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A Murder of Crows

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
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Joseph Geha, Major Professor
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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
PROLOGUE

Can a story be told without a tongue? The tongue is a fire. A sword. A pen? If we called ourselves storytellers, we would be liars. We have no voice. We have no tongues. But this is our story, and the words inside you that read to you, sing to you like a shadow chorus of blackbirds, do so on their own.

Slippery Slope is the village we inhabit. Across the river that bleeds from lost tributaries still shimmering with the reflection of heaven, past the patches of woods so ancient and wild that the trees bend as if to whisper of a world before fire, the village lives just beyond the limits of natural curiosity. The boundaries of the village change so continuously, fixed physical landmarks offer the only real border between Slippery Slope and the rest of world.

To the North is the old, little red schoolhouse dilapidated by decades of disuse. A few of the bricks from the old schoolhouse bled into the willowy grass from the hole ripped into its west wall. Penetrating country gusts, blizzards, and the tailwinds of stillborn tornadoes have opened the hollow insides to birds’ nests, which crows constantly raid. Climbing vines bore into the crevices of the brick like tendons clinging to muscle, and shingles crumble from the roof like clumps of grey matter.

To the South is a pink painted building called The Shop of Love, which thrives despite a conspicuously empty parking lot. It is no secret that many men, and several women, (even some of our own mothers and fathers) have browsed the selection of sexualized wares, fingered the inventory, then buried the receipts for the mysterious merchandise deep in the bottom of their trashcans. The store is situated on an intimate piece of land, encircled by bushes, nestled by a few peach trees and Slippery Elms. A hot, humid place inside, or so we heard once.

To the West is Wright’s glove factory. Suede, leather, lace, velvet, any kind of glove for any kind of occasion. Their specialties are deerskin work gloves, lined with lamb’s wool, used by the many farmers who lived on the outskirts of the village. To the East is Linkisch’s Oak Store, which stocks hand-carved baby cradles, cribs, rocking chairs, picture frames, but
their bread and butter seller was (as it had been for nearly five decades) its oak children’s caskets. All shapes, all sizes, all at an affordable price.

We are the story of Allison Shuck. We are the story of Slippery Slope. These cool pages you touch so gently with your fingertips are our flesh. These brittle, black words are our bones. What happens to souls after they die? Do children stay young forever and the old continue to shrivel? No. They become stories—offered without the hot, untamed taste of tongues.
LATE WINTER

Crows dotted the white winter sky, cawing to awaken the world to the first official thaw of the new year. They scattered their language as they scavenged single-file against the paleness of the melting snow. A mist rose from the loosening soil, and the landscape resurrected with colors almost less vivid than our winter daydreams of them.

What had fallen out of the clouds like a soft, billowy powder, blanketing our village of Slippery Slope, now dripped from the gutters of farmhouses, slid down the splintered red wood of barns, flopped from brown tree branches, slipped from the shoulders of a scarecrow, puddled the bluish black fingertips of an eight-year-old girl death-gripping the grass. In the glow of a morning sky, her small, pale fingers had shone out of the muck and cattails. Sprinkles of molding straw stuck to her straight, black hair and polka dot dress. Allison Shuck had been missing for three months.

Not even a mile down the road, the girl’s paisley scarf fluttered around the neck of Old Mayor Crickshaw’s scarecrow. Brown stubble from the cornfield poked through the snow, which now dissolved into dingy grey slush and the muck of ditches. A couple crows perched on the scarecrow’s shoulders.

The scarf itself was an ordinary one, a dark brown blended with pine green and flint blue, a few splotches of grey. Not really much to speak of. And nobody would’ve spoken of the scarf had it not belonged to Allison Shuck. She was a quiet little girl with thick glasses who nobody would’ve noticed except that her decomposing body had been found face down in a nearby ditch. The discovery of the scarf, more than the discovery of the girl, woke Slippery Slope from its winter barrenness, and people shivered, for the first time in a long while, from a chill born in their own bones. The last time Allison had been seen alive was New Year’s Eve, just as the hardest winter in a century broke free from the clouds.

For three months, Slippery Slope had read with distracted interest about Allison’s disappearance (the first of its kind in ten years), each piece of breaking news located below the fold on the back pages of the Tribune. We watched them set their coffee mugs over her name, line their birdcages with her photograph, recycle her all-too-brief story.
“Hope she’s found,” they had murmured to each other, because it was the sort of thing people were supposed to say. Privately, they already knew she wasn’t lost, or missing; she was dead. None of them suspected any less.

Of course, Linkisch’s Oak Store, with its fifty year history of selling quality children’s caskets, was where Shucks bought Allison’s. They’d both been born in Slippery Slope and there was nowhere else they knew to go. Herbert Linkisch claimed the Shucks wandered the showroom for over two hours; Judith stretched her hand out to touch the cool wood a few times, then recoiled her hand and excused herself to go outside and smoke; Jay kept asking how much each model cost, even after he’d already asked, then he slipped his hands in his jacket pockets and stared out the window with the flimsy jaundice curtains.

Suspicious behavior, Linkisch pronounced, but everyone was used to his remarks being gauche.

Linkisch knew the Shucks. Everyone in the village did. Judith worked as a part-time checkout clerk at the only gas station in Slippery Slope, located on the corner of Maple and Main. She wore a blue smock and smoked cigarettes on the step outside, flicked ashes, and greeted her customers by name and a nicotine chuckle. We remember how she used to give candy bars and pop to children who strayed into the gas station after school because they had nowhere else to stray.

You go straight home, she warned.

The other half of the time, Judith played piano at the church behind Wingston Elementary; it was the church whose crooked steeple could be seen whenever we swung high enough in one of those squeaky playground swings.

All week Judith would practice after dark and sit in the rosy beams of bloody moonlight, which spilled through the smudged stained glass image of Christ holding a lamb around His shoulders. Then on Sunday, she would exchange her smock for a blouse and skirt and play the melodies she’d spent her week bathing in.

On the day she received the phone call from her husband Jay with the news of Allison’s disappearance, she had been smoking outside the gas station, peering into the heavy, dark clouds, asking the warm breeze what the sky would look like tomorrow.
Another year was about to end, and until that night, the winter had been green and mild. Her grandfather told her once that a green Christmas was the sign of impending death.

*A green Christmas means a mild winter and a ground easy for digging graves,* he had sighed, his breath stale with pipe tobacco.

A month before he died, she swore she heard a robin’s song early Christmas morning. After she hung up with Jay, she turned to Mrs. Yarger and said, “I’ve got to find my little girl.” Then she ran. The Tribune reported that she ran to the police station and Old Mayor Crickshaw’s son Lloyd gave her a ride out to her house, but that’s not what happened.

She ran. Through downtown, past the rainbow colored mural in the heart of Slippery Slope, through stubbled stalks of corn, through people’s backyards. She ran the entire way home, stopping only once when a little black-haired girl called out, “Mommy.” Judith had stopped and turned, but the little girl was holding another woman’s hand, and together, the mother and child walked down the sidewalk away from where Judith stood on the four corners; blood flooded her heart.

Nobody in the village knew for sure what Allison’s father Jay did for a living. People claimed he did a strange mixture of trades, which were rumored to be next to *pagan.* Part of the time, he collected Praying Mantis egg cases and sold them. Most of the time, he worked out of a dusty makeshift office, peddling things called “microbes,” which were actually freeze dried microscopic bacteria used for clearing up ponds.

Mrs. Wilker, down at Cranker’s Convenience Mart, could tell tales for hours over a steaming mug of decaf coffee (she’d had to give up caffeine after her second heart attack) and three warm cinnamon twists about the boxes of “bugs” Allison’s father was always shipping to far off places—even to a company called “Ladies of Scarlet.” Cranker’s was the only place in the village that offered a delivery service and the latest news on who was sending what to whom. Mrs. Wilker, like most people in Slippery Slope, didn’t appreciate Jay doing business with folks outside of the village. She also didn’t much like having “bugs” in her store overnight, not even freeze dried ones.

Every morning in late autumn, Jay would comb the piece of land where he intended to build a larger facility, searching for Praying Mantis egg cases, then he’d spend the day in
his office, the loaded shotgun he used for targeting crows propped against his bloated filing cabinets, and he shuffled bills among the mice turds.

*You make your own reality,* was his motto, which he said every time he visited the local bank, Mr. Perkins (the village’s current mayor) down at the hardware, Mrs. Wilker, even Reverend Kirk whenever the minister stopped out to discuss the selection of hymns with Judith.

Maybe this explains why he despised crows, shot them on every opportunity, because they were so common, so indifferent to his attempts to keep them off his land. *His reality,* they seemed to suggest by their ever-present looming, *was their birthright.*

In the Tribune, Jay told how he had looked out the window of his office that New Year’s Eve day, at the front yard, and hadn’t seen his daughter.

“I lost her,” he was quoted as saying.

He’d dropped letters, invoices, a box of bullets and burst through the door out into the misty late December air. She was gone. As if the rolling mist had absorbed her little body and crawled with her through the trees into the clouds. According to the Tribune, that was when he called the police.

But the truth was, as the crows attest, Jay couldn’t see the road from his office. He couldn’t see his house, either. Allison had been playing in the front yard last he knew, but she’d actually been across the road. When Jay finally admitted to himself that his daughter was missing, he’d gotten into his truck, adjusted his rearview mirror, and drove through the barn wall. Then, just as calmly as if he was going to church, he’d stepped out of his truck and sat down in his office chair to return a few phone calls. Then, he called the police.

Shucks lived on old route 125, a major thoroughfare fifty years before, all but abandoned since the new highway was built when Crickshaw was mayor—one of the many things the village still praised Crickshaw for. The Shucks’ house (the folks in the village politely referred to the mobile home as a house) sat parallel to the rusty train tracks, which had become overgrown with weeds, across the road from the old, little red schoolhouse. When the wind howls through the cracks in the schoolhouse walls, we still hear the singsong of alphabets and nursery rhymes, the chant of arithmetic, laughter as warm as any pulse.
The village heard the "official" version of what happened from Clio, an old, white man who claimed a closer relation to Allison than he actually was. He was the president of the Slippery Slope Historical Society, and whenever anyone needed to know the story of the village, they turned to him, despite certain embellishments, a tendency to omit things that reflected poorly on the founders, and a preference to elevate members of his own family.

He told people that Allison could play for hours in that old schoolhouse.

"Poor child," Clio recited with a sigh at the same moment he did every time he told the story. "She’d line up those raggedy dolls of hers and play teacher to them. She’d sit them in the rubble of that old building, on top of that overturned desk, and pretend she was teaching them."

Clio would scratch his chin, his leaky blue eyes widening, his voice hushing to only a breath as he would lean over and whisper, "That’s where she was snatched."

For three months, in the blurry grey photos on the back pages of the Tribune, the village witnessed the remains of Allison’s play through the wound in the schoolhouse wall. Three dolls with no faces leaned against each other atop an overturned desk; the sleek silhouette of a crow, with a piece of straw in its beak, perched beyond them on the windowsill. Then the village folded up Allison’s life and tossed it onto the floors beside their chairs.

Not until the discovery of the paisley scarf around the scarecrow’s neck did the little girl’s empty eyes and muck-covered hands attract the village’s attention.

“We need to find out who did this before it happens again,” they said, half-sure that it would.

They were concerned, righteously so, charitably so, but they still slept soundly at night. It wasn’t until their bedroom curtains billowed with breezes scented with lilacs and the sweetness of manure that they would dream of the hollow laughter of schoolchildren and dolls and the strangled necks of scarecrows. Then they would sit up, awakened by the sound of their own voices whispering unfamiliar names as a drifting glance of the moon erased their faces into blackness.

* * *
They sang acapella down at Judith’s church the Sunday after Allison Shuck’s body was discovered. Voices echoed high among the polished rafters, then sprinkled down onto the congregation like the late winter mist which had revealed Allison’s small fingers. They collected a special offering for the family (whatever spare dollars they had in their pockets and purses), sniffled whenever Reverend Kirk mentioned the little girl’s name, and with heads bowed, chanted a prayer for her already absent soul.

That afternoon, in a mixed denomination processional, the villagers dressed in their blackest clothes and carried casserole, brownies, lasagnas, obscure pastas with olives and glossy cheese up to the front door of the Shucks’ home. Geraldine DeWine brought the same dish she made every time the village gathered to mourn a child. It was a tradition that her mother had started and no visitation felt authentic without it steaming somewhere on the table. Nobody knew for sure what was in it, and considering Geraldine’s age, people wondered if she even knew. The village called it, “Funeral Fettuccini.” The DeWine family wasn’t Italian. The most outstanding ingredient in the concoction was corn, which appeared to have been liberally buried beneath layers of processed cheese, corkscrew pasta, onions, chunks of undercooked hamburger, and tomato paste.

“My mother always made this whenever a child died,” Geraldine explained. “Grief ain’t felt in the heart. It’s felt in the bowels. Everything you eat runs through you anyway. Might as well taste like something going down.”

Of course, the village had come to Shucks’ house to spend their requisite hour in that musty living room with the maize, shag carpeting. A black velvet painting of Jesus hung above the television beside a Budweiser mirror decorated with quails. Stacks of old newspapers and magazines cluttered the floor. Unopened cards had been piled on a stand next to the front door. When Clio’s wife, Mem, offered people a seat on Judith’s behalf, they smiled and opted to stand (it had been such a long drive after all), held their Styrofoam cups of orange punch and cold cut sandwiches that had set out too long and looked shiny.

This was a ritual they had perfected to an art: mourning children. Their cemeteries were littered with lamb-shaped tombstones, toys set on graves to rot in the rain, and they
sipped their punch, mailed their dime store sympathy cards, flocked to the dead child’s home to eat, then drove away with a sigh and a platitude about the mysteries of God.

Neither of Allison’s parents subjected themselves to the parade of grief. Jay was out in his barn counting the mice he’d collected from the various traps and dropped into a white bucket. Some were dead. Others were mangled with snapped spines. His tears diluted their blood.

“I can’t,” he wept, pained more by the fact that he couldn’t end their suffering than the suffering itself. As he listened to a greedy crow perched in the loft, he found the mice’s struggle the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

He wiped his eyes and looked up. Reverend Kirk stood in the doorway with Bible and hat in hand. The gilding on the Bible’s pages glared in a sudden and unexpected flash of sunlight. He was wearing his traditional black suit and tie, but the young man’s brown hair had been swept behind his ears. Too long, according to many in Slippery Slope.

“Seeking God’s comfort?” the young man asked with his fresh from seminary righteousness. Allison Shuck’s memorial service had been his first.

Jay flinched, hugged tighter to the bucket. “How much will it cost me?”

“God’s love is free, Jay,” Reverend Kirk took a step inside the door.

“Yeah,” Jay answered, “so’s my hate.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. Truly. Allison was a sweet girl,” the reverend offered. He opened his Bible, smoothed the crinkly pages. “All we can do is accept God’s will in times such as these.”

The crow above them shuddered and cawed with impatience.

“God’s will?” Jay asked, looking straight into the younger man’s eyes. “How long have you lived here?”

Reverend Kirk squared his shoulders. “You already know that, Jay.” He lifted his chin. “I’ve lived here all my life, except for when I attended seminary.”

“God’s will,” Jay muttered. “Well, Reverend,” he shook his head. “We make our own reality.” He set the bucket down on the worktable; the faint squeals of the mice clinging to what life they had left filled the silence. Then, he turned and stalked into his office, shutting the door so hard that a gust of wind rippled the pages of the reverend’s Bible.
The young man swallowed hard at the thought of the mice and couldn’t seem to decide if it was cruel or kind to let them live. After a few minutes of musing aloud, he peeked over at them, took a step towards door, but then he stopped himself, turned around and grabbed the bucket by the handle, shuffling out into the early spring air.

Allison’s mother Judith mourned across the road, sitting in the old schoolhouse; her blonde hair and crimson dress could be glimpsed through the hole in the wall. She had Allison’s dolls around her as she knelt among the cobwebs and the rubble, broken pieces of blood red brick pressing into her knee bones. She chanted a nursery rhyme to herself, one she had learned as a child.

_One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy, five for silver, six for gold, seven for a secret, never to be told._

She spoke the words aloud without hearing them; instead she believed she could see them, a black flock fluttering from her lips, suffocating her with their awkward squawk. Each letter perched on the air around her. She felt surrounded, watched, frightened by her inability to stop releasing more of them.

_One for sorrow..._

The phrase flapped against her tongue as it dispersed into the shadows of the schoolhouse.

_Three for a girl..._

Syllables shuddered up from her throat and scattered into the air, their spasms shattering the seemingly silent country. They were behind her. In front of her. Beside her. Inside her.

_A secret, never to be told..._

Her heart beat in rhythm with the words’ rhyme as she retched each word, realizing that if more were allowed flight, they would consume her, decompose her, reduce her to only an echoed name in an aimless daydream, so she closed her mouth, put her hands over her ears, and swallowed each letter like a shard, sacrificing herself to save herself.

* * *
Old Mayor Crickshaw swaggered from the Shucks’ house out to where Judith knelt, placed his hand on her shoulder, leaned on his pinewood cane that clopped on pavement and thunked on dirt and had a fragrance you could smell from three feet behind you (and even closer). We recognized his tall, slight body, shaggy grey hair and scarred brown cheek. We watched him through the hole in the tattered schoolhouse roof, while across the road, the village gathered around the Shucks’ picture window, sure that Crickshaw was offering Judith words of comfort. He always knew what to say and when to say it. They were too far away to smell his Old Spice cologne, sprinkled on too thickly, or his stale breath that tasted musty and sour. They were too far away to feel his knobby fingers claw her shoulder blade. They were too far away.

They watched Crickshaw kindly offer Judith his white handkerchief. It swayed a little in the breeze before Judith lifted her head and accepted it, then accepted his clammy, outstretched hand. He turned her hand over, reached into the breast pocket of his shirt and snaked a sparkly necklace into her palm.

“Not many men like Crickshaw these days,” the mourners mused as they preened in their black, black clothes.

Crickshaw refused to wear black, said it was an improper color for a child’s funeral.

“Children are innocents,” he would say. “They shouldn’t look down from heaven and see only the shadow of their family and friends.” So he wore a red flannel shirt and creased jeans.

“That way the dear ones can pick me out from on high and find comfort in knowing how much they were loved,” he spoke with maternal grace. His very name was synonymous with the “good ol’ days.”

His cane shook in his grip as he knelt down beside a dazed Judith. She could say nothing, only purse her lips and fight the nursery rhyme whirling inside her.

Crickshaw’s grey hair tousled slightly as a gust of March wind crackled a few tree limbs. He wrapped an arm around Judith’s shoulders, bowed his head, and began to hum a prayer. Across the road, the mourners flocked around the window, witnessed Judith and the old mayor support each other and cry for Allison. The mourners set down their punch and
sandwiches, and in the country quiet, touched by the old man’s gesture, they tasted the salt of their own tears.

With their diet for gossip satisfied, the village returned to their daily roosts: the hardware store on the corner, the two hair salons, the barber shop, the ice cream shop, the nursing home, body shop, back offices at the bank, The Main Street Grill, village library, village offices, card tables, dinner tables, round or square tables.

The downtown was the village’s heart and pride, especially with its rainbow-colored mural prominently painted on the side of Perkins Hardware. The mural had been designed by Slippery Slope’s original creator and it offered a view of another village with green grass, a yellow sun, blue sky (each color at one time had been absolute in its shade, but years of deterioration, cracking, and caked crow shit had been allowed to obscure the image); a father, mother, and child embraced each other in the painting’s center, a vision of another place more perfect than that which surrounded it—such a seemingly simple scene. Legend claimed the village existed miles and miles from Slippery Slope. Rumor pronounced, at one time, the village had been Slippery Slope. Gossip, and most everyone else, believed it was only a myth, a pretty picture, a nice diversion, too unsophisticated to be a glimpse of something real.

