd been walking all night. He found a wooded place to sleep, and rested for a few hours before continuing on his way. By sundown he reached Quincy and he went to the train station to find a train destined for Springfield. He found one, sneaked onto one of the freight cars, and prepared for his journey to the city. He finally had the chance to relax and reflect on the events of the past twenty-four hours, it now dawned on him that he had run away from home, and there was no going back. The full weight of his decision finally hit him, along with the hunger and exhaustion, and he decided the best thing to do was sleep.

He felt the train lurching as it began its trip to Springfield. Isaac sat up, rubbed his eyes, and finally took stock of his surroundings. The freight car was loud, hard, and filled with various boxes. Isaac studied the labels and found a few marked, "HERSHEY'S CHOCOLATE." Deciding that candy was better than no food, he opened one of the boxes and had a chocolate bar for breakfast. Isaac slid open the freight door and watched the passing landscape with his feet dangling out of the car and the chocolate bar in his hand. For the first time in his life he felt incredibly, truly free. He felt the kind of freedom a person feels once they realized they've been deprived of it. He smelled the mixture of the cool air and the coal smoke, he felt the morning sun on his face and arms, all of it intoxicating and gratifying.

As the train neared Springfield, he slid the door closed leaving a small gap to poke his head out and wait for the best time to leave the train. Once it came to a complete stop, he jumped out and fled the station, finding himself in the middle of the biggest city he'd ever seen. Springfield was far bigger than Quincy, and it made New Canaan seem like a mole hill in the shadow of the Rockies. It intimidated him, and at the same time excited him, now he was *really* on his own. He dusted himself off, straightened his clothes,

and made a plan to find the nearest recruiting station.



**XV**

The next morning, Abe, Sarah, and Ishmael woke up in New Canaan. They convened in the kitchen and ate a meager breakfast, Isaac's empty chair all-too painfully conspicuous.

Sarah shook her head, "I just don't know what he would want to do with that damn fool war."

Abe squeezed her leg and shook his head.

Ishmael finally spoke up, "He's being a selfish, rotten bastard."

"Ishmael!" Sarah said.

"I'm sorry, but he is. You've supported him all these years and what does he do for you in return? He goes off in the middle of the night to join the Army when he doesn't know a damn thing about the real world, and doesn't give a damn about what it will do to the two of you."

"What do you suggest we do?" Abraham snapped. "You know your brother, and you know that even if we do go looking for him, even if we do somehow bring him back, all he'll do is leave again and we'll be right back to square one. We don't even know where he went!"

"Then that's what we ought to let him do. Just let him go off on his own. He thinks he's such a man? Let him see what the world is like, let him go off and get killed in that war. If it'll make him so happy then to hell with the son of a bitch."

Sarah reached across the table and slapped Ishmael with the back of her hand. "Don't you say that, Ishmael!" Sarah yelled at her son, with tears in her eyes. "I don't ever want to hear you say that again!"

Ishmael put a hand to his face but recovered quickly, and continued as if Sarah hadn't hit him.

"Since when did he become Saint Isaac? When did he become the chosen son? You know how much bad

mouth Isaac would be doing if I did this? He'd never shut up. But what do I care, he wants to go off and be another dead hero? That's fine by me. He can go to hell for all I care"

"LEAVE!" Abraham roared.

Ishmael stood up and slammed the chair back into place. He glared at his parents, whipped the front door open, and stormed outside leaving the door open.

Sarah watched him go and turned to Abe, "I never thought we'd have to deal with this."

Abe held his head in his hands and said, "Sooner or later something like this was going to happen. I just didn't think it would involve one of our sons going four thousand miles across the ocean to fight in some war a bunch of old men dreamed up."

Sarah took her husband's hand and asked, "Isn't there something we can do?"

"There's nothing we can do, but wait to hear from him."

Sarah laid her head down on Abe's shoulder and they sat in the empty kitchen, uncertain of the future that they both thought was so concrete. Abraham looked out the kitchen window at the two graves beside the oak tree. He thought about the vision he'd had about the future of the farm, but he quickly pushed it out of his mind lest he worry himself into a heart attack. He listened to the sounds of the world waking up; the birds chirped in their trees and the world moved on ignorant and uncaring of the family's drama.

**XVI**

The cool autumn air of the morning was still in the recruiting office as the sergeant sat down at his desk and began his work on paperwork from the day before. He had just sat down when the door opened and a young man walked in. His eyes were bloodshot, accompanied by dark circles underneath them, and his black hair was greasy and unkempt. The sergeant sat up in his chair, expecting this to turn into a fight with some drunk kid that had managed to stumble into the recruiting office.

“May I help you, son?”

The young man shook away the cobwebs in his mind, smoothed out his hair and his rumpled clothes and approached the desk trying to look confident and official. He cleared his throat and spoke.

“Sir, I’d like to enlist in the Army.”

The sergeant looked the boy up and down, trying to decide if he was serious or not.

“Take a seat.”

Isaac sat down in front of the desk and sat up straight in the chair.

“So, you want to join up? What makes you think you’d want to do that?”

“Sir, I’d like to serve my country and go fight the Huns in France, sir.”

“Stop calling me ‘sir.’ Why do you want to go fight the Germans?”

“I believe that it is my duty as a citizen of this country to defend our freedom, and that at this moment the Germans are a threat to that freedom.”

“I see.” The sergeant tapped a finger against his lips and thought about what to ask next. He’d fought in the Philippines against the rebels and despite being a soldier, he always wondered about the necessity of some of these

conflicts. He had seen what war does to the human body, what it does to the countries used as the arenas, and how it ages men far beyond their natural age. The young man that sat before him was just a boy, probably barely legal to enlist, and he had no idea what to expect.

“Do you have any personal investment in the war in Europe? Is there still family over there that you’re concerned about? Or is it just for the adventure?”

“Adventure? No, no, that’s not it all; I’m taking this very seriously! The Germans are a grave threat and need to be dealt with and I want to help.”

The sergeant frowned and asked, “How old are you?”

“I’m eighteen years old.”

“You’re not lying about your age, are you?”

“No, not at all.”

“It’s not fun and games; it’s not some *schoolboy adventure* to do this. Do you get that son? You pass the physical and sign your name on that contract, you’re in and there’s no way out.”

The sergeant stared at Isaac and wondered if he truly grasped everything that he told him, or if it was just white noise that went in one ear and out the other.

“I understand.”

The sergeant sighed, “Alright, then follow me into the back and we’ll have a doctor check you out then we’ll get your paperwork in order.”

The doctor methodically checked Isaac’s his vitals without a word. He poked and prodded him, acting like a mechanic checking over a piece of machinery rather than a body. The doctor had to see these young bodies as machines, because the truth was too hard to handle if he saw them as people. After the physical, Isaac and the sergeant returned to the desk. The sergeant placed a piece of paper in front of Isaac, handed him a pen, and pointed where to initial and sign his name. He thought for a moment about signing his actual

name, but decided that the less they knew the better. He signed his name as Isaac Abramson and passed the contract and the pen back to Sergeant Hansen.

“Alright Isaac, that’s all there is to it. Go to the train station and tell them that you’re a recruit; you’ll be pointed in the right direction.”

“Alright, I can do that.”

The sergeant extended a hand to Isaac and said, “Good luck.”

Isaac shook his hand and nodded.

He watched Isaac walk out the door and down the street towards the train station. He shook his head and said, “Boy doesn’t know what he’s getting himself into, but he’ll find out soon enough.”

Just as he sat down behind his desk and started to go over paperwork another young man walked in and came up to the desk.

“I’d like to enlist in the Army.”

The sergeant sighed and said, “Take a seat.”

## XVII

Over the next few weeks, life continued as normally as it possibly could on the farm. Abraham and Ishmael prepared the field for the sowing season. Sarah busied herself more than usual around the farm by not only cooking and cleaning, but also helping in the field. In many ways, it was as if Isaac had died and now the family was coping in the wake of his absence. Abraham closed the door to Isaac's room and decided not to open it until he returned, if he ever did. The constant reminder that his son had left was too hard to bear otherwise. Throughout the summer, Ishmael spent his days helping his mother and father on the farm. After that work was done he went into town and helped some of the shopkeepers that he knew well. They paid him for his work, and at night he spent time with friends as they searched for ways to fill up their evenings in the town and in the country.

For Ishmael, Isaac's absence had been notable for the first couple of days, but it quickly waned. Ishmael had his own life independent of his brother. If anything, it was refreshing to not have to deal with Isaac bragging about going to school, or hearing him drone on about the war. There were times he missed Isaac. He had been Ishmael's closest confidant and Ishmael could brag to Isaac about some of the things he'd done with his friends, or a local girl named Ashley. Ishmael knew there would be a future without Isaac, it just surprised him that that time had come so soon.

Abe and Sarah hid their grief as best as they could. They didn't want to make Ishmael feel jealous or like he was just the other son. They wanted to avoid tension where it could be avoided, even if Ishmael didn't pay much attention to his parents. Not for lack of caring, he just had his own life to worry about. Abe and Sarah hid their grief

for another reason, they feared that if they recognized their sorrow it would consume them, and life would not continue until they knew that Isaac was okay.

In the heat of the day, when it is easier to be brave about these sorts of things, they were strong and pretended that life continued as usual on the farm. But at night in the stillness of their room, a heavy silence fell on them. They never spoke about it, and the only recognition they gave it was when Abe held Sarah while she cried. Nothing could be done about the situation, and the powerlessness they felt only made the pain worse. During the day, it was easy for them to pretend life was as it used to be, but at night their resolve weakened, hoping the next day brought hopeful news about Isaac.

## XVIII

Isaac arrived at an Army base with other recruits. Drill sergeants greeted them, screamed at them, belittled them. While the other recruits shrank against the tirades, Isaac welcomed them. It felt *real*, it felt visceral and unflinchingly honest. The sergeants told the recruits that they had no names, only 'recruit.' If they had no names then they weren't men, and if they weren't men then they would no longer fear death. They needed to not fear death, because most of them would die. The sergeants told Isaac and the other recruits what to remember and what to forget. The sergeants tried to prepare the recruits for everything, while admitting to themselves they couldn't prepare them for everything.

Isaac learned how to carry and shoot a rifle, how to hate his enemy, and how to kill his enemy without remorse. He pushed his body and mind to previously impossible lengths, then went to bed at night ready to do more of it the next day. He shed his individuality like an old skin, and learned a new meaning of brotherhood he'd never felt with Ishmael. He became part of a collective body and soul that would fight no matter how many parts it lost.

Their training continued day after day and week after week until time blurred together and sleep became a brief interruption. Isaac became like all the others, and he felt his individuality slipping away. Sometimes at night he wondered if he'd made the right choice, but with each passing day the doubts vanished. He sweated out his doubts, the sergeants drilled them out of him, and he embraced his new life.

With the training complete, he and his fellow soldiers went by train to the East Coast. Isaac saw the city and its sleek modernity, its frenetic speed enthralled him. Part of him rebelled at the sight of it all, and part of him



realized he had just wanted to escape from the farm. The die was cast though, and he had to accept it.

He boarded a ship along with thousands of other young men. They sailed across the ocean, tossing and turning in the violent throes of the waves; the first real conflict they had to endure. It felt like the ocean and Nature wanted to stop them, to protect them from going any further and landing on the violent European shores. Still, the ship's engines raged against the waves and propelled its human cargo toward mechanized destruction.

They arrived in France, unloaded the equipment and the men, who were treated no differently than machines. The metal bodies pumped oil to stay alive, and the tin men pumped blood to stay alive. Isaac, awash in this cacophonous sea and carried by the human tide, found himself completely out of control of his destiny. The part of him that still clung to his individuality recoiled at the prospects that he faced. The Romantics of the propaganda had worn off and now he found himself in strange, hostile lands thousands of miles from home. He had no way of going back unless he survived or died.

The closer they got to the front, the more alien the landscape became. The bombed-out houses, cratered farmlands, and the scarred landscape replaced the bustling humanity of the harbor. In the distance, they heard the whistle of artillery passing overhead followed shortly by the low concussive *thump* of a shell hitting the ground. They knew that somewhere, at that time, someone had probably died, or had had their life changed so much that they wished that they had died in that brief and painless instant.

Upon reaching the frontlines they were shown where they would sleep, eat, and live. Isaac felt his boots sink into the mud, and from somewhere beyond his field of vision he thought he heard rats scurrying and squeaking, living with the same fear that these men felt daily. As time

wore on, Isaac's expectations fell lower, and lower, and he thought about the comfort of his daily rituals back home. About not being jolted awake by the sudden cry of some man down the line being wounded by mistake or artillery, or by the thunderous roll of artillery being fired by both sides. At times, when it became too intense, he thought about the thunderstorms that came at night, replacing the boom of artillery guns with that of thunder, the flashes at night with that of lightning, and the soft pinging of falling dirt and shrapnel with the staccato of rainfall.

The months passed without action. Men were cycled out because of disease, or wounds, or death, or because one day they were needed and the next day they weren't. Isaac sat in the filth, hugging his trench coat around him for the little warmth it offered, wondering day after day if the next one would be his last. The summer months filled with training had passed away, and save for the calendar there was no way of knowing that the seasons had changed definitively. The trees had been blown away, reduced to splinters and mixed in with the mud, no browning leaves, no sign of the impending winter other than the days and nights becoming colder.

Winter came, and nothing changed. Men huddled close together in shivering masses. They prayed for a little sunshine to dry them out, warm them up, and make them feel alive again. Their rifles became an extension of their body, some weirdly deformed limb made of wood and metal that they could not let go of any more than they could cut off their arms and legs and feel whole.

During this time, Isaac wrote home and received letters from home. The communication was a reprieve from the alien world he found himself in. He missed the hum and click of bugs at night, the sound of animals crawling through underbrush, and the gentle, velvety sound of rain pouring down through green leaves. He no longer inhabited that real world though, and he had to keep reminding

himself of that whenever reality became too strange or cumbersome to handle, whenever he felt himself coming untethered. All of this was really happening, and it was happening to him. He felt suspended in a void, without form or bearing. The passing of time became irrelevant in the same way that it is irrelevant to a child, measured only by the rising and setting of the sun. The only fixed date he cared about was his second birthday. It had no fixed date, for his second birthday would be the end of this war, it would be a rebirth of sorts.

Despite his desire to return to the safety of comfortable shores, he still longed for his chance at glory. He approached his sergeant daily, asking when they would go over the top and see some real action.

He always began with, “Any news today about the war, sergeant?”

“Same as it’s ever been private. We’re not moving if they’re not moving.”

“Do you think headquarters will tell us to attack them soon, catch them off guard?”

“I don’t know, and to be honest, I don’t care. If the Huns are content to sit in their trenches, then I sure as hell am content to sit in ours.”

“So, no news sergeant?”

“No private.”

The thaw came and the hot breath of the coming summer whipped up the dying embers of the war, inspiring the Germans to act against their enemies. They drove deep into France, coming close to Paris, threatening to take the city and end the war. Some of the men around Isaac bristled with excitement at the news, eager to finally engage the enemy and get the pound of flesh that they had been promised. The older men that had seen fighting years ago, had come face-to-face with enemy soldiers and killed them,

and watched their friends die, were sickened by the prospect of enduring more of that ugliness.

Isaac fell somewhere in the middle of those two extremes. When the artillery roared at night and he heard the harsh crack of rifles fire he felt a disorienting mix of anticipation and dread. Something in him was both attracted to and repulsed by the fighting, it no longer seemed sanitized and heroic. When the firing at night stopped, he heard the screams of wounded men. He saw some of them come back alive, but not quite whole. Their eyes looked glassy and blind and their faces a picture of numbed minds reeling at what they had seen and done; the human psyche recoiling in horror at the depths of its depravity.

## XIX

Isaac huddled in a jump trench with the other men of his unit. They were outside a town called Cantigny, and the awesome, terrible roar of artillery fire shattered the peace of the early morning. The Germans heard the challenge of the cannons and answered in kind. The town laid on high ground surrounded by woods and German machine guns guarded it. After an hour of the terrible thunder, Isaac and the other soldiers received word to leave the safety of their trenches and advance on the town.

A wave of artillery led them to their target while tanks, flamethrowers, and planes aided in their advance. The drum roll of machine gun fire greeted them along with the snapping of rifles. Isaac and the other soldiers returned fire as they made their way toward the village. Men to the left and right of Isaac fell as bullets tore into and out of their bodies. They tumbled forward and landed face first in the dirt, and Isaac had to keep marching. After only a half hour, the town belonged to them.

It rattled Isaac, but he also enjoyed the rush it gave him. There was a primal selfishness in knowing that he had survived when other men had not. He helped fend off a small counter-attack later in the morning, but it didn't crush his feelings of victory. That happened with the second counter-attack.

The Germans poured artillery fire onto Cantigny and Isaac cowered in the dirt hoping all the shells missed him, then came the infantry. They charged up the hill just like Isaac and his comrades had done earlier in the day. The glory and arrogance vanished, replaced by only one goal: survival. Isaac dug in and fired his rifle on the Germans. Shells whistled across the sky and they made the earth roll and explode on impact. Men in the way turned into a fine mist of blood and dirt. The wounded laid in muddy holes

and screamed for God, for help, or simply for their mother; farther down the hill those same cries could be heard in German: *Gott, hilfe, mutter.*

Isaac took up a position in a fresh crater where a wounded man waited to die. Isaac stood over him and fired at his targets with mechanical repetition and precision: pick a target, pull the trigger, work the bolt, do these things four more times and reload. He wasn't sure until he hit anyone until he saw the soldier he would remember for the rest of the war. Many nights after that battle he could still see the face of the first man he knowingly shot and killed. A young German soldier, maybe not much older than he, charged towards Isaac's position. The soldier had a rifle in hands and a boy's face; probably a fresh replacement. He was close enough that Isaac could see the freshness of his skin, not yet worn down from dirt and blunt razors. The boy's eyes shined with the naïve excitement of a fight, and that light vanished in an instant followed closely by the roar of a rifle.

Isaac felt the kick of the rifle, the small escape of heat as he ejected the spent casing, smelt the sulfur as it stung his nostrils with its acrid and hellish odor, and the sight, damn the sight, of that stupid, ambitious boy taking a stumbling step forward, looking betrayed by what had just happened to him, his rifle falling to the ground and his hand rising to touch the wet, red stain that was spreading across his uniform. Isaac cursed himself for killing that boy, and he cursed the boy for being the one to be the first kill. Why couldn't he have been one of the drooling, savage apes from the propaganda posters? Why couldn't he have been a grizzled veteran that had had his life and his fill of bloodshed, and death was a merciful reprieve? Why? Why did it have to be a boy killing another boy? Why had he come to this place? How much longer would he be in hell? How many more would die before it was all over?

The rest of the war became a gory montage of things he saw and did. He saw men that he knew, men that he ate with, shared the mud and all the misery with, ripped apart by machine guns and artillery shells. He saw friends die in the mud, their bodies eviscerated by hot metal. His mind recoiling with the uncivilized and manic way he pulled the trigger and worked the bolt of his rifle, watching German soldiers freeze for a moment in time as their body accepted the bullet, then collapsed under the weight of mortality. He remembered the way he clubbed men that looked all too much like him with the butt of his gun, and heard the sickening crack as bones and tissue caved under the awful pressure of the wood.

Isaac learned that deep within a man's soul is the dark, animalistic past we've tried so hard to hide from ourselves. Every sinful, awful thing he did came from that primordial place, and he justified it with survival. He justified it with the ancient proverb of warfare, "better me than you." After the fighting his heart and mind recoiled from the reality of the things he'd done, but that primal part killed the guilt and told him it needed to be done if he wanted to go home. Still he asked himself, how much longer until that time came?

One day in November the guns fell silent, and an eerie quiet fell over the battlefields of Europe. Isaac's division had moved into Germany and now, across the enemy's threshold waiting to deliver the final blow, word came down that an armistice had been signed. It seemed like there should be celebrations, that everyone would hug and cry that the madness had come to an end, but there wasn't. Just the crushing silence, as if space and time itself was mourning what had happened here for four long years, condemning all that had been involved. The silence was God speaking, blessing and damning the bodies, both dead

and alive, strewn across the scarred and raped continent, a pre-apocalyptic day of judgement.

For the next ten months Isaac stayed in Europe. He and his surviving friends visited Paris and tried to wash away their bad memories in a baptism of sex and alcohol, and Isaac wrestled with his next battle: coming home. He could return to New Canaan, go back to the farm, and face his family as a changed man, a broken man. He could go elsewhere, start over and fill the things that were now missing from his life; the excitement of new adventures, the passion of the knowingly unknown.

The day came for them to leave and he, along with most of the division, boarded ships and sailed back for the United States. He was discharged from the Army and planned his next move. There was always the farm to go back to, but he couldn't bear to look at his family and know that they had been right. He couldn't bear the shame and disappointment of losing two years of his life. The farm would feel cramped, and the town would be boring. None of the other townspeople would know what he had seen, know what he had done, he would be alone. He had slipped away from his parents' home in the night and he was sure the town knew this. Yes, he had come back from war, but he had disobeyed his parents' wishes and put them through years of agony. There would be no hero's welcome for him and this disgusted him. That small town with their small people judging him for doing what they couldn't do, for leaving the town and seeing more of the World than they ever had. His world was no longer made of farms and shops, no longer made of people who were born and died in the same place. No, his world was a bigger one, and he needed that, because without it he would drown in the simplicity and stagnation. So, with all of that in mind, he set his sights on his father's old home: Chicago.



**XX**

In the years that Isaac had been gone, life continued on the farm. Isaac's absence had aged Abe and Sarah. Only two years had passed since their son left, yet it seemed more like twenty years to them. Of course, they still had Ishmael, but his presence did not negate Isaac's absence. Ishmael realized this, and although he did not refuse to help his father on the farm, it did make him bitter and resentful being around his parents.

He would go downstairs for breakfast and say, "Good morning," to them and they would say it back, but their response was never as cheerful as his greeting. Sure, they had lost a son, but they still had another one, but apparently just one wasn't enough.

*Or maybe I'm not enough*, he would think bitterly.

He never confronted them about this, but knew that even if he did they would act astonished, perhaps even hurt, that he would suggest that they loved Isaac more than him. It would only make things worse if he challenged them, and if he spent too much time on the farm he knew that eventually that fight would come. To avoid conflict, every night he would ask his father if he could take the car into town, and almost every night his father allowed him. Before he left on those nights, he would see his father holding the few letters that had come from Isaac. Ishmael tried not to take it to heart. He understood how much Isaac's departure had upset both of his parents, but their grieving had gone on for months, and it was beginning to take its toll on Ishmael.

The silence of the house became crushing after a while. There were good nights, nights where his father would get some beer and talk with his mother and they would laugh and act like a couple, but on most nights his father would retreat to the living room to read the

newspaper and mother would clean up the kitchen. She would then join Abe in the living room to read a book before they both retreated to their bedroom.

And the late-night crying, how grating it became! Ishmael would come home to the sounds of his mother sobbing in Isaac's room followed by his father coming to console her.

"Oh Abe..." his mother would sigh between sobs, "Why would he just leave like that? How could he just leave us like that?"

"I don't know Sarah."

*"He ran away from us, like it's a prison!"*

"I know..."

"Do you think he's all right?"

"I'm sure he is."

"But we haven't heard from him in weeks, how do we know if he's alive? He could be..."

Her voice would trail off followed by a fresh set of muffled wails.

The conversation varied from night to night, but the main exchange happened something like that, and at first Ishmael pitied his mother and father. He couldn't imagine the agony of it all, but then again, Isaac was his brother too, his *twin* brother, and he didn't collapse into a puddle of tears every night over Isaac's departure. It bothered him sometimes not knowing if his twin was okay, or even alive, but there was nothing that could be done. None of them could just go to the Army and say, "We demand our son/brother back this instant!" Besides, he had lied about his age, and chances were that even if they listened there wasn't much they could do about it. After a while, Ishmael had decided that the best thing he could do was to just leave for the night and meet up with friends, or Ashely, and spend the night doing anything but sit around listening to the oppressive silence, or the inevitable late night mourning. Ishmael scoffed at Isaac's close minded belief that there

wasn't anything to do in New Canaan. Hell, there was plenty to do if you weren't a stuck-up intellectual that spent most of his time with his nose in a book or a newspaper. Maybe it wasn't as exciting as war, and Ishmael wasn't interested in finding out, but he knew that life could be exciting without that nasty business. Those relaxed nights of sharing a fifth of stolen whiskey with some good friends and stumbling back home to sleep. The intoxicating mixture of the liquor and the summer nights. Those exhilarating nights spent with Ashley in a field or clearing, lying with each other in the wild consumed by their young love, and getting her back home in the wee hours of the morning before her parents woke up. To Ishmael, all of this was definitively more appealing than sleeping in mud and waiting to get killed.

Still, Ishmael was impressed that Isaac had had the guts to set out on his own the way he did, and he missed his brother. The nights that he spent with his friends in an open field getting drunk on cheap liquor he would think about Isaac.

*What are you doing right now Isaac? I'm sitting here with friends, enjoying life and getting to go back to a warm bed, and what're you doing? Sitting in some trench, wasting away, waiting for the next chance to die.* Then the whiskey would rebel in his stomach and his train of thought would stop.

Or on the nights he spent with Ashley, lying under some old tree near a pond away from town, listening to the hum of insects and the quiet breathing of the girl next to him, wrapped up in a worn blanket feeling her naked skin against his he would think, *Is it worth it brother? Is it worth it to miss out on something like this? I couldn't be more content right now, I couldn't be more comfortable and satisfied and feel more like a man. Does that gun make you a man? Does that misery make you a man?* Then she would wake from her nap and they would begin again and the

thoughts about his brother evaporated in the summer sex. He had his own worries too.

After they were done Ashely would ask, “Do you want to stay here, forever?”

“What, under this tree?”

“No! I mean in New Canaan; do you ever think about getting out of here and going somewhere else?”

Ishmael would shrug and say, “No, not really.”

She would sigh and lie against his bare chest and stare at the stars. “I wonder what life is like...out there.”

“Probably not that different from right here.”

Ashley would shrug and stop talking. Ishmael loved this girl, but he didn't want to leave New Canaan, and he needed to formulate a plan to keep her and keep New Canaan. She was a beautiful girl, and in many ways still a girl and not yet a woman, and in other ways a woman and no longer a girl. She was tall and fair, and had red hair and green eyes and a slender face with a body that appeared small and childlike, but a woman's. Her green eyes matched her personality, she was wild and beautiful and free like an untamed field, but in that freedom, there was also chaos and Ishmael had seen it before and it was both terrifying and enthralling, like watching a summer storm ravage the landscape and then cleanse it with sun and a gentle rain. To him, she *was* New Canaan.

In the summer after the war ended, Ishmael proposed to Ashley, and shortly thereafter they married in town. Isaac's absence was noted at the wedding, although he had at least sent a letter congratulating Ishmael on getting married and apologizing for his absence. He didn't explain why he couldn't be there for the ceremony, but alluded to the fact that he was working on something big that was life defining and of monumental importance.

The initial shock that Isaac was not returning home had already occurred. Upon his arrival in the United States he had sent a long, but vague, letter stating that he had

survived, that he was back, but that he was not going to return to New Canaan for a very long time. He had his reasons, but they were too complicated to explain in a letter, and that he wanted to start a new life for himself in Chicago. He also explained that he missed his family, but needed time away from them for reasons he couldn't explain in a letter. Sarah took the letter worse than Abraham, and made threats to throw out every scrap of Isaac's belongings, but when she got up to his bedroom she could only sit on his bed and cry about the prospect that she may never see her son again. In the wake of that letter Abe had remained stoic as usual and comforted Sarah, but on the day of Ishmael's wedding he couldn't help but drop hints that he was disgusted with Isaac's behavior and lack of consideration for his family.

After the wedding, Ishmael and his new wife Ashley moved into the farm house and life continued as usual on the farm. Ishmael helped his father and Ashley helped Sarah. Not long after the wedding Ashley became pregnant (or at least it was apparent that she was pregnant, there were rumors that their wedding had been a shotgun affair), and nine months later they had their first son, Nathaniel. A few years later they had a daughter and named her Hannah. For Ishmael, this solidified his life in New Canaan and he was overjoyed, and it solidified Ashley's life in New Canaan too. She was happy to be a wife and a mother, but sometimes she looked to the horizon, and wondered... what if?

The farm enjoyed an unknown prosperity and even New Canaan made a little progress. The farmhouse got a telephone, a new cooking stove and an icebox; a taste of modernity for Sarah and Ashley. Abraham traded in his old car for a newer Model A pickup and for Christmas bought the family a battery-powered radio. Even in the wilderness of New Canaan the people enjoyed the bountifulness of the decade, and nobody expected it to end.

**XXI**

On the other side of the horizon, Isaac was making his own life for himself. He always had a keen sense for numbers, and a way of dealing with people and manipulating them; perfect for business. Upon coming home from the war, he reconnected with his relatives that he knew of in Chicago. They were well-to-do, lived in one of the wealthier neighborhoods of the city, and they happened to be patriotic people, the kind of people that would gladly have sent their son off to war if the country called for it. He contacted them and explained how his mother and father had forbade him from joining the Army, how they had fought tooth and nail to stop him, and how he ultimately made the choice that his family's wishes were important, but his country needed him. The older men of both families nodded their heads approvingly when he told them, and the old women patted his arm and said what a good young man he was, some quoting Scripture about how young men leaving their homes and turning into men and other platitudes like that.

In the wake of what he had seen and done though, it was all Isaac could do not to grab them and shake them and tell them that the war hadn't made him a man any more than robbing a bank or killing a man in cold blood would have. There was no need for that sort of emotional display.

*Pick your battles, Isaac, he told himself. These people may be ignorant, but they are still your family, and perhaps more importantly they're rich and can help you get established.*

He was set up in a house that one of his uncles owned and got a job through a cousin in the Chicago Stock Exchange. He could wheel and deal with people, manipulate these simple-minded men, and build an empire for himself. Like war, it all came down to strategy whether

it was a person or a dollar: put it in the right place, at the right time, and in the right hands and it could be wildly successful, or catastrophic. He planned his moves accordingly, treating life like a never-ending chess game. When he got some more money he already knew what to do with it. When he met a new person, he knew just what he would say to them. There was only one time when he'd had an unexpected snag in his plan. There was a great investment opportunity, possibly illegal but a great investment nonetheless, and they wanted the investment in cash. Isaac had gone to the bank to withdraw the money, and due to some incompetence on the bank's end and a close brush with the law, he lost the opportunity. After that he invested in a personal safe and filled it with enough money that if another opportunity arose he'd be ready.

