

Madison Burden had dressed and prayed and was cooking breakfast before anyone had even considered waking. Sleep had come slowly, fitfully, and when she woke around four there was a sense of finality to the night, of morning having dawned, even though the room was cast in indigo darkness. She rose, pulled on her housecoat, and walked into the living room, where she sat before the cold hearth. The dogs knocked against the front wall, stirring, restless in the languorous heat, and she leaned back in her rocking chair trying to remember what it was that woke her. There was something there, the figure of something that wouldn't come into focus, the outline of a memory just beyond sight. It was as if she were a little girl again, barefoot down in the cotton field or corn patch, evening time with darkness just coming upon the earth, the ridged shape of the tree line becoming a single, serrated line. Everything blurred, memory and shape, meshed in color and form, and she toed that knife blade of knowing. Then she had it. It had been years ago. James was already gone, and Roy must have been fifteen, which would have made Enis nine or ten.

“Roy found it, Mamma,” Enis had told her later, his voice strangled out through tears. “It was Roy’s idea and I just went along with it cause he said.”

Enis had been sitting in her lap, sprawled like a gangly puppet, too large, too old for such foolishness, Will was always saying, Enis’s feet dragging the floor.

“I had to, Mamma.”

“Hush now. It’s all right.”

Past the creek and up through the woods sat a house, forgotten in an abandoned pasture where the field grasses grew waist-high and locust-choked in the summer. Inside were reams of junk, clothes and scraps of newspapers pushed against the baseboards, boxes holding old candles and cooking pots. Weeds and vetch grew through gaps in the floorboards. Wasps, dirt-daubers, and hornets nested in the high corners, in bureau drawers, beneath what had once been the bathroom vanity. The house tilted with the wind, creaking like a leaky ship, a ramshackle collection of boards and sheets of silver insulation sutured with staples and roofing nails, two-by-fours, and old rotting railroad ties—all leaning as hopefully with the wind.

Enis—she was to learn later—would lie in the canyons he shaped in the grasses, marooned and sun-struck and watching the clouds drift, imagining his shape like a spindly footprint, while Roy plowed through the junk.

It was in a box hidden beneath musty quilts that he found three ancient sticks of dynamite bound in electrical tape. He found the old shrimp net in the attic. There was no question what was next.

“It’ll take two sets of hands,” Roy said.

Enis shook his head. “I don’t want nothing to do with it. Seriously?”

“Don’t you do me like this, brother. You’re going.”

In the end, Enis—because he was Enis, because he was the youngest, her softest, because he was always and forever to agree—in the end, he had gone.

They had waited until nightfall, the sky iridescent, the woods still and filling with a silvery light that made poplars and birch trees the stark, cleansed white of bone. Beneath the moon the creek appeared still, encased in a skim of glass, flash-frozen, it seemed, so that twigs and leaves and flotsam were encysted in an imagined skin.

The net was dropped into the waters of Cane Creek, attached along the opposite bank to a poplar tree so that it served as a sort of downstream filter. Enis waited on the other bank, sucking his teeth and near crying while Roy attached a brick to the dynamite. He lit the fuse, waited—timing was everything—then dropped it and stepped away, covering his ears.

There was no great geyser of water, as Enis had expected, only a white flash, muted and deep in the bowels of the fishing hole, only the concussion he felt in his gut. Then there were fish, stunned or dead, rising to float on their sides.

“I’ll be damned,” said Roy. Then he had thought, And you could a been, you lucky son of a gun.

The fish appeared prismatic—a greenish-blue one moment, a silvery red the next, their feathery gills blacked with blood, still or barely flexing, eyes obsidian and bulging from their round heads. When they lifted the net, the fish were beyond counting. Creek chub. Bream. Crowned horny head like sleek muscles cut from a dark body.

“Like in the Bible,” said Enis.

“It might make a man religious,” said Roy. He laughed. “We get em to town it might make a man rich.”

The next morning while Roy made to haul the fish wrapped in quilts in the bed of a wheelbarrow the nine miles down the mountain, Enis—because he was always and forever Enis—had confessed. An hour later their father had picked Roy up, three miles from the house and huddled on the side of the road with sixty pounds of rotting fish and ruined blankets, clots of flies and gnats circling, Roy vomiting into the gully grass and the stench of flesh hanging in the squat heat.

Punishment was swift. There seemed more than the danger of explosives here, thought Will Burden. Their father had judged this a great evil, an

incipient sin that might somehow grow to unseat the natural order of things—insouciant man fashioning a new hierarchy, a new device for the taking of lives—and had quoted long passages from Leviticus before taking his strop to Roy.