Years ago, most of the downtown had stood empty, the vacant buildings like mossy, weathered headstones commemorating the village’s past, but when Crickshaw was mayor, they repaired the buildings, brought in businesses, revitalized the skeletal remains with new paint and new plumbing. On either side of the street, rows of cherry trees and old-fashioned, Victorian lampposts complemented the newly uniform storefronts; the sidewalk was a deep, red brick. The village’s downtown bustled now, attracted tourists who found it quaint. To know where Slippery Slope was on a map, and then, to find it, was almost a status symbol among the surrounding towns. Crickshaw was hailed as its savior.

Publicly acknowledged tragedies like a child’s unimaginably gruesome murder, with the careless clue of a scarf around a scarecrow’s neck and a few bits of errant straw, was such an inconvenience. Slippery Slope was a village that preferred to keep its horrors within itself.
After Allison Shuck's funeral, they returned to their roosts, the lingering hunger for news and details still gnawing inside of them. They’d all spotted enough soda stains on the Shucks’ gaudy maize carpeting, dust cobwebs in corners, to whisper behind their clammy hands about how “a neglected house is the sure sign of a neglected child.” And there was the odor of the Shucks’ house to contend with. A strange stench of mildew spores, cinnamon apple potpourri, old fish bones, and the earthy, fertile smell of insects.

They decided, the ex-mourners, that it was no wonder Allison had chosen the fresh air of the old schoolhouse over the suffocating mobile home. They concluded that if the house hadn’t been so messy and had smelled better, she wouldn’t have been outside where she could be abducted in the first place.

“If Jay didn’t spend his time selling bugs, they might have money to live somewhere decent,” Mr. Perkins said.

Mayor Perkins, the hardware owner, sat around the stove in his backroom along with Sheriff Bertram, two retired farmers, the young boy who worked in his store before and after school, and Morris.

Nobody knew Morris’ last name for sure. Neither did he. Morris believed in conspiracies and UFOs and he had blueprints for a secret weapon he’d designed himself. Folks in the village referred to him as “Moontrucker,” but they called him “Doc,” or “Professor” to his face. Local legend said that he used to be an English professor, even a published poet, who’d fried his brain on LSD and whose parents died in a car accident leaving him a fortune. Rumor claimed that he had a metal plate in his head from when he’d jumped off a crane believing he could fly. Gossip whispered that he had never been “right,” not since he was a boy.

He wore a trench coat in summer, as well as winter, in rain as well as snow. He had a tangle of black hair which flowed into his beard at his collarbones. He spent his days walking through the village, talking to himself, showing his blueprints to only those he truly trusted, such as Mr. Perkins. Mainly, Morris liked Perkins because he called him “Cool Hand Morris” like the forty-year-old man requested. His “secret weapon” wasn’t anything but a yo-yo, which nobody told Morris.
On crisp mornings, Moontrucker would stop into the hardware with the rest of the men and sit on a crate around the stove, smoking pipes and chewing tobacco, crunching into bright red apples. He would nod and sigh and scratch his chin whenever the other men did. When he realized (as he did at the same time each morning) that nobody wanted to hear his stories about haunted woods and alien experimentation, he wiped his hands on his trench coat, held tight to his yo-yo in his pocket, and began his journeys across the village and sometimes beyond.

That morning, the men pecked at the Shuck family even more hungrily than at the doughnuts and apples the Sheriff brought with him. Moontrucker bit into the apple Mr. Perkins had given him and grimaced at tasting the sweetness of a bruise.

"The child shouldn’t have been playing outside," one of the farmers said.

Moontrucker rolled his tongue over the pulp in his mouth. "Today grieves, tomorrow grieves, cover me over, light-in-leaves."

"Shuck claims he didn’t even know she [ ] that old school," the Sheriff informed. He used his pocketknife to peel the red skin from his apple.

"Golden head, black wing," Moontrucker mumbled, then glanced at his broken watch. He sighed and slipped his hands into the pockets of his trench coat before standing abruptly and lumbering out the back door to begin his walks across the village.

"The girl was dead long before she was killed," Mayor Perkins observed. His words floated through the downtown air as easily as pale cherry blossoms and everyone who heard what he said nodded at such insight.

At The Main Street Grill, across the street, Mrs. Perkins offered her customers the tidbits she’d heard.

"Her only friends were those dolls," Mrs. Perkins told.

The Perkins had no children. Mrs. Perkins had lost a baby sister when she was a girl. She and her sister Gilda had been playing "hide and seek" in a neighbor’s cornfield. Every time Mrs. Perkins drove through the country and heard the crackle of dried cornstalks, she tensed, found herself searching and searching, suffocated by the oppressive smell of fertile soil and autumn corn, but her sister had vanished thirty years ago, under the watchful eyes of crows, and all that remained of the little girl were the whispered stories her name evoked.
Meanwhile, across the village in Pleasant Valley Retirement Home, Wilhelmina Foster pronounced during a game of hearts: “That Shuck girl never said two words to anybody. Quiet as a mouse, they say.”

Wilhelmina was the only person still alive who had attended the little red schoolhouse where Allison had last been alive. She loved to tell stories of how she and her brother used to ride their horse Ezra to school each day. Star students, she enjoyed saying. No one was alive to challenge her, accuse her of cheating on every other test she took or remind her of selfish she’d been as a girl.

Her brother Harold died young. He’d been found swinging from a tree in the patch of woods behind their farmhouse. He’d only been ten-years-old, not tall enough to reach any of the lowest branches, let alone climb the thick trunk. The village whispered for days that it was a bizarre murder, the first of its sort, and the descriptions of violet lips, a snapped neck, and the one thing so horrible they could hardly speak it, put a fright into every mother and father for miles, until then Sheriff Crickshaw provided a note in what appeared to be the boy’s handwriting. Crickshaw donated an antique pocket watch to the family to help cover the financial loss of losing a boy during harvest season and no one spoke about Harold’s death in polite conversation again.

In the back office of the Savings and Loan, Meryl Culver listened to the words of her coworkers, the sounds of the letters rattling inside her. _Why weren’t her parents watching her?_ She scratched the brown scar that squiggled down the left side of her face; the heat of a memory scorched her for a moment before her phone beeped. She’d been burned twenty years ago in an unusual barn fire. She’d been inside. Nobody knew why. She never spoke about it, not even to her friends. But she’d survived. Nobody knew why. Luck? Providence?

We watched her flaunt her survival, hoard her own life by withdrawing from the people around her, wake up and refuse to thank God for breath. We could read her thoughts. She believed she deserved the warm embrace of her own skin, that it wasn’t merely survival but escape. She thought her survival was an emblem of her own quick thinking, of an innate superior ability to persevere. She sat in the corner of that bank basement, oblivious to the
hot, hot blood rushing through her veins, the caress of ligaments and joints against bone—the luxury of ignorance.

She glanced over at her phone and whispered, “Allison, Allison,” then her memory cooled into the hum of the fluorescent lights above.

Nobody said anything at the gas station on the corner of Maple and Main, but at midnight, after the side streets had gone dark, in the shadowy sanctuary of the church with the crooked steeple, “Blessed Be The Tie That Binds” groaned from the organ, vibrated the droplets of red glass in Christ’s crucifixion. The cracked marble tombstones mumbled outside the church, and graves, long since hollowed by worms and decay, embraced useless gasps of air. Flowers, wilted by the unexpected warmth, quivered atop the freshest grave in the cemetery as the organ’s melody thundered beneath the ground. We joined together and sang a chorus or two before the blackness absorbed the village in its hush and our voices echoed into the errant cawing of a restless crow searching for its flock.
Lloyd Crickshaw, the old mayor’s son, found Allison. He was a middle-aged meter-maid in a village with two parking meters, a man with his father’s looks except that his hair was dark and his eyes were darker; a man with the sort of face a person couldn’t forget because it was so strikingly forgettable. Lloyd was, by all accounts, profoundly average. And he drove his doorless meter-maid cruiser that night unaware of what the warmth of the day would reveal.

Allison’s winter grave grew shallower with each approach of spring; each flake of snow congealed into ice, then trickled down the sides of her blue face as if the angels cried since the villagers would not. The whiteness of the snow, like a blank page, was covered with crows who carried away pieces of who Allison had been, who she’d hoped to be, and who she will always be remembered as. Their bellies were swollen with the remains of the little girl and they carried away her physical life the way they carried the village’s story in each gleam of their black eyes. She thawed into the distorted colors of a murderer’s imagination, flies frozen to her fingers, and like the steam puffing from the crows’ opened beaks, we encircled our little friend and waited.

Lloyd swerved his cruiser to avoid a muskrat, or at least what his eyes, fogged by the rattling bottles of Jack beside him, identified as a muskrat. His vehicle careened into the ditch, struck the embankment and jarred him from his seat into the muddy slime with a splash. Crows scattered. A coyote howled from the nearby woods.

Muck drained into the ditch by rains and gusts of mild winds thickened the pungent smell of sewage as Lloyd swayed to his feet. He breathed through his mouth, only to feel his tongue tingle with the taste of the air. Flicking mud from his fingers, he grabbed the flashlight from his police belt, clawed one hand into the embankment above him, and tried to crawl out of the sludge weighting his clothes. He gripped the slick grass and reached up higher and higher until his fingertips felt a smooth coldness, like a skeletal hand stretching out to his.

“My God,” he gasped, recoiled his hand, tottered a step or two in the mud, then splashed back into the ditch face first. He gulped and spat ditchwater, wiped his face with
his wet sleeve, lost his glasses, and stared up towards the quiet country road. Only the smug eye of the moon gazed down at him.

His knees quivered. His heart skipped, sending a hard thump when it started again. He couldn't find the voice to call out. Crows fluttered and fussed around the edge of the ditch, but Lloyd couldn't chase them away; instead, he leaned over, hands on knees, and stood there like a little boy too afraid of the dark to exhale. Lloyd had the fear of crows, the fear they would tear away his flesh until he was only ragged pieces, chewed, swallowed, and digested—his soul left to ramble on with only bones.

He gritted his teeth and cursed himself before he lifted his hand again and tried to raise himself from the ditch. He hoisted one leg, then catapulted himself onto the embankment. His flashlight beam glanced across the sparkly shards of broken glasses, the yellow glow of a sundress, finally resting on a blue hand death-gripping the grass; a tattered doll tight in the rigor mortis of her fingers. Ditchwater chilled his back and legs as he knelt down beside her, gently turning her like a father waking his child. With a gasp, he dropped his flashlight in the cattails at the expression of raw fear on her face. Mouth open. Eyes gaping. Forever screaming.

They stared at each other for a few moments before Lloyd, with fingers trembling, slowly unbuttoned his beige shirt and respectfully covered her face and body. He plucked a few pieces of straw from her hair and held them in his opened palm like they were bits of gold. After three months of watching her be consumed by crows, ants, and hungry soil, we welcomed her to the sort of rest reserved solely for murdered children.

The decision to search his old man’s cornfield was not Lloyd’s idea. He heard it whispered on the night breeze. The scarecrow’s voice like a chorus of children spoke to him in its stillness. The scarecrow (his only boyhood friend) hung on those crude wooden boards with its arms outstretched as if to embrace him, as if it were a silent beacon for the flocks of crows it should’ve frightened. They gathered like a mourning congregation to its shoulders, picked at its straw neck and feet, flicked their shit onto its black felt hat.

Lloyd tripped down the hollow country road, catching himself with his hands to keep from falling, and he kicked an empty bottle of buckeye ale all the way to the edge of his
father's cornfield. The crisp sting of winter still owned the air, but the ground was spongy, sucked at the soles of his shoes. A pile of snow steamed at the base of the scarecrow, silhouetting the figure in a misty shroud. Lloyd swayed in front of the scarecrow, then fell into its arms. He staggered backwards a step, tasted the Jack Daniels stale on his own breath, and dropped to his knees in the cool, wet soil. This was his father's farm. This was his father's scarecrow.

Pictures of Crickshaw raising Lloyd into the air to set the felt hat on the scarecrow's head had made the front page of the Tribune forty years ago when Crickshaw had been in one of the hottest mayoral races the little village had ever seen. Crickshaw had invited the village's children out to his farm to construct a scarecrow. He had the children design the rainbow flyers, which promised ice cream and hayrides. They were taped all over the village like multi-colored confetti.

Mothers' sleeves were tugged and pulled whenever that glorious invitation was spotted (a chance for many to play outdoors for the first time), and so on that Saturday afternoon, the village's children gathered among the lush green stalks of corn and pounded nails, stuffed straw into a pair of the old mayor's overalls, and built a man who would hang like an effigy to our innocence. Above, crows concealed by the blinding light of the noonday sun circled, mobbed starlings for kernels of corn, fluttered from pole to pole excited by the excitement of the children's laughter.

We giggled that day at the coarseness of the straw in our hands. We teased each other, placed bugs in each other's hair, shrieked and chased through the emerald stalks. A long table covered with a white tablecloth had been placed in the middle of a small, crescent clearing in the fields, and we ate ice cream there by the bowls full. The sugary stickiness gummed our lips and stained our clothes as we danced with our arms extended, singing and chanting, "Ring Around the Rosie," spinning, spinning...ashes, ashes, we fell to the ground, rubbed our hair in the gritty, gritty soil...the unsettled dust sprinkling over us.

Crickshaw had also invited the village photographer to come out to the field, and when the job was all but done, he'd stood, surrounded by children, lifting Lloyd into the air to set the hat on the scarecrow's head. Wearing his red flannel shirt and crooked grin,
Crickshaw rode that image of him as a good ol’ boy farmer and family man straight into office.

The night Lloyd found Allison, the scarecrow’s straw hands were opened wide as it loitered on that splintered wooden cross, dressed in faded overalls; its black felt hat overshadowing its face. In late autumn and winter, the time after harvest, the scarecrow’s silhouette stood alone on the anemic skyline, visible for miles and even beyond.

A locust shell, months old, loosened near the bottom of the scarecrow, level with Lloyd’s eyes. The middle-aged man looked across the field to his father’s house. It was dark. The stained glass window in the dining room, cold and grey. Melting snow sighed into Lloyd’s face as he swayed to his feet. He supported himself against the scarecrow, lifted himself until he stared into its coal eyes and blank burlap mouth.

His fingertips trembled as he touched the softness of the silk scarf knotted around its neck. A new color stained the grey, the deep crimson of blood, giving the paisley green and flint blue the same look as the little girl’s neck and wrists. They were like bruises, which Lloyd felt in each fiber of the scarf. Emotion tightened his throat, choked his breath. Lost in the silence of the scarecrow’s screams, he buried his face in its red flannel shirt like a child asking a father for affection.

With his usual lumbering strides, Lloyd walked down the dead center of downtown Slippery Slope, his right hand clutching Allison’s scarf. We followed him, surrounded him, urged him on his path towards the police station. Darkness had not yet swallowed the village and the few people still mingling outside the shops downtown stared at the “town drunk” marching so resolutely down the middle of Main Street.

“Where does he think he’s going?” Mr. Perkins asked two retired farmers. All three of them huddled around the hardware’s front door.

“Probably to the tavern,” one of the farmers muttered.

“Or looking to knock up another ex-wife,” the other farm said. The three of them elbowed each other and snickered.
Reverend Kirk paused from changing the message on the church’s sign long enough to nod towards Lloyd as he passed by. The young man rolled up his sleeves, rummaged through his black plastic letters until he pulled GOD out of the box. He knew whose scarf Lloyd held. He’d visited the Shucks’ house enough times to have seen it tied into a bow around Allison’s neck. Once, he’d even commented on how lovely it looked, earning him a smile from a little girl whose bright brown eyes had twinkled with her secret crush on the man. She’d written about it in the diary she kept inside the crumbling schoolhouse wall.

Moontrucker strolled to a stop by the mural and watched Lloyd pass him without a nod or a glance. Our village mascot held a browned apple in his pocket.

“Angels and ministers of grace defend us!” Moontrucker shouted, waving his arms. “Something is rotten!” He laughed to himself and tossed the apple on the sidewalk, smashed it under his barefooted heel.

The villagers lined the sidewalks and looked at the paisley scarf dangling from Lloyd’s fingertips. A bicycle and two cars dodged him, but he did not swerve from the straight line he was shuffling down. When he reached the police station, he flung the door open, squinted at the rush of musty air that swept into his face. The pasty smell of old, yellowing paper, the bitter smell of rooms in need of airing out hung in stagnant pockets. The old floorboards creaked. Lloyd took a deep breath and forced himself towards the dimly lit back office where Sheriff Bertram spent most of his days.

He strode through the opened door and placed the scarf in the middle of Sheriff Bertram’s cluttered desk. Bertram had cards from schoolchildren taped to the front of the desk, as well as scattered across the top. He had given an assembly on safety at the local grade school and these construction paper cards were to thank him. The sheriff had spent the afternoon reading them over a cup of tea and a hard-boiled egg, smiling at each picture drawn especially for him in careful crayon. Some of the cards had the little sayings he’d taught the children: Stay inside, stay alive and A child indoors is a child who soars.

Bertram glanced up at Lloyd. “Kids,” he chuckled. He took special pride in the card designed by his own son Rod, though he wasn’t sure how to reconcile the picture of a stick figure walking alone through the woods with the message Be Safe scrawled in big red letters.

Bertram folded the card and glanced at the scarf, then up at Lloyd.
"What, Lloyd?" Bertram asked with a sigh.

"There's a dead girl lying the ditch by Dad's cornfield," Lloyd uttered. His voice faltered

Bertram scratched his chin, nodded towards the scarf, and smiled. "You turning yourself in?"

Lloyd swallowed hard. "Found this scarf, too. On Dad's scarecrow." He reached into his breast pocket and placed a few bits of straw onto the table. "Along with these. In the girl's hair."

"Fine," Bertram said, picking up the scarf and shoving it into the top drawer of his desk.

"I think the scarf belonged to the girl," Lloyd said. He shifted his weight.

"Fine," Bertram replied. "I'll look into it tomorrow morning." He picked up his telephone receiver. "Suppose I should tell Doc Healy to go get the body."

Lloyd cleared his throat and listened to Bertram tell Healy about the girl, all the while doing his best to square his slouched shoulders.

"Lloyd found her. Out taking a ride in the country," Bertram spoke into the receiver. He paused, then chuckled. "Naw, Doc, we don't got any parking meters out that way."

Lloyd held one hand over his ear. Hundreds of whispering voices hissed through the night air, oppressed him, but when he turned around, there was nothing but emptiness.

When Bertram hung up, the noise startled Lloyd. He cleared his throat and asked, "Shouldn't that scarf be evidence?"

"Yeah," Bertram mumbled, returning to reading his cards.

"I found it out on my—"

"Lloyd," Bertram rubbed his temples. "Go home." He took a sip from his tea. "Try to forget what you saw. Finding dead things is never easy. Just go down to the tavern, have yourself some drinks, and stick to traffic violations." He tossed some money towards Lloyd. "First round is on me."

Lloyd closed his eyes. The voice of the scarecrow howled in his ears, but he tried to ignore it. Slowly, he picked the money off Bertram's desk and held his breath until he found himself outside the police station. He tried not to exhale too loudly for fear the crows might
hear and carry him away. Just then, a woman and her child past him, each one holding
tighter to the other until they were safely around the corner. He bowed his head and prayed
the only prayer he knew: *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I
should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.* A drift of black clouds evaporated
the moon as he whispered, “I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

The lights in Raven’s Tavern flickered on the red brick sidewalk. Opening his eyes
was only a formality. His body already knew the way to the tavern. There was a comfort in
the smack of pool balls and the cool, dark corners inside. People could conceal themselves in
the shadows. They didn’t have to exist. They could sit inside the oak paneled walls and
leave their lives outside the door.

But the ghosts of Lloyd’s past seemed to perch on his conscience, flock to his
memories, peck at his solitude. With each slow swallow of Jack Daniels, he could sit and
admire the stuffed buck’s head on the wall without losing himself in its lifeless gaze. He
tried to ignore the sounds only he heard, but a new, louder voice joined the phantom chorus.
A little girl’s voice, clear and pure, telling him the truth he already knew too well.