Isaac's strategies always seemed to be in the favor of what his family wanted for him. They introduced him to the right people, told him about the proper places and ways to invest his money, and even the women to think about courting. He realized that he was being manipulated by his family, but it worked out well for him. When it came to women though, he was completely oblivious. His cousin introduced him to a friend's sister that also came from a wealthy, Chicago family and he couldn't grasp that this woman had been preapproved to be his future wife. Of course, there was *some* choice, but even if he didn't like this one his family would find another. There was no need for another though. Her name was Rebecca and she had brown hair that fell in curls past her shoulders when it wasn't trapped under a hat. Her eyes were blue and they reflected her split nature: she could be warm and refreshing and calm, but that calmness could lend itself to an extraordinary coldness, and she was just as calculating as Isaac and that is why he fell in love with her.

Around family she played the quiet and subservient girl waiting to be given an order, but when it was just her

and Isaac she was free. They went to parties, she dressed like a modern woman, she smoked cigarettes and drank with the men. She didn't see the problem with it, after all, she was rubbing shoulders with the heirs and heiresses to the old empires of the city. Why not start making business connections as soon as possible? She may have been rebellious, but Isaac loved that about her and loved that she justified it with sound reason. He could let go with her, and bury the old memories in favor of creating new, better ones.

They married and had their own set of twins: Jacob and Ezra. There was no doubt that the boys were twins, at least physically speaking, but as they aged a clear distinction in personalities emerged. Sometimes they served as painful reminders to Isaac of the brother he'd left behind. They fought like Isaac and Ishmael, they bonded like Isaac and Ishmael, in so many ways they were a mirror to Isaac and Ishmael. He tried to avoid those thoughts and focused on raising them as his sons, not as analogues. Time passed and Isaac continued his work maintaining his family's standing in Chicago and building up financial assets. The boys went to a prestigious school and they were constantly groomed by their mother and father on how to rise to their family's tradition. Meanwhile, Isaac and Rebecca went to fewer parties, but still showed up to one at least once a month. Yes, they were parents, but it was a time of plenty and exuberance. Here were the people that survived the Great War, and dammit they deserved some fun. The sun would never set on this eternal day, life would stay the course, and after the years of pain Isaac was finally happy.



**XXII**

It was a cold day at the end of October when the fun stopped. In a matter of hours, the new kings became peasants. Isaac watched in horror as the value of stocks plummeted and by the end of that black day half of his entire worth had vanished. All his work, his years of planning, all his strategies meant nothing. He had been so sure of himself when he came to Chicago after the war, he had believed so deeply that he wouldn't be ashamed of himself a second time. He stood on the brink of thirty years old with a shattered empire and a quickly dissolving psyche.

There was optimism in the beginning, that the market would correct itself and return to normal, but the return never happened. Savings ran out, families crumbled, and the banks ran out of money. Capitalism had failed everyone, and the sun set on the prosperous, eternal day. No one hosted parties any more, and Isaac and Rebecca placed the boys in a public school. Image meant nothing. Rebecca's family went to their summer retreats along with Isaac's extended family out of fear that wealth made them targets. Isaac and Rebecca's safety net ceased to exist and now they faced the dark, unforgiving future.

At night, they sat together and discussed their options.

"Maybe it's better in smaller cities?" Rebecca suggested.

"No, from what I've heard it's the same everywhere in the country. You can't go into any city without seeing a bread line."

"We could sell this house, move somewhere cheaper?"

"Then what would we do, Rebecca?"

"You could get a job--"

“*Doing what?*”

“I don’t know, Isaac! Just...something.”

There was a heavy silence as they both realized the limits imposed on them.

“We’ll be alright,” Isaac said.

Rebecca nodded, but she wanted to ask, “For how much longer?” She knew Isaac didn’t have the answer to that question, and it terrified her.

Sometimes Isaac sat in his office, and looked out the window while he thought about his life insurance policy. He wasn’t sure if it was any good, but if anything was left of it then it would be an extra bump that might help sustain the family for a few extra years.

*Is it cowardly or selfless? Isaac thought. Don't lie, it would be the ultimate escape. It wouldn't hurt. Maybe if it looked like an accident then it wouldn't seem so suspicious, or cowardly. They could make the claim, sell the house, and move somewhere else. That would be more than enough money to buy a new house and last until the boys got jobs.*

He shook his head to his mind of those thoughts, but they had become regular, and persistent. Each new contemplation crashed over him like the waves on a beach, each one stronger than the last, and he knew that eventually it would be too much and he would surrender to those black waters. It could be so easy, so freeing to completely run away from every problem he ever had, or would have. Then he remembered Rebecca, and Jacob, and Ezra and the pain it would cause them. He would be no different than the men that skipped town and vanished into the ether of another major city, or retreated to the relatively anonymous West. There were no good options, so he sat in his office and stared out the window trying to figure out what to do next, how to dodge reality again, and retake control of his life.

In New Canaan, the new depression did not become apparent with the same immediacy like it had in the cities. New Canaan existed in a self-sustaining bubble, and it weathered storms like this before. The effects of the depression crept in like a cancer and by the time anyone noticed it had done its damage. There was one bank in New Canaan, and despite being an independent institution it was still at the mercy of the economy which meant that the residents of New Canaan were also at the mercy of the economy. It became more difficult to get minor loans, which meant that any loans given out by the bank had to be smaller than they had been in years past. The farmers and shop owners had to make due with less, and by making due with less they produced less, which meant they were forced to go deeper into debt to stay alive.

Abe's farm was no different than the others. He had always produced the most, and the loans he got he paid off with no problem. In the spring following the collapse, he went to the bank to get his usual loan. When he entered the building, it looked fragile and waiting for the hammer to fall. They hadn't fired anyone, but the workers looked anxious and knew it was only a matter of time before the reaper came for them.

Abe walked up to one of the tellers and said, "I'm here to sign up for my usual loan."

The teller shook his head, "We aren't doing loans right now."

"What are you talking about? You're a bank!"

"I'm sorry, we just can't risk it. What if you have a bad harvest and can't pay us back?"

"I always pay you back, you know I'm good for a debt."

"Abe, we just *can't*."

He sighed and said, "Okay, then I need to make a withdrawal."

The teller hesitated and said, “Um...how much are you looking to withdraw?”

Abe told him and the teller shook his head, “We don’t have it.”

“What do you mean, ‘*we don’t have it?!*’” Abraham shouted.

“People have been making runs, taking out as much as they can at once. We weren’t prepared, so now I can only give you so much.”

“Well, how much is that?”

The teller told Abraham and he swore under his breath. It wouldn’t be enough to cover one field much less two. What other choice did he have? He took the money, bought the seed, and returned home to tell the family about the situation.

That summer, they sowed their meager crop, and it wasn’t a good harvest. They tried to save some of the seed, save some of the food, and save their money, but it proved to be an unwinnable battle. The next year the money ran thin, and for the first time since he had moved to New Canaan Abraham faced the grim prospect that he might have to join the ranks of those that were also approaching total collapse. The seed store was willing to sell on credit, but even that had its limits. Still, Abe and Ishmael promised each other they would never get as desperate as the poor bastard on the edge of town.

**XXIII**

The farmer stared at his empty fields, his empty barn, and his empty house. There were no sounds other than the whispering wind. It was deathly quiet, and he stood in the open with a shotgun in his hands.

His friends and neighbors had tried to help, but they weren't doing any better than him. The farmer had always been poor. He'd come from a poor family, but they'd always had a roof over their head and knew there would be food on the table, and the same applied for him and his family.

Then the depression came and changed all that. When he couldn't farm, he'd gone into town to see if one of the shops needed help. He asked other farmers if they needed help. He would have worked for food, but nobody had the money or food to spare. He sold the furniture and almost all the family's belongings. Then that money ran out. Every day he came home to a wife and five children, and at the end of every day they looked skinnier and skinnier. The children cried from hunger pains, and the baby shrieked because her mother didn't have the milk to feed her. He couldn't sleep at nights and he paced the house and land praying for the depression to end.

How had this happened?

Why had this happened?

Who let this happen?

These questions swirled around his brain, and they ran together. He wanted to lash out someone, something, he needed a place to put the blame. He didn't have the money to drink, and even if he did he'd never forgive himself if he spent it on that. The days and nights blurred together and he felt himself growing weaker. He watched his family waste away in front of him, and he knew what he had to do.

He went out to the barn to get the shotgun he kept for trespassers and vermin. It felt heavy and dead in his hands as he loaded five shells into its chamber and he pocketed a sixth one. He couldn't feel his heartbeat, he couldn't feel his skin, his head throbbed and his knees felt weak as he walked back to his farm. He didn't have the strength to cry.

The farmer went into the living room and found his wife and four of their children sitting on the floor. They barely noticed him when he came in.

Five shots rang out and the shells echoed as they hit the floor.

Upstairs, the baby began to cry and he silenced it with a pillow.

The farmer grabbed a shovel from the barn and dug six graves behind the house, methodically digging without the full realization of his actions. The farmer gently lifted each body and carried them outside and laid them in the ground. Even as he poured dirt on the body of his baby girl he neither cried nor spoke; just worked.

He went back into the house and stared at the bloodstains on the floor, at the bullet holes in the walls, and at the crushing emptiness of the house. He dug a book of matches out of a pocket and lit each one, tossing the burning sticks without aiming. The farmer exited the house as the fire began its consumption and he stared at the six fresh graves. Only then did he finally muster up the strength to cry. He wept over the fresh graves as he loaded the sixth shell into the shotgun.

He fell to his knees before the graves of his wife and children, and his hands brought the shotgun up to his chin. He lifted his head to the sky and prayed to God to forgive him.

He closed his eyes and said, "Amen."

The shotgun shouted one last time, and then it spoke no more. The only sound was the muffled crackling as the

fire ate the house and the occasional snapping of wood as it failed. Off in the distance there came the sound of car engines, and soon the New Canaanites would find out what the depression truly meant for some people.

**XXIV**

After the farmer killed his family, everyone in New Canaan could see the coming failure of their farms and wondered how long it would be before they too became so desperate and despondent that they turned on their families and killed them.

Those desperate days led to serious talks at night between Abraham and Ishmael. They sat at the kitchen table leaning toward each other and talking in hushed whispers about what to do concerning the farm and how to make sure the next tragedy didn't involve their family. One night after the incident at the other farm, Abraham and Ishmael sat at the kitchen table and tried to formulate a plan.

"We need to figure out what to do next," Abe began.

"We've been over this before, we can't just up and leave."

"Then what do you suggest we do, Ishmael? Stay here, go deeper into debt, turn out a meager harvest and a bad profit and do that season after season? You saw what happened with that other family."

"It won't get that bad here. We'll strike a deal with the bank or the store. We know them, they'll work with us.

Abraham shook his head, "You don't understand how it works Ishmael. It's too much of a risk for them. Hell, they're already taking a risk with us. They don't owe us anything more than what they're already giving us."

"But they're our friends! We've dealt with them for years."

"That's not how business works. We could be their family and they probably wouldn't give us any extra."

"Well then they might as well be stealing food out of our mouths."



"These are the times we're living in Ishmael. You think people are talking about right and wrong? They're only thinking about how to make it one more day without winding up on the street, and that's what we need to think about too."

Ishmael turned away from his father without responding.

"I've been thinking about reaching out to some speculators from up north. I bet we could get enough to pay off our debts and move out of here. There's still family in Chicago that could help us, or maybe we could go to Michigan and start over there."

"You said this farm would be for me and Isaac..."

"I know I did, but you have to understand that I didn't plan on this happening. I didn't plan on Isaac leaving and I didn't plan on the depression. We have to adapt and accept all of this if we want to survive."

Ishmael grabbed his father's forearm, and he said in a choked voice, "Then let's adapt *here*. The farm is home, New Canaan is home. We can't just run away from it and start over somewhere else."

"Ishmael-"

"All I know is farming the land here, and all I know is here. I've poured so much sweat and blood into the soil that it might as well be one of my own children, and you've done that too! The farm might as well be another child, you can't just sell it off and abandon it."

Abraham studied his son for a second and saw him as a little boy again; desperate and optimistic. He sighed and nodded, "Alright, I won't talk to anyone about selling the farm yet. We'll wait."

The peace didn't last long though, and a few nights later Abraham brought up the topic again and the same discussion followed. The conversation grew a little more heated, a little more tense, and each man saw the future

panning out before them, and it looked unknown and hostile.

Isaac and Rebecca sat in their home in Chicago. It was a weekday in late spring, and the boys were still in school. They had sold the things they didn't need, and they still had the safe full of money, but that wasn't going to last forever and they still didn't have a plan. The winter would gobble up more money when it came time to heat the house, and they both knew that if they didn't get out of Chicago before the winter they wouldn't have enough money to get out of the city.

"Isaac, we need to talk about what we're going to do."

For the first time in his life, Isaac admitted, "I don't know what to do, Rebecca. Your family's gone, my family's gone. We wrote to them and they haven't responded. We can't go to the banks, I can't find a job, and the money we have isn't going to last through next summer."

"Then we need to get out..."

"Where, Rebecca? Where do you expect us to go?"

"I've heard things are better out west, maybe we can try there?"

Isaac shook his head, "No, it's too risky." He didn't want to leave his home, he didn't want to leave the city. He scanned the room and took it all in. He saw the places on the floor where some furniture had been, the empty spots on the wall where the paintings once hung, all of it reminding him that he was working with borrowed time. He felt fidgety and claustrophobic. He stood and paced the room while he wracked his brain trying to think of anything. There had to be something! Isaac walked over to a desk where some of the mail laid, and he absentmindedly shuffled around the letters and envelopes. He picked up one opened envelope and casually inspected it. Maybe if he

stopped trying the answer would come to him. He read the sender's address, *New Canaan...*, and his mind finally clicked.

Could he really bring himself to go back there? Would they even take him back? He gripped the envelope in his hand and turned around to face Rebecca.

She noticed that a cold sweat had broken out on Isaac's forehead, and he gripped a piece of mail in one hand while he stood rigidly in place.

"Isaac, what is it?"

He walked stiffly over to Rebecca and knelt beside her. "I think I have an idea..."

"What is it?"

He showed her the envelope and she frowned at first, then realized what he meant.

"Isaac, I don't know..."

"Why not?"

"We don't even know if they still live there. What if they're having money troubles too?"

"I have the money in the safe. Unless they're in worse shape than we are I could help them *and* there would still be money left over."

Rebecca bit her lip and looked at the letter. Could she bring herself to leave Chicago? Her life was here, she knew the city, did she want to uproot all of that and move to a place as distant and alien as New Canaan?

"What about the boys? Where would they go to school, what would their lives be like?"

"There's a school, and it's not a bad town." Isaac saw the doubt in Rebecca's eyes and he continued, "I know it won't be as exciting as Chicago, but we need to get out of the city, *I* need to get out of the city. It would only be for a little bit. Once things settle down we can move back here, I promise."

Rebecca studied her husband. He held both of her hands and stared intently into her eyes. He was begging her

to go, pleading with her, trying to convey to her that if they stayed any longer it would kill him.

She sighed and gave him her answer.

**XXV**

It was a lazy Sunday in late spring of '32. Abe and Sarah were sitting in the living room watching their grandson Nathaniel and granddaughter Hannah playing in the middle of the floor. Hannah had been born a couple years after Nathan, and although there was that age gap they still got along well. Nathan was patient with her, but she still annoyed him from time to time.

Ishmael tended to the field in preparation of sowing season and Ashley prepared food for Sunday dinner. Although Abraham and Sarah weren't ancient, the years of hard work had taken their toll and they relied on Ishmael and Ashley more for simple, daily tasks. From outside there came the scrape of metal against soil and from the kitchen the sound of vegetables or meat being cut up and thrown into a pot or pan. The rhythm of the house and farm produced a tranquility punctuated by the children's laughter and chatter.

The far-off roar of an approaching vehicle broke the stillness of the afternoon. Abe had been reading the newspaper and he set it down, and Sarah did the same with her book. The children continued playing and the rhythmic chopping in the kitchen continued unfazed by the disturbance. Ever since Isaac had left, Abe and Sarah had always hoped that someday out of the blue he would return, and every time a vehicle approached they believed that maybe, just maybe, it was Isaac. It usually ended in disappointment and tears. All they wanted was for their prodigal son to come home and be welcomed back into the family.

This time was different, though. The black beetle-like automobile approached in a cloud of dust. It was sleek, new, and lacked the blemishes and rust of the cars in New Canaan. Abe and Sarah watched the approaching cloud of

dust and both of their hearts pounded in their chests as the vehicle slowed and turned into the farm's driveway. Their hearts threatened to explode or burst out of their chests when the vehicle turned and drove up the gravel driveway that led to the house. They watched, visibly shaking as the driver door of the car opened and a man exited and walked over to the passenger door.

Abe stood up trembling and put a hand on the chair to steady himself.

"Abe?" Sarah said to her husband, her voice breaking as she said his name.

"I don't know."

Abraham walked over to the large, front room window that faced the driveway and stared out at the vehicle and its occupants. He saw two boys sitting in the back of the black car, a young woman sitting in the front, and the young man helping the woman out of her seat. He was tall, and had black hair, and looked haunted and broken. His eyes had dark circles from a lack of sleep and vacant from the tiredness, but when he looked at the woman he smiled and said something to her that Abe couldn't hear.

"Isaac?" Abe whispered, but when he said it, it felt booming and encompassing like he had said the name of God.

"Abe, please, is it him?"

"I don't *know* Sarah," Abe's voice sounded brittle and tense and filled with optimism, but a reluctance to acknowledge that optimism. It had been over fifteen years since he had seen his son. He couldn't even be sure that Isaac would look the same or remember how to get back to New Canaan. Still, Abraham wanted to believe that it was Isaac standing out there with a daughter-in-law he had never met, and grandsons he didn't know existed. The boys got out of the car and followed the man and woman as they walked up to the front door. The man took a deep breath

and the woman squeezed his arm as they ascended the wooden stairs, crossed the porch, and walked up to the door.

"What if they don't even want to see me?" Isaac asked Rebecca.

"They will, you're their son."

"I abandoned them though. I haven't spoken to any of them in years, I didn't tell them about Jacob and Ezra, they weren't invited to our wedding. Now I'm here practically crawling back to ask for a place to stay. What do they owe me?"

"You're *their son*, Isaac. If they're still angry with you, you know they won't turn away their grandchildren."

Isaac stared at the front door and considered turning back, retreating again, this time into the abyss he had stared into back in Chicago.

Abraham walked over to the front door and looked back at Sarah, his eyes wide and mouth slightly open. His tongue felt thick and dry and he tried to tell her to stand up, but he couldn't find the words. Sarah knew, and walked over to stand beside Abe. She needed to see for herself if this visitor was her son, and if it wasn't then she needed to be there to catch and comfort her husband. She had mourned and cried over Isaac's departure, but it had hollowed out a part of Abraham, and the shock of disappointment might be too much for him to handle. He might become angry, he might become violent and rage against this innocent visitor who could simply be lost and in need of direction. He might collapse in the doorway and turn into a sobbing mess, crying for a son that might as well be dead on the battlefields of Europe. She needed to be strong for her husband like he had been strong all those times for her.

The knocks on the door echoed in the silent living room. They bounced off the walls and pierced Abraham and Sarah, disabling them and numbing them. The knocking stopped and Abraham stood by the door frozen, pale, and breathing rapidly. He jumped when Sarah touched his shoulder and said, "Open the door Abe, we have to know."

He put his hand on the doorknob, cold and made damp from the sweat on his hand. He pulled open the door open and stared at the face of the man standing before him.

"Isaac?"

Isaac smiled at his father and said, "Can I come in?"

Abe threw his arms around his son and hugged him. The emotions poured out of him as he held Isaac and cried tears of joy that his son came home, and tears of grief that it took him so long to come home. He didn't see a man standing before him, but the boy that had left so long ago. He wanted to hold him and tell him all was forgiven, but he also wanted to beat him and scream at him for leaving the way he did.

Sarah took trembling steps and placed a hand on her son's cheek. She couldn't believe that he had returned. It was like looking at a ghost that had come out of its grave and was once again a man. Tears formed in the pits of her eyes and she began crying too, whispering, "Isaac, Isaac, Isaac," over and over.

Ashley heard the commotion and raced out of the kitchen expecting some terrible scene. She had never seen Isaac in person of course, and the only basis of knowledge for what he looked like came from the outdated pictures of the boys placed around the house.

Abraham noticed Ashley's presence and pulled away from Isaac. He turned around, wiped his face with his sleeve, and smiling he said, "Go get Ishmael, Nathan and Hannah."



She nodded and hurried toward the back door to go out in the field where Ishmael was at work. They heard her shouting his name and telling him to come quick. Abraham redirected his attention to Isaac and grabbed his shoulders, his face beaming.

"My son, my son, you're back," Abraham said in a whisper. Saying it made it seem more true.

"I am," Isaac tried to sound as overjoyed as his father, but the defeat he felt penetrated the happiness and exposed itself making him sound a little sadder than he wanted to.

Sarah stepped in and hugged her son, the emotional levees she had built caving in as soon as she wrapped her arms around her boy, the tears flowing freely and soaking his shirt. Ishmael came in through the back door, running through the house and wiping his hands on his pants, panicking that his mother, or father had had a heart attack or dropped dead. He froze and his eyes widened when he saw the man standing in the doorway.

In that moment, Ishmael wasn't sure what to do or how to feel. A strange mixture of shock, hatred, and joy rushed into him and he didn't know what to do with those emotions. The man standing before him had abandoned the farm, put their parents through hell, and barely spoke to any of them in over a decade. Yet, this man was no stranger, it was his twin brother who he still loved and had missed; the brother-in-law to his wife, and the uncle to his children. He took a few stiff steps forward, and unsure of what to do next, he threw his arms around his brother.

"I didn't think you'd ever come back."

"Me neither."

Ishmael's breathing was deep and steady, he tried to search for something to say, something heartfelt and profound and welcoming, but all he could respond with, was, "Why?"

"I'll explain as soon as everything settles down."

Once the initial shock of Isaac's return passed, he introduced Rebecca, Jacob, and Ezra to his family while Ishmael introduced Ashley, Nathan, and Hannah. After the reunions and first-meetings, Isaac went to Abraham and Ishmael and told them that he needed to speak with them. They went into the kitchen and sat down at the table where so many important talks had happened before, usually with Abraham presiding and meting out judgements and decisions. This time, Isaac took charge and explained what had happened. He told of how he had come home from the war, scarred and embarrassed to face his family. He explained how he had gotten established in Chicago with help from some of their distant relatives and how he had succeeded in the city; gotten married, had sons, and for nearly ten years done well with money until the crash happened.

"I didn't know where else to go. I couldn't stay in Chicago, the jobs are all gone, and the money wouldn't have lasted. I still own the house, but no one would have bought it anyway. I thought this would be the best place to bring Rebecca and the boys, at least until things stabilize."

Isaac looked down at the table, considering that once again he had failed and been forced to retreat into the arms of family, "I don't know how long it will be, and anything that I have to do to help out I will, but there's nowhere else for us to go. What I'm asking is, can we stay here?"

Ishmael inhaled sharply, incensed that Isaac had been home for less than an hour and was already making requests that he expected to be granted. He wanted to speak up and say that it would need to be discussed, but knew that that would not be Abraham's reply.

"Of course, Isaac. You might be a grown man, but you're still our son. Things are hard, we understand. Seems they're hard for everyone..." Abe's voice trailed off for a moment then he continued. "But the point is we'll make

space for you. You've come so far, and you need help, and even if you didn't it wouldn't matter. The important thing is that you're back, and there are years of catching up to do!"

Ishmael nodded and tried to sound excited, but the words fell flat, "Yep, that's true, so many years...people we hardly know..." He wanted to add something, take a shot at Isaac's absence, but he didn't want to crush his father's happiness. Besides, there was a part of him that was glad to see Isaac. Instead he said, "Welcome home, Isaac."

Isaac smiled and said, "Thank you Ishmael." The sincerity of Isaac's words neutralized Ishmael's animosity. This was his brother that he hadn't seen since he left, best not to be too antagonistic. He sat back in his chair and listened to Abraham catch up Isaac on all that had happened on the farm and in New Canaan since he left. Ishmael started to lose focus, but Abraham grabbed Ishmael's attention when he said, "I've been trying to decide what to do with the farm. It'd be so much work to pack everything up and go back to Chicago, and from what you've told me things aren't much better up there, if not worse." He nodded toward Ishmael, "Your brother doesn't want me to sell the farm, but I don't see how we can stay here any longer."

Ishmael watched his brother, immediately ready to go on the defensive if Isaac started telling their father that selling the farm would be a good idea, but he waited to see what his brother would say.

"How much money do you need?" Isaac asked.

"We need to pay off our credit at the bank, then we need enough to buy seed for next year's crop."

Without hesitation Isaac said, "I'll take care of it."

Ishmael bolted upright in his chair and stared at his brother then at his father, waiting to hear what Abe would say to that.

"Isaac, that's a lot of money, and you said money was tight in Chicago-"

Isaac held up his hand, "Everything is more expensive in the city, and when I said I'd be able to help in whatever way I could I meant it. I don't want you to have to sell the farm," Isaac said as he put his hand on his father's forearm. "It's the least I can do after all I've put you through."

Abraham tried to speak first, but Ishmael broke in first, "Is that your word?"

Isaac cocked his head at Ishmael, "What?"

"Is that your *word*? Do you promise to do this for us, or is this just one of your plans like when we were kids? And when it doesn't work you'll just skip off and pretend that you had no part in it?"

"I've got the cash with me, we can go into town tomorrow to pay off the creditor. I know I haven't been a good brother to you Ishmael," and addressing Abe, "Or a good son, but please let me make it up to you, let me do this. I've done a lot of wrong things in my life, made some bad mistakes, but *this* I feel good about."

Abe looked over at Ishmael then back at Isaac, "Isaac, the thing you have to understand is that Ishmael stayed on the farm when you left. He worked the fields with me, his children were born here, if it hadn't been for him I would have been forced to quit farming. He has just as much of a stake in this farm as I do, or as Eli did."

"I understand that."

Abe continued without acknowledging Isaac, "What I'm getting at is I know you want to help us, but-

"But *what*?"

"I don't want you to think that giving us this money will give you authority over the farm. This also wouldn't mean that you, Rebecca, and your sons wouldn't have to work with the rest of the family. There can be no favoritism here."

Isaac didn't respond and sat in his chair, processing everything he had been told. The day's earlier triumphant

return seemed muted. In trying times like these, there could be no risks taken, or mercy given if anyone intended to survive. Even if he went through giving the money to his father, he could decide to sell the farm tomorrow and he'd be right back at square one.

"Can I sleep on it?"

"It'd be strange if you didn't. There aren't any more bedrooms for you, so that means you'd all have to stay down here until we can figure something out. We'll set up beds for you, we've got a few cots and blankets to spare. Might be a little cozy, but it'll serve its purpose. I'll talk to your ma about it."

"Thanks pa."

Abe smiled and nodded and left the table leaving Isaac and Ishmael sitting in the dining room alone. Neither brother looked at the other, and the immediate silence caused by the end of the conversation stifled any attempts at more talking. Growing impatient with the quiet Isaac pushed his chair back to stand up and leave.

"Why'd you come back Isaac?"

Isaac stopped and sat back down.

"What do you mean? You heard me tell you why earlier."

"Yeah, I know why, but I mean *why*?"

Isaac sighed and sat back down, "You want the whole truth?"

"It'd be a nice change for you to be honest with me Isaac."

Isaac nodded, his mouth a thin line, "Alright, I'll tell you."

Ishmael got up from his chair and walked over to a cupboard. He grabbed a half empty bottle of bootleg whiskey and a glass and poured some of the amber liquid into it. "You want a glass?" Ishmael asked Isaac over his shoulder.

"No, thank you," Isaac replied eyeing the half empty fifth. "I didn't think you'd be much of a drinker after Phil South."

"Bad times lend perspective on why a man does what he does," Ishmael said after taking a drink. He sighed and said, "Well, anyway, get on with your story."

Isaac nodded again and took a deep breath then began, "I've always had to be right, I could never accept that I was wrong, that I had made a mistake and needed to fix it. I've always been like that."

Ishmael nodded without saying anything waiting for Isaac to continue.

"Then I got married, had my sons, and I realized that if I couldn't admit to my mistakes and admit when I was wrong that I'd be hurting more than my pride. I knew that coming down here I could be forgiven for those mistakes. Paying off the farm is the least I can do."

"Damn right it's the least you can do! Do you know how much suffering you caused this family? And after you came home you didn't even invite us to your wedding, or have us up to see your sons. You can't make up for any of that Isaac, no matter what you do."

Isaac stared down at the table, feeling like a chastised little boy. His face turned red and he clenched his jaw waiting for the next barrage from his brother.

Ishmael softened his tone, "But there is something you can do Isaac. You can't fix the past, but you can make things better for the future. If you give pa the money to pay off the debt, then I'll back up anything you want. I don't care much about what decisions are made here if my family and I can stay here."

"You'd just step aside and let me have my way here?"

"Don't think it's a pass for you to get away with anything, but if you need something I'll see you get it."

Isaac thought for a moment then said, "I want a bedroom for me and my family. You can pick the room, but that's my condition: we get a room, and I give you the money."

Ishmael thought about how Abe warned against family politics, but the ends justified the means in this case. He extended a hand to Isaac and said, "Deal. We'll move both my kids into my old room, and you and your family can have your old room. If pa asks we'll tell him that you and I figured it out."

Isaac and Ishmael shook hands and left the kitchen. Ishmael patted his brother on the back, "It might sound selfish of me to say this right after that, but it's good to have you back Isaac."

Isaac turned and smiled then kept walking. It wasn't the best business deal he had ever negotiated, but he was back on the farm and had a modicum of control back in his life. Ishmael followed his brother, also smiling, content with the knowledge that his time on the farm had been extended.

**XXVI**

The next day, Isaac and Abe went into town to pay off the debt while Ishmael and the sons stayed behind to work in the field. They rumbled down the dirt road in Abe's Model A and passed the abandoned farms, signs placed in front of them stating that the property belonged to a land company from out of state. The fields were bare, the uncut grass stood knee-high and Nature had begun its reclamation of the land. Isaac looked to his left and right at the vacant homes and the open, empty barns, taking it all in as they drove toward New Canaan. There were still those farms where men worked in the field with their families and crops had been sown and were growing high in the summer, but they were outnumbered by the ghost farms.

"How many people have left?" Isaac asked.

"Too many, but I can't blame them for selling and getting out when they got the chance."

They passed a burned farmhouse. The fields behind it laid bare and windswept save for the weeds. The remains of a collapsed barn laid in a pile next to the field and it looked like a giant, wooden carcass that had been picked over by vultures.

"What happened there?"

Abe was silent then said, "They didn't get out in time."

Isaac noticed seven small mounds behind the ruins of the house.

Isaac nodded and understood, "Like Phil."

Abe was quiet for a moment then responded, "Yeah, like Phil."

They continued in silence until they reached New Canaan. All the shops were still open; the beauty of a small town where each business fills a specific niche and doesn't have to worry about going under. The owners and workers



looked bored, sitting on porches smoking cigarettes and pipes while they passed flasks back and forth. Some read the newspaper or listened to the radio, while others just sat in their chairs and watched the world turn. They stayed open because that's all the owners knew how to do; open in the morning and close at night. Like the farmers that remained, they lingered on not out of devotion to their trade, but because that's all they knew, and all they had to define them. Without their shops and without their farms they became shadows lacking identity or purpose, forced to wake up every day painfully aware of a life without meaning.