I will make thine enemies my footstool, thought Maddy.

She had sat on the porch that morning listening to Will whip the boy, wondering all the while who her husband had become. He was such a gentle man, but something had risen in his eyes that morning, fear or dread, something dredged from the sink of memory and shaking him with some nameless terror. But it wasn't terror, no. It was grief. She'd sat on the porch, rocking and talking to the beagles, trying not to listen to what was happening inside, realizing slowly that what her husband feared most was the slow accumulation of sin, the grain-sized misstep that led to other, greater, missteps. He feared for his straying, because he feared becoming his own father. She felt a great sadness at the thought. She'd sat on the porch knowing that Will realized his own blood was poisoned.

So why the memory? It was something Maddy had not thought of in years, yet as she thought further, its focus drew narrow and tight. Was it that it was the last time she could remember Roy as a boy, as vulnerable and needing something beyond himself? Surely there were other times, but she could not recall them now. She let the memory fade: another vanity, another useless recollection.

Around the time the biscuits came out of the oven, her husband, William Jennings, walked in. He sat at the table, silent, and she picked up the plate of biscuits only to pause: he was praying.

“Amen,” he said.

“Amen.” She put the plate before him. “Catheads,” she said. “Be careful, they're hot.” He sat with his hands in his lap staring down at something, some spot or empty space, some orphaned memory, and Maddy thought of how many mornings he had sat like this, silent, still—God is silence, she remembered him saying that once—she thought of him sitting there, mornings, years, how the days knotted on one long cord—heart's time, more of his words—she thought of it and it comforted her. She had never realized, maybe, how much.

“I heard him stirring about. Heard him coming in last night, too. Late,” he said. “And you know good and well who it was he was with.”

“Now, Will.”

“That girl is fifteen if she's a day, Maddy, and that boy is still living under my roof.”

“She’s a senior in high school, Will. She’s eighteen years old, Lord. Enis told you that already.”

She set out the butter and a can of King’s syrup. He began to eat, pouring out the syrup then smearing a pat of butter into it, swirling it then dipping his biscuit.

“Well, however old she is, he doesn’t need to be out at all hours. He needs to get up.”

“I thought you said you heard him up?”

“I did,” he admitted. He finished his biscuit, took two more, and wrapped them in a cloth napkin. “You’ve got a talent for keeping a man straight, don’t you?”

“Finish your breakfast, Will.”

“I’d better go.”

“Well, take the thermos,” she said. “What time can I look for you?”

“By six.” He kissed her. “No use waiting on Enis, I reckon.”

“He’ll have a fit, Will. You know how he feels about you running on.”

“Then he needs to start getting up. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Twenty or so minutes later Enis lurched into the kitchen, his hair on end, shirt half-tucked, and began eating as if he had no bottom.

“Don’t founder yourself,” said his mother. “Sitting there like a horse out to pasture. The service teach you to eat like that? No manners to speak of.”

“I’m a growing boy.”

He cleaned his plate, sopping up syrup with a rind of biscuit, then rose to refill it.

“Your father seems mighty worried you’ve been out running around with that young Abernathy girl.”

“Her name is Millie, Mamma.”

“Millie, then. He’s worried about you and Millie.”

“Why’s he worried?”

“He just is, Enis. He is because that’s his way. He worries. The man loves you to death but you know good and well he’s a worrier.”

“About what exactly is he worrying about?” Enis asked, chewing a biscuit.

“The man’s your father—he’s set on worrying about anything and everything that comes to mind. Things get to him, Enis. Real bad. You know as much.”

“Well, you’re my mother, why aren’t you worried?”

“Who’s to say I’m not?”

He looked at her and rolled his eyes.

“Well, let’s just say I credit you with a lot more sense than your father does.”

“Thanks. Or is that not a compliment?”

So much of her life was wrapped up in her sons. She watched the pickup disappear up the drive, thinking of each. Enis was her baby. If I’d lost him like I lost James, I wouldn’t have lived, she thought. I wouldn’t have made it. She still remembered the morning they came for her. At least once a day she thought of it, felt it flash through her like light off a polished stone: bright and sudden, but broken too. She hadn’t heard the car drive up that morning, had been out back taking down the wash when the dogs had started up. It was May and the days were still cool. The clothesline beaded with dew. She’d given it a little pluck and watched the raindrops shiver away, and walked in through the house and out onto the porch to hush the dogs. Then, just the sight of the man—the very sight of him there in his khaki shirt and blue pants, the same uniform James had left in—just seeing him there in the door had crumpled her. At the mere sight, something had come loose inside her, some wild, buried grief.