“If I should die before I wake,” he recited, drowning out the voices inside him.
Children had died in Slippery Slope many times, too many times, before, but he’d never
found one after they were already dead, stared into the accusing eyes.

He slipped out of his booth and approached the bar, focused on the buck’s head with
its enormous, curled antlers and seemingly smaller than normal sized head.

“It’s a damn fawn,” he muttered.

The bartender, Virgil Bardon, stopped wiping the counter. Virgil had been one of the
poor children that Old Mayor Crickshaw had escorted to and from school each day. The old
man funded his education at a bartending school and helped him get a loan to start up his
own tavern. Virgil felt that his kindness towards Lloyd, a free drink here and there, was a
way of giving back to the man who had given him so much.

“What you say, Lloyd?” Virgil asked.

Lloyd shook his head, rubbed at his ears.

“Shooting a fawn is against the law around here,” Virgil said loudly.

Lloyd took another swig from his bottle.
"You saying I broke the law?" Virgil pressed.

"I can see the glue around the antlers," Lloyd replied. He looked Virgil square in the eyes.

Virgil laughed, then chuckled, continued wiping down the bar, exchanged a glance with a few patrons. "Lloyd, dozens of people come in here everyday. None of them see any glue." Virgil stopped in front of Lloyd and lowered his voice. "Why are you the only one who sees glue?"

Lloyd gritted his teeth, squeezed the neck of his bottle. "I don't know." His voice quivered. "I wish I hadn't seen anything."

He wiped his nose with the back of his hand and tossed a few bills in front of Virgil. He took his bottle and staggered out the door into the crisp, pungent smell of spring's return. The keys to the police station jangled loosely in his pants pocket. When Lloyd stared into the night sky, Allison Shuck's pale skin haunted the face of the moon. We knew what he was thinking. Bertram would keep the scarf in his desk drawer for weeks without a proper investigation, not wanting to work that hard. *Just a vagrant passing through* would be the words scribbled on the report. Lloyd pulled the keys from his pocket and stared down the street, looking left, then right.

Mr. Perkins was locking the front of his hardware store when Lloyd stumbled past him. The older man raised an eyebrow but didn't turn around until Lloyd disappeared into the alleyway behind the police station, then he looked across the street in time to catch the eye of Rosie, the florist, who was flipping her open sign to closed.

An hour later, inside Rosie's Roses, the night air tingled with the scent of flowers, needles, sap, scented candles, and old wood. Lloyd opened one of the refrigerators where his cousin Rosie kept her most expensive flowers and plucked a rose from one of the bundles. He lived in the one bedroom apartment above the business and Rosie had always permitted him to take as many flowers as he wanted, provided he wrote down *which ones* and *how many* on the tablet by the cash register.

He brushed aside a couple crumpled Kleenexes to record his monthly rose. Rosie was allergic to flowers, but the village had needed a florist and there was plenty of money to
be made on grave blankets and funeral arrangements, so she kept an open box of tissues by her worktable and resigned herself to never breathing through her nose again. We remember her as a child being the only one whose parents allowed her to play outside. We would watch as she splashed in puddles, squealed at the feel of cool dirt between her toes, stuck out her tongue to taste the unscreened pleasure of a rainstorm. She had always laughed and smiled, waved at the rest of us inside our living rooms. We never waved back.

Lloyd hurried out the back door of Rosie’s in time to hear the funeral home’s clock chime midnight. He started his yellow pickup truck and laid the rose on the dashboard. Absently, he patted his swollen breast pocket where Allison’s paisley scarf pressed his heart. A thorn on the rose stem nipped his finger, making him stop and wipe the blood on the corner of the scarf.

Erinyes Park was miles outside Slippery Slope. A small patch of woods surrounded it. A stream stagnated into a pool of algae, twigs, and sticks, over which a bridge had been built. Visitors could only come to Erinyes Park by way of the bridge, since the parking lot was on the other side of a line of evergreen trees. Wicker lawn chairs blighted the grass in front of the one story brick building where people who couldn’t take care of the business of living were brought. Rest home. Nursing home. Waiting room. Elderly and invalid both crept the sterile hallways or laid on the cold off-white sheets, offering new insight to the idea of killing time; the murdered minutes roamed like ghosts, void and untouchable. This place, miles from the mention of Old Mayor Crickshaw, sepulchered their infirm in Erinyes Park, and we watched them.

Three greyhounds wandered the grounds, supposedly used as pet therapy for the inhabitants, but they’d spent too many nights outside, wild with bloodlust from eating raccoons, rabbits, and possums, and they were rarely permitted inside. Instead, they howled at night and eyed visitors who were brave enough to pass the large, unchained dogs.

We hurried over the wooden bridge and approached the familiar grounds with Lloyd beside us. He clutched the rose in his right hand, touched Allison’s scarf with the other. That night, the greyhounds were too busy prowling the nearby woods to notice us slip in the unlocked back door.
An old man, wearing only a yellowed T-shirt and frayed boxers, mumbled to himself as he roamed the dimly lit hallways. He shook with palsy as he lifted a crooked finger and pointed it at Lloyd. Two old women huddled by the front sitting room. A late night television show flickered colors across their pale faces. Each cradled a doll and whispered into the fabric necks and cheeks, hummed a lullaby now and then between commercials. One of the women looked up as Lloyd walked by and stretched out one of her gnarled hands, catching him by the jacket.

"Son?" she cried. A smile cracked across her lips.

Lloyd looked left, then right. There were no nurses at the front desk.

"I knew you would come for me," the woman gasped. "They told me you were dead, but," she squeezed the doll, "but I knew you would come."

"I'm sorry," Lloyd spoke.

"Wait for me," she uttered, forcing her joints to maneuver the wheelchair. "Let me get my things from my room." She nodded. Her large hazel eyes beamed up at him. "Wait for me. Right here. You'll wait for me. Promise."

Lloyd took a deep breath. "Yeah," he answered.

He stood still until she turned her wheelchair and squeaked down the hallway. A couple of people crept along the walls. Some in wheelchairs. A few shuffled. Inside the little chapel, he could see the glow of red candles and stained glass illuminated by fake backlighting. It was a hollow, red-carpeted sanctuary with oak pews and kneeling racks. Lloyd lingered outside the doors for only a moment, listening to a frail solo of "It is well with my soul." The voice could've been a man's as easily as a woman's. A thorn prick from the rose in his hands made Lloyd remember why he'd made the journey there.

He disappeared down a darkened hallway, finally stopping at the room nearest the plastic, potted lilies. An elderly woman lay alone in the shadows. Lloyd had visited her often during his life. She didn’t belong to Slippery Slope. Instead, he’d met her in the woods North of the village where she’d lived in a cabin. He had been walking through, just a young boy of eleven, hoping to escape Slippery Slope, armed with only an old yellowed letter from his father’s desk. That was when he’d met the old woman (it seems she was always old) sitting on a tree stump, crying. At least, that was the story Lloyd always told.
I can’t live there anymore, he told her.

You can’t live here. My woods are no place for children, she answered.

Her woods were silent. No crows could live there for lack of food. Sometimes, they flew over, muted, unable to be grasped, and all that could be heard was the hush, hush of their wings as they hurried away.

What should I do, he asked.

You already know, she replied.

She invited him to visit her every day if he wanted. She fed him meals that were usually too bitter and well done to be enjoyed, but she nurtured him, and in many ways, became the mother he’d lost as a baby.

He looked at her from the doorway of her room at Erinyes Park. Her delicate body was enmeshed in an afghan, as if the woman had a spread of algae green wings. Her grey hair was a nest of tangles and loosened braids. Her brown eyes, which leaking blood had blinded, searched the darkness, saw visions of a world before she was bedridden.

“Rhea?” Lloyd whispered, sat in the chair beside the bed. “Ms. Morse?”

Her brown eyes rolled in his direction, but she couldn’t see him.

“I told you to quit coming here,” she mumbled through her dry lips.

Lloyd took one of her hands and wrapped her fingers around the rose stem.

“I brought this for you,” he said.

Her ashen face brightened slightly as she brought the rose to her nose and inhaled the fragrance, then she flinched when she pricked her thumb on a thorn.

“Sorry,” Lloyd whispered.

He pulled Allison’s scarf from his breast pocket and stopped the slow trickle of blood.

She jerked her hand away from his and brought her thumb to her mouth. “You weren’t supposed to come back,” she hissed. The dark, reddish circles under her eyes became more pronounced.

Lloyd scratched the back of his neck.

“Another child died, didn’t they?” the old woman muttered. “I don’t want you here.”
She peeled the rose petal by petal, sprinkled them onto the afghan. She smeared the scarlet onto her fingertips as she twisted the flower into a crumple.

"You have no place with me anymore," she said.

Lloyd absently spread Allison's scarf over his knees. "I needed to come here."

"Too late."

"I needed to see you," he answered. "Certainly, you want something more than to die alone."

"Don't you worry about that," she whispered, her blind eyes staring at him. "I won't be alone when the time comes." She tried to smile, but her lips twisted. "And probably not even after that."

Lloyd stuffed the scarf back into his pocket. "What do you want from me? I came here to be with you. To listen to you."

She coughed a laugh. "That's not why you came here." She lifted her fingertips to her nose and smelled the rose stains.

Lloyd bowed his head.

"You want something I can't give you," she said.

"What's that?" Lloyd sighed.

A nurse's aide walked passed the doorway.


"I thought we were good friends," Lloyd shrugged, his voice rising slightly. "We've been good friends for years."

"Stop repeating yourself," she snapped. "We've had this talk before. Dozens of times before." She shifted under her afghan. "I thought you were here to listen to me."

Lloyd flinched. "I am."

"Your real mother is dead, Lloyd Crickshaw," Rhea spoke, her voice quivering.

"Finding some old picture of me in the back of your father's desk, visiting me, doesn't make me your mother." She clenched her teeth while the light above her bed flickered. "I know I encouraged you at first, but it's too late now. You're not my son. I never carried you inside or," she took a deep breath and patted her stomach, "or held you."
Lloyd shook his head. “What do you want me to do?”

She laughed, low and deep, as a dark drift of clouds smothered the moon. “It’s not about what I want,” she said, feeling the air until she clutched his wrist and twisted it. “You already know it’s what you want to do. You almost tried it before but you lost your nerve.”

“Go to hell,” Lloyd choked, standing suddenly, stumbling over a chair.

“It won’t be a long trip,” she smiled. “I told you to do it for me a long time ago. If you loved me like a mother. But you wouldn’t. Or couldn’t.”

She sat up in the bed, the afghan wings unfolding, her loosened grey braids snaking down her shoulders, and she stared her sunken blind eyes into his. “Stop feeling guilty and do something.”

Lloyd hurried over to the doorway, careful to avoid the nurse’s aide still wandering the hall, and then he turned. “I did love you,” he whispered, supporting himself on the threshold.

Her pale face glared in a beam of cloudy moonlight. “Not as much as you loved yourself,” she answered.

He felt the press of Allison’s scarf against his chest before he stepped into the hallway and slipped out the back doors.

We huddled around the old woman’s bed and smiled at her features distorted with bitterness and self-hatred. She had been beautiful when she was younger, mostly because everyone is beautiful when they’re younger. Her hair had been the color of hot copper, but now it was rusty grey, a nest of rats and tangles. We crawled under the covers with her and waited for her breathing to become shallow and steady, but her blinded eyes never closed and she held her breath until we left.

The Sunday that Allison’s body was buried, Lloyd ate dinner with his father. He parked his yellow pickup in the driveway, stopped for moment and looked at the scarecrow out in the middle of the fields; its frayed flannel shirt flapped in the breeze.

Lloyd inhaled the country air. Someone nearby was burning leaves and twigs in a burn barrel. The dark plume of smoke melted into the thunderheads above. The flicker of the fire could be seen on the flat horizon miles and miles away, and we remember the night
Crickshaw’s barn burned to the ground, the way that smell of smoke hovered in the air for days.

As a young man, Lloyd had kept rabbits in his father’s barn. Mottled ones. White ones. Grey ones. He raised and bred them himself, planted a garden with lettuce, carrots, and alfalfa to feed them. But all of them died when the barn burned.

That next morning, Lloyd had stood among the ashes, charred beams, and the cooling bones of his cherish pets, then sat down by a twisted metal cage and soberly chewed a stalk of wheat. He astonished the villagers by showing as little emotion for his dead rabbits as for his own father who had been crippled by the blaze. He didn’t speak to anyone for over a week.

Meryl Culver was eventually blamed for the fire since her little body had been recovered from beneath a collapsed stall. She never denied starting the fire. She never explained why she’d been in Crickshaw’s barn. The village helped Crickshaw rebuild his barn, while Lloyd spent more and more time wandering his father’s cornfield and collecting fireflies by the jars full. After dark, he’d go down to the cemetery and spill their luminous lights over his mother’s headstone.

On the Sunday the village put Allison’s body in the ground, Lloyd slouched in one of the highback chairs in his father’s dining room and watched, as we did, the way the spoon quivered in the old man’s hand. Behind him, on one of the wood paneled walls, was a portrait of Lloyd’s mother. Not a complete portrait. Only a silhouette of her body that had been traced and cut from glossy black paper. Her features were lost to Lloyd’s memory and faded family photos. Without her delicate eyes and soft skin, the silhouette could’ve been a young man as easily as Lloyd’s mother. Her hair had always been short, her shoulders broad, only the curve of the hips suggested the mother Lloyd still grieved and the woman only a few of us had known.

“Ought to be home with your pregnant wife,” Crickshaw muttered.

The steam from Lloyd’s bowl of stew moistened his face like a fever. He tapped his foot against the hardwood floors. The entire room was done in polished wood. Only the
yellow painted piano in the corner (leftover from Crickshaw’s early romance with composing) and the blue and green stained glass window offered any color.

“Emily and me don’t live together anymore,” Lloyd replied quietly.

“Are these the values I raised you with?” Crickshaw barked.

“No,” Lloyd whispered, watching his father eat. “No.”

Lloyd stared at the empty glass in front of his father’s plate. A dusty beam of light showed the speckle of soap spots. When he’d set the table, he filled his own glass, but not his father’s. On purpose. On accident. The tink and scrape of spoons on the late Mrs. Crickshaw’s best china were the only sounds between the two men.

Lloyd touched his breast pocket now and then. We knew he kept Allison’s scarf there. The scarf he’d stolen out of Sheriff Bertram’s desk drawer. The middle-aged man unfolded it and draped it over his face at night. Like a pall.

Crickshaw rattled with a dry cough. He patted himself on the chest and swallowed hard, as if he’d choked on a piece of overcooked meat, the broth too thick to moisten his throat. Lloyd glanced over at his father, at the way the old man spooned broth into his mouth, trying to help the meat down his throat. Holding his hand over his breast pocket, Lloyd took a sip of his water and held it in his mouth as he glanced up at his mother’s silhouette.

Raindrops tapped the stained glass window as we joined hands and whispered Rhea Morse’s words into his ear.

Stop feeling guilty and do something

He slowly slid the scarf from his pocket, and under the table, he folded it lengthwise and wrapped one end around his hand. Crickshaw coughed again, reached for his glass and found it empty. With his eyes watering, his breath labored, he held out his glass and looked over at where Lloyd sat watching. Lloyd slipped his other hand into his lap and pulled the scarf taut between his two fists.

Allison Shuck cherished the scarf. She knotted the scarf around her neck whenever she stood in the front of the crumbling classroom inside the little red schoolhouse, or sometimes, she wore it over her hair, tied it at her chin and married her imaginary friend Elijah. The scarf was a blanket for dolls. A napkin for picnics. A flag to pledge allegiance
to. The scent of Allison’s imagination lingered on each fiber, an innocence Lloyd could not recognize but had always craved.

He stared his father in the eyes. The old man’s face flushed from the force of each cough. A streak of lightning pulsated the stained glass window as a rush of rain swept against the side of the house. Crickshaw gripped his empty glass.

_Stop feeling guilty._

Lloyd gritted his teeth, tensed his thighs as if preparing to stand. We danced in the flashes of lightning.

_One for sorrow_,

Crickshaw reached for his cane, but fumbled it. It dropped to the hardwood floor with a loud smack.

_Three for a girl_,

We raised our voices, howled with each rumble of thunder. Lloyd stretched the scarf tighter and tighter, cutting the blood off from his palms.

_Four for a boy_,

He breathed hard. His eyes were fixed on his father’s pale blue eyes streaming tears down his ashen cheeks. Lloyd sat there in his chair, a middle-aged man who drank himself into a stupor everyday, married four wives and divorced three. He swallowed hard and squared his jaw, pulled the scarf so tightly that it dug into his skin. He wrapped one leg around his chair and leaned forward as if to stand, but he couldn’t. Wouldn’t. He sat paralyzed, a prisoner inside his own skin.

_Seven for a secret never to be told._

The crackle of the old man’s joints and the thump of his cane woke Lloyd.

“Get me some water, damn it,” Crickshaw uttered.

Lloyd looked at his father’s ashen face, tired eyes, whitening hair. He looked at the way his father’s clothes hung on his shrinking body.

“Please,” Crickshaw choked.

A clap of thunderstartled Lloyd, who slowly relaxed the scarf in his hands.

Old Mayor Crickshaw used his napkin to wipe his eyes, shook with a cough whenever he tried to breathe deeply.
“Here,” Lloyd heard himself say. He reached for his own glass of water. “Have mine.”

Crickshaw’s trembling hand brought the glass to his mouth and he drank like a man who’d walked through a wasteland. Water dribbled down his chin and neck, wetted the collar of his red flannel shirt.

“Sorry, Dad,” Lloyd spoke quietly, ran his hand through his hair. “Sorry.”

After Lloyd left Old Mayor Crickshaw asleep in bed, he drove into the middle of Slippery Slope, a block south of downtown to the village cemetery. A black iron gate lined the land, but workers were uprooting it because the boundaries kept increasing. Weeping Willows overshadowed the headstones. Lloyd parked his yellow pickup, and in the dim moonlight, wandered to the back corner where his mother was buried.

Moss traced her name (Dinah Crickshaw) and birthdate. A small crack across the middle had grown from the harshness of the winter. He knelt down in front of the cold, grey granite, and like a penitent sinner kissing the Rosary, he touched Allison’s scarf to his lips.

*If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take*...

Across the cemetery, beneath an old patchwork quilt, Judith Shuck snuggled beside a fresh mound of overturned earth, a pillow propped against the little lamb on her daughter’s headstone. She was where a good mother ought to be. She wrapped one arm overtop of where Allison’s body slept six feet below the surface, closed her eyes, and whispered the Twenty-Third Psalm to a writhing earthworm, the words dripping to the ground, drowning tiny red ants in a wash of grief.
The baby shower for Emily Crickshaw was held in the church basement on the coolest day in May. The afternoon was darker than the morning. A gentle spring rain swept the scent of soil, the earthy odor of opened flowers, and the breath of distant, exotic fishes through the rusty screen windows. It was the first baby shower in Slippery Slope in over three years. Most people chalked the “blessed event” up to carelessness, since Emily and Lloyd no longer lived together, but Emily had always claimed to want children as soon as she was married. Even when she was an annoyingly bubbly girl with floppy blonde pigtails and freckles on her pert, little nose, she used to tell her friends that she wanted a big family. In spite of ourselves, we had spent hours on the playground tire swings and monkey bars, listening to her ramble about what kind of house she’d have, where she’d live, how beautiful Slippery Slope would be. Wasted hours.

The confused fragrances of hairspray and cheap perfume knockoffs mingled with the mustiness of the basement. Faces masked with lipstick and rouge smiled and laughed, beamed at each other, while extended hands were offered palm down so new rings and freshly manicured fingernails could be properly admired. Interwoven pastel streamers sagged from the ceiling and teased the hair of a few of the taller women. Woodcarvings of the Madonna decorated the paint chipped walls. Outside the window, a Praying Mantis perched like a voyeur on a Burning Bush, tilted its large red eyes down at where the women gathered.