Isaac and Abe entered the bank. A few people recognized Isaac and a small crowd gathered around him, asking him about the outside world. Where had he gone? What had he done? When they learned he had been in the war some of the men offered, or insisted, on buying him a drink, joking that the sheriff got free drinks in exchange for ignoring the law. Isaac politely declined. The crowd threatened to crush him, at least that's how he felt. He didn't want to be rude, but he couldn't drink with these people. They wouldn't understand anything about the war or the city, it would have no relevance in their lives, and he didn't want to waste his time. Isaac gently shouldered his way through the crowd to the counter, paid the debt, and returned to the car.

Isaac got into the passenger seat and Abe joined him shortly afterward. They pulled away from the bank and started driving back toward the farm.

Abe spoke up after a moment of silence, "I don't blame you for not wanting to waste the day drinking with them," he paused then said, "Seemed awful nervous in there. Uneasy being back in New Canaan? I'd think this would be nothing after living in Chicago."

"No, it's not that at all, it's just..."

"They would've wanted to talk to you about the war, and that's not something you want to share with old neighbors and strangers."

Isaac nodded.

"I understand," Abe said, patting his son's leg.

They continued toward the farm, Abe staring straight ahead at the road and Isaac looking at all the farms that had been sold, each one in the window for a moment then gone.

Later that night Abraham got up to use the bathroom. He walked past Isaac's room and he noticed that the door was open. He peeked in and saw Jacob and Ezra sleeping in their bed and decided they deserved a bunk bed, same with Hannah and Nathan. He looked over at Rebecca and Isaac's bed and Isaac wasn't there. The covers had been pulled away, but Rebecca was asleep. Abe frowned and made his way downstairs.

Isaac sat in a chair in the living room staring down at a cigar box he held in his lap. He appeared to be deep in thought, his brow furrowed, and he kept his gaze fixed on whatever was in the box. Abe tiptoed over to the bathroom and used it in the dark then got up and walked into the living room. Isaac must not have heard him because he jumped when he saw Abe.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." Abe nodded at the cigar box Isaac held and asked, "What's that?"

Isaac shrugged, "It's nothing, old memories."

Abraham sat down in a chair near Isaac and leaned forward. He saw a collection of three medals: two discs with writing etched onto them, another with a rainbow ribbon, and a third that seemed more important than the other two. The only other item in the box was a patch with a big, red one in its center.

Isaac shrugged again, "It's funny, but it feels like it didn't happen. Not like a dream, but like there's a two-year

gap in my life.” He shook his head, "I don't know. Most of the time it feels like one minute I'm running out of the house, and the next minute I'm in Chicago. Other times I remember it all so clearly. Training, sailing to Europe, the fighting..."

Isaac's voice trailed off and he sighed. Abe tried to find the right words to say to his son, maybe something that would comfort him, or lend him a bit of peace, maybe just a piece of advice on how to deal with trauma, but nothing jumped to mind. His sleepy mind couldn't form the right thoughts, and even when it did he couldn't say what his son needed to hear.

Isaac kept staring at the box then handed it over to Abe. Abe pulled out the special medal. It had a ribbon with a vertical red stripe, blue stripe, thicker white strip, then a blue stripe and a red stripe with a gold disk hanging from it with an eagle in the middle. Around the top edge of the disk were the words, "FOR DISTINGUISHED SERVICE" and on the bottom edge were the Roman numerals for the year it had been awarded.

"I was awarded that for something I don't remember doing at a place I don't remember being."

Abe examined the medal then placed it back in the box, "Impressive."

Isaac scoffed, "Yeah, impressive."

Abraham studied the medal for a moment then decided that after fifteen years he needed to know his son. "What happened in Europe, Isaac? What was it like?"

"It was hell. We lived in mud. Occasionally the Germans fired artillery at us, we fired back. We charged their lines, they charged ours. We killed them and they killed us. Sometimes we got into bigger battles, the kind of battles they give you medals for, and other times we just sat and waited for it to be done."

Abe paused for a moment then knew what to ask, "Did you kill anyone Isaac?"

Isaac looked at his father in the way that a child caught doing a bad thing looks at his accuser. Abe stared back at him, challenging him to say no, challenging him to lie and hide behind clever words and denial.

Isaac thought about the first German he killed, the young boy at Cantigny that had stared at Isaac and his eyes asked, "Why?"

He closed his eyes and said, "Yes, I did."

Abe nodded and allowed the ripple of the words to dissipate before he spoke again.

"You know I've killed, right Isaac?"

"It wasn't the same, Phil broke into our house, he threatened you and threatened our family. If it had been me I would have done the same thing. He wasn't innocent, he was a crazy drunk hellbent on getting rid of us."

"He wasn't though, Isaac." Abe sighed and said, "I've never told anyone this, not even your mother, but I'll tell you. Phil's wife didn't walk out on him, and neither did his son."

"What do you mean?"

"She had something wrong with her, a cancer or some such thing, and she went north to get treatment. His son joined the Army to fight the Spanish, and he never made it home either. He wasn't a bad man, he was a broken man, a pitiful man who wanted to die.

"He threatened the family, he deserved to die."

Abe shook his head, "Few men truly *deserve* to die. I'm just glad Eli wasn't around to see it happen."

Isaac frowned, "They hated each other. Why would Eli have cared about Phil South dying?"

Abe looked at his son and said, "Eli and Phil were brothers, Isaac."

"*What?* But...how? I mean, how do you know that? You always said Eli's last name was King."

"He used their mother's maiden name. I found some old letters in his house after I bought the property. I still

have them in a trunk in the barn. It's a secret I've never told anyone, and I want it to stay that way."

Isaac nodded then said, "I don't understand, what does this have to do with me killing people in Europe?"

"Because, Isaac, there are few truly evil people in this world. Everyone has a history, everyone was a child once, everyone has a family or people that love them, but sometimes when it's you or them you have to make that decision. I regret killing Phil, and I still have nightmares about it, but I know it had to be done."

"How did you get over the guilt?"

"I'm afraid to say I haven't. That guilt hangs around forever, knowing you valued your life above another's, and nothing can be done to change that. It's like a weight on your heart, and it never goes away, it never gets lighter, you just get used to it being there."

Isaac let the words sink in, and it made sense to him. He closed the cigar box and nodded.

Ishmael had been awakened by the talking and gone to the top of the stairs to listen. Since Isaac had been home he'd been paranoid, worried that some scheme between Isaac and his father was being drawn up that would leave him out of the loop. After he heard the information about Eli and the initial shock subsided he felt betrayed. Why should Isaac get to know that dark secret, but not him? As he listened to the rest of the conversation he realized that Abe had told it to Isaac with good reason. It was part of making that burden a little easier, and if Isaac indirectly helped then so be it. It relieved Ishmael to know that Isaac was back and ready to help the family. He considered going back to bed, but he decided to stay and listen to the rest of the conversation more out of curiosity than paranoia.

"You know Isaac, I really was getting ready to sell the farm if you hadn't shown up and bailed us out. I don't think we could've held out much longer the way we were going. After that farmer up the way..."

“What’d he do?”

Abraham shook his head, “Things weren’t *good* here, but they didn’t really seem bad until that man killed his entire family. I guess some people just get so desperate that they need any way out they can find.”

Isaac thought about what he’d considered doing in Chicago and agreed, “A man gets so desperate even *that* seems like a good option.”

“It’s not though, you can always find a way out. I thought you mother and I were going to be stuck in Chicago, but we found a way out. Sometimes you just need to cut your losses and run. There’s no shame in retreating if there’re lives on the line.”

Isaac thought about it and tried to figure out if he agreed with that last bit, then asked, “How do you mean about you and ma getting out of Chicago?”

Abraham remembered what Eli had said about digging up too many old skeletons, and debated whether he wanted to do that tonight with Isaac. Unlike Eli, Abe decided that it was better to get it all in the open rather than have any mysteries left to be discovered later.

“I’m getting tired, so I’ll try to keep this short. I’m sure you know your mother and I came from wealthy families. You saw that in Chicago. I know you think they’re good people because they helped you, but they aren’t good people, Isaac. They’re products of a gilded age, consumed with greed and hunger for getting one more dollar no matter what it takes.

Your mother's family and my family were rival families in Chicago. If you don't think refined, wealthy people are capable of violence, you're wrong. They just weren't the ones to get their hands dirty. Sometimes, things happened to certain people, and one family would back down, at least for a little while. After one side took it too far the families decided there needed to be an alliance. Once your mother and I got married the fighting stopped."

"So, an arranged marriage?"

Abe rocked his head from side-to-side, "Yes and no. We were put in the right place at the right time and *encouraged* to get married. We fell in love, and it worked out well for us, but I'm afraid they would have pushed it even if we didn't love each other. The two families didn't merge their business, but they stopped competing." Abe shook his head and stared at the floor, "They were never satisfied, and it wasn't long before they started looking to other businesses to either absorb or crush out of existence. When I learned that your mother was pregnant I decided that my family would not be raised in that environment, and we left for New Canaan. I've never regretted that choice, Isaac. Sometimes the best way to deal with a bad situation is to remove yourself from it."

Isaac smiled at his father and nodded in agreement. It didn't seem right to him, to run away from problems, but deep down he knew that pride wasn't worth getting killed over.

Sensing the end of the conversation, Ishmael stood up and returned to his bedroom as quickly and quietly as possible. As he slipped into bed he turned over his father's words in his head. Isn't there anything worth fighting for? What about family? What about the farm? Shouldn't there be a point when a man refuses to budge and dies in defense of the things he loves? He also thought about all the things Abe had told Isaac. Why hadn't Abraham told him any of those things? Ishmael listened as the two men walked past his bedroom door and he scowled at the sound of the footsteps. It was one thing to counsel Isaac, but another thing entirely to share family secrets with one son and not the other. If Isaac was going to stay, then Ishmael needed to be ready to confront the possibility of Isaac taking control of the farm. There was nothing he could do about it, but at the same time he refused to take his father's words to heart.

He would not run from the situation, but face it, and Ishmael intended to deal with Isaac if he had to.



**XXVII**

The summer wore on and the men took to the field while the women worked in the house. The first morning Isaac and his sons went to the field was a difficult one. At breakfast Abe and Sarah noticed that none of Isaac's family was at the table, and when they asked where they were Ishmael laughed and said, "Probably not used to getting up and working for a living." Abe and Sarah corrected that, and Isaac's family was never late again.

Harvest came and the crops were collected and sold making it the first year the farm turned a profit since the depression began. Harvest season gave way to winter, Thanksgiving passed, and then Christmas. Spirits were high on the farm. The children were back in school which made the house less crowded during the day and it allowed the adults to have more time to themselves. It gave time for Isaac to reconnect with his father, and to reconnect with Ishmael. The boys realized that they didn't have much in common, but were still brothers and could hold a conversation with each other despite the distance that existed between them.

After talking to Isaac, Abe began to think how his life might have been different had he stayed in Chicago. He had no doubt in his mind that life would have been easier for him, that he wouldn't have a body that felt and looked ten years older than it was, and perhaps things may have been easier for his sons. He never would have met Phil and been forced to kill him. At the same time, he never would have met Eli who had such a tremendous, unfathomable effect on his life. What kind of man would he have been without Eli? Whenever he had doubts and envied Isaac he reminded himself that life in New Canaan had still been better than life was in Chicago.

New Canaan was his home, and he couldn't change the past thirty years or the decisions he had made while there. He'd learned to embrace it and love his life in the small town. Talking to Isaac provided him with an idea of what his life would have been like in Chicago: consistent, boringly comfortable and living under the microscope of two families. In New Canaan, he had been able to live free and that freedom outweighed every bad thing that had happened there.

Ishmael noticed the extra attention given to Isaac by Abraham, and he both understood it and hated it. He understood that Isaac had been gone for over a decade, but hated the favor given to Isaac. He worried that Abraham and Isaac's bonding would lead to certain privileges given to Isaac, but his fears remained unfounded. Months passed since Isaac's return and nothing special had been done for Isaac aside from the room changes, and even that was an agreement Ishmael had made with Isaac of his own accord. The bonding between Isaac and Abraham was irritating, but it presented no real threat to Ishmael and his family. Besides, the extra help benefited the farm, and anything that benefited the farm was worth an annoyance like Isaac's presence. He couldn't be too upset with Isaac's return. After all, it was his money that saved the farm, and had Isaac not returned there was no telling where he and Ashley might have wound up.

The initial shame that Isaac felt being back on the farm dulled then passed. He felt like a child again, but at the same time knew that it had been a necessary move for the sake of his wife and children. Jacob and Ezra adjusted well to the farm work, and although they missed their old home in Chicago they understood that they couldn't live there for a while. They enjoyed the wide-open spaces without the shadows of skyscrapers, and the calming

silence of the country nights. Most of all they enjoyed not having to do school work in the summer with a tutor waking them up to quiz them about arithmetic, or reading, or some other boring thing like that.

They both grew to not only love, but *like* Grandpa Abe and Grandma Sarah. Their grandparents in Chicago had been stuffy old people that didn't laugh at their jokes, or give them candy, or really pay much attention to them at all. Jacob and Ezra were old enough to realize that their grandparents in Chicago saw them as the future of the family business, and nothing else. Had something happened to them the grandparents would have been more upset about the kink in the plan than the loss of grandchildren. They felt wanted on the farm, and they eventually decided they'd rather not leave any time soon.

Rebecca did not enjoy being on the farm, nor did she enjoy helping Ashley, a woman she found to be uneducated and classless. Most of all she found Ashley to be boring. They rarely talked, and even if they did talk it was about nothing of value. Sure, they talked about each other's children at first, then about their lives before they met their husbands, but after that the conversations petered out. Ashley seemed to bitterly envy Rebecca. When Ashley asked a question, it seemed that no matter how Rebecca answered the question the follow up response would be short and angry.

Rebecca didn't mind Ishmael, but found him to be too simple compared to her husband. She saw in him what Isaac could have been if he had just stayed on the farm and surrendered to Abraham's will. She also saw an alcoholic in the making in Ishmael if he wasn't there already, and no one bothered to mention it. She'd enjoyed her drinks just like any other modern woman, and had found the whole Prohibition ordeal to be a poorly thought out social experiment, but she had no use for a person controlled by

their vices, and she worried that if it wasn't the alcoholic that controlled Ishmael, it was the farm.

The two people she didn't mind being around were Abe and Sarah. She liked them both the most, aside from her husband and sons. Her in-laws were farmers and country people, but they still retained some of what they used to be; intelligent and interested in the world even if they couldn't participate. Abraham asked Isaac about current events and Sarah asked Rebecca about the latest metropolitan social trends. She wasn't sure if they were aware of it, but she recognized the customs they still practiced, things her own parents did. They practiced deeply ingrained social habits that never truly left a person once they passed a certain age. That's why she wanted to bring up Jacob and Ezra the proper way rather than allow them turn into a couple of country bumpkins. It wasn't about her being elitist, or prejudiced, rather it was simply preparing her sons for the future. The future was being educated, the future was being well-mannered, the future was in the city, not working on a farm and living in the country.

On top of the personal conflicts she also couldn't stand sharing a bedroom with her two sons. It was bad enough being in the middle of nowhere, and it was bad enough having to share the house with two simpletons, but not having a private bedroom for her and Isaac? They would have been better off in a tenement building, at least then she and Isaac would have some privacy! And her poor boys deserved a room too. Here they were crammed into a room meant for one boy and they were sharing it with their parents. She didn't mind the living situation, at first. She knew she couldn't be picky, but after months of living like that something needed to be done.

The largest problem was the lack of any other available rooms, and it would be a hard bargain to get Ishmael to make any more concessions. She wasn't present

for the negotiations that got them this room, but she knew Ishmael was stubborn and suspicious of Isaac making any more requests thinking he was trying to take over the farm. Which, in her opinion, would not be a terrible thing, but she didn't want to be the one to start that war. Still, they couldn't go on living like this until someone moved out or died. They had spent the summer and the fall sharing this room, and now it was winter. The holidays had passed and the work was done until spring. She knew that she needed to talk to Isaac about negotiating new living arrangements before sowing season became a distraction.

One afternoon, while Abraham was working in the barn with Ishmael, Rebecca approached Isaac. He was sitting in their bedroom reading and when he saw her come in he smiled at her and set down the book. She sat on the bed and began the conversation she didn't want to have.

"Isaac, are you happy with the way things are?"

He cocked his head to the side, "What do you mean?"

She sighed, "I mean *this*. Do you want the only privacy we ever get to be when the boys are at school in the middle of the day? Especially when Ishmael and Ashley get to have all the privacy they want. How is that fair?"

"This is the best we've got right now, and there are no other options."

"There *has* to be something. We're not guests Isaac, we're family. I know Ishmael might not think so-

"That's not true!"

"Isaac, he doesn't want us here. Don't you see it? The way he acts when we're around, especially *you*?"

Isaac picked up the book and flipped the pages. Rebecca reached out and put her hand on his thigh, "We've done so much for this farm, *you* have done so much for this farm. You've given your own money to bail them out and you've gone back into the field to work alongside them. Your sons have helped, I've helped, we've all done our fair

part, yet we're still stuck in one room, because of what? Ishmael is too afraid of you being treated like an equal member of the family?

"What do you expect me to do Rebecca?"

"Talk to your father, he's a reasonable man, he'll listen to you. Besides, you're his favorite."

Isaac furrowed his brow and stared at Rebecca. She laughed, "Oh don't pretend you don't know. You two have so much in common, and you've helped so much."

"I abandoned them, and it nearly killed my father. Why would I be his favorite?"

"You didn't abandon them. You just left for the real world, and if you hadn't done that you wouldn't have been able to help them now."

Isaac nodded, but then shook his head, "No, I can't go behind Ishmael's back like that. I need to keep his trust, otherwise he'll look for any way to make our lives miserable enough to force us out."

"Ishmael owes you and is going to owe you for a very, *very* long time for saving the farm. He's acting like a petty child and it needs to stop."

Isaac didn't respond and looked away from Rebecca.

"Isaac, we can't go another year like this..."

Isaac hung his head and shook his head, as tears formed in Rebecca's eyes, "I've stood by you through so much. The nightmares you had from the war, your depression after the money stopped. I was willing to uproot our life and move here if it you'd be alright, but I will *not* live like this." Rebecca stood up, weeping, and left Isaac alone in the room to consider what his wife had said.

Ashley listened in the hallway when Rebecca delivered her ultimatum to Isaac. Fearing another major upheaval, she ran downstairs, put on her jacket and went out to the barn where Ishmael was helping Abe. She pushed

open the door and found Ishmael helping his father with the car. He was hunched over the engine and despite the cold of the winter he was covered in sweat. He looked up and saw Ashley standing in the door, she hugged her coat around her and her eyes said, "We need to talk."

Ishmael wiped his brow and muttered, "Just a second," and Abe grunted his approval in reply. He stepped out of the barn and stood by Ashley.

"What's the trouble? I'm busy."

"It's Isaac and Rebecca, they were talking."

"So? They're a married couple, they can talk." He paused for a moment then asked, "What were they talking about?"

"Something about living conditions on the farm. Rebecca isn't pleased with how things are and wants things to change. She was telling Isaac that they are owed more than just one room and Isaac needs to talk with Abe. I think if he doesn't do anything she'll go back to Chicago and take the kids with her."

Ishmael shrugged, "Yeah? If she wants to leave she can go and take those kids with her. If we're lucky, Isaac will leave with her. It's a win for us."

"He won't let that happen though, Ishmael! He'll stand his ground and your father will stand by him if he gets to him first. You know how your pa feels about Isaac."

Ishmael winced at the truth he didn't want to admit.

"Pa cares about loyalty though. Besides, Isaac promised not to go behind my back about anything like this."

"Isaac is an opportunist, he can promise you anything you want to hear."

Ishmael kicked the dirt and stared at the farm house.

Ashley placed a hand on Ishmael's shoulder, "You can't let Isaac take over the farm. If he gets his way that's what'll happen and where will that leave us?"

Ishmael looked down and didn't respond.

"You're the inheritor of this farm Ishmael, don't let Isaac take that away from you."

Ishmael nodded, "I'll take care of it," and he walked back into the barn.

Abraham heard the entire conversation, and he knew what to say when Ishmael brought up the situation. He also knew that he needed to be one to resolve the issue rather than let the boys hash out.

"Pa, there's something I need to talk to you about."

Abe looked up from his work and said, "We'll talk about it tonight."

Night fell and the entire family sat in the living room after a tense, silent dinner. The brothers sat next to their respective wives and each couple faced the other at opposite ends of the living room. Abe and Sarah sat together in the middle of the two couples in command of the room. The children had been sent up to their rooms with the cryptic explanation that the adults needed to talk.

Abe started the conversation, "It has been brought to my attention that not everyone is satisfied with the current living arrangements, and that some people here believe that other people are being favored."

Neither Isaac nor Ishmael spoke. They kept their eyes locked on each other waiting for a sign, a betrayal. The wives looked at their husbands, then quickly at each other, but didn't speak or make any motions either.

Abe sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, "If no one is going to speak up then I'm going to assume there isn't a problem and we can move on, but if there is a problem let's get it sorted out."

Again no one spoke. Isaac balled his fists and glared at Ishmael, and Ishmael and Ashley returned his mean stare.

Sarah noticed the coming explosion and whispered something to Abe. He assessed the situation and stood up,



"Somebody speak up! If someone has a grievance then voice it now or drop it, but I won't have this silence."

"Maybe if you could just handle issues on your own like a real man and come to me then we wouldn't be having this discussion," Ishmael spat at Isaac.

"Yeah, and maybe if your nosey bitch of a wife didn't eavesdrop then I could have talked to you and pa first!"

Ishmael leapt out of his chair, "Don't you say a word about my wife!"

"I wouldn't have to if she knew to keep out of a married couple's business, but I wouldn't expect country trash like her to get etiquette like that."

"*This family will not talk about each other that way!*" Sarah ordered. "Ashley comes from a fine farming family, and don't you forget you were born and raised here Isaac. Just because you ran off to Europe and lived in Chicago means you're better than anyone in this room."

Isaac shrunk under his mother's words and her stare. He looked like a little boy again, withering under the judgement and disapproval of his parents. "Sorry," he muttered.

Abe stepped back into the conversation, "I heard that you and Rebecca are unhappy with the current living situation, is this true?"

Isaac nodded without looking up at his father.

"She was trying to convince Isaac that he's the proper heir to this farm! She says since he bailed us out that he oughta have more power over the farm, or she'd leave him!" Ashley interjected.

Abe turned to address Rebecca, "Is this true?"

She looked up at him, humbled but not repentant, "I never said I'd leave him, but the rest of it is true. Isaac has done so much for all of you and won't say a word about it because he's a good, gracious man that's just happy to be

welcomed back by his family. But we deserve more than just one room to live in.”

“I appreciate the honesty Rebecca, but with all due respect this should be between me, Isaac, and Ishmael.”

Rebecca turned away without responding and Abe continued with Isaac, “If you have a problem then you bring it up. I will not have secret deals made behind my back. I let it slide with the room arrangement. But you boys need to get this and get it good: this is still *my* house, and any problems in *my* house will be brought to *my* attention first. I’ve heard whispers that I have a favorite son.” Abe stared at Isaac, “I don’t have a favorite,” then he turned to Ishmael, “You’re not a boy anymore, so stop acting like one.”

Abraham took a deep breath to calm himself, then he continued, “Here’s what we’re going to do to fix the living situation. Each couple will have a room. Ashley and Ishmael will take Ishmael’s, and Rebecca and Isaac will take Isaac’s old room. The children will share Eli’s old bedroom.”

“How’s that fair to my kids?” Ishmael protested, “They’ve just started sharing a room and now you expect them to have to share a room with their cousins?”

Isaac laughed a dry, harsh laugh, “You want to talk about fair? I uprooted my family and we’ve all been living in one room for *months!* You have the nerve to talk to me about *fairness?*” Ishmael didn’t respond and Isaac took a few steps toward him, “Or how about you talk to me about sacrifice and desperation? How about you talk to me about seeing people go through shit they don’t want to, I’d love to hear your take on that. Please Ishmael, tell me how awful it’ll be for your two kids to share a bedroom with their cousins.”

“That’s enough Isaac,” Abe ordered.

Isaac ignored the command and walked over to Ishmael, he thrust his finger into his chest and spat, “You

don't know a *damn* thing about fairness or sacrifice, so don't act like you know what it is."

Ishmael jumped out of his chair, grabbed Isaac by the collar, and pushed him to the nearest wall. He let go briefly, then grabbed his collar again and slammed Isaac into the wall. The two men locked eyes and breathed heavily, their noses touching, faces red.

"ENOUGH!" Abe bellowed. Sarah sat with a hand up to her mouth and the two wives waited to see what happened next. Abe walked over to Ishmael and yanked him off Isaac, "I will not have my two adult sons fighting like this IN MY HOUSE!"

Isaac straightened his shirt and tried to look nonchalant, but his face still looked tense in preparation for the punch he thought he'd have to take.

Abraham glared at his sons and said, "This issue is *done*. Tomorrow we'll make the move and I'll look into getting supplies to build some bunk beds. Now the both of you get the hell out of my sight."

Ishmael put on his coat and mumbled something about going out to the barn. He went into the kitchen and there came the sound of a bottle being taken out of a cupboard then the back door opening and slamming shut behind him.

"I'll be in the room," Isaac said to Rebecca then went upstairs.

"I'm going to check on the kids," Ashley mumbled and excused herself from the room.

Abe went into the kitchen, opened a cupboard and shouted, "Dammit, Ishmael!"

Rebecca stood up to leave the living room, and Sarah took her hand to stop her.

"You're a good mother and a good wife."

Rebecca nodded, smiled, and said, "Thank you."

"I'm not calling you a liar, but if you thought you were going to walk off this farm with my grandsons and

leave my son behind, then you're sorely mistaken. You *will never* so much as *think* about that again. Do you understand me?"

Rebecca's eyes were wide and her mouth slightly open. She had been caught off guard and looked like Sarah had slapped her across the face as soon as she finished complimenting her.

"Now go up to that room and be with your husband."

Without a word, Rebecca nodded and hurried up the stairs to join Isaac in the bedroom. Sarah watched her go and shook her head then sat back down and held her head in her hands, quietly crying. She allowed herself a moment of release, a moment to not have to be the strong matriarch that complemented Abe's position as patriarch. The tension still lingered in the room and throughout the house. It hovered in the air like a poison gas. It escaped through the cracks and spread out over the farm, infiltrated the barn, rolled across the fields, and tainted everything it touched. It was heavy, and threatened to crush the farm and its inhabitants if it couldn't be dissipated.

Sarah didn't know why, but she felt like most of that weight pressed down on her and threatened to break her if she allowed it. She had suffered before and knew that hardship respects resilience, so she collected herself, wiped away her tears, and joined Abe in the kitchen.

The winter passed without any further incidents, and a tenuous peace settled on the farm. There was little work to be done other than making sure the farm was ready for the coming sowing season. The Depression continued to rob and to spare with no discretion or fairness like an angel of death. More farms failed, and even some businesses in New Canaan failed, and the families that had been spared breathed a sigh of relief knowing they had one more year. It seemed the country had hit its high-water mark for suffering. Isaac and Abe read the newspapers faithfully and

listened to the radio at night hoping for any hint that things would get better. Even Ishmael, who usually had no time for current events, listened to the radio and read the papers. There were rumors of revolution, uprisings among the homeless farmers and broken working class. The new president, a man named Roosevelt promised improvements, but in times of great desperation rational thought disappears and is replaced with a manic search for a solution. Ishmael heard the rumblings in the bar, and even older farmers whispered about collecting themselves and attacking the bank in town.

Cooler heads prevailed, and things began to improve. It was not like a great switch had been flipped, but life steadily improved. The bank seemed less afraid to lend money, the shops appeared to be busier, and a cautious sense of optimism replaced the dread that hung over the town of New Canaan and the area around it. Fewer farmers abandoned their farms and talk of open rebellion eventually came to an end. Since the compromise of the bedrooms, life on the farm had been less tense. Everyone worked without complaint, there were no major feuds, only trivial skirmishes that ended in no tears or bloodshed. Peace had been sustained and maybe that's why Abe felt it was time to hand over the farm to his sons.

## XXVIII

In the summer of the year that things began to get better, the temperatures ran high. Usually, there was always work to be done, but this time the work demanded even more hands, not just in the field, but in the house as well. The women and the children helped in the field during the day, then the men helped in the house at night preparing meals for the next day and there was very little time to relax. Despite some protest from the sons and grandsons, Abe declared that now was the time for everyone to help with everything on the farm; social roles be damned. Days began before daybreak and ended long after sundown. Of course, for the younger members of the farm it was tiring, but their bodies handled the abuse well.

Abe and Sarah became visibly worn down, though. Despite insistence from Isaac, Ishmael, Rebecca, and Ashley to take a day or two off, Abe and Sarah persisted. There were hushed, secret conversations late at night and early in the morning between the adults about the health of the patriarch and the matriarch of the farm. What do we do when...? What about if...? Nobody talked in absolutes though, because the absolutes seemed too concrete, too *real*, to talk about. The real seemed too close, too attached, to even contemplate.

One summer day the heat and humidity reached an inhuman point, it reached a temperature when the body sweats itself out and begs for rest, and no amount of water will quench the crippling thirst. No one bothered to check the thermometer, because there was no need to confirm that it was too damn hot. A young man and a young woman could have handled the heat well, but not the older people. Abe struggled in the field that day and by sundown he was drenched in sweat, panting like a race horse, but he continued to deny any aid or comfort. He went to bed and

slept soundly only to rise the next day at the usual time and go into the field for more punishment.

The heat did not relent, and neither did Abe. Even with his family and the aid of a tractor the work never got any easier for him. He toiled in the field trying to keep pace with his sons, and at night he helped his daughters-in-law with preparations for dinner and the meals for the next day, and he kept at it for days. The heat did not give up, though, and it finally took its toll on Abe. His body finally surrendered and he collapsed in the field, gasping for air like a fish out of water, the droplets of sweat hitting the ground underneath him like a summer rain storm. Isaac and Ishmael raced over to him, asking if he needed help. Despite his insistence that he was fine they hoisted him to his feet and helped him back to the house while Rebecca, Ashley, and Sarah followed in silence. The sons laid their father on one of the couches in the living room and barked an order to one of the women to get a cold wash cloth.

Abe laid on the couch, his eyes closed, panting, "I'm fine, I'm fine, just gimme a minute and I'll be back out there to work."

Sarah rushed to his side and stroked his head and whispered that he would be okay. There was no pain in his face, no suffering, just a sense of deep relaxation. Rebecca drew the blinds in the living room and Ashley suggested that they take him up to the bedroom so he could be in a bed. The sons agreed and gently carried him up the stairs to the master bedroom where he could rest comfortably in his own bed. When they set him down he let out a great sigh and everybody watched nervously for him to take another breath. Once he did everyone in the room relaxed and knew for at least another minute everything would be okay.