“Good morning, ma’am.” He had taken his hat off and held it beneath his arm, pressed against his side. “Are you Madison Burden? Mother of Private First Class James Burden?”

That was all. Down on her knees then, she drained like a sink, wept, studied the red stripe of the man’s pants. She could see her face, warped and swelling, in the polished curve of his shoe. He tried to touch her. There was a chaplain with him, and he tried to touch her as well.

She crawled into the front room and locked the door, praying *Please, Jesus . . . please, Jesus, I need you now. . . I need you to come to me now, Jesus. . . I need for it to be somebody else. Please, Jesus. I need for it not to be my James.* The moment the prayer passed her lips she meant to recant but couldn’t. She meant it; she meant it more than anything she had ever thought.

A week later word came that James wasn’t dead: he was being held at a POW camp north of the 38th Parallel. The Marines meant this as good news. No one could understand why it hurt her so deeply. She feared for what might happen to him, of course, feared for what *was* happening to him. But what she realized—and what scared her most—was that her prayer had been answered: it was someone else. She knew then she’d lose him, that in whatever form he returned to her, he would not be her James, the James she had known.

She was only eighteen when he was born. Will was ten years older than her, already a widower when they'd met, and in many ways Will was a father to her, raising her up as he raised his firstborn son. Maddy and James—we were children together, she thought. She had taught James to fish, first with a cane pole along the creek, then with his first Zebco rod and flies they tied themselves. On the days Will was out visiting or locked away in his study preparing a sermon, Maddy and James would slip away. They would sit on the mossy banks and do nothing but listen, lines drifting in the water, no sound except the soft rippling, the now and then trill of a bird. She felt herself reflected in her son: he was more her than she was. They knew each other intuitively and spoke in gestures and motions. Little blond-haired boy, the skinniest baby she'd ever seen. How many hours she'd spent poking oatmeal into his closed lips or rubbing wrinkles from his closed palms, staring into his sleeping face.

She'd hear the women at the church: *Just look at him. That child is puny. Don't you feed your baby, Mrs. Burden?* He wanted no one but her and would cry in the arms of other women. *He's particular, one would say. He's queer.* But he was hers. She had no other. The women thought her silly and vain, though she was neither. She was once beautiful, that was true, but she was a serious woman, not the trivial, fussy thing the old Wesleyan women wanted to believe her to be.

She lived an entire lifetime with James, she felt. Something she would never be able to wholly repeat: she had been so young then, and never again would she be able to love like that, so reckless with her affection. Her love for Roy and Enis was just as deep, just as real, but never again had she imagined love tumbling physically from her breast.

She hadn't wanted another child. Lord forgive me that, too, she prayed. James was nine and badly wanted a brother. Will had wanted another son. For weeks she avoided him, then, losing conviction, gave herself over to him, and he shuddered and sighed and rolled away into sudden sleep, his hand drifting back to touch hers. She hugged her knees to her chest, feeling the wetness run along her skin to dampen the bedsheet, and then she'd cried silently. She felt it the ultimate betrayal.

Roy nursed for eight months, then quit her—that was the only real way she could understand it: the boy had quit her. Will left his position at the church and went into long fits of depression, sealing himself away in the attic. Maddy went to work at the garment mill down the mountain. Will's retreat—until his later retreat in the sixties—was the hardest time of her life, harder even

than losing James, and had she not met Sharon Thorton, she would have left. Maybe. She had thought Will was losing his mind. One day, she knew, she would climb the attic stairs and find him dead, his wrists slit and dangling. She had already lost James and felt she couldn't bear anything more. Had I the courage, she thought, had I the courage, I would've packed up and left.

Sharon had saved her.

Maddy met her in the women's prayer group, the only woman near her in age, and they became inseparable, Sharon with her girl, Sue Ellen, on her hip, Maddy with James and Roy trailing behind. It was then that James and Roy took up with Sharon's husband, Bobby. He needs a son, Sharon would say. Maddy would glance at her boys: How about two? He took them hunting and camping, taught them to skin a deer and track a turkey—all of the things neither she nor Will were able to impart.