All of them were women we knew—mothers, friends, sisters, cousins, neighbors. Every woman in Slippery Slope was invited to a baby shower, even Meryl Culver. Though nobody spoke such feelings aloud, we knew they resented that particular point of tradition. After all, Meryl had been accused of burning their beloved Mayor Crickshaw’s barn to ground.

She might’ve been left off the guest list if they hadn’t needed her there. With every baby shower, a special yellow invitation went to Meryl. It was her mother’s honor years before, but since her death, Meryl had been chosen. Usually, they sat her in the corner,
her the customary piece of cake, and held their breath as the mother-to-be clasped hands with her before opening the gifts. That was it. Her golden function.

On the day of Emily’s shower, Meryl sat beneath the woodcarving of Mary stretching out her arms towards her son as he sacrificed himself on the cross; the woman’s holy maternal love only ever to be outdone by her son’s. Surrendering the whole is easier than sacrificing a part. Meryl wrapped her arms around herself, traced her fingertip along the scar on her right cheek, and studied the picture as if memorizing it.

The rest of the women nibbled on mints and nuts, laughed at the same stories they heard every time they gathered.

*I was in labor twelve hours before they knocked me out...*

*I gained forty pounds and only took off five...*

*It’s worth the pain...*

*Children never forget their mothers...*

On a nearby table was the cake baked and designed by Mrs. Perkins with the traditional miniature of Slippery Slope’s definitive mural. The father, mother, and child embraced each other in an interlocking triangle, the various colors favored and sweetened with thick frosting the women would later politely scrape off.

Geraldine DeWine made the customary dish of noodles, processed cheese, tomato paste, corn, and whatever else she had found in a can. It was the same casserole she brought to every baby shower in the village, which wasn’t especially frequent in Slippery Slope. The women called it “Good News Goulash,” but the DeWine family wasn’t Hungarian.

The old woman leaned on her walker by the gift table, appraised the presents wrapped in shiny silver paper, small pastel envelopes sure to contain money.

“Judith ought to be here,” Geraldine murmured with a sigh, taking a potato chip from Mrs. Wilker’s opened palm.

Mrs. Wilker crunched her last chip and crossed her arms (in that bear hug way she did). “Been nearly three months,” she raised her eyebrows and sighed. She waved some flies away from the cold cut sandwiches, muttered “damn bugs” under her breath.

“When my sister’s child disappeared, she was only down for a week,” Geraldine remarked.
Mrs. Wilker nodded. “All the crying in world never brought anybody back.”
Those Shucks knew they were taking chances letting her run wild.”
“But it hadn’t happened in ten years,” Mrs. Perkins offered.
Mrs. Wilker paused, leaned closer. “Some folks say it wasn’t a vagrant this time.”
“Or any other time,” Mrs. Heart added as she joined the conversation.
The Praying Mantis in the window turned his face away. A bumblebee landed on a
scarlet leaf nearby. Meryl Culver pretended she couldn’t hear the women from where she sat
and rubbed her arms as if she were cold.
“What?” Geraldine asked, cupped her ear and adjusted the volume on her hearing aid.
“ Heard the girl’s scarf was found tied around the neck of Old Mayor Crickshaw’s
scarecrow,” Mrs. Hearst said.
“What are you saying, Betty?” Mrs. Wilker squinted.
Mrs. Hearst shrugged. “I never have liked that thing out there.” She shivered.
“You aren’t saying you believe something so outlandish,” Geraldine admonished.
“Land’s, Bet,” Mrs. Wilker scoffed. “You helped build it.”
The circle of women laughed while Mrs. Hearst set her jaw and studied her
fingernails.
“Lloyd Crickshaw claims he found the scarf,” Mrs. Hearst defended.
Sheriff Bertram’s wife Mag took a gulp of coffee. “Drunker than a skunk run over by
beer truck when he found it,” she blurted. “Now the scarf is missing. Stolen.”
“And Lloyd still visits that damn old woman who used to mail love letters to my
uncle,” Rosie tossed in as she walked on by. She was hopelessly infatuated with her uncle.
She claimed she wanted to marry a man just like him, which probably accounted for why she
was a forty-year-old spinster whose only satisfaction came from fingering the soft lips of
roses.
“Old Rhea who lived out in the woods north of the village?” Mrs. Wilker asked.
Geraldine shook her head and gripped tighter to her walker. “She tried to insinuate
herself on this village.”
Mrs. Hearst snorted a laugh. “Maybe now he’s having an affair with her, too.”
“Too?” Mrs. Perkins asked.

“The apple never falls far from the tree,” Mrs. Hearst replied with a smug grin.

Mrs. Perkins gasped, put her hand over her heart. “I don’t believe what you are suggesting.”

“Gossip like that is plain evil,” Mrs. Wilker snapped.

“And false stories hurt people, tarnish respectable people,” Geraldine DeWine barked.

Mrs. Perkins nodded. “The old mayor adored his wife. I remember how distraught he was when she died.”

“She was lucky to have him,” Mrs. Wilker replied, receiving nods of confirmation.

“Too bad Lloyd didn’t learn anything from his father,” the women concluded, even a reluctant Mrs. Hearst.

Sheriff Bertram’s wife sighed. “There’s a history there,” she said. “But we need to think about right here and now.” She pulled a pencil from her purse and licked the tip. “The annual benefit dinner. Any volunteers?”

Rosie Ingram set a basket of freshly cut lilies, cushioned by a few sprigs of Baby’s Breath, in the middle of the casseroles, cookies, and finger foods, then sneezed into her sleeve three times.

“The arrangement is from Wilhelmina Foster,” she informed loudly enough that the women standing nearby could hear. She sneezed again.

The elderly woman had wanted her congratulations prominently displayed, since she was in Pleasant Valley Retirement Home and could not be there in person to hug Emily Crickshaw, gush about “the wonderful blessing a new life brings to a community,” or eat her fill of cake and mints. Because that’s what people in Slippery Slope did.

Emily Crickshaw, Lloyd’s most recently estranged wife, sauntered across the room, eyeing herself in one of the paintings’ glass frames. Her blonde hair was twisted tightly into a single braid down her back, and she moved with all of the grace of a ballerina with an ingrown toenail. Pregnant or not. She raised her chin high as she passed Meryl, even dared to glance at her before she joined Rosie Ingram by the food table to peck at some carrot
sticks and the privileged guest in the corner.

“My mother insisted she be invited,” Emily remarked.

“It’s what everybody has always done,” Rosie offered.

Emily fluffed her bangs and cleared her throat. “So what does Lloyd do with all those roses again?” she asked Rosie.

Rosie blew her nose, then stuffed the tissue into her sweater sleeve. “Em, when Lloyd was younger, he couldn’t even get his rabbits to breed,” she crunched into a carrot. “He’s not having an affair.”

“But roses?”

Rosie shrugged. “Hasn’t done it in over a month.” She grabbed Emily’s arm and whispered. “Don’t tell anyone but I’m sure Lloyd has that dead girl’s scarf.” She stepped back and sighed. “I feel sorry for my poor Uncle Crickshaw.” The women began sitting down at the tables. “He doesn’t deserve Lloyd.”

Emily stared off into one of the corners, absently stroked her stomach.

“Right?” Rosie asked with a gentle nudge.

We watched Emily pick at her nail polish.

“Em?”

“Yeah,” she answered dryly, looking down at the blue and violet paisley print carpeting as if she’d found something she lost. “I’m sure he doesn’t.”

Only dirt and a small piece of the sky could be seen from the basement windows. Earthworms wriggled passed the screen, tunneling up towards the rain and eager birds. Meryl Culver should’ve been looking at them and the world she missed, but instead she watched Rosie and Emily sauntered past. She sipped the last of her punch and fanned herself with a baby bingo gamepiece. Hot on the coolest day in May. Hot in one of the coldest rooms in Slippery Slope. Too hot for her own good.

The women gathered around in a large circle and played games to name the baby (Clio’s wife, Mem, won with the name Hugh). They stacked the gifts around Emily’s chair, held their breath as the young woman walked over to where Meryl sat in the corner and the two touched hands. Emily kept her head bowed. Meryl looked towards the doorway. Each
woman wove her fingertips with the woman next to her and they prayed silently for the future of Emily’s child.

It was an old wives’ tale in Slippery Slope that every broken ribbon was a day when your child would be in danger of disappearing (or worse) on the child’s birthday. Legend claimed that the only woman who didn’t break a ribbon during her shower was Meryl Culver’s mother. Rumor whispered that Judith Shuck had come the closest in recent years, fatefully breaking only one. Gossip, like everyone else, whispered that the rumors were false—Judith Shuck had popped every single ribbon. Most mothers made sure their children never left their sight on their birthdays. They locked doors, closed blinds, kept their arms wrapped tightly around their shoulders as they sat together in the living room, usually on the couch or the floor and vigilantly waited.

The women clapped hands and exchanged looks whenever Emily slid a ribbon off the box. We watched the way their faces paled each time she picked up a new gift.

*Stop feeling guilty and do something.*

Crumples of wrapping paper and tissue paper cluttered the floor around Emily’s chair. Her mother strung the unbroken ribbons around her neck like medals. Bottles, diapers, bibs, a box full of nothing but socks, blankets, and other brightly colored things covered one of the tables. Mrs. Wilker had given her a baby book. It had A-B-C in big rainbow colors on the front and spaces inside to record the child’s first word, first solid food, the date of those first few steps.

“Every child needs to know their history,” Mrs. Wilker had announced from a back table.

But there were no blanks for those precious last words cried out and carried away by the black flutter of crows, or that last meal casually eaten around a flickering television set, or a place to record how far those last steps had raced under the dark canopy of trees, around a dimly lit barn cellar, into the soft rustle of cornstalks.

Mrs. Perkins gave Emily a quilt of the village’s downtown; each building had its own square.

“Now the child can always sleep under the blanket,” she paused to wink, “of our village’s posterity.”
All of the women nodded and murmured words of agreement, their bracelets and earrings flashing in the basement’s bright lights. They soon quieted when Emily was passed the last gift.

She held it in her lap, the room silent as her fingertips brushed the shiny pink ribbon tied around the four rectangular sides of the box.

“Careful,” her mother whispered, her hands on her knees.

Emily inched one side and then the other. The ribbon and box creaked with each attempt to slide it off. Outside the social room, a clock in the hallway thunked the seconds. Meryl leaned forward, craned her neck, and as she did, her plate slid off her lap, along with the fork that rattled against the metal chair. The women collectively jumped and gasped. The box fumbled in Emily’s lap and she released a faint scream.

They turned and stared at Meryl. She allowed her hair to slip from behind her ear and conceal her face.

“Sorry,” she mumbled like it was accident. We knew better.

Emily took a deep breath and bit her bottom lip. She clawed at the ribbon, leaving trails of little tears in the wrapping paper. The women gripped their knees, held their stomachs, clutched their purses. They were no better than Meryl. As much as they wanted to see someone not break a ribbon, we knew they hoped she would, so she could continue to be just like the rest of them.

She pinched her little finger beneath the ribbon.

“Wait,” her mother uttered.

But Emily’s thumbnail had already severed the ribbon and it slipped from the box to the floor in a hush. Only the rattle of the rusty refrigerator could be heard.

It was a full minute before Geraldine DeWine spoke, “Open the box, Honey,” from her place in the circle.

Slowly, Emily slid the lid off the box and stared into the mauve tissue paper. The crinkling of the paper sounded harsh as she reached inside.

“What is it?” Rosie asked, sitting farthest from the flowers.

Emily took a deep breath while her mother read the card. “Baby shoes,” her mother spoke.
“What?” Mrs. Wilker wondered aloud.

“From Judith Shuck,” Emily’s mother answered.

A few women laughed. Others sat stunned. Most kept their eyes on Emily and the pair of white baby shoes she pulled from the box.

*My Bobbie didn’t need shoes until he was three...*

*Children aren’t hard on shoes. They’re hard on socks...*

*The baby will outgrow those before he ever uses them...*

“It’s the thought that counts,” Emily mumbled. She forced a smile and offered a weak, “aren’t they just precious.”

Geraldine DeWine folded her arms. “It’s the thought that’s the problem,” she muttered, receiving a nod of agreement from Mrs. Wilker.

Women began to stir and cradle their purses; the jangle of car keys and the sight of Geraldine and Mrs. Wilker standing up and moving towards the food table to collect their plates signaled the end of the shower. Meryl watched the flock of pastel skirts and blouses file by her. Her duty was done. Failed again. Maybe she wasn’t as charmed as everyone thought. She brushed her hair in front of her cheek as a shield, then looked across the room. Her eyes met Emily Crickshaw’s. For only a second, the two women exchanged a glance. Meryl offered a small, quiet smile, and Emily Crickshaw, in spite of herself, didn’t look away.

The sight of her crawling on all fours, pleading with a half-dead mouse to come out from under the church dumpster, was almost as pathetic as her fire-melted fingers reaching into the cool to coax the rodent with a sticky, stale breathmint from the bottom of her purse. Meryl Culver had been one of the last to leave the church basement. She’d climbed the steps and hurriedly slipped out the doors into the spring drizzle. A faint squeak coming from beneath the dumpster stopped her.

She slapped the pavement. “Come out,” she insisted.

Only a couple cooing pigeons and a crow were around to watch her crawl on her hands and knees, sweep her reddish hair through puddles. She glanced back towards the church. The window in Reverend Kirk’s office open but no sight of him.
She peeked under the dumpster and wiggled her fingers. It was as if she believed her very fingertips were blessed, as if she were the embodiment of Survival itself. We wondered what she thought she was going to do with the mouse once she held it in her hands. Cradle it. Sing to it. Comfort a rodent with a few soft words. We waited for the mouse to bite her, gnaw away her nails. It didn’t realize, like we did, that it shouldn’t have feared the dagger pecks of crows. At least there was purpose in being a meal.

A crow positioned himself along the ridgepole of the church’s orange-shingled roof, allowing a gleam of sunlight to sparkle in his eyes as he lifted his heads and cawed. Soon, the soft rustling of the trees birthed a small flock of seven, which loitered behind where Meryl knelt. They prattled to each other, folded their wings, content to wait. The mouse had been crippled by a trap’s snap across its spine and it squealed as much from fear as pain.

“Come out,” she begged. “You’re not safe there.”

The crows chattered, a scatter of shadows pacing with hunger. Their presence defined the village. They knew as well as we did that Meryl might save this mouse, but there were others she wouldn’t be there to protect. Abandoned, those mice would squeak, choke on their own raw throats—in the end, as with every living thing in the village—condemned to twist through the guts of a murder of crows.

The mouse remained in the rainwater.

“Come here,” she cried. She patted the pavement. “Let me save you.”

The rumble of a rusty muffle ripped through her concentration, and even before she looked up, Meryl knew who was driving past. It wasn’t the first time she’d heard the growl of Lloyd Crickshaw’s old yellow pickup, or the first time she’d listened for it. She leaned back on her knees, wiped her hands on the hem of her dress and allowed herself a quick peek of Lloyd Crickshaw’s angular profile. He stared straight ahead.

“Can’t save it,” Moontrucker said.

She spun around.

He continued. “Let the crows have him.”

Meryl supported herself against the dumpster and stood up.
“If we don’t let crows eat the mice, then the crows might eat us,” Moontrucker replied, arguing with himself. “Or they might start to eat cats, then who would eat the squirrels.” He waved his arms and yelled, “Then, who would gather the nuts!”

She took a couple of steps away from where Moontrucker walked by. He began debating about whether Allison Shuck, like the other dead children, had been killed by a governmentally developed virus, a highly communicable plague, which bruised the skin and could be contracted by simply breathing the same infected air—he swept the collar of his trench coat over his face—or, he decided, dropping his trench coat—Allison was an android covered with human flesh who a distant planet had sent to earth as a scout. The killer wasn’t a murderer, Moontrucker deduced, but a savior of the human race. Her death was necessary.

“My God, for the good of the many,” Moontrucker urged. “Leave the mouse! Save the us all!”

He mumbled to himself as he disappeared around the other side of the church. Meryl took a deep breath, shut herself into her car and locked the door. She closed her eyes. We were sure she congratulated herself on her own coldness. Probably eased her conscience by calling the death of that diseased mouse essential.

_Ashes, ashes_

Some had to sacrificed. For the greater good. Or else (The Lord and all of His heavenly angels forbid) the world might swivel off its axis. Of course, that’s what she thought.

Just as her car was safely onto Main Street, the church doors squeaked open. Reverend Kirk looked left, then right, then jogged out towards the dumpster. The crows squawked and defiantly refused to fly away. They stayed firmly on the ground, fluttered their wings and stalked even closer to where the mouse lay suffering in a puddle.

The young man unbuttoned his suit jacket and knelt down. He shook his head and grabbed hold of the mouse before it had a chance to bite him. Rolling his eyes, he stuffed it into his pocket and dashed through the rain back into the church.

* * *
The gas station’s big orange sign blinked. There were no cars at the pumps. It was that Sunday afternoon draught that comes to small towns. Meryl opened her car door, drawn by the faint hint of cigarettes drifting on the breeze, the smell of Judith’s pain.

On the step outside the propped open door, the older woman smoked, one arm wrapped around her waist. She was pale. A week’s worth of grief thinner. Since Allison’s burial, she’d spent every night at the cemetery. We crawled under the patchwork quilt with her, longed for the warm nook between a mother’s arm and her breast. We sang to hear the only lullaby we could remember, letting our voices fade into the distant echoing aria of the courthouse clock chiming midnight.

* And down will come baby, cradle and all... *

Meryl seated herself beside Judith, stared down the street towards the perfectly swept downtown, the gold lettering on each storefront shiny and polished. A few tourists from the nearby towns strolled along the blood red brick, admired the blooming cherry trees, took pictures of themselves standing beside the mural. With a sideways glance at Judith, Meryl hid her burned hand inside her jacket pocket.

Judith didn’t look over at her, just watched the white paper on her cigarette blacken into ash and sprinkle an ant carrying one of its dead on its back.

“My mother told me once,” Meryl cleared her throat, “she had to hide my shoes when I was a little girl for fear I’d sneak outside when she wasn’t looking.” She laughed lightly. “So I’d run outside anyway in my bare feet and get blisters, terrible colds.”

Mourning Doves moaned on top of the flickering sign.

“Nice day,” Meryl commented. She squinted up into the sky. “This is a good place to make a future.” She looked at Judith’s profile and said quietly, “I believe that. I honestly believe that. Truly.”

“It’s no place for a mother,” Judith whispered, blew smoke into the air as if to erase her words.

Meryl bowed her head.
"I take it Emily didn’t like the shoes," Judith remarked. She smirked, sucked on her cigarette, and exhaled. "Her baby might." She flicked more ashes onto the ant. "They were Allison’s." Blinking slowly, she turned to face Meryl. "She used them on her dolls."

Meryl shook her head. "Slippery Slope is all Emily knows. It’s all any of us know." She shrugged. "We want to just live here and be happy."

A car pulled into the gas station.

"Don’t sound so guilty," Judith replied. "You already do." She dropped her cigarette onto the ant and squashed them both. "Not everybody can say that."

She stood, wiped her hands on the back of her jeans, and stepped into her booth with the plexi-glass window. Meryl waved away the smoke and coughed, lost for a moment in the struggle of the half-dead ant buried beneath the ashes. And we watched her. Alone.
Not even a week into July, when the cornstalks rustle knee high, Leroy Cobb slipped from the monkey bars at the elementary school playground and landed in a crumple among the dandelions and weedy grass. An ant crawled along the ridge of his bald head. A fly bathed on his open eye. His father had turned “for only a second” that Saturday afternoon to admire the clear blue sky (and the young woman jogging past in a tank top and tight athletic shorts). The man had wandered away from where Leroy was playing and leaned against the chainlink fence to smile at the girl. That was when he heard the dull thud and saw that his son had fallen. When he raced across the wet grass, stained his knees sliding towards Leroy, he shook him, gave him mouth to mouth; it was too late.