His eyes sprang open and he looked over the group of people watching him, surveying their faces, understanding the grave position he was in and understanding why their faces looked stricken with grief

and worry. He scrunched his eyes and took a deep breath and said in a weak, but determined voice, "I want to have a word with my sons."

The women departed from the room, and Abe motioned for Isaac and Ishmael to sit on the bed with him. He pointed to a glass of water on the nightstand, and Ishmael handed it to him. He drank quickly, like he knew he didn't have much time left.

"We need to talk about something, before it's too late."

His two sons nodded solemnly knowing time was not in their favor.

"I know you boys haven't always gotten along. I'd be blind or stupid to ignore that fact."

Isaac and Ishmael exchanged a glance and then looked back to their father.

"Do you remember when you two had that big fight when you were younger? And afterwards I tried to smack some sense into both of you?"

The sons smiled and confirmed the memory.

"And do you remember when you fought Phil South, together, as brothers, trying to defend each other from him?"

They nodded and agreed again.

"And do you remember why Eli planted that tree behind the house? It was to remind you both that this farm was yours to share, and it would be stronger together. I know you two have grown apart, and I know you two have always had your differences and disagreements, but you are still brothers, and always will be. You were raised on this farm, you will inherit this farm, and you will share this farm. Promise me that you won't waste all of this work, please, just grant me that." Abe watched his sons and waited for them to promise him that.



The boys nodded without saying anything and Abe looked at his sons, and he remembered the vision he'd had, of prosperity or destruction so many years ago.

"Promise me, and promise each other that you will work together to preserve this farm. Promise me!" His voice sounded urgent and pleading, that if they didn't promise him that that alone would kill him.

Isaac and Ishmael took their father's hands and promised him they would keep the farm. He placed a hand on each of their cheeks and said, "My boys, my grown sons, together this farm will not fail, but if you allow hatred and jealousy and paranoia to come between you it will collapse. Too much has been done for it all to have been done in vain...now please, send your mother in, I must speak with her."

Abraham died the next morning in his bedroom in the house that he had built. His family surrounded him when he took his last breath, and before he opened his eyes no more and breathed no more, he whispered, "Promise me, boys..."

Isaac and Ishmael drove into town to take care of the necessary paperwork and to alert the residents of New Canaan that Abraham had passed away. When Ishmael walked into the bar the usual customers stopped and looked up from their drinks and greeted him, offered him a chair, or offered him a drink, but stopped when they saw his eyes were red and his jaw set firm.

"What's the trouble, Ishmael?" the bartender asked.

"My pa died this morning. Had some kind of stroke or something in the field yesterday and that was that..." He sniffed and wiped his eyes.

A murmur went through the bar as the men whispered, "I'll be damned," and "I didn't think he'd have gone so soon." Some of the older farmers shook their heads

without saying anything, but offered Ishmael a place to sit down.

"My brother's getting all the legal work in line. I know pa wanted to be buried on the farm, so he's just getting that business in order."

The men agreed with the decision. The bartender walked over and handed Ishmael a shot of whiskey and said, "This one and a few others after it are on the house, for you and your brother if he decides to come and sit awhile."

Ishmael nodded and mumbled, "Thanks" and shot the whiskey.

Isaac walked into the bar a little later to pick up Ishmael who had gotten reasonably drunk. Isaac couldn't blame his brother for wanting to get away from it all, because Isaac wanted to do the same. In the war, he'd gotten used to the casualness of death, and he'd assumed he would have been able to take his parents' deaths well, but this time it was different. His father dying felt like God had died; impossible and blasphemous. He wanted to drink and cry with his brother, but he needed to maintain his show of strength.

"Everythin' set?" Ishmael asked when he looked up from his glass.

Isaac nodded, and he hoisted Ishmael to his feet. As they walked out of the bar, Isaac noticed everybody watching him escort his brother to the car. They watched with sad, shockingly vulnerable eyes as the sons of one of the greatest New Canaanites left their presence. It felt like a tragic, hallowed moment and no one spoke. Before they left, Isaac turned around to address the crowd.

"We're burying him tomorrow afternoon on the farm. Anyone that wants to come, you're invited."

The harsh reality of the words struck him in the gut. His throat tightened up and his eyes burned and he wanted to make a swift exit before he burst into tears in front of

half the town. He ushered Ishmael outside and as soon as he got in the car he allowed himself to weep. All the deaths he'd seen finally caught up to him and demanded his attention. The loss of his father, the loss of friends in the war, the horror he had seen, the cruelty of mankind, all of it crashing down on him at once. He sobbed and placed his head down on the wheel shook as he tried to expel the bad feelings. Ishmael patted him on the shoulder as tears rolled down his face too, but he offered no words of comfort knowing full well that the last thing Isaac needed was an empty platitude.

Isaac cried not just because he lost his father, but because he knew that he would have to take up the mantle of the farm; completely responsible for its future and the people living on it. He knew of the hardship that would entail and it terrified him. He felt like he was a father for the first time, except now he oversaw so many more people, and the burden weighed down on him, crashed down on him like a tidal wave or a flood that threatened to wash him away. It was the same feeling he had felt when he looked out the office window in Chicago contemplating jumping, except now there was nothing to do, but confront this new reality.

On the day the family buried Abraham, the remaining citizens closed up shop or stopped working and came to pay their respects. He had been one of the hardest working, friendliest, honest men that had come into New Canaan, and for those that could honor the late Abraham they came out to see him off. The men wept along with the women unafraid to show their sorrow when everyone was in mourning.

The minister that had buried Eli and Phil presided over Abraham's burial. He spoke of the kind of man Abe had been, the work he'd done, and the impact he'd had on New Canaan. He likened Abraham to Eli and commended

him for following in Eli's footsteps, and asked Isaac and Ishmael to continue that legacy.

Abraham was buried next to Phil South and Eli South; two former enemies buried next to the man that tied them together. Sarah threw dirt on Abe's coffin while she clutched a handkerchief to her mouth to stifle her cries, then Isaac and Ishmael, then the grandchildren, and finally the daughters-in-law. Everyone shoveled dirt onto the pine coffin and offered their goodbyes and condolences to the family. Isaac couldn't make sense why these complete strangers felt so deeply for his father, but he realized that for fifteen years he had been absent and perhaps there were stories he'd never heard about his father, stories he'd never hear unless Ishmael felt inclined to tell him. It didn't matter, though, their father was gone and no number of stories would bring him back.

After the funeral, the burial, and the all the guests had left, the family busied themselves on the farm and tried to process what had happened and what the future held. Sarah sat in the kitchen by herself, now the matriarch of the farm, the sole leader of the family for all intents and purposes. She had always been the adviser, the voice of reason to Abraham, and despite knowing she could lead the family she doubted her abilities.

She collected herself and went into the living room to join Isaac and Ishmael. She looked at Abraham's empty chair and stopped herself from crying, then sat down in her own chair ready to take her new place in the family hierarchy.

"Your father is gone, and that's it. Before he died he told me to make sure that you boys shared the farm when we were both gone, and to keep the farm in the family. I'm sure he told you the same thing, correct?" The sons nodded and Sarah nodded back.

"Well let me tell you something. This farm is just land; soil, dirt, stones, and bones. Eli thought it was important, and I know why he did. Your father thought it was important because Eli did and because he worked it for so many years. This land is not sacred, do you understand me? It's not holy, it's not sanctified, it's just ground.

I don't know how long I have, and I don't want this to go unsaid. Don't fight over this farm, and don't let this farm divide you two. I want you to be able to keep and work this land without issue, but if you don't think you can share it, then you need to leave this place. There's no use in shedding a brother's blood over soil. I want to die knowing my sons won't kill each other over some damn farm."

Isaac and Ishmael saw the pain in their mother's face and didn't know what to say in return.

Sarah continued, "I know you boys don't get along, and that breaks my heart, but I don't want to force you into a situation that will not work. If you must sell the farm and part ways then so be it, but don't let this land destroy our family. I know your father was an idealist, and ideals are wonderful, but ideals are always subject to reality. Don't let some dirt destroy you just because your father believed in something."

Silence fell over the living room and neither son spoke and Sarah waited for a response.

"And for the record, right now *I* am the owner of this property. So if the opportunity presents itself I *will* sell this farm and get this family out of here before anything happens. Is that understood?"

The boys nodded and mumbled, "Yes, ma."

Sarah gave a faint smile, and deep down she knew that none of what she said mattered. It had been her last, desperate attempt to plead for peace between her sons, that they might honor their mother's wish and at least tolerate each other until things changed. She knew her words fell on

deaf ears, but she had tried, and would continue to try for as long as she lived.

Sarah stood up, smoothed her dress and walked over to the stairs. She turned around to address the boys one last time and said, "Just think about what I said, please."

She walked up the stairs and left Isaac and Ishmael sitting in the living room alone together.

Finally, Ishmael spoke up, "Where the hell would we go if we sold the farm?" He stood up and walked into the kitchen. Isaac stood up and followed him.

"You don't think ma knows what she's talking about?"

Ishmael reached into the cabinet and pulled out the fifth of whiskey and a single glass. He paused and without speaking offered a glass to Isaac. He nodded and Ishmael poured two glasses of whiskey. Isaac took his glass and sat down at the kitchen table.

"It doesn't feel good to run from your problems, but sometimes retreating is the best thing you can do."

Ishmael swirled the liquor in his glass then drank all of it. He set the glass down and said, "I think that's bullshit."

"Pa said that, Ishmael, so are you saying his words are bullshit?"

"No! This is different, we have options, we don't *need* to sell the farm. We can make it work!"

"How much longer do you think this will work, huh? Ma is the only thing keeping our two families from killing each other and when she dies it'll be up to us. How will this work if we're at each other's throat over something as simple as that?"

"What if we all didn't live on the farm?"

Isaac eyed Ishmael with a wary eye and said, "What do you mean?"

“I could get you set up in a house in New Canaan, and you could work on the farm with me until things get better. We’d split the profits, fifty-fifty, and we’d each have our own place to stay.” After a long, tense silence, Ishmael asked, “What do you think?”

Isaac gulped down his glass of whiskey and slammed the glass on the table, “I think this farm is mine as much as it’s yours. Both families stay on the farm, or both families leave the farm.” He stood up and shoved his chair back into place then said, “I will not be driven off this farm.”

“Isaac...”

Isaac ignored Ishmael save for muttering, “I’m going up to my room, I’ll see you in the field tomorrow.” Isaac stomped up the stairs leaving Ishmael behind in the kitchen.

“C’mon Isaac, can’t we talk about this?”

Only Isaac’s footsteps up the stairs and the slam of a door answered him. Ishmael shook his head and poured himself another glass of whiskey, and another glass, and another until he decided it was time for bed. Ishmael turned off the lights and left the dark, lonely kitchen to head upstairs, crawl into bed and with a great sigh prepare for the next day and all the days that followed.

**XXIX**

The weeks passed and a subtle tension returned to the farm. The men and boys worked in the field while the women worked in the house. On occasion Sarah came out to see if her sons or grandsons needed any help, but they dismissed her as gently as possible. Rebecca and Ashley did more of the work in the house and worked harder, not for themselves, and not even directly for Sarah. It was no secret that Sarah wouldn't last much longer. That is not to say Sarah was weak, but she was getting older and whether she said it or not, her behavior and body language indicated that Abe's death took its toll on her. The wives wanted to be as prepared as possible for the inevitable.

At night, when the men and boys came in from the field, the whole family ate dinner together then retired to the living room where the children played games and the adults listened to the radio unless there was work to be done in the house or outside. Everything the family did served as a distraction from the impending sense of conflict. It was just a matter of time before the tension broke and the farm devolved into a state of civil war.

Sarah was the only person left on the farm with any authority, and even then, she did not possess the command that Abe had. The ultimatum she gave to the boys wasn't binding; she knew it, and she knew they knew it too. And if she was being honest with herself she didn't *want* to sell the farm anyway. She'd spent over half her life on this farm, given birth on this farm, she'd raised her family on this farm, her husband was buried on this farm. To leave it now would hurt worse than leaving Chicago. All she could do was hope she didn't live long enough to see the final collapse.



Sometimes she tried to convince herself that it wouldn't be that bad. There would be fighting, probably some bloodshed, but nothing horrendous...right?

*It's different*, she told herself.

Back when the boys were children the worst they did was kick and punch each other until she or Abe intervened and broke up the fight. A feud lasted a couple days before the boys made peace and forgot about the issue. Now, who knows what they boys were capable of? If they got into a fight it wouldn't be Abe breaking up the fight it would be the sheriff, and that's if one of them didn't...

*No, that wouldn't happen. They might argue and might not like each other much anymore, but things wouldn't go that far.*

She thought about Abe's old pistol kept in the bedroom. Every night before bed she checked to make sure it hadn't been moved. She changed its hiding place every night, and kept the ammunition in a separate hiding place away from the gun.

Still, she tried to perish the thought that her boys would get so desperate, or so angry that they would resort to *that*. Ishmael was emotional, and Isaac could be cold, but neither one could be that cruel, could they? She remembers the fights Ishmael got into with other local boys, and she couldn't begin to imagine what Isaac had done or seen in the war. Still, they were brothers, they were family.

Brother against brother was not some unheard of, impossible thing.

Cain and Abel.

The Civil War.

A shiver ran through her whenever these thoughts came to mind at night, and that is why she moved the gun and the ammunition every night.

**XXX**

Harvest season brought its annual flurry of activity leaving everyone on the farm too tired to think about disputes or imagined conspiracies and plots. Sarah relaxed a little and decided she didn't need to be as conscientious about moving the gun every night. Nobody had the strength to commit a crime.

With the crops brought in and sold at a profit the summer tension dissipated. Isaac and Ishmael laughed, joked, and cooperated in the field doing their end of year work, discussing plans for the coming winter. The wives got along as summer gave way to fall, and Sarah heard them chatting in the kitchen and they sounded genuinely happy talking to each other.

Even the children, who had established a distaste for each other from day one, had made peace. Jacob and Ezra reached out to Nathan and Hannah to play with them. Sometimes the boys fought, and Hannah stood nearby to encourage her older brother, but the issue either resolved itself or vanished upon adult intervention.

The weather turned cold heralding the coming holidays. Moods on the farm lifted even more with the coming winter. The children returned to school which meant more time for the adults to be together on the farm. Less work allowed the husbands and wives to spend time alone since most of the work was completed earlier in the day allowing a freer afternoon. The holidays passed in a blur, replaced by the first days of the new year.

The problem with peace is not the lack of conflict, but the arrogant laziness that comes from it. Perhaps it's an aversion to admitting the inevitable, that conflict will come again. Maybe it creates the kind of confidence that leads to too much comfort and shortsightedness. Or maybe it allows unresolved issues to remain unresolved. None of the

underlying issues that persisted after Abe's death had been resolved and no one wanted to address the future of the farm.

It was like everyone on the farm was in a dream after harvest season, and recognizing that they were dreaming would cause everybody to wake and the dream to end. Nobody wanted to be the one to call attention to that, nobody wanted to be the pessimist that ruined everyone's good time.

Sarah avoided the topic, because she didn't want to be the nagging mother that dictated her adult sons' lives and decisions. She assumed they had prepared and to assume otherwise caused her too much stress. Even analytical Isaac seemed to ignore it. He had resolved to be more like Ishmael, to take life at a slower, more relaxed pace and work with his brother; that didn't always work. Sometimes Ishmael did something, or didn't take something seriously enough and it made Isaac grit his teeth. To Isaac, it felt like the gears inside his brain seized for a moment and begged to be released through a quiet tirade and by commandeering the situation. He remained calm, and at the end of day he drank in the kitchen with Ishmael and took off the last of the edge with Rebecca. This made things tolerable for him. It was a mostly hollow peace, and at any moment it could implode and take the whole farm with it.

**XXXI**

A cold wind came over New Canaan in late January. It sucked the air out of people's lungs and forced them to stay inside. Winter had taken a mean turn for the worse, and with it came snow, and confinement to the house. The shop owners in town stayed closed, and the farmers with livestock only went outside to check on the animals.

People said the weather would break, that this was some freak storm, and within a few days the sky would be blue and there'd be no more wind and no more snow. A week passed, and the weather didn't break, and another week passed, and the weather still did not break. People in New Canaan became anxious, fearful that trucks would not be able to reach them to resupply the town. How much food was there in dry storage? Was there enough pickled and canned and salted food in the cellars if this storm lasted any longer?

At the farm, the men took turns each day bundling up and going to get firewood from the pile next to the house. Even after the snow stopped, the frigid air settled over everything and made the trees like crystals and the ground crunch like thin glass with each footstep. The men returned to the house and set the wood beside the stove and fed the metal belly with oak, and maple, and the occasional pine. At night, the family huddled in the kitchen with the radio on in the living room, the volume turned all the way up, so the children could listen to the shows and music, and the adults could hear the news. With the start of the second week the radio's battery died, and neither Isaac or Ishmael wanted to drive into town until the weather improved.

Kerosene lamps and candles were brought out for nights, with the oil and matches rationed to ensure that nobody went without light. For the first couple nights,

nobody minded the lack of radio and the cold. The children pretended they were frontiersmen, or soldiers, camped out on some lonesome frontier comforted by the light of the fire. The adults enjoyed the dark and kept warm in their own ways late at night when the children were asleep.

Novelty tends to wear off, though, and tensions mounted in the house. The children grew bored, and they began to turn on each other. First the cousins fought, followed by the siblings, warring over trivial matters that frustrated the adults and led to many spankings and extra chores being assigned just to keep them busy.

At the end of the two weeks the weather finally broke and the sun shone over New Canaan, warming the streets, melting the snow, and making the air breathable again. The children ventured outside, exploring the farm like explorers in a strange, new land. Isaac and Ishmael tended to the cars to make sure they were still in working order and went into town to buy food and supplies.

The short-lived tension on the farm evaporated with the snow and the cold and returned to the shallow peace that existed before the storm. They'd outlasted the siege by Nature and felt good about their situation. Spring drew near, which meant another sowing season, and another good harvest season, which meant another good year.

One day, when her sons were in the barn, the wives were in the house, and the children were outside playing, Sarah left the house and took a walk outside. Snow still covered the ground and the trees, and the world lacked the noise of birds in the trees or animals moving in the brush. She walked over to the creek and found it frozen over, same with the pond. Walking around the pond she stood in the field where Phil's house once stood and kicked the ground, sending up little puffs of snow then little clumps of dirt wondering if any memories or secrets would escape, maybe some revelation Abe or Eli never told her. The earth didn't answer her questions, but it didn't bother her.

She walked across the frozen field and saw her grandchildren throwing snowballs at each other, wrestling on the ground, smiling, laughing, and she felt peace. If they could get along with each other, then the family had a future. It didn't matter if they all shared this piece of land, it didn't matter if they sweated under the sun in the summers and froze together in the winters. All that mattered was that when they were together they enjoyed each other's company and reveled in that love. Sarah stopped under the great oak tree Eli had planted so many years ago. Three crosses were planted in the dirt near the tree; one for the man who sold the land, one for the man who worked it, and one for the man who died for it. She brushed the snow off the wooden crosses and knelt before Abe's grave. It didn't matter if he heard her, it didn't matter if he looked down and approved of her decisions and her leadership, all that mattered was what she said next.

"Abe, I know you loved this farm, and wanted it for your sons' future, so they could work the land and live comfortably in the house you built for all of us. Times change though, I'm sure you saw that at the end of your life. I don't know what you and the boys talked about when I wasn't around, and I'm sure I'll never know, but I just hope it was about the future of this family.

This farm, it's just land. I know you had great aspirations for this farm, that maybe it would grow even more and your sons, and grandchildren and great grandchildren would buy up more land, and they'd have their own houses on the land, but it doesn't look like that's going to happen, at least not right now. I won't tell the boys what to do, but I sure as hell won't sit idly by and let this farm be the end of this family."

She stood up, dusted herself off and walked back into the house to make dinner.

**XXXII**

It seems the worst part of the year is the brink of spring when the anticipation reaches a fever pitch. The promise of a world reborn is just around the corner, with the birds returning to build nests, the animals emerging from their winter shelters, and the trees and fields bursting with color. There is an anxiety that comes with spring, though, that with a quarter of the year gone, and the mobility of good weather ahead there is no time to lose. If spring is a time for preparation, then summer is the time for action. For the farmers of New Canaan, spring was always a stressful time filled with preparations for the coming sowing season, and the Depression didn't make things any easier.

In March, the clouds broke, the skies turned from gray to blue, and Isaac and Ishmael set to preparing for another growing season. Isaac and Ishmael worked in the barn preparing the tractor and the tools for the coming months of abuse they'd have to endure. Together they went out to check the irrigation lines that ran from the pond into the fields to make sure none had frozen and burst, then accepted that they wouldn't know until they tried to water the crops for the first time that year.

At night, Ishmael and Isaac pored over the Farmer's Almanac, studying the predicted weather patterns: the rise and fall of temperatures, the times with rain and the times without, and concluded that it would be a good year. For some reason, a strange optimism seized the two men and they talked excitedly about plans for the near future. Perhaps they would get so many crops they wouldn't need to buy seed next year? If they didn't need to buy seed, they could start to save the money and turn a sizable profit. In five years, maybe they would have enough to buy the land next door, and Isaac's family could move into that house

and both families could work that field and make even more money. It would be their empire, they would be its kings, and their children its heirs.

They surrendered to, and believed in the American Dream. Someday they would be the kings of their own land, servant to no master; tangible or intangible. They fell in love with the phantasmal, and just-barely-out-of-reach future that promises security in old age, and prosperity after death. Isaac and Ishmael might have been lying to themselves and known that such a future did not exist, or if it did they would not see its genesis, but the thought comforted them. Like working men across America and across time they allowed their imaginations to run loose and create private utopias for themselves and their families brought forth with a little money, a little shrewd planning, and the kind of luck that is not given to those that need it most. For the time being though, that reality remained imaginary, the unreachable stayed beyond touch, and the future kept ahead of the present whispering, "maybe, maybe, maybe..." as it ran toward the horizon.

When the husbands and wives retired to bed, the hopeful talk continued.

"Do you really think it'll happen like that?" Ashley asked Ishmael.

"I think it will. I mean, my pa came down here and made a name for himself, why shouldn't the tradition continue?"

"And we won't have to worry about money, or about Nathan or Hannah like your ma worries about you and Isaac?"

"Not at all. There'll be plenty of room for all of us, and enough money to go around that no one will want. Why, if one family member stumbles a little bit we'll be around to pick them up and get them going again. If one house needs a little extra seed, we'll just give it to them



without a loan. If one house needs some work done on a tractor, we'll repair it without a bill."

Ashley snuggled closer to Ishmael and sighed, "I sure hope you're right. I never wanted my children to want like me and my family did, and for a while there I thought it was gonna be like that...Oh Ishmael, you're sure this will happen?"

"I'm sure."

"And things will be alright?"

"They'll be alright."

In the next room over Isaac and Rebecca had a similar conversation while they got ready for bed.

"So, you and Ishmael have been talking a lot lately about the future," Rebecca stated while fixing her hair in the mirror.

"Yeah, I suppose we have. It's fun, and kind of nice, I haven't talked that much with Ishmael since we were kids. Hell, it's probably the first time we ever agreed on the future."

"That's wonderful Isaac, and I love seeing you happy, but aren't you worried you're taking this a little far?"

Isaac sat up in bed, "How do you mean?"

"I'm just worried that you're putting the cart before the horse, and I don't want you to get hurt if it doesn't pan out. I'm afraid that you're losing sight of what's in front of you right now."

"I haven't forgotten about what needs to be taken care of right here in the present."

Rebecca sat down on the bed and put her hand on Isaac's knee, "It's wonderful that you and Ishmael are being so optimistic about things, and I think you two have a great plan for the future of this family and the farm. But maybe you should focus more on a plan for tomorrow instead of a plan for next month?"

"What are you saying Rebecca?"

"It's your mother, Isaac. You can't tell me that you haven't noticed that she's getting old, and what with your father dying and having to be the head of the family that's all taken its toll on her. You don't spend time with her the way I spend time with her. She still smiles, and laughs, makes jokes, and is strong when Ashley and I work with her in the house, but she's tired, and getting more tired every day."

"Well then maybe you and Ashley ought to try and convince her to take it more easy. I know she's a stubborn woman and doesn't want to be lazy, but--"

"It's not that kind of tired Isaac. She's tired from worrying. She doesn't think that you and Ishmael will be able to handle the farm without her presence, that if she isn't around to keep you two from killing each other then you will."

Isaac frowned and shook his head, "Ishmael and I are fine now! Doesn't she see how we talk at night? Doesn't she see how we get along?"

"I know, and I'm sure she wants to believe that her sons are going to be alright, but she's still worried. She thinks you're keeping things bottled up, that you don't agree with everything Ishmael says or wants to do, and you're just trying to avoid conflict."

"I won't agree with every idea Ishmael has, but I'm not going to explode some day and kill my own brother!"

"Still, your mother worries about what happens to the family after she dies." Rebecca paused for a moment, "You know, the ironic thing is she's worried about what will happen after she dies, but that same worry is what is going to drive her into an early grave."

"Then how do you suggest I fix that Rebecca?"

She shook her head, "I don't know if it *can* be fixed, but you should prepare for what happens after she dies."

There needs to be a plan, and it ought to be for tomorrow, not a month from now."

Isaac thought about his wife's words, turning them over in his head trying to make sense of it. He'd always known his father would die, but his mother? His mother was this immortal being that might age, might age to the point of being handicapped and infantile, but dead? Impossible! You might as well suggest that the sun would burn out. Sure, it was theoretical and probable, but not conceivable, at least not soon. Still, Rebecca's words got to him. He had been spending a lot of time thinking about a future that may never happen rather than turning his focus on a future that *will* happen, sooner as opposed to later. Could he let Ishmael become the head of the family? Ishmael was a good man, with a good heart, but he lacked the smarts to keep the farm from going bankrupt.

If he allowed Ishmael to take control of the farm without so much as a peep of protest then who knows what condition the farm would be in in five years, if not next season? They could talk about saving money and making investments and expanding the property, or they could piss their money away on bottles of whiskey and a mindset of why do today that you can put off until tomorrow? He'd grown close with Ishmael, and didn't want to usurp his own brother. At the same time, he didn't want to hand over his future, his children's future, to a man that seemed to be locked in a state of childlike naivete that said, "Everything will be alright if we *think* it'll be alright."

Perhaps he could orchestrate things so that when the time came he would take control of the farm. It would be like a bloodless coup. Isaac would have the final say when it came to the farm, but Ishmael would always be allowed to have his say. Maybe not a perfect option, but the best option available. He laid down and rolled over to give Rebecca a kiss good night, then drifted off to sleep knowing that tomorrow he had a sense of purpose.

**XXXIII**

Dim sunlight poured into the kitchen, obstructed by closed curtains. The stovetop was cool, and no plates had been set on the table. The kitchen lacked the sounds of a person making breakfast; no dishes being put out, no silverware being arranged, no meat, or bread, or pancakes, or potatoes frying in a skillet. The room possessed an eerie quiet. An abnormal quiet that suggested something was amiss. The grandfather clock in the living room chimed seven times when the arm slid over seven.

The other noises came from outside as the first birds chirped and some residual meltwater trickled off the roof. No popping grease or crackling fire or clinking dishes; just silence. No life existed inside the kitchen save for an idle fly bouncing on the window pane. Dust particles hovered in the air over the kitchen table and over the stove. It all looked apocalyptic, like the kitchen had not been touched in twenty-four years, but only twenty-four hours had passed since this moment in time.

Sleepy people wandered into the kitchen breaking the silence, rubbing their eyes, groaning and scraping their chairs against the floor as they took their seat at the table. One by one they woke up and realized the emptiness of the kitchen. The boys and girls looked up with curiosity, wondering why food and drink had not materialized before them as usual. They turned to ask their parents why breakfast wasn't ready, but thought better of it as their fathers gave worried looks to their mothers, then worried looks to each other.

The two adult men bolted out of their chairs sending the wooden furniture crashing to the floor as they ran out of the kitchen, through the living room, and up the stairs. It sounded like they were taking two steps at a time as they raced to the second floor of the house. Each man crying,

"Ma!" or "Mom!" between breaths. Their voices sounded weak and scared, like young boys waking from a nightmare begging for their mother to come save them from some horrid, imagined reality. The problem being there is no 'waking up' from reality like it's a dream, there is only confronting it.

Isaac reached his mother's bedroom first and threw open the door. Ishmael followed close behind. They found their mother in bed, the covers against her chin, and her face pale. The room felt like the kitchen: eerily quiet and unnaturally still. The curtains allowed only a sliver of sunlight to come in and make a thin, yellow line on the floor. The blanket covering Sarah didn't rise, or fall, with the rhythmic flow of breathing. She seemed relaxed, but at the same time stiff.

Ishmael rushed past Isaac to the bed and shook his mother, begging her to wake up. He dissolved into sobs while Isaac slumped against the door frame.

*This is too much, Isaac thought, I'm probably just dreaming. It's probably what Rebecca said before I went to bed. It's my subconscious. That's a thing, right? Those crazy head doctors figured it out, you know all about that. You're just dealing with guilt, or anxiety, or something like that. You'll snap out of it, go downstairs, it'll be some time around midnight, and you'll have a nightcap and go back to sleep.*

Isaac pinched himself, then slammed his elbow into the door frame, but he didn't wake up. The horrid vision of his brother sobbing at his mother's bedside refused to evaporate and become waking consciousness. He desperately slammed himself into the door frame again, hoping that maybe, just maybe, the pain would snap him out of this grim dream, but again, he found himself wide awake. Rebecca's words came back to him, about his mother's coming demise and about preparing for tomorrow

and he realized that she'd known more than she could have possibly known.

He walked over to Ishmael who shook Sarah and cried, "Wake up ma! Please, wake up!"

No matter how grown a man, no matter how tough he thinks he is, the death of his mother will always come with pain.

Isaac rested a hand on Ishmael's shoulder and it felt heavy on his brother's shoulder. He wanted to feel like a little boy again, he wanted to be able to cry next to his brother and mourn his mother's death in the moment, but he could not afford himself that luxury. He envied his brother's freedom to cry and be free of responsibility. In a moment of crisis like this he needed to maintain his composure, stay strong and rise to the new leadership position. As cold and callous as it seemed, his mother's death created a power vacuum and he needed to act quickly. If he didn't act fast his brother might make hasty, emotional decisions that would jeopardize the farm's future. Or he might retreat into the depths of a whiskey bottle to escape his despair, and if Isaac didn't take control of the farm then who would?

Isaac knelt beside his brother and kept a firm hold on Ishmael's shoulder. Ishmael sniffed his nose and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

"I just didn't think she'd go this soon..."

"I know."

"I...I just wished we could've gotten to say a proper good bye..."