By the time Enis was born—a complete surprise to Maddy—fatherhood seemed split neatly between Will and Bobby, one handling discipline, matters of spirit and manners, the other teaching them to build rabbit gums. Sunday afternoons, Bobby would take Sharon and Sue Ellen, Maddy, Roy and Enis riding in his dune buggy. They climbed the side of Tamasee Knob once, forded the Chauga on countless occasions—pleasures denied now by government regulation. The children would play in the river while they sat on a blanket on the bank, Bobby sipping from his flask or popping cans of Pearl with the church key he kept chained to his belt, a picnic of fried chicken and tomato slices and egg salad spread at their feet. She and Sharon would tie their hair up in handkerchiefs and wear sunglasses and imagine themselves beautiful. Then the children would come up, and when he was drunk enough, Bobby would tell them about the war—Anzio, then Rome up into Germany where he'd won a Silver Star—calling himself a hero but never meaning it, a certain jaded quality it took her months to understand: he was mocking himself. But he was a man who'd done things, a husband. Still, not once did Maddy miss her own husband. Not once. She missed James, and she might have pined for a man more like Bobby, young and knotted with muscle, although already something of a drunk, but not once did she miss Will.

There was the feeling of having two families, of living two lives. There was her life with Will, and her life without. There was life with James and Roy and then, after Korea, life with Roy and Enis. Two lives, but each so violent and terror-filled, so warped with hope.

Pray—that had become her answer. Pray and let God worry.

Remembering what she'd said to Roy as he left: God's will, child. Not my own. Remembering Will's belief in the Sabbath: there is faith enough to go on, Sabbath morn.

When things started falling apart between Sharon and Bobby, the visits grew less frequent. Sue Ellen left for college and never came back. Sharon began to hate Bobby for his unwillingness to do anything with his money besides drink it away.

"Something. Anything. Just *do* something with it, you know?"

Sharon wanted things. A decent house. A color TV. She started reading magazines and picked out the design of her "dream home." "Which is exactly what it'll remain: a dream," she said. Maddy had lost a son, and nearly lost a husband. There was no pride left. She could understand such desires, but she could no longer sympathize with them.

Maddy hadn't seen her in years now. In passing here and there, a brief *Hello, how are the boys? Fine. How's Sue Ellen?* Nothing more. Sharon took up collecting dolphins: porcelain, ceramic, prints of dolphins, dolphins brocaded on pillow slips. She lined the mantle with dolphins, filled curio cabinets. Their friendship waned, and by the time Maddy realized it, she was past caring. It was just another life, something for the shelf, neat and dustless behind the glass.

Now there were only her sons, and Will, the men in her life, nothing else.

Her world felt calm and ruined.

The dust had settled on the driveway without her even realizing it. The sun, mammoth and red, was halfway up the sky. Enis was probably halfway to work by now. She didn't know where Roy might be. James—well, James, she told herself. I've put James on my shelf.

On the table between them sat a gilt frame, within it a sepia print of the girl, her cheeks rose, her hair the color of baked bread and braided in soft plaits. Her hands, one folded primly over the other, appeared porcelain, as did her powder-white forehead. Roy Burden slid the picture toward the glass, the café dim but for the scattershot sunlight that lay like coins across the concrete floor.

“You get this from Millie?” he asked.

His brother laughed. The lunch crowd was gone, the place near empty now. His voice seemed to carry into the far reaches of the diner.

“She don’t know you got it? Enis?”

“It fell out the damn sky, Roy. What do you think? Hell no, she don’t know I’ve got it. You see me sitting here? You think I’d be sitting here if she knew?”

“All right.”

“She’d kill my ass. Seriously. She would.”

“I not gonna argue the point.” Roy looked up. “I thought you was working today.”

“Took a half day. I had to show you this. How old you think she is there?”

“I don’t know,” said Roy. “Maybe twelve, thirteen.”

“Pubescent.”

“Is that the word for it?”

“Yeah, buddy, it is. What the man on the TV said at least.”

“Ugly word for such a pretty thing.”

“Well, it’s an ugly world, brother.”

“So I keep hearing.”

Through the glass they watched the woman step out into the two o’clock sunshine then turn to study her reflection for a moment in the storefront glass. She tugged at the hem of her skirt. Her hair lay in soft folds, waves not unlike those in the photograph, her eyes pinched by the afternoon glare. She turned to face them, unseeing, a pendant disappearing in the hollow of her breasts. A wasp circled, glittering and trembling on transparent wings. She waved it away.

“Now you got your pros and you got your cons here,” said Enis, touching the tips of his index fingers. “Pro one is this, well, look at her. Good God. That’s pro one. Fine. Now cons. Cons is this: engaged. Engaged to be married, Roy. That’s con one.”

“That’s the one I’m most aware of.”

“It pretty much goes downhill from there.”

“So don’t worry about it. Besides, it’s too late to worry about it anyhow.”