If Leroy had fallen, or simply drifted away in his sleep before Allison’s death, before the whispers of scarves and scarecrows, then the villagers wouldn’t have questioned why his father turned his back, his parents wouldn’t have eventually divorced; the villagers might’ve believed the straw found in his pockets had simply come from the farm where his grandparents lived. The village would’ve mailed their sympathy cards and sighed fatalistically about “God’s will”—because that’s what people in Slippery Slope did—but not even Sheriff Bertram’s constant reminding that the boy had a disease could stop the spread of stories about the pieces of straw found in the boy’s pockets. *Like the bits of straw stuck to Allison’s hair and polka dot dress*, they whispered to each other. They all believed the straw was evidence. A connection. *Not just a vagrant passing through.*

The village gathered at Charon Funeral Home for Leroy Cobb’s visitation. Charon’s was a block off the Main Street, visible to travelers and natives alike because of the hot pink, neon clock in its front lawn. The clock surged and buzzed with electricity. Its second hand was missing; the first hand limped its way around the face. Two o’clock? Six o’clock? Midnight? Only the out of tune chimes told for sure.

The line to get inside Charon’s snaked down the sidewalk shaded by rows of Slippery Elms. The villagers flocked in their black clothes. Most of them only there to see if the latest
rumor was true: that Leroy Cobb had the ghostly imprint of a piece of straw across his forehead.

Clio stood near the funeral home’s double doors and corrected the people around him. “Doctor Healy only said the boy had a disease. He didn’t say what it was or how the boy got it.”

“Don’t you remember?” his wife, Mem, asked those nearby.

After a moment, the small crowded nodded and mumbled about hazy memories.

Meryl Culver waited outside the viewing room. She stuffed her right hand into her pocket, hid her right cheek with her hair, and stared towards the opened casket. It was a shiny new model fresh from Linkisch’s showroom. Even from the doorway, it was possible to see Leroy’s blue baseball cap, sunken eyes, a glimpse of his black suit jacket. His small hands rested limply on his chest. He still wore the green plastic spider ring Allison Shuck had sneaked him in the cloakroom last Christmas. His secret crush.

“Looks like he’s sleeping,” Mrs. Wilker offered Leroy’s mother.

It didn’t. No child in Slippery Slope ever slept in their Sunday best. His cheeks were too grey, lips too violet. He looked like someone dead painted to look alive. Someone’s masterpiece of peace fading in the heat of high summer.

A reverent hush floated through the viewing room. Groups of people parted. The mourners turned and waited until the grey hair of Old Mayor Crickshaw became visible. The unmistakably muffled sound of his pinewood cane thumping on the carpeting stopped conversations in mid-sentence, relatives in mid-sniffle.

His shoulder slouched, chest caved, but there stood their beloved old mayor in his special red flannel shirt and creased blue jeans.

Meryl held her breath and mumbled to herself, “I need some air,” moved to step out of line.

But the old mayor stopped her with a smile.

He raised his hand and gently touched her burn-scarred cheek.

“So forgiving,” a few people murmured by the casket.

We watched while Meryl stiffened, endured the public caress for the sake of her good name. It wasn’t the first time she’d seen the old mayor since she was pulled from the ruins of
his barn, but it was the first time they’d been together at a child’s visitation, close enough to touch. We could feel the snares of his calluses on his fingers, taste his Old Spice cologne, and we enjoyed each of those seconds that Meryl had to stand before him and smile into those hollow blue eyes, pretend she welcomed such a fatherly indulgence.

“You’re all grown up now,” Crickshaw said with a wistful sigh. For a moment, we almost believed tears glistened in his eyes. “Why can’t children stay young and innocent forever?”

A small crowd near the front doors nodded and wiped their eyes.

Meryl stared down at the carpeting, as if her nose smelled smoke, moldering straw, as if she heard the shrieks of rabbits engulfed in flames, wood crackling into ash, the sound of a little girl pleading for her mother, for her father, for anyone.

Then, she looked up into the face of Old Mayor Crickshaw. Sheriff Bertram, Mr. and Mrs. Perkins, Virgil Bardon, Rosie Ingram had all flocked around the elderly man. Meryl only bit her bottom lip and smiled.

He winked at her and shuffled into the view room to shake hands with Leroy’s mother. He pressed his other hand on top of the woman’s and whispered such words of sympathy that she broke down and sobbed on his red flannel shoulder.

“He understands pain,” they whispered.

A couple of sneezes from inside the viewing room distracted people for only a moment before they returned to speculating about the imprint of straw believed to be on the boy’s skin; each person stared from time to time at the mob of crows pecking at the neon clock, preening.

“Where’s Lloyd Crickshaw?” people began to whisper.

Then, they inched forward in line, stuffed their hands into their pockets. In a summer day’s noon heat, they shuddered. At the back of the line, Jay and Judith Shuck stood shoulder to shoulder, silently following the progression, and for the first time in months, Jay Shuck reached out to his wife and held her hand.
Exactly when pieces of straw began appearing around the village that summer no one knew for sure. At first, the villagers reported straw sightings only around the downtown. In the alleyway between Rosie’s Roses and The Main Street Grill. Sprinkled inside the front door of Perkins Hardware. Scattered along the back pews of the church with the crooked steeple.

Local Legend claimed the bits of straw weren’t ordinary. Rumor suggested that the mysterious straw had been spotted around the village as early as forty years ago. Gossip held the opinion that straw had been involved with every child’s disappearance in Slippery Slope’s history, but only now, ten years after the last murder, did folks begin pressuring Sheriff Bertram. The man wearily sealed the straw into dime store sandwich bags and filed them in his desk. None of the villagers seemed bothered by the fact that the only straw Bertram physically had were the pieces Lloyd brought to him, pulled from Allison’s hair, and three little pieces picked off the sidewalk after a farmer had walked by.

Mrs. Wilker mentioned to her Bridge Club about finding straw on her own back porch.

Wilhelmina Foster told all of the nurses who checked her blood pressure at Pleasant Valley Retirement Home that there had been straw at the foot of her bed one morning.

Virgil Bardon showed all of his patrons at Raven’s Tavern the straw he’d discovered on a windowsill outside his living room.

Geraldine DeWine even said she’d accidentally swallowed a piece. Somehow it had been baked into one of her casseroles.

They chattered for weeks with each new finding. A bathtub drain. Inside of old shoes. On the elementary school playground, beneath the swing with the squeaky chains (which we knew was a lie told to successfully cancel school until the scare passed. Sheriff Bertram’s own son Rod called it in. Claimed the straw blew away before they could pick it up). The Tribune included a daily feature on the front page called, “Where Next: Hunting the Straw Man.” Readers speculated on who or what was responsible for the sudden rash of little golden bits. Children were told to keep away from windows and stay in their rooms.
Moontrucker stood on the four corners in downtown Slippery Slope, holding tightly to his yo-yo, and proclaimed, “God is an angel in an angel, and a stone in a stone, and a straw in a straw!”

He flung handfuls of straw into the air and cried, “A straw in a straw!”

Downtown businesses began to show a decline in profits. Tourists stayed away because the village was considered too “unsafe.” Business leaders met in the backroom of Perkins Hardware and wrung their hands over cups of day-old coffee, stale doughnuts, and browned apples.

_Without money, the downtown will fall apart..._

_How will we pay to have the cherry trees trimmed..._

_I can't afford to have my storefront repainted..._

Mayor Perkins had stood up and received rousing support when he declared, “As the current mayor, I feel it important to say that we cannot allow what Old Mayor Crickshaw built of this village to turn into a ghost town.”

For weeks, the downtown struggled to entice customers with sidewalk sales and giveaways, but still business owners spent their days sitting on their front counters, reading the newspaper.

Locusts hissed in the muggy, early evening air as Reverend Kirk stepped out of the Shucks’ mobile home and lumbered towards his car. August smothered Slippery Slope with temperatures near 100 and a wet haze of perspiration and humidity. That crazy heat that makes the living want to shed their own skins.

Reverend Kirk had met with Judith to discuss the next Sunday’s selection of hymns, and sitting around that small kitchen table, he wiped napkins over his forehead and neck, drained by the stuffy heat of the Shucks’ house.

The night air offered no relief. He looked over at the barn in time to see Jay shut the door and bolt it. Crows bantered with starlings and sparrows for control of the shadows. Only the tiptoe of squirrels in the trees provided any breeze. Loosening the tie around his neck, Reverend Kirk paused and stared across the barren country highway at the
schoolhouse. *Stop feeling guilty and do something.* He tossed his hymnal into the opened
car window and marched across the road.

Red brick bled from the wound in the schoolhouse wall and the rotting grey roof
crumbled into the weeds. Reverend Kirk touched his hand to the jagged stone and stepped
onto the dusty floorboards. Three faceless dolls leaned on each other; their white cloth skin
stained with the fingerprints of both Allison’s mother and father. The young man squatted
down and added his own. Allison’s cherished friends, lonely without her there to cradle
them.

The scurrying footsteps of a field mouse made Reverend Kirk look into one of the
corners. A brick that had obviously tumbled from the wall weeks before, perhaps removed
by the phantom fingers of the wind, revealed a gap where a small, black book waited
patiently. Reverend Kirk stretched out his hand, opened the leather binding and began to
read the childish doodles and perfectly practiced handwriting (Allison had always gotten high
marks in handwriting). He flipped a couple of pages and found a pressed dandelion saving a
date almost exactly a year before.

They’d sat on the front steps to the schoolhouse. Allison and Reverend Kirk. He’d
been out to the house to pick “Sunday’s songs” with Judith when he saw Allison playing
across the road by herself.

He sat down beside her in the cool of the evening. She picked up an orange cat and
placed it in her lap.

“Your parents let you play outside,” he said.

She nodded, smiled.

“Is that safe?” he asked.

She shrugged. “God watches me.” She beamed.

The cat scratched at her scarf, struggled to get free. With a meow and a thrust from
its back feet, it leapt into the tall grass and chased cricket. Allison picked a dandelion,
mumbled something about a mama and a baby and flicked the top off with her thumb, then
laughed.

“Ever do this?” she asked, rubbing another dandelion on her chin, leaving a smear of
yellow on her chin. “Means you’re in love.”
Reverend Kirk smiled at the stain.
“Here,” she said, handing him one.
A breeze rushed through the small patch of nearby woods.
He rubbed on it on his chin. Allison giggled and pointed and stomped her feet.
“You’re in love,” she said. “Your chin is all yellow.”
“Silly game,” he replied, wiping away the stain. “You must want to be a
schoolteacher, playing out here all day.”
She untied her scarf. “Didn’t you always want to be a minister?”
Reverend Kirk scratched his chin. “Nope,” he smiled. “I wanted to be mayor.”
“Mayor?”
He nodded.
“As good as Old Mayor Crickshaw?”
“Well,” he responded, staring down at his hands. “I wanted to try to be.”
He leaned over and plucked a dandelion, then handed it to her.
“Keep baby’s head on this time,” he said, standing. “Remember, God helps those who
help themselves. Go play in the house.” He smiled and began to walk away, but turned at
the edge of the road. “And save that dandelion for a few years down the road. You’re too
young to be in love.”
She wasn’t.
Reverend Kirk sweated in the stagnant August night. The writing in Allison’s diary
almost impossible to see in the fading sunlight. He lifted the dandelion out of the diary. It
had browned, withered, but he absently touched it to his chin.

*God watches me.*

He looked up through the hole in the schoolhouse wall at the purple clouds slowly
bruising the sky.

Across the village, Sheriff Bertram stood outside the cardboard box where
Moontrucker spent his nights. Morris owned a house. He’d inherited a three-story mansion
from his parents, but he slept outside on the porch, securely tucked inside the box from his big screen television.

The sheriff had followed a trail of straw straight up the sidewalk to Morris’ front door. He squatted down and knocked on the cardboard, kept a hand on the butt of his gun, and waited for Moontrucker to peep out of the small, jagged hole cut into the front. He stood to his full height and sighed. When it felt like he’d waited too long, he tapped his foot against the box.

“Morris,” he said. “Come out now. You and me got some business to take care of.”

The swaying bushes behind him startled Bertram, who ripped his gun from its holster and swiveled around. He stared into the greying light of a full moon.

“Morris?” he asked.

He knocked over the box and found a rumpled sleeping bag, curled farming magazines, a deflated bag of chips, browned apple cores, and a burlap sack of straw.

Wrapping his fingers tighter around the butt of his gun, Bertram took a cautious step off the porch. We laughed at his large eyes and clenched jaw, and so we shook the bushes some more.

Lights from the Savings and Loan’s lower level attracted fireflies. Meryl Culver could be glimpsed inside her cubicle. No one waiting for her. No one at home to miss her. Since the recent straw scares, more of the women had been staying home to be with their children, so Meryl volunteered to cover their work. She wrote down figures with her left hand and pecked at the keyboard using the forefinger on her right.

Emily Crickshaw sauntered past the window, but lifted her chin. Lloyd’s apartment looked dark from the street, so she stopped and glanced back towards the bank. With a smile, she adjusted Hugh’s pacifier. Only one other person moved along the sidewalk in a downtown used to bustle. A crow squawked as it flew towards the church with the crooked steeple. She absently began to follow that black slit against the darkening sky, passed the Ice Cream Shoppe that frantically advertised a “free first cone” for anyone who wandered in, passed Perkins hardware which had lawnmowers and wheelbarrows in front of the store.
where passersby almost tripped over them, passed through the scentless air outside The Main Street Grill.

She marched a couple of blocks outside downtown and stopped. Faintly, through the church’s open doors, the dimly lit sanctuary and its silence seemed to beckon Emily. Hugh fidgeted in his basket. Making sure no one watched her, she slipped into the cool shadows of the church and began walking up the isle towards the baptistery.

"Damn it, Morris," Sheriff Bertram shouted, stuffing his gun back into its holster.

"Why the hell you sleeping on the goddamn roof?"

Moontrucker flapped his trench coat like wings.

"Get down, Morris," Bertram said. "You and me got things to talk about."

Moontrucker squawked.

"It’s just a chat, Morris," Bertram said with an impatient sigh. "Get the hell down now."

"I’ll have to fly down," Moontrucker answered, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his yo-yo.

"No!" Bertram answered. "You stay there." He hurried over the lattice along the porch. "Just stay there." He scratched his chin and rolled his eyes. "I’ll come up there."

We rattled the bushes but Bertram no longer cared.

Golden head, black wing...  

Candlelight flickered in the rippling baptistery water as Emily scooped a handful and poured it over her arms and neck. Hugh squeaked and gurgled from where she’d placed his basket on the altar. A fly buoyed on the back of a drowned spider. Emily slipped open a couple buttons on her blouse, spilled water onto her chest. Outside the window, she could see the marble tombstones in the graveyard; each one silhouetted by the magenta shadows of an early summer’s evening. She popped a few more buttons open until she glanced back towards the lonely church doors and slipped off the flimsy cloth completely.
The sweet fragrance of incense lingered in the shadows, hovered near the altar. Children’s voices echoed among the rafters. *Little ones to Him belong. They are weak but He is strong...*

Emily leaned over the rocking waters of the baptistery and unzipped her skirt. She stared up towards the large wooden cross displayed above her head and closed her eyes.

Sheriff Bertram caught his feet on the gutter to keep from sliding down the roof. Moontucker stretched out his hand and helped him sit down.

“What are you doing with all that straw?” Bertram said once he’d settled himself.

“God is an angel in an angel, and a stone in a stone, and a straw in a straw,”

Moontucker answered, stroked his beard.

“You spreading that straw around and scaring everybody?”

“Wasn’t me.”

Bertram scratched his chin, rubbed the pokes of his stubble. He could see bits of straw stuck to Moontucker’s coat, poking from his pockets.

“Wasn’t me who did it,” Moontucker repeated.

“But you know who did,” Bertram said, kept one hand on his gun.

Moontucker shook his head, flapped his coat, and leaned back to stare into the moon.

“You wouldn’t believe me,” Moontucker mumbled. “Nobody does. I know who’s to blame.” He sat up suddenly, pointed a finger into Bertram’s face. “I know what happens in this town at night. Don’t think I don’t.” He shook his head. “I walk from one end of the village to the other and back again. I’m the only one paying attention.” He crouched. “I know. I know things.”

“What things, Morris?”

“It wasn’t me.”

“Who was it?”

“I can’t say.”

“You can say.”

He stood and squawked.

“You better say, Morris.”
Moontrucker squared his jaw, climbed higher up the green-shingled roof. He stuffed his hand into his trench coat pocket and pulled out his baby blue yo-yo.

"Tell me what you know, Morris," Bertram said sharply.

Moontrucker slipped his finger into the yo-yo’s string loop.

“You better goddamn start talking, Morris,” Bertram hissed, supporting himself as if to stand.

Instead, Moontrucker climbed higher, shook his head.

“Is Lloyd Crickshaw scaring everybody?” Bertram shouted. “Is it the old mayor’s son?”

Bertram grabbed Moontrucker’s shoe and pulled him down until he could clutch him by the labels. The black-haired man let out a scream and whipped his yo-yo, flinging it at Bertram’s head. The plastic toy slapped Bertram between the eyes and he let go of Moontrucker, dropped face first against the shingles.

“Oops,” Moontrucker uttered under his breath.

As he leaned over the sheriff to listen for a heartbeat, Bertram unsnapped his holster and cocked his gun, poked into Moontrucker’s ribs.

“Sit back,” he mumbled into the roof. “We’re not through.”

Emily stepped into the shadow cross darkening the water’s ripples. Her skin shone pale in the dim sanctuary lighting. Her blouse and skirt tossed aside like the memories of a previous life. A couple of red candles still burned for the souls of Allison Shuck and Leroy Cobb; wax trickled into small hot pools on each candleholder. She stood in her white silk slip and wiggled her toes in the water cloudy from dust. Her baby cooed and gurgled from his basket on the altar, but she didn’t seem to hear him as she sat down in the baptistery and crossed her arms over her chest.

*Now I lay me down to sleep...*

Holding her breath, she slowly leaned back until her dark hair floated passed her face and her slip swelled against the surface of the water.

* * *
Sheriff Bertram and Moontrucker sat staring at each other across Morris’ kitchen table. They’d had to break in the back door, since Morris didn’t have a key to his own mansion.

"Tell me," Bertram said.

"Something is rotten."

"Fine, Doc."

"I’m Cool Hand Morris," Moontrucker replied. "Everybody knows that."

"Of course, you are. Tell me."

Moontrucker climbed onto the table and crossed his legs. He kept a careful eye on the window, flinched every time the gnarled tree branches swayed. More straw sprinkled from his pockets.

"I’ve known since I was a boy," Moontrucker said. "We moved through the trees like shadows. I’ve known what other people don’t. I can sniff stuff out." He tapped the side of his nose. "I know who’s been killing everybody who’s ever died here."

Bertram sighed, gingerly touched the red bump in the middle of his forehead. "Not more aliens."

"Not aliens."

"The government then?"

Moontrucker shook his head, bit his fingernails. "Took me a while to solve it."

"Who then?"

"Not who."

Bertram shifted in his chair.

Moontrucker leaned closer and whispered. "Not who, but what."

"What?" Bertram wrinkled his nose.

*Seven for a secret never to be told...

"The very thing you don’t expect."

"Damn it," Bertram said, looking down at his watch. "I should’ve never better than to listen to a goddamn lunatic." He stood and snapped his gun back into its holster.
Moontrucker grabbed him by the arm and shook him. “Listen to me, man. This village isn’t what it looks like. It’s only an illusion. Not real!” He quickly glanced out the window.

The sheriff jerked his arm loose from Moontrucker’s hold.

“It walks. It talks. It stalks!” Moontrucker shouted, moving away from the windows, pressing himself against the white kitchen wall.

“I’m getting out of here,” Bertram said. He wiped his gold badge with his shirtsleeve.

“It’s alive,” Moontrucker continued. “I can’t send you out there with it. Now that I’ve told,” he pulled his yo-yo out of his pocket, “it’ll come for us.”

“Good, Doc,” Bertram said, watching Moontrucker fidget. “Maybe it’ll take you back to the Mother Ship.”