Isaac looked at his brother with sad eyes, partly because he agreed with his brother's remark, but also because Ishmael sounded like a pitiful child. Isaac closed his eyes and nodded.

"Now what're we gonna do Isaac?"

"We'll take care of ma," Isaac sighed, "I'll see to it."

"But what about after that?" Ishmael's voice sounded thick and desperate and scared.

"I'll take care of that too. Look, let's just focus on taking care of ma right now and we'll worry about the farm later, okay?"

Ishmael nodded then burst into tears again and pressed his head on the bed. Isaac looked at his mother lying in her bed, so still and ashen. For a moment, he thought she would gasp, take a great sucking breath, and bolt upright in bed. She would be wide-eyed and alert and look at her twin sons and ask why they were kneeling at her bedside?

*It would be so much easier if she'd lived a little longer,* Isaac thought with a touch of bitterness. Then immediately chastised himself, *What're you saying? Your mother's dead and you're being selfish!* He shook his head trying to clear the competing voices.

Isaac rose from beside his brother and said, "You can stay here, but I need to tell the wives and children. I'm sure they already have an idea of what happened though."

Ishmael either didn't hear him, or didn't feel inclined to respond, because he stayed silent except for muffled cries of, "Oh ma...oh ma..."

Isaac left the room and walked down the hallway toward the stairs. He looked down and saw Rebecca, Ashely, and the children waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

"Children, you need to go outside now," Isaac commanded in a soft voice. The children looked at each other, then did as they were told.

Ashley spoke first, "Is she...?"

Isaac nodded. Ashley's hand flew up to her mouth and tears appeared in her eyes. Rebecca's eyes grew wide, her mouth grew thin, and she placed a hand over her heart.

"You better go and comfort Ishmael," Rebecca advised Ashely. She nodded and half-ran up the stairs. Isaac passed her on the way down and hugged Rebecca.

"Oh Isaac...I'm so sorry..." she said into his shoulder.

He gently pulled himself away. "It's alright, well, it's not alright, but it is what it is."

"What do you think happened to her?"

"Heart attack, maybe? Probably all the stress Ishmael and I have been causing her." The last sentence must have come out more biting than intended, because Rebecca recoiled then placed a hand on Isaac's arm.

"I know I told you she was stressed, but Isaac, you didn't do this, and neither did Ishmael."

"Yeah? Then who did?"

"She did it to herself Isaac, and she was old,"

Rebecca's voice sounded firm and unapologetic. "If she had just calmed down then she would be alive and we wouldn't have *this* on our hands. Now is not the time for you to feel guilty and think you had a direct hand in this." She took his hand and led him toward the kitchen. "Now is the time for you to take control," her voice softened, "I know you want to grieve right now, but you can't, not yet. When it's all over..."

Isaac walked into the kitchen and placed his hand on the phone's rotary dial. He said in a low voice, "Get me the numbers of the doctor and the sheriff." She nodded and went to get their phone numbers.

He stared blankly at the black telephone receiver without a thought in his head except what he would tell the men he was about to phone. From upstairs he heard the muffled crying of Ishmael and Ashley, but it was background noise like static from a distant radio that he wanted to turn off. Rebecca returned and slid a piece of paper with both phone numbers in front of him. He



mechanically rotated the wheel to each number and waited to be connected.

Sarah was buried the next day in a grave beside Abraham. The local pastor and a collection of farmers joined Isaac, Ishmael, and their respective families at the service.

With the conclusion of the funeral service, the boys shoveled dirt into the hole and the wives laid flowers on the new grave. Despite spring being near a cool wind blew across the empty fields and forced the people to pull their coats tighter around their bodies and bow their heads against the breeze.

The family members, neighbors, and pastor retired to the farmhouse where the wives served drinks and snacks and the farmers told stories to the boys about Abe and Sarah.

Isaac noticed that the younger the farmers got, the newer the stories became. In them his mother and father sounded like foreign characters, distant relatives he'd only seen a few times. These weren't stories he had been present to experience, and they weren't stories his father or brother told him after his return. He realized that, in a way, he had been dead for over a decade and had returned confused and out of touch. Being polite, he smiled, laughed, nodded and said, "Yep, that sounds like them."

As Ishmael got drunk and entertained the guests and Isaac became more uncomfortable Rebecca came to get him out of the situation. She smiled like a lady and excused herself, but said she needed to speak with Isaac for just a moment.

"Thanks for getting me out of there."

She smiled and gave his hand a squeeze. "How're you holding up?"

"Fine, I guess. It all seems so...weird. They're swapping stories like they expect me to know them already

and all I can do is pretend. It only makes my parents seem more dead, not more alive.”

Rebecca looked at the floor then up at Isaac and said, “When are you going to talk to Ishmael about the farm?”

“Damn it Rebecca, can it not be right now? Please?”

“I’m not saying ‘right now,’ but it needs to be soon, preferably after the guests leave.”

“What should I say? ‘I’m in charge now and that’s final?’ Ishmael isn’t going to agree to that.”

“I don’t know! Just be subtle. But there’s one thing you need to make clear it’s that one of our sons will get lessons in the summer. We need at least one child smarter than the rest.”

Isaac shook his head, “I’ll try, Rebecca, but I don’t see this going well.”

She kissed him on the cheek, said nothing else, and returned to the living room leaving Isaac in the hall to ponder his next move.

By late afternoon, all the guests had left allowing the perfect opportunity for Isaac to make his speech. The four adults sat in the living room and Isaac tried to get up the courage to address the family as the leader.

Finally, he sighed, stood up, cleared his throat and said, "I think we should talk about the future of the farm."

"Right now, Isaac?" Ishmael asked in a timid, unsure voice.

Isaac nodded and replied in a soft, but confident voice, "Yes, right now Ishmael. If we put it off until tomorrow then we'll put it off until the day after that, and the day after that until the future is on us and we're not prepared," echoing Rebecca's words.

Ishmael sat back in his chair and spread his hands, not in a hostile or sarcastic way, but in a welcoming way urging his brother to lead the farm into the future.

Isaac continued, "Here's how things will go on the farm from now on. Nothing will change in the winters, but we need to discuss the summers. First: Rebecca is going to spend part of the day tutoring one of my sons. The family needs one of the children to get extra education in the summer so they can lead better once we're all gone.

"Why does it have to be one of your sons?" Ashley asked with an edge in her voice.

"Because my sons have already had more education outside of school than either of your children have, and if we want this farm to have the future we expect it to, then at least one of the children needs to have the book smarts to make that future possible."

Ishmael nodded, but seemed unconvinced.

"I'm not saying Hannah and Nathan are dumb, not at all, but do you think they have the...leg up to deal with accounts, budgets, or making business deals?"

Ishmael shook his head and Isaac subtly nodded his head, "That's right. We don't need every child to be educated that way, though I'd love it if they all could get a good education, but that simply can't happen. It's better to have one person in charge than a whole bunch of people thinking they ought to be in charge."

"So what will *you* do?" Ashley asked.

"Me? I'll still work in the field like I do anyway. I grew up helping pa in the fields and nothing has changed. Rebecca will help you after she's done with the morning lessons"

Ashley stared into Isaac's eyes without frowning or letting her real thoughts known to him. They locked gazes for a while then she looked away. Isaac made a curt nod then turned away from her.

"The last bit of business is living arrangements. Rebecca and I will take ma and pa's old room."

"Why are you taking that room?" Ishmael asked, suspecting Isaac's power play.

Rebecca glanced at Isaac, wondering if he was too emboldened and asking for too much at once, but she stayed quiet and let her husband play it out.

"Well," Isaac drew out the word and tried not to make eye contact with Rebecca, "Rebecca will need more room to teach one of our sons, away from as many distractions as possible; the living room has the radio and the kitchen has food." He paused then continued, "Besides, there's no reason Rebecca and I shouldn't reap those rewards."

"Where do you propose we sleep?" Ashley asked, folding her arms across her chest.

"You and Ishmael will move into Eli's old room. All of this is temporary if we're set on buying an adjacent farm. One of the families can move into that house and we'll have all the space we need. I'm sure you're worried about Nathan and Hannah sharing a room, but it won't be for long. It's just a temporary adjustment. Hasn't this been nothing but temporary adjustments since I came back to the farm with my family in tow?"

Ashley mulled over the question then slowly nodded.

Isaac gave a warm smile and nodded. "So, we're in agreement?" he asked glancing at his brother.

There was silence for a while then Ishmael spoke up, "I think Isaac has been good to this family, and these new arrangements may not be ideal in the short term, but it'll only be a little while. Hell, I might disagree with Isaac from time to time, but I know he disagrees with me too sometimes. This plan of his will be good the farm, and it'll be good for the family too. I say we do it."

The rest of the family smiled and Isaac relaxed with his brother's agreement.

"Then it's settled, we'll start the new plan tomorrow."

Nobody rejected the assertion, but Ashley had her own reservations that would be allowed to fester and turn into bitter frustration if left unspoken. She couldn't voice her suspicions or disagreements, not with Ishmael. Instead, she stayed quiet as Isaac crowned himself the new king of the farm.

**XXXIV**

In the days following the agreement the family members moved into their new rooms. Although Ashley maintained her suspicions about Isaac's true intentions she remained silent, so as not to provoke any conflicts. Isaac and Rebecca decided Jacob would be the best for lessons. He possessed the dedication to education like his father had, and the arrogance to believe he deserved the extra lessons. At first, Ezra resented the decision, because it meant he would work more in the field than Jacob. He accepted his fate though, and decided it would be for the best. Sure, Jacob would have the schooling to run the farm, but he, Ezra, would have years of practical knowledge on how to *truly* run a farm. "In the trenches," as their father said.

Sowing season came, and the new order of things truly went into effect. Rebecca tutored Jacob while Ezra joined Isaac, Ishmael, and Nathan in the field. Ashley and Hannah cleaned the house and prepared meals for the families. Hannah was too young to notice the obvious hierarchy and she enjoyed spending time with her mother even if it was work. Although she was a child she noticed her mother's sullen demeanor. She wanted to ask, "Mama, what's wrong?" but she thought better of it. Ashley's attitude got even worse when Rebecca came into the kitchen to grab a glass of water, or a small snack for herself and Jacob.

In the afternoon, the men came in from the field to break for lunch and once the women served the men the entire family sat at the table together and chatted amiably about the day's work inside and outside. Food tends to be the great pacifier when it comes to conflict. Afterwards, Jacob joined the rest of the men in the field and Rebecca helped Ashley and Hannah with the remaining chores. The

women got along well in the afternoons, their spirits lifted after eating lunch and seeing their husbands and sons.

After the sun set the family joined together at the table and ate dinner. With their plates cleaned the children retreated to play together and the men sipped whiskey while the women cleared the dishes. In the evenings, they gathered around the radio and listened to the day's news, or some entertainment that carried them away from the remote outpost of humanity that was New Canaan. Ashley loved the shows set in the city, because even if she detested Isaac and Rebecca she had always dreamt of going to the city...someday. That's not to say Nathan and hadn't been an unexpected blessing, and she loved Ishmael, but sometimes she wondered how her life would've been if she'd gone to the city. She wanted to ask Rebecca about it, but never had the courage to broach the topic. The news allowed Isaac and Rebecca to feel like they weren't totally cut off from the outside world, and even Ishmael developed an interest for that mysterious place beyond New Canaan, asking Isaac for clarification about certain topics. After the radio, everyone went to bed, and waited for the sun to appear on the horizon so they could repeat it all over again the next day.

**XXXV**

It's strange, but tensions always seem to flare in the summertime. Perhaps it's the heat of the high noon of the year, when the sun beats the earth and cooks everyone and everything unfortunate enough to be caught out in the open. The men in the field reddened under the solar tyrant, while the women sweated in the house. Rebecca and Jacob moved into the living room to study, because neither of them could focus on the lessons with the heat rising and cooking them in the room.

From the kitchen, Ashley heard the dull, monotonous repetition of Jacob's lessons as Rebecca asked him a question and he responded. Normally, it might not have bothered her, but the summer heat frayed her nerves and shortened her patience. She grew up in the area and was accustomed to the heat, but this year was different. This year it was grating and annoying. On the hottest day of the summer Hannah and Ashley worked in the kitchen while Rebecca and Jacob worked on Jacob's lessons. Perhaps it was the heat, or maybe the droning lessons in the other room, or the festering unfairness of the new family arrangements, but something caused Ashley to snap.

Hannah and Ashley were washing dishes, and as the lessons went on Ashley's scrubbing of the dishes intensified. Hannah wanted to ask her mother if everything was alright, if she wasn't doing something right, but when she looked at her mother she decided it would be better not to ask.

It wasn't that Rebecca was tutoring Jacob, it was that he was being tutored in the middle of the day while the rest of the family worked. *She* and her children worked while Rebecca and Jacob spent their time going over the same lessons every day, and for what? To prepare one of



Isaac's children to run the farm? What is there to know about running the farm, or any farm for that matter? Her mother and father ran a farm and neither of them were educated people, so why did Jacob need an education? Besides, the farm was supposed to be a family effort, so no one person needed to be any more educated than the rest of them.

Ashley gripped a plate in her hands and shook, then slammed it into the sink. She stormed away from the sink, her hands still dripping with soapy water. Hannah considered intervening and asking what was wrong, but whenever she did her mother snapped at her or told her in a sweet voice nothing was wrong and not to worry; all dependent on her mother's increasingly variable moods. On a day like today she knew better than to ask what was wrong. She kept her distance as she followed her mother into the living room where Rebecca and Jacob sat.

Ashley stomped into the living room and Rebecca set down the lessons book to look up at Ashley.

“Is everything alright, Ashley?”

Ashley ground her teeth and responded, “No, everything is not alright Rebecca.”

Children seem to be attuned to coming conflict, or at least emotional exchanges, especially when it happens between people they care about and hold in high regard. Jacob and Hannah shot each other a glance then looked away from each other. While they didn't understand the family politics they knew any alliances between the children could not exist when their parents were at odds.

“What's wrong Ashley? Is it anything I can do?”

“Yeah, there is something you can do, you can stop with the lessons.”

“I don't understand...”

Ashley laughed, “You don't understand? Let me try again. Knock it off with the lessons. Just *stop*.”

Rebecca cocked her head and frowned, “Why should I?”

“Because I said so! I'm sick of hearing the same lessons over and over. Hell, I could probably tell you everything you've told Jacob. What use are these lessons anyway? Everything I've heard doesn't sound like it'd be any use for running a farm.”

“These lessons aren't about running a farm,” Rebecca shot back indignantly. “It's about getting Jacob ready for college, so he can go to college and learn about economics and agriculture so he can make informed decisions on how to *help* run the farm someday.”

“How is that supposed to help us right now?”

“It's not about helping us right now; it's about preparing the farm for the future. At least one of the children needs to know how to operate the farm.”

“They'll learn better if they're out in the field working like the rest of the men, not mindlessly repeating facts,” Ashley spat back.

Rebecca stood up and set down the lesson book, “Ashley, I know you grew up in this town, and I know you think there's a certain way things ought to be done, because they've always been done that way, but times have changed.”

“How so? How have things changed? Do you think the way things changed up north also mean they changed down here?”

“What're you talking about Ashley? People are abandoning their farms, or selling them if they're lucky. What would've happened if we hadn't shown up?”

Ashley scoffed, “Yeah, just like you two to think you can swoop in and be our saviors.”

Rebecca's face hardened and her voice lowered to a soft, but dangerous tone, “We didn't have to save your damn farm. Do you think *I* wanted to come here? Do you think *I* wanted to uproot my sons and drag them to this

backwater town? I did it for Isaac, *your brother-in-law*, because I knew he wanted to make amends with his family and he knew he could get back on his feet here.”

“Well I'm sorry that your husband couldn't handle things on his own, but that didn't give you the right to come down here and impose yourselves on us! And another thing, we didn't need your help saving this farm, we coulda done it on our own.”

Rebecca stepped closer to Ashley, and her voice rose as her calmness diminished, “How could you have saved the farm? Abe was going into debt trying to keep this place afloat! Given a few more years he probably would've gone bankrupt and then where would you have been?”

“We would have made do.”

Rebecca laughed at Ashley's defiant remark, “*Made do?* With what?! The farm would've stopped producing, and even if Abe owned the property what use is it without crops? What would you have done? Sold the car? Or the farm equipment? Were you going to till the land by hand or pray for divine intervention? It doesn't work that way!”

“Y'know, you city types come down here and think you're so high and mighty with your *education* and your *money* and you think us 'bumpkins' can't handle anything without you all holding our hand along the way.”

Rebecca smirked, “Well, you said it, not me.”

Ashley struck Rebecca across the face. The hard slap echoed in the living room. Jacob held his breath and Hannah stayed back in the kitchen taking in the scene wide-eyed. Ashley glared at Rebecca with her hands on her hips tempting her to say something in return. Rebecca slapped her back with even more force and ferocity sending Ashley stumbling backwards.

Hannah gasped and Jacob began to stand up, wondering if he needed to step between the two women, or if the exchange was already over.

Ashley lunged at Rebecca and tackled her. The two women went sprawling onto the living room floor, screaming insults at each other and pulling each other's hair. Rebecca elbowed Ashley in the face and tried to crawl away from her, but Ashley grabbed her foot and dragged her back. Ashley threw out a few punches that landed squarely on Rebecca's face prompting a bloody nose. Rebecca let out a rage-filled scream and shoved Ashley from her, then jumped on top of Ashley and tore at her dress and punched back.

Hannah stood paralyzed in the kitchen, tears forming in her eyes and rolling down her cheeks. She looked pleadingly at Jacob, begging him to intervene or do something to stop her mother and her aunt from killing each other. Rather than risk getting in the middle of the fight Jacob yelled to Hannah over the chaotic din of the fight, "Stay here!" and he ran outside.

Isaac, Ishmael, Ezra, and Nathan were working on the far end of the field when they saw Jacob sprinting across the open ground. Ishmael stood up and used a hand to shield his eyes to see Jacob better. He saw that Jacob looked panicked, his eyes wide and wild and his cheeks flushed.

"What the hell's wrong with him..."

Isaac looked at his son and shouted his name, but Jacob either couldn't hear him over the sound of his heavy breathing or didn't want to stop to respond. Isaac shouted his son's name again and this time the boys and Ishmael joined in, asking him "what was the problem?" and "what's going on?" Fearing an emergency involving Hannah or one of the women, the group of boys and men ran toward Jacob to meet him halfway across the field.

Isaac reached him first and put a hand on Jacob's shoulder to steady the boy, "Jacob, what's going on in the house? What's wrong?"

Between gasps Jacob replied, “Ma...Aunt Ashley...fighting...real bad.”

Ishmael caught up just in time to hear Jacob's news. The men looked at each other and groaned.

“Son of a bitch,” Ishmael muttered. “Better go and stop the ladies from rippin' each other to shreds.”

Isaac nodded in agreement. He turned to Ezra and Nathan, “Stay here with Jacob. Ezra, give your brother some water before he keels over.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Nathan asked.

“No, I think anyone else is just going to make the situation worse. It's bad enough with Hannah having to be in there with this going on.”

Nathan nodded and Isaac took off to catch up with his brother as they ran toward the farm house. The two men burst in through the back door and heard the women screaming at each other and their bodies rolling around on the floor. Ishmael ran over and grabbed Ashley and Isaac did the same for Rebecca. They pulled their wives up and held them back as they struggled and tried to get away from their husbands so they could continue the fight. Isaac tightened his grip on Rebecca's arms and she stopped trying to break away, but Ashley kept twisting and elbowing Ishmael in the stomach.

“*Stop it! Just stop it Ashley!*” Ishmael roared in her ear.

She turned around and faced him with wild eyes, her hair a tangled mess, sweat glistening on her forehead. She pulled her lips back and said through gritted teeth, “Why should I?”

“Because this is ridiculous!” He glared at her, his eyes wide and severe threatening her to challenge his assertion.

Ashley looked away from him, shot a stare at Rebecca then relented under Ishmael's grip. Isaac and

Ishmael looked at each other to see if the other thought it would be safe to let go of the women. They gave a subtle nod to each other and slowly released their respective wives, ready to grab them if they decided to charge at each other again. Isaac crossed the living room keeping his eyes straight ahead as he walked to the kitchen to get a couple chairs for the women to sit in. The only sound anyone heard was the scrape of the wooden chairs against the floor punctuating the tension, but not breaking it. He left a chair by Ishmael and Ashley and brought the other to Rebecca. Ashley plopped down in the chair and folded her arms across her chest not paying attention to the hair hanging in her face or her torn dress. Rebecca gently sat down in her chair, her fingers tucking the stray strands of hair behind her ears, and frowning at the tears in her dress.

“Now, do either of you care to tell me *what the hell just happened?*” Ishmael asked the two women.

Neither Ashley or Rebecca answered. Ashley continued to glare at Rebecca, but Rebecca didn't look back, instead she pursed her lips and stared away from her. Isaac tapped his foot while Ishmael stuffed his balled-up fists into his pockets.

Ishmael paced the room and nodded, “So, no one wants to tell me what happened?”

Ashley continued to glare at Rebecca and responded with a curt, “Nope.”

Ishmael's face reddened and he visibly clenched his teeth. He opened his mouth to speak again, but Isaac beat him to it, “We are wasting time with you two women acting like *children*,” he seethed. “Now, I'll ask my brother's question again: what the hell happened?”

Isaac's break in his normally calm composure took both women by surprise, and even Ishmael raised his eyebrows.

Rebecca cleared her throat, “Well, I was just tutoring Jacob, and Ashley and Hannah were working in

the kitchen. Suddenly she came in here and just started *raving* at me like a lunatic. Then she slapped me and one thing led to another and now you're here."

Ashley scoffed and shook her head, "She makes it sound like she's innocent."

"Did you come in here and start yelling at her?"

Ishmael asked.

"Well, yes."

"And did you slap her?"

"Yeah...But she asked for it! She just acted so...so much better than me, like her family's better than ours."

"I believe the word you're looking for is 'arrogant,'" Rebecca answered.

Ashley moved to get out of her chair, but Ishmael held her back.

"Let's try this again," Isaac said. "Ashley, tell us what happened. Everything you did and everything Rebecca did. You don't need to say what each other said, just the events that led up to right now."

Ashley nodded, "Alright, well yeah, Hannah and me were working in the kitchen and y'know I have to hear Rebecca and Jacob just doing those lessons day in and day out. Hell, *I* could probably recite most of the stuff she teaches him the way I hear it all the time. It gets tiresome to hear the same stuff all the time, and what good is something like history or grammar for a boy that's gonna run a farm?"

"The point is for him to be a well-rounded individual that can represent the farm and the families," Rebecca interjected.

"*See?* That's what I have to put up with!"

"I don't see what's so wrong with that," Ishmael said with a shrug, "She does have a point."

"Oh don't tell me you're sticking up for her?"

"I'm not! I'm just saying it makes sense."

"Why can't it be Nathan or Hannah?"

Isaac and Rebecca both inhaled as if ready to defend their son's education, but Ishmael answered for them, "Look, I'd love it if Nathan or Hannah could get a good education, maybe go off to school somewhere, but let's face facts: Jacob and Ezra had a better school in Chicago and that means they're ahead of Nathan and Hannah. They'll probably always have a leg up on those two. That's just how it is."

Ashley pouted and sat back in the chair, deflated over Ishmael's lack of support.

"Is there anything else that hasn't been said?" Isaac asked Rebecca.

"No, that's basically everything that happened."

The brothers nodded at each other, satisfied with the conclusion of the mini trial. Isaac looked around the room then realized the absence of one person.

"Where's Hannah?" Isaac asked.

The adults looked around for a moment and then began walking around the house calling her name. Rebecca ascended the stairs to investigate the bedrooms. She went into Hannah and Nathan's room and looked around for a moment. Just before she left she heard quiet whimpering coming from under Hannah's bed. She knelt and saw the little girl lying underneath the bed, tears streaming down her face with her back against the wall. Rebecca extended a hand, but Hannah cringed and pulled herself into a ball.

"I'm not going to hurt you, can you please come out from under there?"

Hannah shook her head and kept her wide, teary eyes fixed on Rebecca.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Please, everyone is looking for you and they'd like to know you're here; safe and sound."

"You hit my ma..." Hannah said in a small, frightened voice.



“I know I did, and I feel terrible about it, but the fight is over and it's safe to come out.”

“Why did you hit ma, Aunt Rebecca?”

“Because she hit me first.”

Hannah mulled over what Rebecca said, then asked the kind of question only children can ask without so much fear of retaliation, “Did you mean what you said, about not wanting to move here, and about the farm and all of that stuff?”

Rebecca paused for a moment, considering if it was wise to answer honestly to a child that might very well tell her parents what was said. “Well, a little bit. Sometimes I miss my home and wish we hadn't left it.”

Hannah moved a little closer to Rebecca and asked, “If you didn't want to leave, why did you?”

“Oh sweetheart,” Rebecca sighed. She thought about Isaac's depression, the grim possibility of what he might have done had he stayed, and she answered in the best way she could, “Sometimes we do things for the people we love for complicated reasons, even if it hurts us in the process.”

Before Hannah asked another question the rest of the adults came into the bedroom. Hannah crawled out from under the bed and got to her feet, but hesitated to approach her mother fearing another outburst of violence between Ashley and Rebecca. Ishmael walked over to his daughter and picked her up. She held onto her father and looked at the adult faces focused on her, waiting for her to start crying. She preempted all of them and spoke first in an apologetic, but guarded tone, “I got scared, so I came up here, but I'm alright now.” The simplicity and honesty of her statement defused any uncomfortable explanations about why her mother and aunt got into a fist fight and all the complicated factors that led to the confrontation. Everyone in the room nodded and decided that's all that needed to be said for the day.

“C'mon honey, let's go get back to work,” Ashley said.

“Will Aunt Rebecca help us?”

The men held their breath, waiting for another explosion between the two women, and sensing the potential for another conflict Rebecca answered the question with tact and sincerity,

“Only if your ma wants my help,” Rebecca said.

Now the choice belonged to Ashley, and if she decided to be antagonistic then any sympathy she had would be lost if she answered with hostility or sarcasm.

Ashley figured out Rebecca's tactic and gave her own open-ended response moving the burden from the women to the men, “Well, I wouldn't mind the extra help provided pa and Uncle Isaac think it's a good idea.”

“I think it'd be a fine idea,” Isaac said before Rebecca could answer, recognizing Ashley's attempt to control the conversation. “Besides, we could use Jacob's help in the field.”

The conflict was settled with Isaac's statement and the day moved on without any further interruptions. The men and boys worked in the field, quiet and diligent at first then relaxed happy as they settled into the rhythm of their work. The two wives and Hannah worked in the kitchen, preparing dinner and keeping the conversation light far from any talk about the farm's future, the family's plans, or any other points of contention that might have existed between the two women.

Ashley said to Rebecca, “I don't want you to think I hate you, or hate people from the city. I just,” she paused and said to Hannah, “How about you go outside and help the boys?”

Hannah jumped at the offer and ran outside.

Ashley watched her go and sighed, “I love Ishmael, and I'm glad he gave me Nathan, but I don't want Hannah to live my life. I want her to get out of here, to do more

with her life than be a farmer's wife. I want her to have a life like yours."

"*Like mine?*" Rebecca said with astonishment.

"Ashley, I had to leave my home and move in with my husband's family in the middle of nowhere. So far my life hasn't exactly been easy."

Ashley shrugged, "I know, but you're from the city, and you came from money, right?"

"I guess you could say that."

"And you went to school. I had to leave school after the eighth grade, because my ma needed help on the farm and thought I should learn how to be someone's wife. I don't want that for Hannah. Did you go to parties?"

"Yes, I mean...I never went without Isaac."

"At least he brought you to parties, and had parties to bring you to! Even if we had parties here I doubt Ishmael would take me to them..."

Rebecca wanted to put a hand on Ashley's shoulder, or give her a hug, but she didn't know if that kind of contact would be welcomed or rejected.

"All I'm saying is if there's a chance for Hannah to get out and have a better life then I wouldn't object to it." She paused and said, "Would you mind if Hannah listened to the lessons sometime?"

Rebecca smiled and said, "No Ashley, I wouldn't mind at all. Just try not to slap me again."

As the sun set, the men trudged back to the house leaving their muddy boots on the doorstep and shuffled inside ready for dinner. They methodically wiped their necks and faces with damp towels breathing in the variety of aromas from the dinner waiting for them. The family ate as a family and talked as a family rather than as two warring factions and it was good. After dinner, the women cleared the tables and washed the dishes while the men and children sat in the living room listening to the radio. The

wives came in soon after and sat with their husbands until Ishmael went outside with a lantern to work on some piece of machinery in the barn and Isaac announced that he needed to work on plans for the farm.

Outside, the last of the daylight vanished beneath the horizon and the air cooled in the absence of the sun. As the sun departed it took with it any residual bad thoughts or feelings that existed at the forefront of everyone's minds. Lightning bugs winked above the field and on the lawn and the family went outside to enjoy the cool summer twilight. Hannah chased the insects while Nathan, Jacob, and Ezra climbed the oak tree, discussing the mysteries of young adulthood in a way that only made them sound more like boys. Rebecca and Ashley sat together on the back steps of the house watching their children in the lawn. Although they knew they would never be friends, they knew they could not escape the reality that they were family and that their children were family.

The two women were bound together by forces beyond their control and a chain of events set in motion long before their births they could not escape. True, they could continue to simmer and fight in cycles, divide their families, tire their husbands and engage in an emotional arms race to make the other miserable, or they could bury their anger, be stoic about the situation and hope that everything would turn out all right like their husbands promised. Ashley still resented Rebecca, but at the same time was glad they made amends. If it meant a chance for Hannah, then it was worth swallowing her pride.

Nathan, Jacob, Ezra, and Hannah, despite being children could not ignore the palpable tension that existed between their mothers. Hannah ran faster, spread out her arms farther, and laughed harder trying to avoid the nagging fear that someday all too soon another battle would be fought in the house. The boys carried on their conversation, fidgeted on the limbs of the trees and

sidestepped any mention of the day's events out of fear that even talking about the thing would give it power and allow it to climb out of its shallow grave and wreak even more havoc than before. An emotional divide existed between the two families and the children knew it just as the wives knew it, and they were powerless to close that divide. They wondered if Isaac and Ishmael felt the divide, or simply tried to ignore it for the sake of peace and stability in a time when peace and stability were precious commodities.

Nobody spoke about the divide. Rebecca and Ashley sat on the back stoop watching their children at play, occasionally glancing at each other to give a faint, defeated smile to let the other know that they understood the animosity and regret. Hannah chased the bugs, the boys climbed the tree and talked, and everyone tried to enjoy themselves until the next day and the next catastrophe.

**XXXVI**

Weeks passed without another calamity. The fields showed the men's progress as the crops broke out of the dirt and reached for the sky. Storms rolled in to refresh the ground and replenish the pond that fed the plants, and the brothers' conversations always carried an optimistic tune about the coming harvest season. The wives figured out a way to maintain their distance whenever possible. If the weather permitted, Rebecca and Jacob worked on his lessons outside to give Ashley space and avoid a repeat of the episode that happened earlier in the summer. Sometimes Hannah joined them and listened for a while before losing interest and going off to do her own thing.

On some of the days though, Rebecca simply gave Jacob instructions to read from a book, or she wrote a few questions for Jacob to answer and give back to her later in the day. On days like that she retreated to her bedroom and stayed in her bedroom until it was time for her to help Ashley. At first, Ashley resented how Rebecca disappeared for a few hours then showed up to help with the meals or the housecleaning. She considered confronting Rebecca and accusing her of being lazy, but then she noticed how Rebecca slouched, how she seemed drained of her usual energy and work ethic, and how her eyes looked vacant when she peered out the window at the horizon. Ashley held back her accusations, and decided that it'd be better not to ask any questions.

She had never given much thought to just how much Rebecca's life changed. Sure, she enjoyed hearing about life in the city, and envied Rebecca for the life she'd had in the city, but she never thought about just how different Chicago was from New Canaan. When Rebecca sighed, and gazed out the window with those sad eyes while she mechanically washed dishes or prepared food

Ashley thought more about Rebecca. Rebecca had probably grown up in Chicago the same way she had grown up in New Canaan. Rebecca had probably assumed that she would live and die in Chicago, and that her children and grandchildren would grow up in Chicago just like Ashley thought Hannah and Nathan would grow old in New Canaan. How long had it been since she had seen her family, or talked to them? Had there been marriages, funerals, births that Rebecca missed? And what did Rebecca think about New Canaan? Ashley thought of the solitude as being peaceful, comfortable, and homey, but maybe Rebecca thought of it as a prison in the wilderness and she a prisoner with an indeterminate sentence length.

On one of the days when Rebecca stayed in her room and sent Jacob to work on his own, Ashley decided to talk to Rebecca and offer her some words of solace that might give her a new perspective on the situation, or at least gently convince her to buck up and focus on reality as it is as opposed to how Rebecca wished it was. She sent Hannah outside to busy herself to avoid any complications and hurried her work to avoid getting behind.

When she went into Isaac and Rebecca's room she found the blinds drawn and Rebecca curled up on the bed, not under the covers or with her head on the pillow, lying there and staring at the wall.

"Do you mind if I sit?"

Rebecca gently shook her head without further acknowledging Ashley's presence.

"Now, I've noticed this has been happening more and more, you going up here and hiding out until it's time to come down to work in the afternoon. Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

Rebecca shook her head again and Ashley let out a deep sigh, "Rebecca, listen, I've been cuttin' you a lot of slack these past couple weeks, and I haven't felt it was my

place to bother you about *this*,” gesturing at the dark room and Rebecca's still form on the bed, “but I need your help.”

“You seem pretty capable; you could probably get along just fine without me.”

Ashley noticed the veiled suggestion and said, “Now don't start talking like that.”

Rebecca sat up and tears rolled down her cheeks. “I'm just so sick of all of this. The same thing every day, every week, every month, and for how long? Now Isaac talks about staying here for the rest our lives, expanding the farm, and never returning to Chicago. I don't think I'll ever see my family again, and I just think about our house sitting vacant in the city. Did you know we didn't lose our home? We just abandoned it and came down here. I feel like I'm dead, just a ghost wandering this house and these fields.” She let out a humorless laugh that sounded more like a sob, “I don't even get to haunt my own house!” She broke down into heaving sobs and buried her face in her hands.

Ashley stayed quiet and made no move to console Rebecca until it seemed safe to approach the grieving woman.

“I don't hate you, or Ishmael, or the farm, or New Canaan, but at the same time I do.”

“What will make you feel better?”

“Going home. This might be your home, and Ishmael's home, and even Isaac's home, but it's not *my* home.”

Ashley put a hand on Rebecca's shoulder, “I know this farmhouse isn't like your old house, and I know New Canaan ain't exactly Chicago, but that doesn't matter if you have your husband and boys, right?”

Rebecca looked at Ashley and said in a choked voice, “It shouldn't matter, right? I feel so damned selfish and I hate myself for feeling this way, but it *does* matter. Isaac got to be with Abe and Sarah when they died, will I get the same for when my parents die? No! Isaac's family is



here, but my family is miles and miles away. He gets to see his family every day at breakfast, I haven't seen mine in *years*. The worst part is I don't think Isaac thinks about any of this.

I put on a smile, do my work, be a good mother and wife and he thinks it's all fine, well it's not!" She wiped her eyes and sighed again, "Isaac is happy here, and he doesn't have to worry as much here. He can be a father to his sons and a husband to me. I can't take that away from him, I just wish he realized that what he has is because of what I gave up."

Ashley pulled Rebecca close and hugged her like a sister. They sat together in the dark room and in that moment Ashley realized she had to do the thing Rebecca couldn't do and the thing Ishmael didn't know he had to do. She didn't know when she would say it, and she didn't know how she would say it, but she knew she would say it: Isaac and his family needed to leave New Canaan.

While Rebecca had an emotional breakdown, Jacob sat under the oak tree and watched his family working in the field. He'd been reading a book his mother gave him, but had grown bored with the subject matter. He didn't quite see the point of reading literature when he was supposed to be making the financial and legal decisions for the farm someday, but he liked reading and didn't want to jeopardize it by asking why. On a hot summer day like this one he had even more reason not to ask why. He surveyed the field and saw his father, his uncle, his brother, and his cousin at work and felt a twinge of guilt for not being out there with them. Still, when he saw the heat shimmering in the air the guilt dissipated and he was happy to be in the shade with his back against the tree.

Out in the field Ishmael stood up and rose his hand above his face to shield his eyes from the sun. He squinted and figured that it wasn't even high noon. If the heat was already this bad in the morning, he didn't want to think

about what it would be like in the afternoon. His head tilted down and he scanned the field and the rows of crops. The plants seemed to be doing fine and probably wouldn't mind if everyone took a break.

“Say Isaac!” he shouted to his brother.

Isaac lifted his head and looked at Ishmael, “Yeah? What do you need?”

“How's our schedule with the crops?”

“Well, I'd have to check the calendar and the heights of the plants, but just by eyeballing it I'd say we're ahead of schedule by about a week or so. We got a good handle on things during sowing season.”

“Think it'd be safe to take the rest of the day off?”

Isaac laughed and wiped his hands on his pants, “I don't know about taking the rest of the day off, but I think we could use a break.” Addressing Nathan and Ezra he said, “How would you boys like a break?”

Nathan and Ezra nodded and grinned at the suggestion.

“Alright, let's break for a couple hours. We'll eat and then work until sundown. How about you boys go for a swim in the pond? And go see if Jacob wants to join you, he could probably use a break from his studies.”

Ezra smiled and agreed, but Nathan remained silent and didn't smile. He and Ezra deserved a couple hours to swim and relax, but Jacob? Jacob didn't deserve a break; he didn't deserve to go swimming. He got to stay inside all morning, and even if he did get outside he still sat and read a book or wrote answers to questions or did anything but pour sweat on the ground like Nathan, Ezra, Isaac, or Ishmael; like a *real* man. He decided not to protest his uncle's suggestion and agreed by default.

The two men and the two boys walked toward the house. When they reached the oak tree Isaac and Ishmael walked up to Jacob to talk to him. He set down the book and stood up.

“How's the book Jacob?” Isaac asked his son.

“It's pretty good, but I don't quite see why ma wants me to read a story and not something about money or laws.”

Isaac shrugged, “Well, just do what she tells you, I don't think there's any harm in reading a book.”

“Besides, don't question a good deal while it lasts,” Ishmael added with a laugh. “It sure as hell beats working in a field.”

Isaac smiled and nodded, “Listen to your uncle. We helped your grandpa in the field every day in the summertime from sunrise to sunset. You're lucky to have the job you do.”

Jacob kicked the dirt, visibly uncomfortable, and he averted his eyes from his family members. He was painfully aware of the good deal he had, a deal he had not chosen, and it felt like more of a burden than to work in the fields out in the hot sun.

Isaac noticed his son's discomfort and the awkward silence, “We're *all* going to take a break, so how about you and Ezra and Nathan go for a swim in the pond? Uncle Ishmael and I are going into the barn to cool off for a spell.” He paused for a moment then asked, “Where's your ma? She having you do work on your own again?”

“Yeah, she said she had a headache and needed to lie down.”

Isaac frowned and looked beyond Jacob at the farmhouse, “She's been having a lot of headaches lately, maybe she needs to talk to doc.”

“It's probably just the heat,” Ishmael interjected. “Don't worry about her Isaac, let's go have a drink in the barn.”

Isaac mumbled his agreement without taking his eyes off the house and followed his brother over to the barn.

Nathan and Ezra stood next to Jacob, trying to come up with something to say. Finally, Nathan spoke up, “Well, think we might as well go swimming?”

The brothers nodded and they set off across the field toward the pond. They got to the edge of the water and stripped down to their shorts and dove into the water. It felt warm, but refreshing on their skin. The world's problems seemed distant and intangible, like distant thunder at the edge of the horizon. They had more pressing matters to worry about, like the approaching school year and corresponding harvest season.

After they grew tired of swimming the boys went to the far shore and laid in the grass, letting the sun dry them. Jacob stretched out and sighed, “It's nice to have a day off.”

Ezra nodded and smiled, but Nathan sat up and looked at Jacob, “What're you talking about cousin? Every day is a day off for you.”

Jacob opened his eyes and looked over at Nathan, “What do you mean? I help you guys in the afternoon, and I spend my mornings studying.”

Nathan snorted, “Oh yeah, you sit around reading and then work in the field for a couple hours, sounds real difficult.”

“Hey! My lessons in the morning will help the farm someday, and it's not like I volunteered for them.”

“No, but it's not exactly like you refused 'em either!”

“Well someone needs to know how to do something besides pick crops!”

“What, are you saying that picking crops isn't important?”

“He never said that Nathan,” Ezra said in his brother's defense. “All he's saying is that one of us needs to know how to keep the books and make orders and stuff like that.”

“So why him?” Nathan retorted. “Why not me, or Hannah, or you?”

Ezra shrugged, “The grownups just figured Jacob would be best.”

“And you act like that doesn't bother you.”

Jacob glanced at his brother, his eyes worried and anticipating hurt.

Ezra looked at the grass between his feet, “Well, I'd be lying if I said I never felt jealous...”

Jacob turned away from his brother, and Ezra added, “But it's not like I let it eat me up! I don't mind doing farm work, besides, I like the outdoors.”

Nathan laughed, “Yeah, sure Ezra, I bet you'd just hate to be indoors all day, sitting in a chair, sipping on some iced tea, being pampered by your mama-”

“If you think it's so damn easy how about you do it?” Jacob yelled. “Yeah, be my guest!” He stood up and balled his hands into fists.

Nathan rose to his feet and frowned, “Yeah, I think I will. I could use an easy job like that, it's just woman's work after all.”

“In case you forgot, my *pa* takes care of that work, and he's not a lady.” After a pause, he added, “Besides, even if you think he's a woman he still whooped your daddy's ass, so what does that make your daddy?”

Nathan lowered his head and said in a threatening whisper, “Take it back.”

Ezra stood up and got between the two boys, “Easy guys, c'mon, it's just hot. Let's just get back in the pond and-”

“Shut up Ezra!” Nathan spat.

“Don't you talk to my brother that way!”

“What're you gonna do *Jacob*? Run back to the house and tell your ma on me?”

Before Ezra could stop him, Jacob leaped at Nathan knocking him off his feet. He straddled his cousin and

punched his face. Each punch made a dull thud as fists struck flesh. Nathan shoved Jacob off him, his face already bruised and bloodied. Jacob landed on all fours and Nathan delivered a mean kick to his ribs. Jacob coughed as the wind left him, and he clutched his torso.

Nathan picked up Jacob and threw him into the shallows of the pond, pushing his head underwater, screaming, "Take back what you said about my pa!"

Jacob spluttered and said through a mouthful of water, "Go to hell."

Nathan dunked him again. His eyes wild and nostrils flared, he looked like a savage dog taking pleasure in killing its prey. Ezra stood by and kept shouting, "Stop it Nathan you're gonna drown him!"

Jacob's arms flailed trying to get his fists to hit Nathan and deliver a hard-enough hit to make him stop. Jacob's movements grew slower, weaker, and something in Ezra snapped. He yanked Nathan off Jacob, then punched him as hard as he could. Nathan's nose made a sharp *crack* as it bent the wrong way, and blood drops hit the water. He stumbled backward with his hands on his face trying to stem the rapid flow of blood. Ezra yanked his brother out of the water then eased him down on the bank of the pond. Jacob stared up at the sky and gasped like a fish.

Nathan sat a few feet away with his hands pressed against his face, quietly moaning and muttering, "You broke my damn nose."

Ezra sat beside Jacob and asked him, "Are you alright?"

He nodded and Ezra responded with a pat on the shoulder. He stood up and walked over to Nathan. When Ezra approached, Nathan flinched and said in a muffled voice, "Please don't hit me again."

"Why shouldn't I? You tried to drown my brother!"

"Well, he started it."

“So you were gonna kill him 'cause he hurt your feelings? Are you *crazy*?”

Nathan looked away. Ezra glared at him for a moment then looked over at his brother.

“Let's just go back to the house,” he announced.

Nathan nodded and stood up. Ezra walked over to his brother and hoisted him onto his feet, supporting his weight on his shoulders.

“Lemme help you,” Nathan said in a subdued voice. “It's the least I can do for almost killing him.”

Ezra gave him a little smile and put Jacob's other arm around Nathan's shoulders. The three boys began their long walk around the pond back toward the house.

Ishmael and Isaac entered through the backdoor and found Rebecca and Ashley sitting at the kitchen table. Rebecca clutched a handkerchief in her hands and Ashley stared at the two men as they approached.

“What's the matter?” Isaac asked the two women.

Ashley motioned to two open chairs and said, “I think you and Ishmael oughta sit down.”

The brothers looked at each other and took their place at the table. Ashley looked at Rebecca then turned to the men, “There's something we've gotta talk about. It's about Rebecca.”

Isaac leaned toward his wife, “What's wrong? Is there something wrong? Should I call for a doctor?”

Rebecca shook her head and Ashley jumped in, “It's nothing a doctor can fix, Isaac. It's the farm.”

Isaac leaned back in his chair, “What about the farm?”

“I'm not happy Isaac!” Rebecca cried. “We uprooted our lives in Chicago to come back here. There's *nothing* for me here!”

“There was nothing back there either!” Isaac shouted across the table. “At least now we have a chance.”

“A chance at what? To break even? To *just* survive? The farm barely supports our families, what happens when the children get married? You plan on them living together and raising a family?”

“If we just buy some more property-”

“*With what money Isaac?!*”

“With the money we get from selling our crops!”

“You know as well as I do that that money pays for the fall, the winter, and for next season's supplies. Where will we find money to buy more property? How are we going to compete with land speculators?”

Isaac whirled around and stared at Ashley. In a low, dangerous voice he said, “Did you put these thoughts in her head?”

“Don't you accuse my wife of manipulating her,” Ishmael barked.

“Well they're both here together all day, I don't know what kinda crazy ideas your wife is putting in my wife's head.”

Ashley remained calm and said, “Isaac, listen to your wife. She isn't happy. I didn't have anything to do with her decision. She's been sleeping most of the days, she barely eats, the life's gone out of her. Do you really think this place is good for her?”

“Why don't you just let her answer that for herself?”

“How about you not talk to my wife that way?”

Ishmael snapped at Isaac.

Isaac paused, considering whether to fire back at his brother or not, then turned to address Rebecca instead, “Is it true, are you unhappy?”

She sighed, “Isaac, I know I should be content with you and the boys. I should be pleased we have a roof over our heads and food on the table, but that doesn't change the fact that I feel trapped. There's enough here for the two families, but not enough for four families. If we leave then that might give Nathan and Hannah a chance.”



“Why shouldn't Jacob and Ezra get a chance? This farm belongs to them as much as Ishmael's kids.”

“You mean your niece and nephew,” Ishmael interjected.

Isaac whirled around, “Can you give us a minute?”

Ashley moved to stand, “Isaac, please just listen to Rebecca-”

“Shut up!”

“Don't talk to her that way!” Ishmael roared.

Isaac turned his attention back to Rebecca, “Rebecca, we are staying on this farm until I am damn good and ready to leave, do you understand? If you want to go back to Chicago then fine, *go!* But the boys are staying here with me.”

The three boys entered through the backdoor, but heard the fighting before they entered the house.

“What do you think is going on in there?” Nathan asked.

“Sounds like a fight,” Ezra responded.

The trio walked into the kitchen and all the adults turned to look at them. Ashley and Ishmael flew over to Nathan whose nose was bent and blood stained his shirt.

“*What happened?*” Ashley asked Nathan.

“We were swimming at the pond, then we got into a fight. I was holding Jacob underwater, then Ezra punched me- “

“You were trying to drown my son?!” Isaac yelled at Nathan. He advanced toward Nathan and rose his hand to slap him, but Ishmael grabbed his brother's hand.

“If you hit my boy there'll be hell to pay, so I suggest you think about what you're gonna do next.”

Through clenched teeth Isaac retorted, “Your *boy* tried to *kill* my *son*. Let go of my hand or I'll break your arm.”

Ishmael tightened his grip and glared at Isaac, ready to snap his brother's arm without a second thought.

Ashley and Rebecca moved to their respective husbands to calm the men. The air crackled with an unseen electricity, the static buildup before some great release of tension. It was like a thunderstorm gathering strength, building, building, building before it could hold no more and ruptured. Isaac and Ishmael moved away from their wives, curled their hands into fists, and stared each other down like dogs daring the other to make the first move. Waiting for the moment to be set free and attack each other with insane fervor, all they needed was a signal.

Ishmael struck first and punched Isaac in the jaw. He stumbled backwards and caught himself on the kitchen table, pushing off it in one fluid motion. Hannah and the three boys retreated to the stairs and watched from their secure position. Ishmael approached his brother prepared to throw another punch, but Isaac swung first catching him in the stomach. Ishmael doubled over then recovered. He shoved Isaac onto the table and he grunted as he hit the table. Ishmael pulled back his fist to throw a direct punch onto Isaac's face, but Isaac rolled off the table and Ishmael screamed as his knuckles hit the hard, unflinching wood.

Isaac got up and knocked Ishmael off his feet with a tackle. He jumped on top of Ishmael, picked up Ishmael's head and slammed it down onto the floor. All the children yelped as the head whacked onto the hardwood floor and the women cried out in protest.

"Isaac, stop!" Rebecca shrieked.

He didn't relent and brought Ismael's head up again and slammed it back onto the floor. The first one had been bad, but now Ishmael's eyes were half-open and he struggled to focus on his attacker. Rebecca tried to pull Isaac off his brother, but he just shoved her away and snarled at her, telling her to get back.

Meanwhile, Ashley had gone into the kitchen to grab something, anything heavy enough to hit Isaac. She found a rolling pin, and gripping it in one hand she charged into the living room and swung it onto the back of Isaac's head. It made a bone-cracking sound as it hit his skull. He cried out and rolled off Ishmael. He grabbed the back of his head, his hands came away sticky with blood. Ashley dropped the rolling pin and tended to her husband.

Rebecca looked at the children huddled on the stairs and said, "Go upstairs right now." She tried to make her voice sound calm and commanding, but it came out shaky and timid.

The children listened to her and ran up the stairs to hide in their rooms. Rebecca found it a little pointless to send the children to their rooms. They had already seen the fight; they had already seen one family member try to kill another one; they hadn't been spared any traumas for that day.

She turned her attention to Isaac and set his head in her lap. The warmth of his blood stained her dress, but her attention was on other things.

"You need a doctor."

"I don't need a doctor; I just need a second for my head to stop ringing."

"You probably have a concussion which means you need to see a doctor."

Isaac sighed in surrender, allowing Rebecca to take command of the situation. She gently set him down and went into the kitchen to make the call. Isaac looked at Ashley and Ishmael, Ashley shaken and weeping with Ishmael cradled in her arms. He kept repeating, "I'm fine, I'm fine, Ashley, I'm fine..."

Isaac closed his eyes and took a deep breath allowing the smells of the house to rush into him and through him. The wood floors, the old paint, the scent of memories. He had grown up in this place, this house part of

his being. Even after spending so many years in Chicago, this place was home. Even after the long time away it all seemed normal and comforting to be back here. Rebecca's words echoed in his mind; the lack of future for their children, the limited space, and her feelings of imprisonment. He thought about the fighting between the boys, and how could boys, family members, be willing to *kill* each other? How had he almost tried to kill Ishmael?

In his moment of rage he had allowed his brother to become the focus of his aggression, his brother became Phil South, became a German soldier shot dead on some French field, became some vile creature that he despised and wanted to crush under his foot. He terrified himself. This farm, for all its goodness also brought out the worst in him. This land that held so much promise, that seemed so blessed, it got into his blood and made him vicious, but he still didn't want to leave the farm.

The doctor came to the house and looked at the two men lying on the floor. He frowned and wanted to ask what happened, but decided it would be better to avoid that question. He checked out the men and concluded that, yes, they had both suffered minor concussions. He advised that they relax for the next few days and give their bodies time to heal. After he had been paid and prepared to leave he made his only comment about the obvious circumstances that led to his visit, "Perhaps you two boys should spend some time away from each other. I think that would do everyone some good." He closed the door behind him and fled the warzone.

Later that night, when Isaac entered the bedroom he saw Rebecca sitting on the bed, still in her day clothes, and staring straight ahead. She said nothing when she heard him come in, and he said nothing to start a conversation. As Isaac started to get ready for bed, Rebecca stopped him and said, "Isaac, we need to talk."

Isaac stopped and sat down on the bed next to Rebecca and she sighed, “I think the boys and I need to get out of New Canaan.”

Isaac nodded and said, “I think that would be a good idea. You can go stay with family in Chicago for the summer then come back down and- “

“Not for the summer, Isaac, I mean forever.”

“What are you saying Rebecca? Are you leaving me?”

Tears formed in Rebecca’s eyes and she shook her head, “No, I mean, I don’t want to leave you. I want you to come back to Chicago with us. We need to leave. We can’t raise Jacob and Ezra in New Canaan, we can’t *live* here.”

“So what do you suggest I do? Give up and run away *again*?”

“Don’t you see, Isaac? There’s nothing to give up on,” Rebecca said as tears rolled down her face. “The boys have no future in New Canaan, this farm has no future, nobody has a future here. Ashley wants to get out too, for Hannah and Nathan, *especially* for Hannah.”

“I haven’t heard anything about that.”

“Do you think she would come right out and say it? It would break Ishmael’s heart.”

Isaac got off the bed and walked over to the window. He looked outside and saw the first field, the pond, and the second field illuminated by the setting sun. He saw the trees lining the property on the east and west. He saw the oak tree, and the four graves beneath it.

“I can’t leave this place again,” Isaac said in a quiet voice.

Rebecca choked and said, “Then I’m leaving, and taking the boys with me.”

“Would you really do that?”

Rebecca nodded and wiped the tears from her eyes. “I love you, Isaac, but this needs to end. We can either go

as a family, or go separately, but I'm not staying, and I don't think any of you should either."

She got up to leave the room, and in that moment Isaac realized what he stood to lose if he decided to remain on the farm. He would be stuck, paralyzed by his self-imposed guilt about something he did when he was young and foolish. Rebecca would wait for him, but for how long? She would find someone new, get the divorce, and he'd be stuck in New Canaan for the rest of his life.

"Wait...I'll get things set up tomorrow."

"You're coming with us?"

Isaac nodded, "I'll help with the rest of the season and be home just after harvest."

She looked up at him and he gave her a small smile, and she smiled back.

"I don't want you to suffer anymore, and I want the boys to have a future. I'll go into Quincy tomorrow and get everything prepared for your return to Chicago."

Rebecca went over to Isaac, hugged him, and said, "I know how hard this is for you, but it's the right choice." She pulled away from him and looked him in the eye. "I know it might not seem like it right now, but you'll be happier once we're back in the city. It's where we belong, it's where *you* belong."

Isaac smiled, but said nothing in reply. He broke away and said, "I need to tell Ishmael." He kissed her mouth, then kissed her on the forehead and walked out of the room. Rebecca watched him go and considered telling him to stop, that she would persevere, that things could be okay, but she remained silent. He turned the corner and his steps faded down the hall, down the stairs, until she heard them no more.

Isaac went downstairs and found Ashley sitting in the living room. She held the newspaper in her hands and frowned as she studied the page.

“What’re you reading?” Isaac asked her.

She jumped then relaxed, “I didn’t hear you come down. I’m not reading, at least not properly. Just looking at the pictures mostly...” Ashley admitted this with a certain amount of shame and avoided eye contact with Isaac.

“Do you...do you not know how to read?”

“I can read, just...not all that good. It’s one of those things I wish I knew how to do better.”

Isaac nodded and thought about what Rebecca had told him about Ashley. She would never admit it to Isaac, but for the first time he saw her desire to be educated, and beyond that her desire to see her children educated.

“Never too late to start getting better,” Isaac offered, trying to sound optimistic.

“I don’t really care so much about me. I just want Hannah and Nathan to get their chance...especially Hannah. I don’t want her dependent on a man like...” Ashley shook her head and said, “Did you need something?”

“I’m just looking for Ishmael.”

“Out in the barn.”

Isaac nodded and walked over to the front door. Before he walked outside he considered asking Ashley if she would want to go with Rebecca back to Chicago, but thought better of it and walked out into the night.

Isaac entered the barn, and found it bathed in a yellow glow from a kerosene lamp sitting on the ground. Ishmael sat on a box with a fifth of whiskey next to him and a bandage around his head. He looked tired, on the brink of a defeat he wouldn’t surrender to, just as exhausted as Isaac.

He noticed Isaac and said, “Didn’t think you’d want to talk to me after what happened.”

Isaac shrugged, “Well, I need to talk to you about something having to do with today. I think we should take the doctor’s advice and have some time apart from each other.”

Ishmael nodded in agreement, “Yeah, I think a few days of separation would do us well. We can take that time off, it’s not like any of the crops are going anywhere.”

Isaac shook his head, “No, not a few days, it has to be longer than that.” He looked down at the floor and sighed, “I’m taking Ashley’s advice and listening to Rebecca. I’m going into Quincy tomorrow to make the arrangements.”

“Arrangements for what?”

“For us to head back to Chicago. I’ll stay here for the rest of the summer, but after that I’ll be gone too.”

Ishmael considered protesting, then solemnly nodded. He didn’t want his brother to go, but at the same time felt relief. Now that the farm had been stabilized maybe Isaac could leave and Ishmael’s family would have a chance to make the farm not only successful, but profitable.

“Do what you have to do, brother,” Ishmael said. “I’d hate to see you go, but it probably would be better for everyone if you left...” He felt ashamed saying it, but it was the truth.

Isaac nodded and stood up to leave the barn. Before he left he asked, “Do you think you’ll always stay on this farm? Or make sure Hannah and Nathan stay on the farm?”

Ishmael frowned and said, “Of course! Why wouldn’t we stay? Where would we go?”

Isaac wanted to tell Ishmael about Ashley, but decided against it. As far as he was concerned it didn’t matter to him anymore. He walked back to the house, went inside, and ascended the stairs to go to bed. He looked like a man climbing the steps to the gallows; unhappy, but resigned to his fate. Ashley watched him go and said, “I wish it didn’t have to be like this, Isaac.”



Isaac smiled a sad smile and said, “Me too.”

**XXXVII**

The next day Isaac kept to himself. He walked over to the place by the pond where he and Ishmael fought Phil and he walked to the place by the creek where Ishmael had nearly killed him. He walked the perimeter of the property and surveyed everything around him: the fields filled with growing crops, the blue sky above him, and some of the abandoned farms in the distance. He thought about how he'd fled this place so many years ago and failed to return. He thought about how he'd come back in shame, and prepared to return to Chicago in disgrace.

Three times a failure.

He still had a life insurance policy, and he had money in his account, enough for Rebecca and the boys to live on without him. He took one last look around the farm and decided it was time to go.

Isaac returned to the house and found Rebecca in the kitchen. He walked over to her, hugged her and said, "I'm heading into Quincy to get train tickets and telegram your family to pick you up at Union Station."

She turned around and saw the hurt in his eyes, and noticed how old he looked for such a young man.

"Will you be home for dinner?"

"Yeah..." Isaac lied. He kissed her on the lips, then kissed her on the forehead. He wanted to tell her he loved her, wanted to ask where the boys were so he could tell them he loved them too, but it would have only made things harder.

Rebecca watched him go. After she heard the front door open and close she sat down in one of the kitchen chairs and sobbed.

On his way back to the farm, Isaac stopped at the bar on the far end of New Canaan. Despite having his affairs in order and making his decision final, he couldn't calm down and he wanted to numb the pain before going through with it. He didn't want to think about what had led him to this place. The dead German boy in Cantigny, his incompetence in Chicago that uprooted his family and nearly cost them their future. He had heard people say when you hit rock bottom, all you can do is look up, but he knew that to be patently false.

Isaac took a long pull from the glass in front of him and thought, *When you hit bottom, all you can do is start digging your grave.*

In the middle of the afternoon on a summer day the bar was empty, but that was no surprise. On top of that, most of the old patrons had either gone bankrupt and fled town or been bought out by the speculators. Only Isaac and a few older men sat in the poorly lit building, all waiting for their end to come.

*I'll make it look like an accident,* Isaac thought. *I don't want them to think I did it on purpose. Straight into a tree. Will it hurt? Maybe, but that's okay...*

The door opened allowing in sunlight and fresh air and a man stepped into the bar. He was around Isaac's age, clean-shaven, and dressed in a brown suit with brown shoes. He looked like Isaac would have looked had Isaac stayed in Chicago. No beard, well-dressed, and robust. Isaac turned away from that ghost of alternate reality and ordered another drink. The older men gave bored stares to the newcomer then returned to their liquor and conversations.

The man walked over to the bar where Isaac sat, and sat down near him, but not in the seat next to him. The bartender walked over and asked what he wanted.

"I'll take a whiskey, neat, thank you."

The bartender grunted and went about making the drink.

Isaac looked at the man and said, "I'd have thought you would've ordered some fancy, city drink. Not something like plain whiskey."

The man chuckled, "Well, when in Rome, right?"

Isaac smiled and took a drink, "Yeah, I suppose so."

The bartender came over and placed the drink before the man. He took a drink and swallowed with a straight face. He turned to Isaac and said, "You're younger than the rest of the men in here."

"Yep, I suppose I am," Isaac replied, taking another drink.

"You a farmer?"

"I used to be."

"What happened?"

Isaac finished off his drink, "What do you care?"

The man smiled and said, "I represent people that are interested in property in this region. These people have heard that the land here is good for farming, and I've been sent to see if anyone is interested in selling."

"So you're a speculator?"

"Yes, I am."