“It’s not an alien.”


Moontrucker stopped moving, stared his wild eyes into Bertram’s, and whispered. “It’s the scarecrow.”

Emily opened her blue eyes wide. Up through the water, she could see the wavy silhouettes of children peering down at her. The breath she swallowed bubbled towards the surface, as the children’s face loomed closer and closer. The darkness concealing their faces melted into squiggly shapes and the lines of familiar features. Lost friends she’d known as a girl. Mrs. Perkins’ sister Gilda leaned closest to the water, her muffled voice spoke:

*Can you find me?*

Allison Shuck peeked over the edge. Golden bits of straw sparkled in her hair. Eyes missing. Face grey from her icy winter’s sleep. Her small fingertips broke the surface of the water and grabbed Emily’s hand.

The woman thrashed, choked. Water splashed against the marble sides of the baptistery as Emily gripped one side and clutched the little girl’s cold hand. She rose out of
the water, gasping, hearing her baby’s cries, nearly ramming her forehead with Judith Shuck’s nose. When she looked down, she realized the hand she held was Judith’s.

“Hot night,” Judith remarked, flicking water from her fingertips. She knelt beside the baptistery. “I heard Hugh crying from outside.”

Holy water dripped off Emily’s chin and earlobes.

“I thought he might be alone in here,” Judith said, standing. With a sigh, she pulled a pack of cigarettes from her back pocket. “Nights like these, you can’t help feeling dirty and gritty.”

Emily wiped her hand over her face. Her bracelets clanked together. She spat water from her mouth, coughed before climbing out of the baptistery and hurrying over to calm her son. Her footprints stained the carpeting by the altar.

Judith slid a cigarette between her lips. “Whole village feels like it’s dying.”

Emily picked Hugh out of his basket and tried to lift her chin higher and turn away from the woman she had never particularly liked. A gas station attendant. Her husband traded with outsiders and did “secret” things in his barn. Emily stood there with all of her expensive breeding washed away.

“I wish things could be simpler again,” was all she could say as she patted Hugh on the back.

Baptistery water returned to its rest with small slaps. The only sound in the sanctuary. Judith Shuck stood in the middle of the isle, slipped the cigarette from her mouth. She held her breath like she could see Emily’s words fluttering against high stained glass windows. Then, she stared out a side window at the cemetery’s marble flock of lamb-shaped tombstones and sighed.

A week later, Mayor Perkins, Sheriff Bertram, Virgil Bardon, two retired farmers, and the boy who swept the floor before and after school, gathered around the old stove in the back of Perkins Hardware. They sat on empty crates, which had once been used for deliveries of chain, nails, and screws. A box of cream stick donuts and a bag of apples were untouched on a table. The men smoked pipes, spat tobacco juice, and chewed the ends off cheap cigars.
“Poppycock,” one of the farmers scoffed.

“The son of bitch stood there and told me as solemnly as if he were confessions to God,” Bertram said.

“Haven’t seen him for a couple days,” Perkins offered. “Not like Moontrucker to miss making his rounds.”

“He’s crazy,” Virgil said, using his pocketknife to thin a callous on his palm. “He probably thinks that damn scarecrow will come after him.”

The boy swallowed hard, leaned on his broom. “Maybe it did.”

The men looked over at him and sighed or rolled their eyes.

“This world is just a dangerous place,” Perkins said.

Bertram stuffed more tobacco into his mouth from his little green can of tobacco. “He seemed pretty convinced.” He scratched chin. “I’ve been driving out past Crickshaw’s farm each night. To be on the safe side.”

“Safe side?” the other farmer snorted.

“Insane side,” Virgil muttered. “Sheriff, you aren’t saying you believed him?”

Bertram shook his head. “Hell, no.” He shrugged, glanced out towards the darkened showroom. “I should go by his place today and see where he went to.”

“Could such a thing even happen around here,” Perkins wondered. He shifted his weight from the stares his question attracted. “For the sake of asking.”

The boy stopped sweeping again. “It’s happened other places.”

“How the hell do you know?” Virgil asked.

“I’ve seen it on T.V.” the boy answered. “Stuff like this is always on T.V.”

Perkins stood up and held a bright red apple in his hand, shined it on his flannel shirtsleeve. “I’d have to see it to believe it.”

“Maybe Morris has,” the boy replied.

The whish sound of the broom collecting cigarette butts and gummy copper pennies into a pile hushed, hushed the men into silence.

Lloyd sat in Raven’s Tavern, his fist tightly wrapped around the neck of a bottle of Jack Daniels. The fawn, with its large black eyes, seemed to accuse Lloyd each time he
tipped back the bottle and swallowed his way into forgetting. The bar was full with people who’d marched down the sidewalk straight from work and unwound with couple drinks before returning to their homes, to their beds where they dreaded yet another night of sleep so deep they’d wake wondering who and where they were.

“That’s a wild story,” one man said in a back booth.
“How else would you explain it?” a woman answered. “Makes sense to me.”
“Some things just can’t be explained,” another man offered.

“Always wondered why Crickshaw kept that damn thing in his cornfield anyway,” the first man said as he approached the bar. His voice loud enough that everyone heard could him. “Now look what’s happened.” He motioned to Virgil for another Gin and Tonic.

“Ought to knock it down.”

“Thing needs burned,” Virgil stated. “Causing too much damn trouble.”

The loud man put his arm around Lloyd’s shoulders. “You lived out there with it, Lloyd,” he whispered. “Did it ever do anything to you?”

Knocking back another shot of Jack, Lloyd’s blood-shot eyes stared into all of the faces around the bar. Without uttering a word, he tossed a few bills in front of Virgil and staggered out the door into the cool September night air.

After midnight, the manse’s squeaky screen door opened slowly. Reverend Kirk peeked outside. He’d heard footsteps from his bedroom. Distantly, Charon Funeral Home’s neon pink clock twanged the quarter hour. The faint squeals of mice coming from the stacks of cages and cardboard boxes in his living room sneaked into the night air. His robe pocket squirmed until a little pink nose and whiskers poked out. The young man gripped a tennis racket, prepared himself to swat the intruder on his porch swing.

“Howdy, Rev,” Lloyd Crickshaw slurred. He was stretched on the porch swing with his boots hanging off one end. He slung one arm over his face while the other was bent to hold a bottle of Southern Comfort upright on his chest.

Reverend Kirk shook his head and sighed. “Lloyd, go home,” he said. “Go home and be a husband to your wife and a father to your child.” He stepped into the house and closed the screen door.
“But I have a question,” Lloyd shouted.

“In the morning, I’m taking you to your wife,” Reverend Kirk said with his hands on his hips. Still inside the doorway.

“Can you sin by association?” Lloyd called out.

Reverend Kirk opened the door, swatted mosquitoes away from his face.

“What?”

The swing jerked as Lloyd struggled to sit up.

He sat forward and whispered, “How do I confess sins that aren’t mine?”

Trees swayed with the breeze of an impending thunderstorm. Leaves trickled from crackling limbs.

“Whose are they?” Reverend Kirk questioned, leaning on the porch ledge.

Lloyd swigged from his bottle.

The young reverend crossed his arms and puffed his chest with piety. “Pray.”

“Pray?” Lloyd smiled. “That the answer to everything?”

“It’s my answer.”

Swing chains jingled as Lloyd rolled himself to his feet. He staggered left, then right.

Reverend Kirk stepped forward and caught Lloyd before he tipped over.

“I know who killed that little girl,” Lloyd breathed into the reverend’s face.

Darkness crowded the porch. The unison hissing of locusts surged through the night air.

Lloyd patted his breast pocket and confessed, “I’ve always known.”
AUTUMN

At the end of October, they congregated at the old sanitarium on the outskirts of town. It was Mrs. Wilker’s brainchild, a murder mystery dinner to raise funds for the struggling downtown. Back in the early part of the century, the musty brick building had been an orphanage. Nobody knew for sure what it had been before then, but some of the plaques outside the coldest rooms had words like “lunatic room” and “mortuary.”

It wasn’t but twenty years ago that Wilhelmina Foster (with Old Mayor Crickshaw’s blessing and Clio’s charisma) persuaded the village to convert the empty building into a makeshift museum. Maybe it was Wilhelmina’s encroaching senility or a Historical Society comprised of cacklers and naysayers, but what eventually resulted from the fundraisers, anonymous donations, and estate buying was nothing more than historical clutter. A large garage sale without the masking tape price tags.

Every child of school age had toured the “museum” at least twice by the sixth grade. We remember the plump pheasant stuffed on a stick, startled to find itself as a dust collector atop a grand piano with cracked, yellow keys. We remember the black potbelly stove that squatted in the room beside the walkway lined with dozens of spinning wheels, flax still webbed around their spindles.

But a tour of the museum was never really complete without a visit to “The Gallery.” Plush, red carpeting cushioned the footsteps of the hundreds of schoolchildren who’d ever floated down this hallway, their hands hushing against the whitewashed walls. It was narrow. No expense had been spared on the carpeting or lighting, but the ceiling was bruised from water damage and cobwebs shuddered in dusty drafts. Cracks in the whitewash revealed rotting wood beneath.

Along both sides of the hallway were pictures of children. Dozens. In the black and white photographs, the grey eyes gaped. In color, a few glared red. There were Christmas scenes, still moments captured beside a treehouse or an empty tire swing, but most were professionally posed, each face looking five years older than we remembered it.

Occasionally, there were names beneath the smiles, but some had fallen away or had been overlooked. Schoolchildren dreaded The Gallery, and yet were transfixed by the way
the hallway held its breath; the only sounds were the scuffles of sneakers and skipping heartbeats. This hallway was a history. The village’s way of easing the conscience it didn’t want to recognize, so they tucked their lost children into the shadowy recesses of an old sanitarium and called the hallway a memorial.

The Gallery was Crickshaw’s idea. He said he wanted the village to never forget its innocence. The janitor, Dan Tay, whispered around the handle of his broom, to anyone who would listen, that the older Crickshaw got, the more often he stopped out to the museum and walked The Gallery. His pinewood cane thumping, thumping softly on the plush as he would recite the names of the children to himself, almost as an awkward rhyme. The older he got, the longer he lingered on each face.

“He’s so dedicated to children,” Dan would say. “Especially after they’ve gone.” Then, the janitor with the sagging jeans would sweep the scratchy autumn leaves off the stone steps leading into the museum.

But that October, late in the month, the village decided to save themselves with a murder. A murder authored as a mystery, which they gleefully playacted and even accepted “blood money” for (which they termed “a donation”). They wanted to raise money for the village’s downtown. To maintain the cherry trees. Brick sidewalks. Fake Victorian storefronts. After all, as Mrs. Wilker explained at a village meeting, not only was it a chance to generate income for the downtown but it was also a chance to show unity in the face an internal evil. Straw stories still persisted; each one prompted door locks to be triple-checked at night, children to sleep in their parents’ bedrooms, and neighbors to spy on neighbors.

The planning for the Murder Mystery Dinner began as early as mid-summer, with Mrs. Wilker mobilizing volunteers in her own kitchen, calling the meetings “teas” (excuses to eat cinnamon twists).

So they flocked to the old sanitarium on the outskirts of town and ate the dinner of franks and baked beans to support their community. That night, we wandered the grounds, cold as the autumn air chilling the life from the trees, all the while whispering:

Stop feeling guilty and do something...

Old Mayor Crickshaw sat the head of one of the long tables, his cane hooked on the corner. Virgil Bardon and Mr. Perkins flanked him. Rosie brought him a plate of food. Mrs.
Wilker laughed too loud, too hard at every time Crickshaw mumbled something through his feeble lips. Even Lloyd was there for a while, attracting stares and words hushed behind cupped hands. His shirrtail was untucked, hair matted from having passed out against the steering wheel of his meter-maid cruiser. Emily smoothed the wrinkles from the crepe paper tablecloth.

“You might’ve cleaned up first,” she whispered, shielding her face from the many looks.

Lloyd stared out the window, rubbed at his ear as though he felt the tickle of a spider. He patted his breast pocket and breathed shallower, leaned forward, poised.

“You listening to me?” Emily asked, her face pale, almost stricken. She wrapped her arm around his and touched her forehead to his shoulder.

He turned his ear towards the window. He was listening to something else; a cry carried in through the building’s cracks.

*If I should die before I wake...*

He glanced over at where his father sat surrounded by adoring villagers.

Most everyone in the village was at the old sanitarium; one of the exceptions was out on route 125, across from the little red schoolhouse, where the naked bulb in the Shucks’ barn burned hot, attracted the powdery flutter of millers. Jay stood beside his workbench, surrounded by a clutter of buckets full of wrinkled Praying Mantis egg cases. Some had been pecked by birds and were worthless. Others contained thousands of babies in a single case the size of a walnut and would bring enough money to survive the winter.

One hand lifted each case to his face, the dust hanging in the air, filtering into his nose and mouth. The other hand gripped the barrel of his rifle. Jay sneezed visions from the hovering hallucinogenic dust. We surrounded him, welcomed him. Moths swarmed the exposed light bulb, clicking against the glass, dropping onto the floor, into Jay’s hair, sprinkle across us, a snowfall of soft bodies and wings. The barn’s wooden boards swayed like cornstalks snapping in a gust of wind. Jay was running. The stalks grabbed at his arms, tripped him in his stride. He grabbed his daughter’s hand and together they ran. The moonlight was clear and full and lighted their way forwards, or backwards, always towards a
silhouette on the skyline. He wanted to pick Allison up, to run faster, hold her tightly, tuck her securely under his arm, but there was no time. They had to keep running. The crackling, cackling corn cleared a path to a man with a dark, felt hat overshadowing his face. All Jay could hear was breathing, his breathing, he told himself to keep breathing.

“Come on. Come on,” Jay gritted his teeth and hissed. “Hurry up.” He jerked Allison’s arm and dragged her behind him.

They were closer to the man. His red-flannel arms were wide. We danced around him in circles. *Spinning, spinning...ashes, ashes, we all fall down.* They could see the straw hands stretched out in welcome. Jay laughed. Allison laughed. We all laughed. It was only Crickshaw’s scarecrow. They both slowed their pace, chuckled at their anxiousness when suddenly the brim of the scarecrow’s hat raised and they stared into its coal black eyes, watched as it stepped down from the splintered boards. A paisley scarf was knotted like a noose around its neck. A pinewood cane thumped on the dirt. *Ring around the rosey, pocket full of posies...* Crows screamed. Jay shielded Allison from a swiping hand, and together, father and daughter jumped through the hole in the schoolhouse wall. Jay turned back to look at his child, to have a good look at the face he hadn’t seen in months, but all he saw were three lifeless dolls heaped in a crumbling corner. She was gone. She was missing. When did he lose her? Why did he lose her?

He wiped his hand over his face and swayed backwards from his worktable. The vision melted out of his eyes like tears and he stumbled a step from the dizzying scent of the air. A couple of millers flitted around the lightbulb as he wandered into his office and sat down too hard in his chair. Scattered across the floor of his office floor were bits of straw. His fingers wrapped tighter around his rifle, and the first time since Allison was buried, he loaded it.

Admission tickets for the Murder Mystery Dinner were scarlet-colored with a frightening black font. Those tickets, which had a little “X” scrawled on the back corner, indicated victims. Mrs. Wilker made herself “The Inspector” and paraded around in a rumpled trench coat, sucking on a lollipop and twirling her fake moustache.
In a back corner of the meeting room, Meryl Culver shifted in her squeaky chair. The Savings and Loan bought tickets for their employees, part of an attempt to help bolster morale. The flyers, which the payroll department had attached to the ticket, read, “murders are great ways to relax, blow off steam, and escape the rigors of life for a couple of hours.” Maybe a typo. Maybe on purpose. Maybe they were quoting what Mrs. Wilker had said when she’d persuaded the bank to buy tickets for their employees.

Meryl folded and unfolded her admission ticket, peeked two tables over at Lloyd and Emily. Her own coworkers nearby ignored her. A few times, she tried to wiggle her way into one of her coworkers’ conversation, but they never paid much attention to her. Even if she had spoken, chances are they might’ve ignored her as they did so often in the break room. So she poked a fork into her hotdog and slowly chewed the fleshy mush, doing her best to hide her burn-scarred cheek with her hair.

Rosie Ingram scampered from table to table, fluffing her table decorations. A couple of tissues fell out of the sleeve of her lavender sweater onto Geraldine DeWine’s plate of baked beans. But she kept on moving, giving the polite nod of a cousin to Lloyd, and exchanged an empathetic (pathetic, by our accounts) glance with Emily. In fact, Rosie scanned the crowd and smiled to each of Lloyd’s ex-wives before she excused herself to go changed into her costume of pink feathers and fishnet stockings (she’d been cast in the role of the floozy).

Meanwhile, “The Murderer” lurked outside in the sanitarium’s carriage house. A cloud of cigarette smoke eclipsed the light in the old barn while crickets serenaded each other and crows stood still as statues in the rafters: the blackbirds oversaw everything. Rosie Ingram, who had convinced The Murderer to attend that night, had supplied the black cape and hood. It was for a good cause, after all.

Stop feeling guilty and do something...

Some time between the commercials on the television that same night and the babysitter dialing her boyfriend, Sheriff Bertram’s ten-year-old son, Rod, slipped out the backdoor. His mother was at the Murder Mystery Dinner and his father had left to patrol the village. Rod had listened countless times to his parents warn him about playing alone, being
outdoors without them, but he was young and brash, fueled with courage by the threat of having to take a bath. We waited for him in the tangle of trees, followed him as he kicked pebbles and swiped a switch like a whip. The moon trailed us all.

"Everybody who has an X on the back of their ticket," Mrs. Wilker explained, "is a victim. The murderer is hunting you." She tied her trench coat closed and readjusted her moustache. "If you don’t have an X, then you can’t be a victim. You’re a witness who can turn the killer in." She looked down at her index card. "All the rooms have clues. We’ll meet back here in an hour and see if anyone was able to unmask the murderer." She stepped closer to the dessert table. "Enjoy yourselves."

Mr. and Mrs. Perkins laughed and rubbed their hands together, teaming with Sheriff Bertram’s wife and a few people they knew from church. Meryl Culver slowly smoothed her fingers over her admission ticket, which felt like velvet she’d folded it so much. She bit her bottom lip when she discovered a black “X” on the back.

The meeting room bubbled with the babble of eager clue-seekers hurrying towards the exit. The only prizes were courtesy pens from Perkins Hardware, some silk floral arrangements from Rosie’s Roses, and a 10% discount on all snack bags at Cranker’s Convenience Mart, but they might as well have been gold to the villagers in the old sanitarium that night.

Rod Bertram slashed the night air with his switch, slapped the stick on mailboxes, reveled in the unexpected thrill of being without the walls of his house or the adult walls of his parents. He would tell his friends about his escape, of course. Tell them they should try it for themselves, if they weren’t too chicken.

He followed the sidewalks. Decided it was the best plan. But soon, he found himself straying onto lawns, drawn to the open curtains of houses and the blue flicker of television sets. There is something freeing about darkness, like standing chest deep in the kiddie-end of the park’s pool. The kind of cool that steals your breath.

Rod recognized the glare of the white lampposts downtown as he paused to take off his socks; his tender soles were unaccustomed to the slap of cold pavement, but he liked the
The Murderer slinked through the back door of the sanitarium, squashed a cigarette with a shoe heel, and stood against the sink while Mrs. Wilker forked pumpkin pie into her mouth and spit out the instructions on how to “make a kill.”

“Just have fun,” Mrs. Wilker said, lifting the paper plate to her mouth and licking the crumbs. “Remember, it’s for a good cause.”

Upstairs, Meryl Culver half-heartedly scribbled clues that other groups found, and eventually, she wandered into the darkened wing of the sanitarium. Mrs. Wilker had tied ropes in front of the doorway to show which rooms weren’t part of the “scene of the crime.” Meryl stepped over the rope into the chilly shadows of one of the lunatic rooms. It had been painted a thick shade of baby blue, and except for an old dentist’s chair, a few bits of wooden kitchenware, seven cracker barrels and a cot, the room looked hollow.