"Are you looking to undercut the poor, desperate bastards in the area? Give them an offer they can't believe and walk away with a hefty profit?" Isaac asked, not caring to hide his hostility.

"No, not at all! We believe in a fair trade: you get paid a handsome sum and we take care of the farming business. We've dealt in this area before, and we believe that if we consolidate the land we can turn a better profit in a year than a family farm could turn in ten years. We are offering a generous amount for each property, and we are willing to negotiate."

Isaac sat up straighter in his chair, "What're they offering for property?"

The man smiled, “That depends, how much property do you own?”

Isaac fell silent, looked around, and said in a hushed voice, “I don't want anyone to know what I'm up to. If word gets back to my brother-”

The speculator held up his hand and said in a quiet voice, “Say no more. How about you just write down the size of your property, your best guess, then I'll write an offer on the paper. Sound good to you?”

Isaac nodded, and the speculator grabbed a napkin from the bar. He pulled a pen from his pocket and handed the napkin and pen to Isaac. Isaac jotted down the size of the property by number of acres and average crop yield then handed the napkin to the man. The speculator read the numbers and his eyebrows rose.

“Looks like you have quite a successful farm. Are you willing to sell?”

“How much are we talking for the farm?”

The speculator took his pen and scratched numbers on the napkin, then slid it back over to Isaac.

“Is that a fair price?” Isaac asked.

The speculator took back the napkin and read the number. “Hmm...I suppose it *could* be a little higher.” He crossed out the original number and wrote down a new one. Isaac tried to control his reaction, but his eyes widened giving himself away.

The speculator smiled and said, “Now, is *that* a fair price?”

Isaac swallowed and said, “Yup...that's a fair price, but-”

“I can't go any higher than that.”

“No, no it's not that. It's just that it's the family farm, and my brother and his family are living there too.”

The speculator laughed, “Well that's no trouble, you can split a check!”

Isaac shook his head, “It's not that. I don't think he'd be willing to sell. He's grown up on that farm, raised a family on that farm. I would be more than happy to sell to you, especially for that amount, but not him. It would be a matter of principle.”

The speculator sighed and leaned toward Isaac, “Look pal, I'm supposed to leave this town tonight, and I have every intention of getting the hell out of here, but if you're willing to sell then I'll stick around long enough to make the deal.”

Isaac said nothing in return and stared at his empty glass thinking about this new option, this new lease on life.

“You seem like a savvy man. You don't act like the rest of these *people*, you seem like you've got your wits about you, I can tell just from talking to you. You seem like you've got business sense.” The speculator lowered his voice to a whisper, “You and I both know this place will be a ghost town in ten years, why not get out while you still can?”

“I just don't think Ishmael-”

“Is your brother's name on the deed?”

Isaac gave the speculator a sideways glance and said, “No, they were having trouble when I came back, so I bought him out; I own the farm.”

“So what're you waiting for?”

Isaac sighed. It would be more than enough money for both families to move to Chicago. Hell, if Ishmael didn't want to live in the city he could probably buy his own little farm in Wisconsin or Michigan and work it for pure enjoyment. No more quarreling, no more infighting, and no more worries about money. The families could see each other on the holidays, if not monthly with that kind of money. Isaac could get reestablished in Chicago, and Ishmael could have his farm. Maybe the farm had outlived its usefulness? They knew who they were, they didn't need some bit of land to define them.

“There's just one thing,” Isaac said.

“Sure.”

He remembered his father saying this before he did business with new people and now he said it himself, “I never caught your name, and I'd rather know a man's name before I start doing business with him.”

The memory of his father stopped him, and for a brief moment all of the memories of the farm, both good and ugly flooded his brain. He considered walking out and running back to the farm. Then he reminded himself of what the farm almost drove him to do; it was time to wash his hands of this place.

The speculator smiled, “The name's Harry,” and he extended his hand.

Isaac gripped Harry's hand and pumped it up and down, “Isaac.”

They released hands and Isaac said, “There's just one *extra* thing Harry.”

“Sure, sure, what is it?”

“After I sign this paperwork, and you cut us a check, we're both going to the farm and telling my brother. You don't agree to that, it's no deal.”

“Well, I don't see the harm in doing that.” He placed a hand on Isaac's back and said, “Now, let's take care of that paperwork.”

A plume of dust appeared in the distance. The late afternoon sunlight reflected off a black, shiny object roaring down the road. In the front seats sat two men, the one passenger a clean-shaven city boy, and the driver haggard and bearded. Animals watched from the safety of the brush as this strange beast zoomed past them. Over thirty years before, their ancestors had watched a similar creature go the same way. The fields had been cleared and seeded, the houses alive with families caught in the excitement of another growing season. Now plants and

animals occupied the fields, unmolested for the time being. The farmhouses vacant and awaiting new occupants, or waiting their future destruction.

Isaac gripped the steering wheel, and tried to prepare himself for Ishmael's reaction. He looked at Harry. He seemed calm and arrogant in the knowledge that he had the full support and protection of a big business.

*It's not like either of those things will protect you if my brother tries to beat you to death,* Isaac thought.

Isaac turned into the dirt driveway before the farmhouse. For some reason, it looked bigger, more intimidating, like an ancient temple judging the priests that had surrendered to the conquerors. Well, even holy men must find ways to live; they can pray for forgiveness later. Can a treason like this be forgiven, though? This land held family bones, years of sweat poured to sustain the living, and the spilled blood of tragic enemies. There was history here, and it no longer belonged to its creators.

The two men exited the car, and as they did, Isaac took a deep breath. The rest of the family must have heard the car pull up, because Ishmael, Rebecca, Ashley, and the children gathered on the front porch.

Ishmael folded his arms and nodded toward Harry, "Who's this?"

"He's a speculator representing a property company from out east, his name's Harry."

Ishmael hmphed, and as Harry walked over to shake his hand Ishmael kept his arms folded. Harry smiled, said nothing and let his arm return to his side. He took a few steps back and Isaac stepped forward.

"I've got something to tell you Ishmael, and I hope you understand even if you don't like it."

Ishmael raised his hand and said, "I already got an idea of what's coming." He pointed an accusing finger at Harry and said in a dangerous voice, "This sonofabitch got



in your head and convinced you to sell the farm. Isn't that right, you greedy bastard?"

Harry said in a polite, but tense voice, "Isaac and I negotiated a deal for my company to acquire the farm. Now, I understand this farm means a whole helluva lot to your family, but I can assure you that I gave Isaac a fair price."

Ishmael snorted, "Yeah, and what's your idea of a fair price? I bet it's chump change compared to what this company makes."

"It's a good price," Isaac confirmed. "We'll split it evenly. You can buy another farm, Rebecca and I can move back to Chicago, and there will be enough left over for the children."

"I already got a farm here! There's a future for the children here, we just need to expand a little bit and--"

"There's no future here for any of us!" Isaac roared. "Don't you see? We're breaking even right now, and how the hell are we going to expand if we don't turn a profit? There's barely enough now to support our two families, what do you think will happen if Ezra, Jacob, Nathan, and Hannah decide to raise their families here? We'd be damning our children to a life of poverty to stay on the farm."

"Listen to your brother," Harry said to Ishmael.

"You stay out of this!" Ishmael bellowed. The children shrank in fear, and the wives retreated away from Ishmael. He descended the steps and advanced toward Harry who stood his ground.

"Ishmael, think about what you're gonna do next," Isaac cautioned.

"If I didn't have to worry about the law..." Ishmael said to Harry, leaving the threat unfinished.

"What would you do? Kill me, cover it up, and try to keep scraping out an existence?" Harry taunted, staring down Ishmael.

“Just come inside,” Ashley cried from the porch, “Please Ishmael, don't do anything rash.”

“Shut up!” he barked.

“Ishmael, you don't have to do this. Trust me, it's a good deal for everyone. Ma and pa would understand, Eli would understand. This farm will kill us if we don't leave it.”

Ishmael looked at Isaac and his gaze softened, “You never were the sentimental type Isaac, but doesn't it break your heart to leave this place?”

Isaac shook his head, “Hell yes it does! But we don't need this farm to define us as a family. Sure, it's part of our history, it's part of who we are, but it doesn't have to be part of our future.”

Ishmael frowned, “I'm sorry Isaac, but I don't believe that.” He turned and spat on Harry's suit, “That's what I think of you and your *fucking company*.” He retreated into the house and slammed the door behind him.

Harry pulled out a handkerchief, and as he wiped off the spittle he said, “At least he didn't pull a gun on me.”

Isaac mumbled his agreement, and Harry continued, “We might as well go back to New Canaan. We can get dinner at the bar.”

“I'll pay for it,” Isaac offered, “I'm sorry about my brother's reaction.”

“Well, I wouldn't turn down a free meal. Honestly, I thought his reaction would've been worse. It's not like he tried to kill me.”

**XXXVIII**

As Isaac and Harry ate their dinner in the bar, more local men filled the place. It had been a hot day, and these men desired the comforts of a cold drink and friends that understood their struggles. Isaac cast nervous glances at the door, expecting Ishmael to enter at any moment, drunk and ready to fight. Harry ate his food and drank his drinks at a steady pace, seemingly unfazed by the encounter at the farm.

The door swung open, and Ishmael entered the bar with his closest friends. These men were the kind of men that had threatened tax collectors and bank officers with shotguns. They were bound to their farms by a code, a sense of honor, that no man or institution could break. Isaac's stomach turned when he saw his brother, knowing conflict was inevitable.

Ishmael and his posse sauntered over to Isaac and Harry, and with a boozy breath Ishmael said,

“So, breakin' bread with the enemy, huh brother?”

“I didn't think I was welcome in my own house,”

Isaac shot back.

“Hell, *you're* welcome, but not *him*,” Ishmael said, pointing a wavering finger at Harry.

“Come talk to me when you're sober Ishmael, maybe then we can have a reasonable discussion.”

Ishmael and his friends laughed and they sounded like a pack of wild dogs, “*A reasonable discussion!*” He slapped Isaac on the back, “Oh brother, you always had this thing about sounding fancy, like you were better than this place. Why shouldn't you? You got out and did well for yourself.”

He snarled at Harry, “But you don't got a right to be uppity. You weren't born in this place, you weren't shaped by this place, but you just might *die* in this place.”

Harry wiped his mouth and said, “That sounds like a threat to me, maybe we should get the police involved?”

Ishmael scoffed at the counter-threat, “Sure, hide behind the law rather than face us like a man!”

“You hillbillies are all the same. You hide behind your bravado, and your friends, and all the same bullshit, thinking you can scare us 'big city types.' You're not the first man to threaten me, and you sure as hell don't scare me, but I *know* I scare you.” He stood up, “So what'll it be Ishmael? Are you going to follow through with your threat, or back down?”

Ishmael's friends egged him on, encouraging him to strike first and prove his point. Meanwhile, a crowd of patrons gathered around the group, and the bar owner watched from the relative safety of behind the counter.

Isaac stood up, “Enough Ishmael. Harry signed the check, I signed over the deed, it's over. We have until next spring to move out, which means we can still bring the harvest to market and get our affairs in order before we leave.”

One of the patrons spoke up, “What the hell's going on here anyway?”

“He sold out the family farm to this city boy!”

Ishmael cried, pointing a finger at Isaac then at Harry.

Some of the farmers bristled and murmured words like 'traitor' and 'backstabber' and 'coward.'

“How much did ya sell it for, son?” asked another farmer.

Isaac shouted the price and the other farmers murmured their agreement with the choice. One man said, “Say! City boy! You willing to make any more deals?”

This drew a

few laughs, while other men growled their opinions:

“Just ain't right.”

“Selfish.”

“How much work did Abe put into that farm for his boys?”

The farmers on Isaac's side offered their retorts:

“Makes perfect sense.”

“I'd have done it for half the price.”

“Might as well get while the gettin's good.”

The line had been drawn: those loyal to New Canaan, and those loyal to their own interests. Rational thought vanishes at times like these, and the simple disagreements escalated into a clamor of voices.

The bartender watched as the men moved closer toward each other, surrounding Ishmael, Isaac, and Harry. He moved toward his shotgun situated close to the telephone. There had been bar fights before, and they didn't used to bother him, but given the situation in New Canaan...who knew what could happen? A few men standing face to face, screaming insults and making vague threats wouldn't have scared him ten years ago, but after the bankruptcies and buy-outs the entire region was poised to explode with the right kind of catalyst.

The individual fights escalated to a roar, and the bartender noticed as Isaac, Ishmael, and Harry got into a shouting match, taking their places in the groups that satisfied their views. There came the dull *thwack* of a fist striking flesh, followed by more shouting, more punches, and finally the crowd dissolved into a fury.

Ishmael tackled Isaac, Harry jumped onto Ishmael, and Ishmael's friends launched themselves at Harry. The bartender grabbed his shotgun and cocked it, feebly hoping that the distinct *click* of a shotgun being loaded would stop the riot, but the sound only served to comfort him instead of deter the chaos in his bar. Cradling the shotgun in one arm, he picked up the phone and called the sheriff. Even if the people in this town didn't respect each other, maybe they still respected the law. If not...well, then it was better for the town to fail anyway. If common civility failed there

was no point in having a town. A glass sailed past his head and exploded as it hit the wall behind him.

He winced and shouted above the din, “Knock it off! Sheriff’s on his way!”

Either nobody heard him, or they heard him and didn’t care.

Harry shook off Ishmael’s friends, then pulled Ishmael off Isaac and punched him across the face. He pulled Isaac to his feet and shouted something to him. They were working toward the door when the sheriff and his deputies burst into the bar, armed with shotguns and expecting the worst.

The sheriff knew this sort of thing was inevitable after all this prolonged tension. These men pushed to the brink, desperate and looking for a way to release their frustrations, and the speculator provided the perfect target.

The sheriff tried to shout an order over the brawl, “*You all need to cease and desist!*”

A few men noticed the sheriff and his deputies. They paused for a moment, then decided it would be better to keep fighting. One of the deputies blew a whistle, but it only provided a thin shriek lost in the roar of the mad crowd. They tried to break into the crowd, using their shotguns to push back the enraged men.

One of the patrons stepped in front of the sheriff.

“Get out of here!” screamed the sheriff.

The man followed the order and made his way toward the door. The trio of officers moved toward the center of the bar, hoping to commandeer the situation from the inside as opposed to from the fringe. After pushing and shoving the sheriff reached the middle.

He jumped on top of one of the upright tables and roared over the crowd of men, “You all need to leave, *right now!*”

Some of the men closest to him heard the command. They saw his sweaty face, with red eyes, and afterward

they claimed it looked like his spirit had been imbued with the wrath of God. A few men shuffled off toward the exit, but the rest of the men kept fighting. The sheriff surveyed the scene and saw Isaac, Ishmael, and Harry caught in the center of the maelstrom of bodies.

“*Shit,*” the sheriff cursed under his breath. He knew the local men could beat the hell out of each other, go home, and be fine with each other the next day. This out-of-towner? What if something bad happened to him? There’s no telling what kind of force he had backing him. Maybe he was just some peon sent out to make deals for the company, but even then...at the rate that company bought up farms it seemed like that business could buy and sell New Canaan without batting an eye.

“This is my last time telling all of you: *cease and desist!*”

The command fell on deaf ears again. He pointed the shotgun straight at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. The *boom* rolled through the bar like a clap of thunder, threatening to bowl over the patrons and shatter windows. Men at the edge of the bar winced at the sound, while those closest to the sheriff clapped their hands over the ears. The sheriff ejected the shell and it made a hollow click-clack as it landed by his feet.

Before the sheriff could issue another command, one of the farmers screamed, “The sheriff’s trying to kill us!”

These men that had been bickering and fighting amongst themselves came together and rallied around a perceived threat. It didn’t matter if the threat didn’t exist, even the possibility of a common enemy was enough to bring these enemies together. The police watched the transition in the crowd and it looked like an electric current had rippled through it. The crowd of farmers redirected their animosity at their new target, another symbol of the system: the police. One of the deputies, a younger man

desperate to prove himself, swung his shotgun around and without a thought pulled the trigger. The second blast rocked the bar and the birdshot tore through a nearby farmer, and hit the men behind him.

An eerie silence fell on the bar, punctuated by the cries of the immediate wounded, and the cries of the horrified men. Isaac, Ishmael, and Harry gathered themselves, ready to make their retreat. The sheriff realized what had happened, and knew any hope of reversing the momentum of the crowd had been lost after he fired into the ceiling. The crowd surged toward the police; wild, half-drunk, and unsatisfied men ready to take out their defeats on anyone that resembled the government or the system that betrayed them.

Harry grabbed Isaac and Ishmael and led them toward the door. The crowd parted around them as they headed for the exit. Harry half-dragged the two men away from the fight, ignoring the sounds behind him.

To Isaac, it felt like being back in France, complete with the gunfire, and the screaming, and the unhinged chaos of battle. He kept his head low, anticipating shot or a bullet to race over his head making the wood explode on contact.

Ishmael stumbled along, some of the terror numbed by the drinking. He briefly thought about his friends, and tried to turn back, but Harry yanked on his arm and shouted, "Don't stop, just keep moving!"

They finally reached the open door and tumbled out into the street. People had come out of their homes after hearing the gunshots. A few bystanders asked the trio what was going on in the bar, but none of the men answered. Seconds later a couple men charged out of the bar and took off running down the street. Neither of them appeared to be wounded. Harry and the brothers watched the men run, then ran over to Isaac's car.

"Did you take pa's car?" Isaac asked Ishmael.



Ishmael shook his head.

Isaac jumped into the driver's seat while Harry and Ishmael piled into the back. The car roared to life. As they sped away from town the tires kicked up a flurry of dirt and gravel. Ishmael turned around and watched as New Canaan receded behind them. He thought he saw fire in the bar and the rising of smoke, but decided not to mention it. He slumped down in the seat and noticed that Isaac and Harry both stared straight ahead, Isaac's hands gripping the steering wheel, Harry's hands balled into tight fists.

“What? You two never been in a bar fight before?”  
Ishmael said with a weak laugh.

Harry glared at him, “I've seen a helluva lot worse than that you stupid asshole.”

Ishmael considered saying something back, but noticed Harry's set jaw, wide eyes, and the veins bulging in his face and neck, and decided it would be wise to stay quiet.

Once they had gotten farther away from New Canaan, Isaac eased up on the gas and let the car slow down to a reasonable speed. The moonlight seemed to make everything look still and peaceful giving everything a dreamy quality, like none of the night's events had truly happened. They pulled up to the farm and a light clicked on; someone had stayed up to see that they made it home.

As Ishmael exited the car he said to Isaac, “You comin' in?”

“I'll be in in a minute,” Isaac said in a quiet voice. He stared straight ahead, looking out the windshield without seeing anything in front of him. His fingers still wrapped around the steering wheel had turned white.

Ishmael shrugged and left the car.

“Stupid bastard,” Harry muttered. He put a hand on Isaac's shoulder making Isaac jump.

Isaac whirled around and stared at Harry, he took quick, shallow breaths through his nose and glared at Harry.

“Easy, Isaac, easy.”

Isaac blinked a few times and turned back around.

“You were there too,” Harry said, a statement not a question.

Isaac didn't respond, but Harry nodded, “I went over in 1918. It's been a long time, but nights like that...it feels like I'm back there.”

Isaac nodded and said in almost a whisper, “1917, I was sixteen.” He shook his head and laughed, “I survived Cantigny, Soissons, and Argonne, but almost got killed in a bar fight in my hometown.”

In the silence he reflected on the irony of the day's events. Going into New Canaan he hadn't feared death, well no, that was a lie, he feared death but *reconciled* himself to it. Now after the day's turn of events he rejected death, he wanted to live a long life, he wanted to survive.

“It's funny, I was twenty-two when I enlisted,” Harry said. “Some of the things I saw and did...I can't believe a kid doing those things.”

“Yeah,” Isaac lamely replied.

“C'mon, let's just go inside,” Harry offered. “I hope it's not too much of an imposition, but I think it'd be best if I stayed here tonight. No telling how things are in town.”

“You aren't worried about my brother?”

“He didn't kill me at the bar, I doubt he has any plans to do it now.”

They entered the house and after many assurances that everything was fine, the women retired to their bedroom and the two men went to the kitchen. Ishmael sat at the kitchen table sipping a glass of whiskey. He looked up and saw Isaac and Harry standing in the doorway. Without a word, he stood up and fetched two glasses from a cabinet, placed them on the table and poured whiskey into

each one. The two men sat down and Ishmael offered a glass to each man.

“I gave you less,” Ishmael said to Harry, “Cause you're a rotten sumbitch.”

Harry smirked, “Better than you spitting in it.”

The three men sat and drank in the dark, not talking, just enjoying the fact that they survived the night long enough to have another drink.

**XXXIX**

Harry left the next day. Isaac drove him into town to check out of the inn. Isaac cashed the check and placed the money in the family's account while Harry waited in the car. He and Ishmael would make the split once they got out of New Canaan and established separate accounts. On their way into town they had passed the bar. Its windows had been shattered by gunfire, blood trails went from the doorway into the street, and there was evidence of a recent fire. They were lucky to have survived the brawl.

Isaac drove Harry to the train station in Quincy and separation was uneventful. Before Isaac left, Harry said to him, "You're all good people, and I hope you make it out. This town is poison, and the longer you stay the more damage it'll do. It'll kill you and your brother if you don't leave as soon as you can."

"We're going to spend one more Christmas in the house and once the roads clear we'll leave."

Harry nodded, but didn't seem reassured, "Well, once you make it to wherever you're going, just let me know you're all okay. Can you do that for me?"

Isaac smiled, "Yeah, I can do that."

The two men shook hands and parted ways. As Isaac walked away, Harry considered telling him that they should all leave as soon as possible. Forget the harvest. Forget waiting until spring. Get out, cut their losses, and just start over. He decided against it and walked away, hoping he had made the right decision not to say anything.

When Isaac got back to the farm he found Ishmael and all the children in the field. Without any questions or discussion, he fell into the rhythm of work. Once they stopped for lunch he pulled Jacob aside.

“Why're you out here working instead of inside studying?”

“Ma said it'd be best if I helped out here. Since we're going back to Chicago.”

Isaac nodded, “Anyone giving you any trouble?”

“You mean Nathan, or Uncle Ishmael?”

Isaac looked away, and without looking at his son replied, “Yeah.”

“Nah, it's not like I never work out here. I get up with everyone at the same time anyway, only difference is ma told me to go outside instead of stay inside.”

Isaac smiled at his son. Jacob reminded him of himself, but less stubborn, less arrogant, less resentful. He was a smart boy, but he never let it go to his head. That's why Jacob had been chosen to lead the farm in the future, at least that had been the original plan. It's not that Ezra couldn't have done it, Ezra was just as smart, but he was too much like his father: calculating, arrogant, and he didn't belong in New Canaan. Isaac had realized that as soon as he'd made the decision to move down here. Jacob accepted it, and Ezra did too, at least on the surface, but Isaac knew that his other son didn't want to be in the small town. That's why they needed to return to the city. Jacob would have been fine anywhere, but that wasn't the case with Rebecca and Ezra; they thrived in Chicago, but they withered in New Canaan.

Weeks passed without incident. Isaac was sure that it was only a matter of time before Ishmael exploded in a drunken rage. Oddly enough, Ashley seemed happier. She and Rebecca both seemed eager to do their housework. Ezra didn't mind going into the field, and Jacob tended to be happy if everyone else was happy. Despite the positivity, Nathan was angrier. He responded to questions with snapping responses, and Hannah seemed more forlorn. She asked questions like, “Where will we be in the spring?” and “Do we get to take everything with us?”

Innocent questions, but they made Isaac realize that he had made a momentous decision for not just his family, but his brother's family. At least his family knew a world outside of New Canaan, but his brother's family had been born in New Canaan, grown there, and had planned on living and dying there. Still, Isaac's family survived their drastic move, so there was no reason for Ishmael's family not to survive their transition. The one person that worried Isaac the most was Ishmael. Even though Ishmael maintained a stiff upper lip during the day, Isaac saw him staring wistfully at the field of crops, fixating on small things in the house: he studied the floors, the light fixtures, the incidental and minor objects that he'd never bothered scrutinizing before.

As the summer wore on, and the days grew shorter, Ishmael drank more. He'd always had a few drinks before going to bed, but a few drinks had turned into a pint each night, and a pint turned into most a fifth. Ishmael took less interest in his work. He still did his job, and did it reasonably well, but he no longer possessed the joy of going to work. Once he'd had his breakfast he shuffled out to the field with Isaac and the sons. He used to lead the way, but now he followed everyone else.

The tension that had existed prior to the sale had dissipated. Ishmael had been hostile for a few days, but the hostility gave way to acceptance and a quiet depression punctuated by moments of desperate, wishful thinking. He held onto the hope that maybe, just *maybe* the company would go bankrupt and be forced to back out on the deal. At first Isaac shot down the idea, annoyed with Ishmael's ongoing passive resistance to the deal. The annoyance gave way to sympathy, and Isaac tried to comfort Ishmael by reminding him that their father had left his home to start somewhere new. It seemed to help, at least at the time, but a few days later they would have the same conversation, and all the while Ishmael's resentment grew.

**XL**

Near the end of the season the heat persisted and it showed signs of becoming an Indian summer. At night, the children spent their time in the backyard or in the barn trying to make the most out of their freedom before school began. Isaac and Ishmael prepared the necessary equipment for the final harvest. They sharpened and oiled the tractor and the combine, ready to go to the field one last time. Ishmael talked about bringing the two machines north, but after considering the logistics abandoned the idea. Abe had bought the two machines when he'd gotten older, and now it was two more of their family possessions to be left behind, destined for the auction block or the scrapyard.

On one of those summer evenings Isaac noticed a raven sitting in the old oak tree. He couldn't remember seeing one before and didn't think those birds flew in the area. For some reason, the sight of the bird troubled him, and as he walked past the tree toward the house it called once, then twice, and a third time before falling silent. It left its branch and flew off toward the barn. Isaac shrugged it off and went inside to join the rest of the family for dinner.

After dinner, the children ran outside into the twilight yard. A few lightning bugs flickered and Hannah chased them around trying to catch them in her small hands. The boys had grabbed an old lantern and brought it with them. The group wandered over to the barn and went inside. It smelled of machinery and dirt, with the smell of gasoline hanging in the air. Their fathers had gone to town earlier that day to pick up fuel and there was a small stockpile of gas cans near the tractor.

The lantern illuminated the barn and it seemed emptier. Ishmael had sold some of the equipment to farmers that planned on staying in New Canaan, and only

the bare necessities remained. In the corner of the barn sat an old trunk. The children had never paid much attention to it before, but that night they decided to open it and see if there were any secrets left to be discovered. They opened it and found piles of photographs, an old Army uniform, a yellowed wedding dress, and stacks of letters. They carried the items up to the barn's loft and began sorting through them.

Nathan put on the Army jacket and marched around the loft while Hannah sat back and giggled at her brother. The uniform hung loose on him, but in an odd way it also seemed appropriate for him. Jacob read the old letters while Ezra looked through the photographs.

“Who are these people?” Ezra asked.

“I dunno,” Nathan lamely answered.

Hannah put on the old wedding dress and sighed, “I can't wait to get married someday.”

None of the boys paid attention to her and continued with their own exploits.

Jacob held up a letter and said, “I think this stuff belonged to some guy named Phil South.”

“Wasn't Old Mr. Eli's brother named Phil?” asked Nathan.

“Huh, yeah I think so,” responded Jacob. “Nobody ever really talked about him, at least our parents never did. How about yours?”

Nathan and Hannah shook their heads. “All I know is that one time I asked Grandpa Abe if Old Mr. Eli had any siblings, and he said yes,” offered Nathan. “But he didn't sound like he wanted to talk about it.”

“I think part of the field used to belong to him,” Hannah said.

“How do you know that?” Ezra asked.

She shrugged, “I think I just heard it one time. I think something bad happened between him, Grandpa Abe, and Old Mr. Eli, so that's why nobody talks about it.”



“Well, what's the bad thing that happened?”

“I don't know! All I know is that there's four graves in the backyard and nobody talks about Phil South the way they talk about grandma, grandpa, or Old Mr. Eli.”

Jacob shrugged and went back to reading the letters, but Ezra waved a hand at her, “I don't think you know what you're talking about.”

“I do too know what I'm talking about!” Hannah protested.

Nathan stepped toward Ezra, “How would you know any different? You didn't grow up on this farm. Did your pa talk about this farm *at all*?”

“I know enough to know that sounds like a little girl making up stories,” Ezra fired back, “Besides, what point is there in knowing anything about this place? It's not like it'll matter once we leave.”

Jacob set down the letters and watched the other boys getting closer to each other, while Hannah took a few steps back to get away from the impending fight.

“Just like a son of Isaac to talk like that,” Nathan spat at Ezra.

“Why do you care what happens to this farm? It's not like you can't start a new farm somewhere else.”

“That's not the point!” Nathan cried, “Your pa sold out the farm from underneath us. Your pa left the farm then brought you all here, but our pa stayed and we grew up here.”

“It's just land, Nathan,” Jacob added in a calm voice. “You can always start in a new place.”

“Easy for you to say. You can always go back to your old home, but where will we go?”

“I don't know Nathan; I'm just trying to make you feel better.”

“Besides, this farm was doomed before we came here,” Ezra interjected. “Without us who knows where you'd be.”

“We never asked you to come back. You just showed up out of the blue and started changing things. You messed up our lives because your pa was too afraid to stay in the city, and now he's messed 'em up even more!”

“What if we had just left? I doubt you could have held on much longer,” Jacob said.

“What the hell's that supposed to mean?”

“The company that bought the farm isn't just buying farms,” Jacob said. “I heard my pa talking about it. They're buying places in town too. It would've only been a matter of time before they took over New Canaan and made it impossible for the farmers to live here unless you had a lot of money. It's better for *everyone* to get out before that happens.”

“Like I said before, just like the son of backstabbing Isaac to make it sound like he did us a favor.”

Ezra shoved Nathan. “Don't talk about our pa that way! And he's still your uncle.”

Nathan pushed back. “No family of mine would ever go behind someone's back.”

“You're just too stupid to get it!” Ezra yelled.

“Don't call my brother stupid!” Hannah cried.

“Shut up!” Ezra snapped at her.

“Don't tell my sister to shut up!” Nathan tackled Ezra and the boys rolled around on the floor kicking and punching each other. Jacob stood and backed up against the wall while Hannah cowered in the corner. Nathan jumped up and threw off the Army jacket. It fluttered over the side of the loft and landed on the ground below. Ezra punched Nathan straight in the face knocking him onto his back. He recovered from the blow and ran headlong toward Ezra, headbutting him in the stomach. Ezra slammed to the ground and Nathan jumped on top of him, landing strike after strike against his cousin.

Hannah started to cry, reminded of the fight that had happened between Ashley and Rebecca. Jacob intervened

and he pushed Nathan off Ezra. Nathan rolled toward the lantern knocking it off the loft. It sailed through the air and exploded as it hit the ground. The unleashed fire and the spilled oil set the jacket on fire. Had the jacket landed in a different spot it might not have been a problem, but it was close enough to a wooden support beam that the fire had a path to follow, and that path led it toward the gas cans by the tractor.

As the boys fought in the loft, the flames spread to the beam and worked their way up it. Hannah saw the flicker of the fire and the rising smoke. She tried to warn the boys, but they were too fixated on their fight to notice her. The fire spread like a cancer through the barn. As the wood popped it sent out a flurry of sparks that found new sources of fuel; oily rags, clumps of dried vegetation, all perfect hosts for the fire to metastasize and gain strength. The smoke changed from a thin white to a thick black as the oil ignited.

The boys finally noticed the smoke and fire. They jumped up and ran for the ladder that led to the barn's floor, but when they looked down they saw that the fire blocked their exit. Ezra scanned the loft for an exit and noticed a square of night sky. They would have to jump, and it might result in a few broken bones, but that was better than burning to death. He pointed to the window and the other children raced over to it. Nathan looked out and down at the ground.

“That's a good twenty foot drop, it'll kill us!”  
Nathan objected.

“No it won't, there's places for us to hold onto and put our feet. Once we get far enough down then we can jump. I'll take a broken leg any day over dying in a fire,”  
Jacob said.

Nathan looked back at the fire and groaned about the limited options.

“I’ll go first,” Ezra began his descent, and as he worked his way down he shouted, “Once I’m on the ground someone else can go next. If you fall, I’ll catch you.”

Jacob, Nathan, and Hannah watched nervously as Ezra made his way down. If he fell and got hurt, then they were stuck. Smoke filled the barn and the three other children poked their heads out of the window to get fresh air. The fire worked its way toward the fuel supply and the gas-filled tractor.

Nathan turned to Hannah and said, “Once us boys are on the ground you just jump and we’ll catch you. Don’t worry about climbing down.”

Her eyes wide and terrified she gave a slight nod, but she didn’t seem to hear him.

Nathan and Jacob made their way outside and got to the ground. The boys called up to Hannah to jump, but she stayed in the loft. Fear had paralyzed her and now she was stuck in the loft as the barn burned around her. The fire had become serious enough that the adults saw it from the house. They ran over to the boys and started bombarding them with questions, but Nathan cut them off by screaming, “Hannah’s still inside!”

Isaac took off running toward the barn doors leaving Ishmael in charge.

“We need to start spreading water around the barn,” Ishmael directed. If the barn collapsed, the fire would spread across the lawn, and if it reached the field...

Isaac threw the barn doors open, the power of his adrenaline nearly giving him enough strength to rip them off their hinges.

“Hannah!” he shouted, “It’s Uncle Isaac, where are you?”

The barn’s interior looked like a scene from hell. Pockets of fire burned independent of the larger conflagration. He didn’t see her on the ground floor, then he looked up and saw her peering over the side of the loft.

Isaac bolted for the ladder and practically threw himself up the rungs. He reached out his hand and said, "C'mon sweetie we need to get out of here."

The fire had spread to one of the outer walls and the old wood shrank and collapsed under the heat. The barn whined and creaked under its own weight, trying to warn the occupants of its impending collapse.

Outside the rest of the family threw water on the grass while Ishmael fixed a hose to a faucet and sprayed the ground and the barn. The barn listed as a wall grew even weaker and it groaned as it died.

"Hannah you need to come here NOW," Isaac commanded Hannah, the confidence in his voice gone and the terror going into his vocal cords.

She crawled to Isaac and he scooped her up with one arm. Holding her tight to his chest he looked down and decided to risk the jump instead of climbing down. He landed on his back and screamed in pain. Hannah knelt beside him, but he barked, "GO!"

Hannah ran out of the barn, still wearing the wedding dress. It trailed through the mud and she ran to Ashley, tears streaming down her face.

"Where's Isaac?" Rebecca cried.

"He's hurt!" Hannah wailed.

Ishmael cursed under his breath and threw down the hose. "Everyone get away from the barn!"

He ran to the open doors and in the light of the fire saw Isaac lying flat on his back, his face contorted in agony. Ishmael went to his brother, hoisted him up in a fireman's carry, and ran back outside under a shower of ash and embers. He laid Isaac down by the rest of the family, and they watched the fire consume the barn.

The orange-yellow light illuminated the field, and the flames climbed high into the night sky. Cars approached driven by concerned neighbors coming to investigate the source of smoke and fire. A small crowd

gathered on the farm and watched as the fire destroyed the barn. One of the walls gave way and the barn sagged to one side. The fire spread to the roof and moved across the loft, consuming the old photographs and letters, erasing almost every reminder that the South Family had existed. Only the muddy wedding dress worn by Hannah remained.

An explosion tore through the barn as the fire reached the gasoline. It knocked out the other wall and the barn listed in that direction. The crowd of people screamed out in surprise and fear, unprepared for the dramatic turn of events.

*Bang!* Followed by more screams.

A fireball *whooshed* out of the barn signaling the destruction of the tractor. Within minutes the fire had conquered the barn, and after an hour the barn had been reduced to a large bonfire. The people worked to put it out, but they moved without urgency knowing it was about extinguishing the fire, not saving the barn or its contents. Once the fire had been dealt with, the crowd dispersed, and the families went inside. They dealt with a hurricane of conflicting emotions: overjoyed that their children had survived the fire, but devastated that the barn was lost, and with it any hopes of one last successful harvest.

## XLI

In the days following the fire, the family members picked through the charred rubble of the barn hoping to find anything worth salvaging. Nothing had survived; the tractor and combine were blackened and solid hunks of metal sitting on melted tires and covered in burnt wood and ash. Isaac and Ishmael found the remains of the trunk, but none of the letters or photographs had survived. There was a scrap of paper here, and a single face there, but nothing worth keeping.

After the fire the brothers came to a decision: the wives and children would go to Chicago, and the brothers would stay behind to harvest the crops. At first, Rebecca and Ashley protested the decision, but the brothers made it clear that it would be better for everyone. They could stay at the house in Chicago and there would be plenty of room for everyone. Once they completed the harvest they would leave New Canaan and join them in the city.

Isaac called the remaining relatives in Chicago to say more people would be coming, and he prepared to send all the belongings and the cars north by train. The time had come for the family to accept the end and leave the farm. There had been discussions about moving the remains of Abraham, Sarah, Eli, and Phil to Chicago to be reburied, but the brothers ultimately rejected the idea. They would want to stay at the farm regardless of who owned it. They had committed their lives to this land, and their bodies belonged to the land, deserved to stay in the land.

When it was time to leave New Canaan, the families loaded up the cars with everything the cars could carry. Ishmael had borrowed a truck from one of his friends to haul most of the furniture. Only the kitchen table and chairs, the radio, and two cots remained; just enough to

survive with. With everything loaded, the three-vehicle convoy formed on the road and departed without fanfare.

In the light of day, and with a more objective attitude, Ishmael saw the abandoned farmhouses and the overgrown fields. Nature had already begun its reclamation of the farms, and even the properties sold to the land company looked neglected. Once they entered New Canaan it became apparent just how much the town had changed. Some of the stores were under new management, controlled by out-of-town entities that had no reason to keep the businesses open other than to turn a profit. Boards covered the windows and the doorway of the bar, but light still escaped through the cracks signifying greater damage within. Neither Isaac nor Ishmael knew if the bartender or sheriff had survived, and they didn't want to know. The town existed in a sort of stasis, kept alive by the economic machinery of a big business; not thriving, just existing. The few people outside watched the vehicles pass then returned to whatever tasks filled their day.

They left New Canaan behind and continued toward Quincy. The fields and dirt roads gave way to buildings and pavement. In Isaac's car, the boys and Rebecca perked up at the sight of civilization, but in Ishmael's car the occupants gawked at the tall buildings and the modernity of the place. They seemed both fascinated and repulsed by everything. At the train station, they unloaded the cars and allowed the workers to handle the rest. Both families separated and had their own conversations:

“We'll miss you.”

“It'll only be for a month or so.”

“What will it be like in Chicago?”

“Are there animals in the city?”

And on and on and on...

Ashley, Nathan, and Hannah tried to bolster Ishmael's spirits:

“We won't stay in the city long.”



“I bet there's a lot of property for sale!”

“Make the last harvest a good one.”

Meanwhile, Rebecca, Jacob and Ezra tried to convince Isaac to leave with them:

“It doesn't matter now; we have the money we needed.”

“Just come up with us, there's no reason for you to stay.”

“If *he* wants to harvest so bad then *he* can stay behind.”

The words of encouragement for Ishmael fell on deaf ears, and no amount of positive thoughts could possibly break the reality that in a month he would leave the farm forever. Isaac, on the other hand, rebuffed his family's pleas.

“I'll be up north in a month, if that. Maybe we can get some of the locals to help us with the harvest if we give them a cut of the profit.”

“Do you think they'd help you?” Rebecca asked.

“Well, it's not like I sold *their* farm!” Isaac said with a smile, trying to get his family to laugh, but none of them did.

“I'll try to join you as soon as possible, I promise.”

He gave each of his sons a hug and told them to take care of their mother. Rebecca turned to Isaac, “You really don't have to stay behind, Isaac. After everything you've done for this family, for *his* family, you're allowed to come with us.”

Isaac shook his head, “I'm sorry Rebecca, but I don't think he'd ever forgive me if I decided to leave right now.”

“So what do you care?” she cried while trying to keep her composure.

“I've abandoned him before, and I can't do that to him again.”

Rebecca started to cry and Isaac hugged her, stroking her hair and trying to comfort her, whispering over and over, "I won't be gone long."

She finally pulled herself away and he wiped away her tears. "All three of you need to be there for Ashley, Nathan, and Hannah. Chicago's going to be a huge shock for them and as much as they hate to admit it, they'll need your help."

Rebecca nodded, but said nothing. He kissed her and gave her a long hug, making a note of the way she smelled and the way her body felt against his. Isaac hugged Jacob and Ezra again and said his "good byes" and "I love yous." Although he didn't want to turn away he knew that he had to, so he did.

As Isaac walked toward Ishmael's car, Ashley ran over and stopped him.

"I wanted to tell you somethin' Isaac."

"That I'm a lying sumbitch that sold out his own family for quick money?"

She shook her head, "No, no not at all. I wanted to thank you."

Isaac recoiled in surprise, "But...why?"

"You saw the writin' on the wall, you knew the farm would never grow as big as Ishmael wanted it to, and you knew it could never support all our children. Maybe if things had been different it could've worked." She paused and thought about that alternate, brighter future, then came back to reality. "But it didn't happen that way and we just have to accept it. I'm sorry Ishmael couldn't come to grips with it and won't just leave right now, and I just wanted to tell you thank you, for everything you've done." She gave Isaac a hug and said in his ear, "I'm actually kinda excited to see Chicago, 'specially if it's bigger than here!"

Isaac smiled, "It's much bigger than Quincy. Rebecca will take care of all of you."

Ashley and Isaac smiled at each other without saying anything, then turned at the same time and walked toward their respective futures: Ashley toward the train and Isaac to the car. As Isaac and Ishmael drove away from the station their families boarded the train, everyone on their own path and the series of events irreversible.

On the return to New Canaan the brothers didn't talk. Isaac didn't expect much conversation, but the coldness of the silence shocked him. They got back to the farm late at night, and no lights were on to greet their arrival. Ishmael pulled the car up next to the house and got out without a word to Isaac.

**XLII**

Ishmael continued to get drunk every night, but Isaac didn't mind. While Ishmael sat outside drinking under the stars Isaac listened to the news on the radio. The Hitler fellow in Germany appeared to be getting more power every day and things didn't seem to be going any better in Asia. At least the United States was pulling itself together, but even then, could it be sustained? In New Canaan, the outside world had taken its toll on the isolated community, so why wouldn't the same apply to a country? He tried not to worry himself about it too much, but at the same time it scared him. How long before those distant, worldly problems drew in his sons and his nephew?

He tried to bring it up to Ishmael one night with expected results:

“Sounds like things are getting bad around the world.”

Ishmael grunted his reply, the fifth of whiskey hanging in loose in his hand.

“Apparently, the Germans are fond of this guy named Adolf Hitler, sounds like a troublemaker.”

“That so?”

“Yeah, I'm hoping it all gets sorted out before our boys are old enough to worry.”

“Probably be fine,” Ishmael replied in a flat voice and took a pull from the bottle as he stared at the burned barn and the field of crops. Isaac and Ishmael had made some progress with their harvest by using borrowed tools, but they couldn't get their hands on any machinery.

Isaac kept his temper in check and tried a different approach, “I'm just glad things are going better in our country. Seems like Roosevelt's got things figured out.”

“Couldn't tell by looking at New Canaan.”

“Well at least the bankruptcies have stopped. Some people are getting jobs with the government. Sounds like we might be on the upswing.”

Ishmael scoffed, “Always the idealist.”

Isaac decided further conversation was pointless. For a moment, he considered kicking the bottle out of Ishmael's hand, trying to channel an old drill sergeant and order Ishmael to act like a man, but he decided against it. No use in provoking something, so he turned around and went inside leaving Ishmael to drink and wallow in his self-pity.

They continued to make progress on their work, but they wouldn't get everything in before it came time to go to market. With the barn gone they had nowhere to keep the harvested crops other than out in the open. Isaac accepted it and decided that, after the fire, they should be grateful to have any crops. Meanwhile, Ishmael's day consisted of drinking, or going into town to get more alcohol. He began drinking as soon as he woke up and didn't stop until he went to sleep. He stumbled into the kitchen in the mornings and at night to make a quick meal, then returned to his bedroom to keep drinking in the dark. If Isaac wanted to kill himself working in the field, then let him. Let him be the martyr, let him be the repentant brother. Isaac continued his work in the field and tried to ignore his brother's resistance.

*I suppose I deserve this, he thought at times, I'm making up for the ten years that I wasn't here.*

Ten years of missed work done in one month. He couldn't be sure if that balanced out, but it didn't matter. This was his way of making peace with the decisions he had made as a young man and as an older man. He thought about what his father would have done. Would he have sold the farm? No, he probably wouldn't have sold the farm until it became necessary, until they passed the point of no

return. What about his mother? Yes. Without a second thought Isaac knew his mother would have sold the farm. One parent says no, and the other says yes; more conflict.

One night after working in the field Isaac came inside to fix himself dinner. He found Ishmael sitting at the kitchen table, with a letter in one hand and a bottle of whiskey in the other.

“Got a letter from everyone,” Ishmael said in a thick voice.

Isaac wiped off his hands and said, “Oh? How's everyone settling in up north?”

“Just fine...Ashley says she didn't know we had so much family in the city.”

“Yeah, there's quite a few of us up there. How are the kids adjusting?”

Ishmael gave Isaac a sour smile, “Oh they're swell, just swell. Nathan and Hannah say they want to stay in the city, go to some hoity-toity private school, be just like every other city-boy and city-girl.”

“They could want to be worse,” Isaac muttered.

“And Ashley says that she wishes she'd gone to the city sooner. Says that she can see why Rebecca felt so trapped here.” Ishmael took a swig from the bottle and slammed it onto the table.

Isaac ignored it and continued making his dinner.

“Why is everyone so happy to be out of here?”

“I'm just glad to hear everyone's doing well.”

Ishmael shrugged, took another drink and gave no response.

Had Ashley and the children been doing worse Isaac would have felt guilty, but hearing that they were fine made his patience with Ishmael wear thin.

Ishmael belched and Isaac looked at him with disgust. What had become of his brother? Had he allowed his irrationality, his unchecked emotions, to take over every

part of him? He remembered when Ishmael had been a hard worker, more of a realist than Isaac, and now he'd been reduced to a whining drunkard that couldn't accept his reality.

“Yep, everyone's doin' real well. Now everyone can just forget about this farm, and about this family, and just get fat and happy in the city and never have to work hard-“

“ENOUGH!” Isaac roared. “At first I felt sorry that I sold the farm, but now that I hear everyone is fine, everyone is *happier*, then I have no reason to feel guilty. Our parents are dead, Eli is dead, and that means we need to live for ourselves. I'm sick of this work, I'm sick of this farm, and I'm sick of you moping around and drinking yourself unconscious every day. I stayed behind for *you* and this is how you repay me?”

Ishmael stared at Isaac and said, “Nobody asked you to stay.”

Isaac flushed with rage. He remembered how he had felt when he left the farm for the first time, how the guilt ate at him for all those years, and he expected to feel it again. Instead he only felt an unchecked anger toward his brother, and a burning need to get out before it consumed him.

“Fine Ishmael, you can stay here and wait until the speculators show up. Then the sheriff can haul you off and that can be how our family is remembered here. Not as the kind of people that left with dignity, but the kind that have to be kicked off their own farm!”

“Don't you care about leaving this farm, about everything that's happened here? “Ishmael stood up and pointed at the kitchen floor, “We were born here!” Then he pointed at the ceiling in the direction of the bedrooms, “Our family died here! Doesn't that mean anything to you?”

He opened the back door and walked into the backyard over to the oak tree, and Isaac followed him.

Ishmael pointed at the four graves and said, “Our family is buried here, *we* were supposed to be buried here!” He fell to his knees and brought up two handfuls of dirt, “They’re in the ground here, do you want to leave them behind like this?” Tears streamed down his face as he begged Isaac to do something to make this pain go away.

Isaac looked at the ground and said, “There’s nothing I can do, Ishmael. The contract’s been signed, and you’ll have to leave one way or another. I’m sorry brother, but it’s over.”

Ishmael laid his head down in the dirt and sobbed into the ground. Isaac wanted to comfort his brother, but he needed to get off the farm. He needed to get his brother help, or at the very least needed to call on some local allies to help him deal with his brother. Isaac went back into the house and packed his suitcase. Before he left his room, he stopped to look for Eli’s old revolver. He checked every possible hiding place, but couldn’t find it anywhere. Panic set in as he considered the possibility of Ishmael having the gun, and he immediately tried to calm himself by considering the alternative: maybe the revolver had gotten packed into the luggage and was in Chicago? Either way, he needed to get off the farm.

He went back downstairs and Ishmael greeted him in the living room. His eyes focused on Isaac’s suitcase and he said, “Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving. We aren’t going to bring in this crop, the farm is sold, and our families are in Chicago. It’s *done* Ishmael, and I hope you realize it before it gets you killed.”

Ishmael pulled the revolver from the back of his pants and said, “I intend to fight.”

“Quit the bullshit Ishmael! They’ll kill you *and still* take the farm!”

Ishmael frowned and walked back into the kitchen. He grabbed some leftover grease and threw it on the kitchen floor. He grabbed a kerosene lamp and threw the



liquid all over the room. Isaac watched in horror already anticipating Ishmael's next move. He grabbed his suitcase and ran for the front door, having flashbacks of his original flight from the farm nearly twenty years ago.

Meanwhile, Ishmael continued to scour the house for anything that might help it burn. He had invested so much energy, so much *time* into the farm that the idea of someone desecrating the land by tearing down the house, plowing up bones, and using it up until it could be used no more physically pained him. It was as if someone had raped his wife and daughter, or killed his son. The very *idea* shook him to his core. He threw down the lamp, letting the rest of the kerosene pour on the wood floor and stomped around the living room. He punched walls, ripped out spindles on the staircase sending them flying across the room. If anybody was going to destroy the house, it would be him. Then he realized that Isaac had left the house.

Outside, Isaac threw the suitcase into the passenger seat of the car and he got ready to make his final departure from the farm. A bullet *zinged* past his head and sailed off into the dark.

“YOU TRAITOR!” Ishmael bellowed from the porch. Another bullet went past Isaac's head.

Isaac charged at Ishmael in a zigzag hoping to evade a third bullet and as he crashed into Ishmael the two men tumbled back into the living room. The room reeked of fumes and Isaac jumped to his feet. Ishmael still clung to the revolver, so Isaac kicked it out of his hand and Ishmael yelped in surprise. Isaac grabbed a piece of wood and ran into the kitchen. Ishmael rose to his feet just in time to see Isaac put the wood to the stove and set it aflame. Isaac wanted the house to burn if it meant snapping his brother out of his insanity.

“What're you doin'?” Ishmael said in a weak voice as he stumbled into the kitchen.

Isaac threw the burning piece of wood into the living room. It landed in a puddle of kerosene and ignited in an instant. The fire zoomed across the living room floor following the path made by Ishmael. By some inexplicable force, maybe the old wood finish, or maybe the old paint, or maybe by some otherworldly force, the fire spread rapidly. Within seconds the living room had become a firestorm. The fire moved up the stairs to the second floor, moving from room to room hungrily, consuming everything in its wake. Ishmael screamed like a tortured animal as he watched the fire explode in the living room.

Isaac rushed outside through the backdoor toward the remnants of the barn. He dove behind the melted tractor and peeked out from behind it, waiting to see his brother emerge from the burning house. The windows on the second floor lit up as the fire entered the rooms, then the roof, and the greedy flames illuminated the skeleton of the house. He both hoped for and dreaded the moment that Ishmael came running out of the backdoor. Maybe he had forgotten the pistol in the confusion? Maybe the destruction of the house stunned him long enough that he would no longer be a threat?

A few seconds later Ishmael ran outside, and after that the roof collapsed onto the second floor. Ishmael watched in horror as the house fell apart, then instinct kicked in and he moved away from the collapsing structure. Isaac noticed that Ishmael still had the gun, and he decided to start inching toward the field. If he could just get through the field, he would be able to circle back and start running toward town. Ishmael would follow him, but Isaac was sober and could outsmart him.

Just as Isaac stood up and began to run, Ishmael turned around and saw his brother running from the ruins of the barn. The revolver *boomed* across the open space and Isaac screamed as the bullet tore through his calf. He fell to the grass, near the oak tree Eli had planted an eternity ago,

near the graves of all the other people that had died on this land. Ishmael ran toward his brother, a shadowy figure with the details obscured with the light to his back.

“Look what you've done!” Ishmael screamed at Isaac. “You destroyed our home!”

Through gritted teeth Isaac shouted back, “It's not our home anymore Ishmael, why don't you get that?”

“That's easy for you to say! You left us, you *forgot about us*, and then you came back and expected things to be just like how you left them!”

“I NEVER EXPECTED THAT!”

The second floor collapsed onto the ground floor, the fire had spread through the kitchen and reached the lawn. Weeks had passed without rain, and the grass was a dry and welcoming host for the fire. It moved across the ground in random patterns with little regard for what it touched or where it went.

“Stand up!” Ishmael yelled at Isaac.

Isaac knelt on the ground and glared at Ishmael, defying the order.

“STAND UP AND FACE ME LIKE A MAN!”

Isaac stood up and groaned when he put pressure on the wounded leg.

“Look what you've done!” Ishmael raged, waving the gun at the destroyed barn and the burning house as tears streamed down his face. He pointed the gun at Isaac and raged, “If you hadn't come back none of this woulda happened.”

“It was bound to happen sooner or later,” Isaac croaked. “You just don't want to admit it.” He considered refraining from what he said next, but it needed to be said. “You always hated me, you always wanted me to go away, to disappear, to be forgotten.”

“Liar!”

“You wanted to be the center of attention. If I’d died in France, then memories of me could have just been wrapped into memories of you. It’d be like I never existed.”

“Shut up! You’re just trying to trick me like you always did and I’m sick of it!”

Isaac didn't let up. Maybe he wanted things to go this way, he didn't know anymore. The pain radiated up and down his leg, threatening his connection to consciousness. He had been ready to die when he went into New Canaan the night he talked to Harry. It had all been so simple, and now those feelings came rushing back. It would be easy, painless, liberating, and if Ishmael survived then *he* could live with all the guilt. He would know what it was like to kill a man, to destroy a life, to ruin a family. Isaac could rest easy, but Ishmael wouldn't. It would haunt him all the days of his life.

“Look what I've done! Look at everything I've done to you!”

Ishmael watched as the house collapsed and the fire spread toward them. It reached the old oak tree, a symbol of brotherly unity, a father's prayer that his sons would live in harmony and make this land prosperous. The fire worked up the trunk, and the flames touched the leaves setting them ablaze. Finally, the tree burned just like everything else. The covenant was broken and no hope remained of mending it.

A whisper in the storm, Isaac said, “Kill me, *brother.*”

Isaac dropped backward as the bullet struck his stomach. He thudded on the ground and the blood felt warm and sticky on his clothing. He blinked a few times, his brain registering what had happened. Strangely, he felt no pain. He remembered the wounded men in France crying out because of fear, not because of pain, and he felt neither. Ishmael stood rigid with the smoking gun in his hand, and he began shaking all over.

“Isaac...?” he said in a timid voice, realizing what he had done. “*Isaac?*”

He walked over and saw Isaac lying on the ground. Fat, whiskey-scented tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Isaac...I'm sorry...I didn't mean to...” Ishmael dropped to his knees and sobbed, the revolver dropping in the grass beside him. The sounds of his cries mixed with the fire consuming the house and the oak tree.

Isaac grabbed the revolver, cocked it, and shot Ishmael in the head. Ishmael rolled backward and splayed out on the ground as the burning oak tree showered his body with dead leaves. The suffering of the families would be equal, now.

“Me neither,” Isaac answered in a sad whisper. He laid down and felt a coldness come over him. As his vision blurred he saw Ishmael lying dead near the oak tree engulfed in flame. The fire spread into the field and the surrounding trees. Isaac laid back and closed his eyes. He thought of Rebecca, Jacob, Ezra, Ashely, Nathan, Hannah, and the unknown future as everything came to an end and faded to black.

## XLIII

The sun rose over New Canaan and bathed the countryside in a new and muted light. It was as if the entire land knew what had happened the night before, and the last bit of hope for peace and the continuation of the status quo had departed. The remnants of the farmhouse still smoldered along with the scorched field. A small crowd had gathered after hearing the gunshots. They had watched as flames consumed everything that Abraham had built, watching as the fire spread out to the far edges of the field. The fire ate all the crops, hungrily, greedily, and without remorse for its gluttony. The trees that surrounded the property were caught in the holocaust, their leaves curled and died on the branch. The stalks of corn and wheat ignited and wilted, surrendering to the heat. Everyone stood and watched as Abraham's empire burned to the ground, and all that he had worked for turned to ash. The destruction stalled at the pond and at the creeks edge, the water forming a natural barrier against the flames. It edged around the pond and made quick work of the land that had belonged to Phil.

The crowd watched as one man's life vanished and returned to the earth, a final debt repaid to the earth that had given Abe and his family so much over the years. It made no difference to any of the farmers whether the property was saved. It was known that Isaac had sold the property to the speculator, which meant if the crops hadn't been harvested they would have been left to rot, the house torn down, and anything left behind sold to the highest bidder. It had happened to the other farms, and this one was no different. There was nothing sacred or special about this place, it had only seemed that way to Abraham when he first came to New Canaan because it was a place of promise, a refuge for a man to raise a family.

By the time the sun rose over the countryside the fires had died down. One of the farmers found Isaac and Ishmael's bodies earlier in the morning near the oak tree. They had been partially burned, but were still recognizable. The blood had soaked into the soil leaving it both hallowed and damned. A few of the men collected the bodies of the two brothers. The audience left the scene in a long convoy, a whirlwind of dust and activity, and then the land fell silent save for the sound of animals rising from their slumber, or leaving the safety of holes and burrows knowing that the worst of the chaos had passed.

The farmers brought Isaac and Ishmael's bodies to the town for the doctor to shed some light on what had happened. After the cursory autopsy, he stepped out of his office and addressed the crowd.

"Seems to me that Ishmael shot Isaac, then Isaac shot Ishmael. Isaac either died of blood loss or asphyxiation."

"So...what now?" asked one of the farmers.

The doctor shrugged and continued, "No one to punish. Those responsible are dead, only thing to be done is to tell the families." He knew he'd have to be the one to contact the families and he dreaded the moment. There was one saving grace though and he said it to the crowd, "At least none of them were here to see it happen."

The doctor tracked down and informed Rebecca and Ashley of the news. Ashley took it far harder than Rebecca. Ashley wailed and hugged her children and cursed the farm and everything that led to this happening. Rebecca took the news stoically in front of her boys, but at night she cried into her pillow and tried to avoid the cold side of the bed that Isaac would never warm again.

In the weeks following the destruction of the farm the wives became locked in a bitter legal fight about how the money should be split. Even after all the bloodshed, after all the heartbreak, the families could not let the dead

rest. Rebecca blamed Ishmael for guilting Isaac into staying on the farm, and Ashley blamed Isaac for setting the events in motion. Legal fees consumed the money, and if they kept fighting there wouldn't be any money to fight over.

The world continued its trajectory toward disaster, unflinching and uncaring about the petty squabbles of two widows. One Sunday morning in December changed the lives Nathan, Jacob, and Ezra and they were all called to serve their nation in humanity's latest quarrel. They survived the fight and all came home, but Jacob fared better than the other boys. While Nathan and Ezra fought across the Pacific and Europe, Jacob stayed in the States working for the Air Corps in some office on a base. None of them talked to each other much after the war feeling bitter and divided because of their experiences on the farm and during the war.

Hannah stayed in Chicago and became a young bride for a factory worker that couldn't serve in the military. She thought she loved her husband, but she loved the idea of marriage more. Hannah had a few children for her husband, and she was an obedient wife, but not a happy one. Ashley wanted to believe Hannah was happier than she would have been in New Canaan, but she was just trying to avoid the truth: Hannah was no better in the city than in the country.

Once Rebecca and Ashley died, the family ceased to exist in any meaningful fashion. Only in name could the surviving children call themselves related.

The land company tried to make a go of it in New Canaan. They buried the remnants of the house and barn, and ground the bones into the dirt. The old farm was sowed and harvested until the business ran out of money. More people left the town, and another business took over. It tried its hand at farming, then at developing the land, but by then the highways had been built. Nobody had any reason



to go to New Canaan anymore. It was just another ghost town in the middle of nowhere, used up and forgotten.

Time passed, and the fields laid fallow and unkempt. Weeds and wild flowers retook where man, a man, had carved out a place in nature. The old farm's future was no longer decided by the actions of a man and his sons, its destiny no longer molded by a daily struggle in the dirt to keep the land prosperous and tame. Buildings collapsed, plants choked the roads, and animals no longer feared wandering the fields and roads in the middle of the day. Nobody would ever know about the tears shed, the victories had, and the sacrifices made for the love of a dream. It would just be more wilderness, endless and expanding toward the horizon.

Nature slowly erased the buildings and the farms along with the evidence of the struggles of the men and women and their stories. These things became meaningless, not even footnotes in the greater history of the country, just more casualties of the relentless march of time. And like with all things, the symbols, the places, the people, the loves, the marriages, the births, the deaths, the funerals, the conquests, and the defeats, it all crumbled and was forgotten, all of it returned to the soil it had been born from. Humans no longer had a place in this wild, and like Eli had predicted so long ago it became again, the land of God.

*In the Land of God* is the debut novel of Adam Jones. He was born in Lowell, Michigan, and currently resides in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with his girlfriend and four pets. He studied Journalism at Grand Valley State University and works for the Grand Valley State University Veterans' History Project.

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