Voices intoxicated with excitement announced clues and speculated on The Murderer’s identity. She sat down on the cot, touched the smoothness of her scarred cheek and hand, then reached into her pocket and unfolded the scarlet admission ticket. The moonlight illuminating her pale skin was the color of smoke. The scarlet from the ticket had bled onto her fingertips, staining them.

The crickets’ songs grew louder. She held her breath as if remembering the pressure of being face down in a stall of straw. Had she only gone into the barn to pet the rabbits? At least, that’s what she told herself at night when her lungs filled with invisible smoke and she woke with a cough. We hovered over the cot as she laid back and stared into the darkness. Maybe if she’d thought long enough, she would’ve remembered that she didn’t survive because she was “chosen” or “special.” It was luck: God’s greatest left-handed compliment.

Footsteps stumbled in the hallway. Meryl to held her breath. Was it an overzealous clue-hunter who’d strayed away from the others? We knew better. The scuffed staccato of police shoes on the slick sanitarium floor caused her sit up. We’d all heard the same
awkward shuffle against the red brick downtown, the same lumber on the packed dirt outside Crickshaw’s barn.

*If I should die before I wake, I pray...*

A willowy silhouette blotted the light from the doorway. Meryl gripped the sides of the cot, like she was eight-years-old again, unable to move, unable to struggle.

The blackened figure tripped over the rope in the doorway and smacked the floor with a bent knee, elbow, and a shriek of skidding skin. Meryl forced herself to stand, but a hand caught her by the ankle. She tried to shake off the clammy fingers, but the harder she jerked her leg, the tighter the fingertips clung to the bone. With both hands, she clutched the doorway, breathed hard, hoped if she breathed hard enough she might feel her own voice.

“Meryl,” the fallen shadow whispered.

Rod stood in the middle of the Main Street with his arms out-stretched, his eyes closed, and his head tipped back, absorbing the full light of the October moon. Free as a bird. There were no cars. A couple of crows perched on one of the old Victorian lampposts. Rod tilted his head as though he heard the skitter of critters scratching along the sidewalk’s blood bricks, and he curled his toes.

He opened his eyes and looked around him. Something about the way the moonlight glanced off the darkened store windows mesmerized him, as if it made him remember mousy Allison Shuck. He knew she’d been missing for three months, eventually found dead in a ditch on the edge of Old Mayor Crickshaw’s cornfield. His father was the sheriff, but he didn’t know what his parents whispered about after he’d gone to bed: how she died, or why nobody seemed bothered that she wasn’t sitting beside him at school anymore.

Rod tackled her on the playground once. By the tire swing. He didn’t know why he did it. It just felt like the right thing to do. Something about her made him want to wrestle her, punch her in the arm, and ask her why she had to be so quiet and play with her dolls underneath the fire-escape rather than join in the kickball games. They were questions we all had asked.

The day he tackled her, he watched her climb off the tire swing, straighten out her dress (she was always wearing sundresses, even in winter), and then he charged across the
playground and did it. She lay there beneath him, her doll tightly clenched in her fist, a pale glow in her large, black pupils. Their depth swallowed him. And then, with a face as peaceful as if she were sleeping in church, she boxed him in the nose with her doll. A sprinkle of red spotted the doll’s white cloth neck. We’re sure Rod remember the blow’s force rattling his eye sockets and the overwhelming urge to cry, but he didn’t in front of Allison. Instead, he rolled off her and laughed until she walked away and he could whimper in private.

Rod wandered over to the Ice Cream Shoppe on the corner of Main and Verita (the straightest street in Slippery Slope, except in the middle of the village where it twisted). The shop was painted like a peppermint stick; its sign had shiny gold lettering. Rod smudged his face against the glass and peered at the display case full of cardboard tubs of multi-colored ice cream. Bubble gum pink. Mint green. Blueberry blue. The darkness inside made each flavor look like a different flavor of grey. Chairs were stacked on top of tables. Football jerseys hung next to the old-fashioned jukebox. The shop had to close after the straw sightings. People weren’t taking their children into Slippery Slope, and with the approach of colder weather, all the shop was good for was its air of nostalgia.

Behind the display case was nothing but blackness and we milled around in the shop’s nighttime barrenness. Yet, we envied the face pressed against the glass, the way his tongue was surely swelling from the thought of the cold, sugary nip of vanilla ice cream dripping down his chin.

Allison Shuck had eaten ice cream there once with her father Jay. Before the tackle. She and Rod had recognized each other from school, and although Rod had stuck out his tongue at her, Allison had only tied a paisley scarf around her head and concentrated on eating her peppermint stick ice cream before the dribbles could touch her fingers.

Rod lifted one foot and rubbed it against the other. He was about to turn away from the window when a hand lightly gripped his shoulder. He stood still at the warm tingle of the words “Are you lost” whispered into his ear.

* * *
In the darkness, Meryl couldn’t see the face of the person still holding her ankle, but she certainly knew the voice. The hard “r” and the hint of drawl. She flinched at the flick of a lighter, the sudden spark then flame.

“You fell,” she said, shaking his hand from her leg and pressing her back against the wall.

The lighter’s quivering glow chased shadows up Lloyd Crickshaw’s sharp features. His chin looked reddened from the fall.

Meryl took a taste of the sanitarium’s musty air. “You all right?”

A howling gust snuffed the lighter. The room suddenly felt hollow, as if neither of them existed without the light to prove it.

“A little bruised,” Lloyd answered towards the evaporating moonlight.

“Are you bleeding?” she asked, taking a timid step forward.

He snapped his lighter again until another flame illuminated his nose and mouth.

“Only on the inside,” he replied.

Meryl scratched her burn-scarred cheek as if she could feel the heat from the snatch of fire in Lloyd’s hand.

“Where’s your wife?”

Lloyd laughed. “The oblivious victim?” He pulled a scarlet ticket from his breast pocket, the tiny “X” barely visible. “We switched tickets.” He crumpled the piece of paper and tossed it across the room. “She didn’t want to die. I guess that makes me a victim by default” He let the lighter extinguish itself.

“I’m a victim, too,” Meryl confessed, holding her ticket in a feeble beam of moonlight.

“Are you bleeding?”

Meryl looked down at her fingertips, though it was too dark for her to see. “No. Just stained.”

The old cot creaked as Meryl sat down on the edge. Maybe she was remembering how it was Lloyd who dug her eight-year-old body out of the rubble of Crickshaw’s barn. How his frantic hands had tossed away charred wooden beams, brushed the ashes away from
her pale skin, from her eyelids, and when she had stared up into the crimson-scarred sky, the warmth she felt was his ear against her mouth. When he turned around and announced that she was still alive, that was the same instant she knew he was right.

She stared at his silhouette on the floor of the lunatic room and a flash of silver briefly blinded her. Liquid swished inside a flask.

“How about a little communion for the damned,” Lloyd said, leaning forward and touched the flask against her knee.

“What is it?” she asked.

“The cure for what ails you,” he answered, staggering to his feet.

Meryl held the flask. She’d never drunk before.

“Go on,” Lloyd slurred. “Just tip it back and let it slide down.”

With a deep breath, she touched the opening to her lips. There was the hint of onion around the rim as she tipped her head back and poured a large gulp into her mouth. We laughed. Before she even swallowed it, she must’ve felt it burn down her throat, the fumes stinging her sinuses, smothering her breath. Most of it dribbled down her chin. She coughed, choked on her own fiery saliva. Like smoke. Like hot smoke. Like boiling smoke, smoldering in her chest, gnawing the flesh from her face, engulfing her head in a dizzying swirl. She shot to her feet and fumbled with the window, fighting it open, needing it open. She allowed the numbing bite of fresh autumn air to clear her mind and lungs. She exhaled into an oak’s orange leaves.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped. “I’m sorry I set that fire. I don’t know why I set that fire.” Her cheeks glistened with unexpected tears.

“That was a long time ago,” Lloyd said stiffly.

“Feels like yesterday.”

“Well, it wasn’t yesterday,” Lloyd snapped.

The sound of Lloyd’s footsteps walking towards the doorway made Meryl turn around.

“Lloyd, I have to tell you,” she said, wiping the back of her hand under her nose. “I wouldn’t have set that fire if I’d known your rabbits would die.”
A flash from Lloyd’s flask reflected the faint lights in the hallway. The floorboards creaked as he stepped closer towards the cot, wiped a smooth piece of silk across both of her cheeks, absorbing her tears, then he slipped it into her palm.

“You didn’t set that fire,” he whispered.

He tripped towards the door and took another swig from his flask.

“I need to find my father and go home,” he said.

Before she could tell him the old mayor had left, he stumbled down the hallway. She looked down at what he had given her. It was Allison’s scarf. She unfolded it and held it up to the window. The room was too dark for her to see if the stains were from anything more than dirt. The fibers held the smell of soil, as well as something sharper, more familiar, and the faintest fragrance of Old Spice cologne. Meryl leaned against the cold panes, and as wind howled outside, she buried her face in Allison Shuck’s cherished scarf.

One for sorrow...

Rod turned slowly and looked Old Mayor Crickshaw in the face. Behind the old man’s grey hair, crows began to flock to the lampposts.

Crickshaw smiled. “Too bad it’s closed.”

“What?” Rod asked, still visibly startled.

“The ice cream shop,” Crickshaw answered with a chuckle. “We might’ve had a cone together.”

Rod glanced back at the lonely chairs and tables, at the way the shadows strolling across the floor resembled children.

“Pretty late to be on an adventure, isn’t it?”

Rod nodded.

“Haven’t your parents warned you about being outdoors, especially at night?”

A child indoors is a child who soars...

“Yes,” Rod mumbled.

Crickshaw leaned forward on his pinewood cane, put an arm around Rod. “They tell you those things for your own good,” he said, his voice deep and smooth. “My car’s just there.” He pointed his cane towards a black Mercedes. “You shouldn’t be alone downtown.”
"I didn’t want to take a bath," Rod replied as he followed the old man down the sidewalk.

Crickshaw laughed and patted him on the back. "Neither would I." He coughed, opened the passenger car door for Rod to climb inside. "Maybe we can go on an adventure of our own," he offered. "Before we take you back."

"For ice cream?"

"Not ice cream," Crickshaw answered. "Have you ever seen a scarecrow up close?"

Rod shook his head. "The one on your farm. When we drive by it."

"Would you like to see him?" Crickshaw asked. His palsied fingers struggled to place the key in the ignition.


Crickshaw winked at him before twisting the key and starting the engine.

We followed them on the glide of the moon, chased by the crows all the way to the cornfield. A drifting pall of clouds draped itself across the face of the moon, and the only thing stirring besides the legions of field mice, seemed to be the scarecrow’s own fingers, tickling the breeze.

The shiny black car rolled to a stop at the edge of Crickshaw’s farm, but not before mashing cornstalks and the old man’s own mailbox.

Rod jumped out and began stomping through the dirt towards the middle of the field. He had never seen the scarecrow close up like we had. Other than the trees and houses, it was the tallest thing visible on the flat, uneventful horizon. Most children pretended it was real and waved to it. He was animated by our imagination, a benevolent rustic illusion, which we often hoped would guide us to another land, a golden land, where children could play outdoors whenever they pleased.

Rod stood in his bare feet in front of the scarecrow and stared up into its faded burlap face, half torn away by congregations of crows eager to fill their bellies with the taste of its flesh, but they were worshipping in the wrong place. The red flannel shirt hung untucked from the overalls and the black felt hat was crusted with crow shit.

Crickshaw doubled over with a violent cough, leaned forward on his cane. He struggled to catch his breath.
Rod turned and squared his shoulders. “Should you be outside?”

The old man stared into the boy’s eyes and we watched him shudder before he righted himself.

He took a couple of steps closer to Rod and encouraged, “Go ahead and touch him.”

Meryl touched her fingertips to the cool whitewashed walls of The Gallery. Bits of paint flaked across the tops of her shoes, curled beneath her fingernails, sprinkled the plush red carpeting like the final few tapers of a fading snowstorm. Layer after layer of thick white paint could not conceal the mildew that fed on the rotten wood beneath; the building’s corrupted skeleton groaned when the wind blew, threatened to dismember under the weight of the rooms cluttered with useless heirlooms.

“What’s a murder mystery dinner without a murder?” an errant echo asked from another hallway.

“Has anyone been murdered yet?” replied a louder voice.

The syllables broke apart against The Gallery’s walls.

Meryl stood at the beginning of The Gallery. Didn’t she notice as we have that the plush, red carpeting wasn’t quite so plush? It rippled down the hallway like a tongue, depressed from the passage of hundreds of wandering soles, worn and frayed almost down to the splintered floorboards. There were thin patches beneath the pictures of children with the most family. Some of the frames hung crooked; others had clearly been bought at dime stores (genuine fake wood), nearly allowing the pictures to slip free, as if those faces couldn’t be contained in such artificial boundaries.

Meryl held Allison’s scarf in her fist. We recognized the faces that lined the walls. Not all of them victims.

In a couple of pictures, parents were caught in the background, their hair darker and fuller, their bodies thinner, less wrinkled. One scene captures a little red-haired boy, Willis, kneeling in a meadow blooming with violet, yellow, and blue wild flowers, a black and white puppy beside him jumping to catch a butterfly. Another moment froze Cherie by a pond, a turtle slick with algae lazily floundering in her small hands. There was a family dressed in pajamas and terry cloth robes huddled around a Christmas tree, crumpled wrapping blocked a
child’s face (the brother of the missing boy, Jerry). We could hear the low chime of Christmas bells, an old record player with a dull needle scratching through the singer’s voice as he crooned: Do you hear what I hear?

Time hovered in The Gallery, minutes, snapped seconds bound and shackled in withering colors, pieces of paper warped from the sanitarium’s damp air. Those pictures didn’t remember lost children. Those pictures couldn’t speak with a whistle because of missing teeth. They couldn’t giggle when their belly button was poked. They couldn’t stare intently at a cloud drifting into the shape of a bird, or wonder who lived on the distant twinkles canopying the night sky.

The wind cried through the cracks in the ceiling. We followed Meryl, crowded her hoard of warmth. We coveted the careless way she inhabited her flesh and blood, the way she took the firmness of her own bones for granted, the way she ignored the miraculous pump of each heartbeat tickling her veins. She didn’t genuflect at the taste of her own mouth, or marvel at how eyes, powerful only by a thought, could move so smoothly in their moist sockets. And yet, she was part of us and we were all she would ever be.

Stale smoke wafted through the hallway. Deeper into The Gallery, where the soft glow of the lights could not penetrate, squatted a figure dressed entirely in black—The Murder Mystery Murderer.

*One for sorrow, three for a girl, four for a boy...*

Meryl leaned back against the wall. Her movements knocked a couple of pictures on the floor, and in her confusion, she dropped Allison’s scarf. It floated onto the red, red carpeting like an angel tumbling from the hand of God. The brittle smack of the hollow plastic frames falling startled her. The cloaked person shuffled from the shadows. A swirling beam of light fell onto Judith Shuck’s sunken eyes.

Judith smirked. “Are you a victim?”

Meryl placed her foot over Allison’s scarf and stared down at her red stained fingertips. She shook her head.

Judith reached beneath her cloak and slipped a cigarette between her lips. She struck a match, sucked on the cigarette until the tip glowed red. “I can’t tell who’s a victim and who isn’t anymore.”
“Smoking will kill you, Judith.”

Judith blew smoke from the corner of her mouth. “Good,” she replied. “Now at least I won’t have to live in suspense.”

Voices from other hallways mingled into muffled pitches and tones. The clue-seekers were hunting for Judith, to take her back down to the Meeting Room—their game was over and they wanted to know who won.

“I should’ve known,” Judith confessed. “I should’ve seen it.” She inhaled smoke and held it. “We were careless with Allison. Letting her play where she pleased.” The words rolled from her lips, dispersing with the smoke. “I belong here. In this game. In this village.”

Meryl bent over and picked up one of the fallen pictures. A little girl with straight black hair and thick glasses wore a grey costume, whiskers painted on her pale cheeks, enormous pink mouse ears fastened to her hood. The girl smiled into the camera’s lens as if it were a mother’s eyes. She held a doll in one hand and wore a paisley print scarf around her neck. Meryl stroked her own throat, wiggled the shoe which covered the scarf.

Stuck in the back of the frame was a black and white picture turned backwards. In it, a young woman with long, light hair held her pregnant stomach. She stood in a dining room with a long table and a stained glass window anyone in Slippery Slope would recognize. She didn’t stare into the camera, only off to the side. With her eyes and mouth closed, she seemed as silent as anyone’s memory of the picture.

Meryl flipped it over and read the scratched handwriting. $R$ with child.

Judith cradled her cigarette between her fingers and looked down the rows of pictures. “I am guilty,” she said flatly. “I killed my child. I am the murderer.”

“No, you aren’t,” Meryl spoke quickly, looking up from the photograph.

With a laugh, Judith dropped her cigarette and squashed it with her heel. She unfastened the black cloak around her shoulders. “I didn’t protect her. Keep her safe.”

“You did the best you could.”

Judith wrapped the cloak around Meryl and winked. “Semantics.”

“Where are you going, Judith?” Meryl shifted her weight. “We need to rejoin the others.”
The weak lighting shadowed the circles under Judith’s eyes. “What for?”

Judith turned around, ran her hand along the wall as we watched her melted into the darkness at the end of the hallway. Meryl squatted, let the black cloak slip off her shoulders, and picked up Allison’s scarf. The pine green and flint glue print, the few stains of crimson, resembled the bruises she’d had on her own body after she’d been dragged from the rubble of Crickshaw’s barn. She smoothed her hand gently over the silk, like she could feel the throb of each bruise in the fabric. Kissing the photograph of Allison Shuck, she closed her eyes, and whispered, “Pray for us sinners till the hour of our death.”

They flocked to the Meeting Room, feasted on pumpkin pie and warm punch, waited with excited babble for the murderer to be revealed. Each clue had been a treasure, intoxicating with its promise of danger and thrill. Their faces were flushed. They sat laughing with each other, not even sure what they were laughing about, forking food into their mouths, allowing the crumbs to sprinkle onto the tablecloth. They sipped punch from Styrofoam cups but the thirst they’d come to quench, the taste of choice, had been for something much thicker than sugar water and they were still thirsty. They were high. Tripping on a murder mystery blood buzz.
Jay Shuck burst through the old sanitarium’s meeting room doors. His rifle clutched in his right hand. Pieces of straw clenched in his left. At the other end of the room, Rosie and Mrs. Perkins put their arms around Sheriff Bertram’s wife Mag. She rocked back and forth, sobbed, screamed, “My son is missing. My boy is missing. My baby, my baby!”

The babysitter had called the museum and given the message to Mrs. Wilker that Rod wasn’t in the house. Women sat pale and stiff and one by one filed from the room to call their own babysitters. Men rubbed the back of their necks, gritted their teeth, sighed as they knocked their knuckles on the tables.

“Let’s burn the goddamn thing to the ground,” Jay shouted, out of breath.

They chattered in their chairs, gasped, warm with the excitement of the evening. The air inside the room felt stuffy, closed. They drank punch and licked the sugar from their red stained teeth and lips.

“The scarecrow?” Emily Crickshaw uttered.

“Of course, the scarecrow,” Perkins barked. “We’ve left it stand too long.” He marched to the front of the room. “Time for this village to come to its senses and take care of business.”

“Probably demon-possessed,” Mrs. Wilker remarked, holding Mag Bertram’s hand.

“Just like that alien show,” stray voices whispered.

Geraldine DeWine took a swallow of punch. “And where is Morris? Sheriff Bertram said he found a trail of straw around his house.”

Harold Linkisch pounded his fist on the table. “It’s terrorized this village for years.” He shot to his feet. “All the pieces fit too well. The straw around town. That girl’s scarf around the scarecrow’s neck.” He waved his hand towards the window. “Hell, she wasn’t found but a mile down the road from Crickshaw’s cornfield.”

“Look what happened to Meryl Culver,” Jay Shuck yelled. “It was Crickshaw’s barn and Crickshaw’s farm.”

Meryl wrapped her arms around herself as the entire Meeting Room looked at her.

“I just want my son,” Mag cried.
The rest of the people murmured about how evil can manifest itself in peculiar ways. The meeting room windows fogged with perspiration and anxious breathing.

Stop feeling guilty and do something...

Emily Crickshaw slipped her arms into her jacket and rose to leave, but the shadows swaying outside the window, like the faces of children through cloudy baptistery water, made her stop.

“Children have been dying strangely way back when Crickshaw was sheriff,” she blurted. “Why couldn’t he solve it? A vagrant passing through? Ever since he was mayor, children haven’t been allowed outdoors.” She choked back a sob. “Crickshaw’s farm, Crickshaw’s barn, Crickshaw’s cornfield.” Her face reddened. “Crickshaw’s scarecrow!” She kicked her chair and shouted. “What the hell do you think is happening here?”

“You’re talking nonsense,” Mr. Perkins admonished.

“Maybe she’s possessed, too,” someone suggested from the back of the room.

“Probably more children would’ve died without Crickshaw,” Rosie Ingram defended.

“He resurrected this village,” Virgil Bardon spoke. “We owe him everything.”

“Now he’s out there with it,” Mr. Perkins said.

“Old man’s not safe out there,” Jay Shuck proclaimed, then headed out the side door with his rifle high.

They pushed aside their chairs, mothers wrapped arms around fathers, neighbor supported neighbor, and the small mob followed Jay Shuck into the frosty night air. Emily Crickshaw sat stunned in her chair, her jacket half across her shoulders. She barely noticed Meryl Culver, the only other person in the meeting room.

Slowly, Meryl stood, pushed her chair in and hurried passed Emily.

“You of all people don’t believe them?” Emily uttered before Meryl could slip through the doors.

Meryl turned, took a deep breath. “You mean you don’t?” she asked. She reached into her pocket. Perhaps to touch Allison’s scarf.

Emily shook her head.

“Look at all the good he’s done for this town,” Meryl spoke. “All the children he’s helped. All the families who barely had the money for food.” She gripped the sides of the
doorway and nodded more to herself than Emily. “Without him, so many people would’ve been lost.”

Emily stroked her forehead, gritted her teeth. She ripped the rings off her fingers, squeezed her wrists through her bracelets and watched them glittered in the fluorescent light. With tears in her eyes, she scattered the bits of gold across the meeting room.

Dried stalks of corn rustled in the glow of a full October moon as Rod stood before the scarecrow and raised his hand, the same way a child might reach into a casket to touch a dead man’s finger. We circled around, swayed the cornstalks, tried to frighten off the crows. *Ring around the rosey, pocket full of posies...*

Just as he was about to take a step closer, the retching cough of Crickshaw startled him. He dropped his arm and faced the mayor.

“You all right?” Rod asked.

Crickshaw wheezed and nodded. His knuckles whitened around the handle of his pinewood cane and he poked it into the dirt. He stared at Rod, punched himself in the chest, then looked up into the pocked face of the moon.

“Rod!”

Old Mayor Crickshaw and Rod both turned around, surprised to see Sheriff Bertram marching through the field.

“What the hell are you doing?” Bertram asked his son, yanked him by the arm. “The babysitter is frantic.”

Rod took a deep breath. “We were looking at the scarecrow.”

“You’re supposed to be home,” Bertram hissed. “Get your ass in my cruiser.”

Rod exchanged a glance with Crickshaw before he rolled his eyes and ran towards the road. Bertram reached out and shook Old Mayor Crickshaw’s hand.

“Thanks, Mr. Mayor,” Bertram said with a nod and relieved sigh. He stared hard the scarecrow. “Thanks for looking out for my boy.”

Crickshaw leaned forward on his cane and smiled, put his hand on Bertram’s shoulder. “My pleasure.”

* * *
At first, they ransacked the sanitarium’s kitchen for matches and lighter fluid. Then, they disbanded and raided the garage of gasoline and kindling they could use for the blaze. There was no time for cars. There was no time for jackets or purses. They marched across the sanitarium’s overgrown lawn and headed towards downtown.

Three greyhounds prowled the hallways at Erinyes Park, their toenails clicking on the slick floors. They growled as they stalked passed the rooms, kept the inmates frightened in their beds. Some clutched their dingy blankets. Others curled up and hugged themselves. A few cried out for their homes.

The squeak of a nurse’s rubber soled shoes stopped in the doorway of Rhea Morse’s room. The young woman smacked her gum.

“Here you go,” she whispered. She stepped into the brownish lighting and placed a doll into the old woman’s arms. Then, she blew a bubble and popped it.

Rhea flinched at the doll’s bleached smell. Recycled. A dead woman’s orphan.

“My baby?” Rhea asked. Her blind eyes blinked slowly.

“Yes,” the nurse answered. “Your brand new baby and she looks just like you.”

The old woman lifted one of her wrinkled hands and touched the smooth cloth face.

“It’s not my baby,” Rhea answered. “Not my baby at all.”

“Of course, she is,” the nurse coaxed. “You’ve been so sad lately, we knew she would cheer you right up.”

“My baby wasn’t a girl,” Rhea spoke.

“Oh,” the nurse coughed on her gum. “Well, I believe you’re right. It’s a handsome little boy.”

The old woman’s brown eyes squinted. Her rusty grey hair sprawled across her pillow. Her afghan wings remained folded around her shoulders.

“It’s a doll,” she said flatly.

“Yes,” the nurse echoed. “He is a little doll.”

Rhea closed her eyes. “My baby is dead,” she whispered, turned her face towards the white moonlight spilling onto the floor.
“What?” the nurse asked. She leaned closer to the bed. “What, dear?”

The old woman absently stroked the doll’s yarn hair. Her finger dug into the doll’s face, clutched its body. She began to twist.

“Rhea?” the nurse uttered.

“First child to die in Slippery Slope in years,” the old woman remarked. The doll’s head tore off in her hands. Jagged pieces of straw pricked her fingertips, bled onto the white cloth. “Just as easy as swallowing a special homemade tea.” Her blind eyes widened as she turned towards the nurse and whispered. “And no one has to know.” She clasped the doll’s body to her breast. “No one else has to know.”

The nurse stood still, swallowed her gum.

“Help me,” Rhea said, struggling to sit up. “I want to go to the chapel and pray.”

*An eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth...*

Inside the sanctuary of the church with the crooked steeple, organ music rippled the baptistery water. The hymn “Under His Wings” thundered the church’s foundations, and in the pale moonlight spilling through the stained glass image of Christ’s dying face, tears dripped onto the yellowed organ keys. She didn’t allow the words flight, to flock and peck at the air, at her quiet vision of her daughter’s face. But they were there. Inside her. They reduced Allison’s straight black hair, large hazel eyes, and funny sideways smile to only a blur, the cold chiseled granite of her name on a headstone. That’s all her baby was now. A slowly weathering word.

The hymn’s chords vibrated her own bones and she whispered:

*One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl...*

She repeated the rhyme as though it wasn’t the words she wanted, but what they could conjure. The warmth of lying in the nook between her mother’s arm and breast. That moment when her mother held her, relieved her of having to be. She could nestle back against the flesh she came from and be nothing, and at the same time, everything her mother ever wanted.

*One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl...*
Judith’s fingers stroked the organ’s cool keys and she cursed Slippery Slope with all the heart she had left.

Lloyd laid the quilt his mother had made of his old baby clothes across his father’s shoulders. It smelled of mothballs, his father’s sour night sweats. He picked up his father’s pillow and fluffed it between two fists. The old man’s eyes sunken, red rimmed. His cheeks ashen, lips violet. Lloyd leaned over him with the pillow. The room itself seemed to gasp for a shallow taste of air.

He stepped forward, his fingers clawing into the pillow.

*Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray...*

Crickshaw opened his leaky blue eyes and rattled with a cough.

*If I should die before I wake, I pray...*

The grandfather clock in the hallway thunked on the hour and released its tinny chimes. Crickshaw’s bedroom window had been cracked open, an autumn breeze wheezed through the curtains, and Lloyd stood still, touched his hand to his ear, as if the fading breath of a children’s chorus chilled the shadows.

His father’s body barely filled the bed. So fragile. Brittle. Breakable.

*If I should die...*

Lloyd wrapped one hand around the back of his father’s neck. The bedsprings squeaked with each jarring cough. He held his breath, listened to his father struggle for his own.

*I pray...*

Lloyd placed the pillow behind his father’s head and tucked in the sides of the blankets. With a deep breath, he pulled a small stack of letters from his back pocket and scattered them across his father’s chest.

“*I know Rhea Morse,*” he whispered.

The old man stared into Lloyd’s face.

“*I know,*” he repeated, snapped his lighter and held the flame up to his face.

Crickshaw gripped his blanket tighter.

“*I need Reverend Kirk,*” the old man choked.
Parting his lips, Lloyd smiled, and for a moment, he watched his father’s face drain of color. Then, he nodded. The floorboards groaned with each of his footsteps out the door.

The mob pushed and elbowed each other as they flooded Main Street. Torches held high. Steps resolute. The scratching of leaves along the red, red brick. Tarnished storefronts heartened their cause. The glowing light inside the church with the crooked steeple glanced across their faces. Each rumble of the organ’s melody thundering beneath the ground, pulsed through their feet, sent tiny tremors through their veins. They chanted and yelled, called out to people inside their houses. Slammed front doors and the flap of porch doors birthed more and more members.

While the dusty corners of basements and the skeleton foundations of the downtown businesses murmured with a rumor in the walls. Concealed beneath concrete sidewalks, fingertips smoothed into showroom floors, lost children had only leaky pipes for bones, storage shelves for ribs, a village supported by their secret graveyard.

Only Judith’s quiet hymn could be heard echoing between buildings and darkened alleyways. After the mob swept through downtown, a few leaves tumbled across the street and a paisley print scarf danced in the middle of Slippery Slope. In the confusion and bustle, Meryl dropped Allison’s scarf. It came to rest, curled itself like a child inside its mother.

The shrill caw of one of Slippery Slope’s crows, the crows who never roost, screamed through the empty downtown as a silhouette moved into the streetlight and picked up the scarf before disappearing into the darkness.

Lloyd moved towards the bed. Crickshaw shrank back. Cowered.

“What’s the matter with you, boy?” Crickshaw coughed.

“Warm enough?” Lloyd asked. He flicked the lighter again.

“Yes.” The old man’s eyebrows drifted together. Lloyd’s breath was thick, intoxicated.

“Please,” Crickshaw uttered, nodding towards the lighter. “It reminds me.”

Lloyd allowed the flame to extinguish. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.
He leaned over his father. Closer. His shadow cooled the wetness in the old man’s eyes. He grabbed the quilt and pulled it around his father’s neck, then loomed over him. He leaned closer as Crickshaw shifted beneath the covers, but Lloyd stopped himself, then pressed his lips against his father’s clammy cheek. In the stillness of that bedroom, before the sound of Reverend Kirk helping himself in through the back door, before Lloyd hurried off into the icy October night, the middle-aged man touched his lips to his father’s cheek and kissed him.

Inside the small chapel, Rhea Morse unfolded her green afghan wings, knelt down before the altar, and touched her face to the red carpeting. It had been hour since the rabble in Slippery Slope stormed through the village. Erinyes Park, miles from the mention of Crickshaw’s name, settled silently into another night of dreamless slight.

“Ms. Morse?”

A woman’s voice and the soft squeals of a baby caused the old woman to lift her head and turn around, though she couldn’t see.

“You know my husband,” Emily Crickshaw spoke. She held Hugh close to her chest. The old woman laughed. “Knew him,” she corrected. “What do you want from me?”

Emily moved over to where the woman knelt and carefully placed Hugh into her arms.

“I had to leave,” Emily whispered. “I was the only one who could see what the others couldn’t.”

Emily sat down beside Rhea, put her hand on the old woman’s back.

“Lloyd always said you were like a mother to him,” she spoke.

The candlelight inside the chapel sparkled in the old woman’s tears as she smoothed her hand over Hugh’s head and back. She touched her nose to his skin and inhaled deeply. Her lips trembled with each sob.

“I tried to avenge you,” she cried, clutching tighter to Hugh, speaking him as if her own child might hear. “I tried to burn that bastard and his barn to the ground.” She rocked back and forth on her knees.
Emily gently slipped Hugh from her arms and watched the old woman’s frail body quake with grief.

“And yet I still love him,” she hissed, pounded her fist against the altar. “I can kneel right here at the feet of Christ and say, God spare me, I’d do it again if he asked me.” She doubled over. “My God, I’d do it again.”

Reverend Kirk held his Bible in his lap. He sat in a creaky wooden chair beside the bed. Smoothed his hand over the bumpy, black leather. Listened to the old mayor cough. A green desk lamp offered a few feeble spirals of light.

“You called me?” Reverend Kirk spoke. He kept his eyes focused on the window.

Outside, a distant glow of lights snaked down the road. Faintly, the sizzle of mingling voices sharpened the gusts of wind billowing the curtains.

Crickshaw sucked in air through his nose and held it. He nodded.

“Yes.”

The young man opened his Bible, moved a dried dandelion aside, and read: “For the time will come when men will not put with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.”

Chants could be heard from the cornfield.

Reverend Kirk leaned his head back against the wall, folded his hands over his Bible.

“Sad thing about so many children dying here,” he spoke.

Crickshaw patted himself on the chest. He rubbed medicine into the sparse grey hairs below his Adam’s apple. The menthol pierced the room.

“At least they kept their innocence,” Crickshaw answered hoarsely. He held back a cough. “Their deaths kept them safe.”

“Safe?” Reverend Kirk questioned evenly.

“From the sins and temptations of life,” Crickshaw replied. “Having to watch themselves crumble and die.”

The young man looked down at his hands. “Hard to know where we’re safe and where we aren’t.”
Crickshaw paused, stared sideways at the calm young reverend, then choked, “yes.”

“But then,” Reverend Kirk rubbed his hands together, “God watches you.” He met his eyes with the old mayor’s. “Doesn’t He?”

Crickshaw nodded.

He watched the young man flip a few pages in his Bible and slide out a paisley print bookmark, slowly begin to fold it lengthwise on his knee. The grandfather clock in the hallway thumped onto the half hour. Night air surged with the wildness loose in the cornfield.

“This is finally the end for me,” Crickshaw stated.

“Yes,” Reverend Kirk echoed. “It is.”

Crickshaw closed his eyes and whispered, “What should I do?”

Reverend Kirk wrapped the scarf around one of his hands and answered, “Pray.”

They circled the scarecrow in silence. The flickering light of the torches made its limbs seem to move. Its eyes seemed to blink. It phantom mouth seemed to sneer. Cornstalks swayed like children lost in a game of tag. The withered leaves flapped like thousands of tongues professing the same secret: the browned skin of the corn grew out of the bones just beneath the surface of the soil.

The villagers whispered about how they’d seen the scarecrow running at night. How the scarecrow had stalked them in their living rooms, sprinkled its bits of golden straw throughout the village.

Ring around the rosey...

It watched us when we slept, chased us through our dreams, snatching our children, stole our breath; its moldering straw lingered in shadows, alleyways, always wanting to take our children, our future. But the scarecrow stood still. We could feel its evil around every turn, strangling our lives, stealing our sisters from cornfields, hanging our brothers from trees, smothering our daughters inside schoolhouses. But the scarecrow stood still.

“Burn it!” Jay shouted, rushing forward and igniting its straw feet.

They threw matches, gasoline, flaming sticks; each burst into explosions of orange and yellow sparks racing towards the moon. They laughed, cheered.
Pocket full of posies...

Through the waving flames, the scarecrow’s silhouette stood still. Geraldine DeWine, with Mrs. Wilker’s help, flung her walker into the fire. Virgil Bardon shattered a bottle of liquor at the splintered boards, the glass sprinkled to the surrounding dirt in a flare of smoking shards. Meryl Culver slipped off her shoes, threw them at the scarecrow’s outstretched arms. She clapped and shrieked.

Ashes, ashes...

Mr. and Mrs. Perkins uprooted dried stalks of corn, and with gritted teeth, whipped them into the blaze.

“For Gilda!” Mrs. Perkins shouted.

Jay Shuck paced in front of the scarecrow, then hurled his rifle into the ever-growing fire.

“For Allison!” Jay yelled, spit into the heat.

They felt good. They felt vindicated.

Ashes, ashes, we all fall...

Sheriff Bertram held his son on his shoulder, while Rosie Ingram clapped her hands, stared off towards her uncle’s darkened house, seeing the willowy figure of a man leaning against a yellow-up truck.

Their sweaty, flushed faces, eyes wide with excitement, sparkled in the light of the scarecrow’s snapping, crackling body. They broke into a chorus lead by Meryl Culver. I once was lost but now am found. Was blind but now I see. They raised their voices towards a drifting mass of black clouds, which snatched any glimpse they might have had of Heaven.

A smoking pile of ashes and a scorched patched of earth was all that remained of the scarecrow when they left, returned to their homes exhausted with indignant justice. They shook each other’s hands and smiled, took deep satisfied breaths.
THE NEXT MORNING

A family from a nearby city decided to take back country roads for the more “scenic” route around Slippery Slope. They hoped the trip might “get them back to nature.” The newly polished car slowed near the edge of Crickshaw’s cornfield.

“Let’s stop and take some pictures,” the father suggested.

“Oh,” the wife cooed. “It’ll make a splendid picture for our yearly Christmas postcard.”

As soon as they stepped out of the car, the child looked towards the fields and asked, “What’s that?”

“Looks like a scarecrow,” the father said.

“What stinks?” the child wondered.

“The country,” the father answered. “It’s the smell of life.”

They smiled and pushed their way through the dried cornstalks, the mud sucking at the soles of their shoes. The smell of smoke still lingered in the misty morning air. Charred shoes, buttons, and boards cluttered the ground near the scarecrow.

“Dear God,” the mother choked, putting her hand to her nose and grabbing the child’s shoulder.

The father continued forward, unconsciously sliding his sunglasses from his face, not noticing when they fell to the ground, or when they’d crunched under his feet. His eyes were wide, mouth gaping. He swallowed hard.

With its arms out-stretched, the scarecrow hung crooked on the post; its felt hat had been carefully set upon its head, tipped in front of its face. The father looked left, then right, and then stepped forward, his unsteady head knocking the hat off.

“Lord have mercy,” he uttered, staring into the bluish face of a man.

His two eyes had been gouged from their sockets and replaced with two buckeyes. Straw had been stuffed down his throat, poked from his lips. He was wearing a red flannel shirt and creased jeans. Soaring high above, then swooping down, a black crow cast a shadow across the dead mayor’s face as it perched on his shoulder and preened.
Old Mayor Crickshaw stood in his cornfield surrounded by children, like he had over forty years ago; only this time, the children rustled as dying stalks of corn, and instead of posing beside it, he was the scarecrow. Strangled tight around his neck was an ordinary scarf. A dark brown blended with pine green and flint blue, a few splotches of grey and crimson. Not much to speak of.

The villagers, too afraid to go near the scarecrow they thought they destroyed, allowed their missing mayor’s bones to be picked clean by Slippery Slope’s ravenous murders of crows. Only Lloyd dared to go near it, and when people asked him, he simply told them the truth: “It’s the same,” he said. Reverend Kirk vanished not long before the mayor did and people speculated that he, too, had succumbed to the scarecrow’s evil.

Businesses closed. The downtown storefronts crumbled. And that winter, Slippery Slope faded into a ghost town, buried under a blanket of white, white snow, overrun by the scurry of field mice. All that would remain were the stories the people in the surrounding cities would tell each other in the middle of the night when they felt too safe, feared they might love each other too much. None would tell it as well as a clean shaven poetry professor at a local community college who went by “Dr. Coolhand” and who carried a yo-yo in his jacket pocket “just in case.” And we were entertained. We were so very entertained.