

GLORYBOUND



JESSIE VAN EERDEN

# Glorybound



a novel

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*for Mike*



# Prologue

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SLEET-BLURRED VISION. Fewer headlights. It was the young driver's first run, and he distrusted the truck's bulk in weather. He edged his rig off the road, a shortcut north of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and into a diner's parking lot, wary of the wheels sluicing the gray slush. He eased to a stop beside a white delivery truck and stepped out of the cab into darkness thick as pond water; he had to swim toward surface, toward moon: the diner's *Coors* sign.

A bell shook when he opened the door, and he walked up to the bar where a tall man sat hunched. A wide waitress showed her face, and the driver asked for anything the kitchen was willing to serve up this late. She nodded, bobbing her high, bleached hair, and disappeared. He sat three stools down from the bent man and took up a pen sitting by the register, a fake flower glued on top. He fingered the petals and looked down the counter. The man was backlit by the window's neon sign, mostly silhouette. Black, wavy hair, black jeans and black, wool shirt. His face was cloudy, indistinct, and the driver rubbed his eyes as though still seeing through sleet.

"Bad out," the driver said, after awhile. He waited and spun the pen petals, skittish, the loneliness of his cab more palpable beside this shadow man. "Too much weather. Thought I'd get a bite and wait it out. I'm hauling lumber up to Buffalo, gone down to Georgia and back. The South gives me the creeps." The flower tore loose, so he took up a salt shaker. "I've got a girl in Buffalo I stay with. Glad to be clear of that curvy route, but slick highway can kill whether it's straight or not."

The waitress brought out a Reuben and some chips, along with his bill to say she wouldn't be open long. She glanced at the man in black, but his bill lay unnoticed, no cash on the counter. The chips were stale.

"Where you from?" the driver asked the slumped man.

“No home to speak of. I lay my head where it’s fit.” The man didn’t turn, just scooted his plate away, untouched eggs and toast. Slow movement, like moving in his sleep. Talking in his sleep, too, his voice hollow and dreamlike.

“You been south?”

“Yessir. I been south a everyplace. But you go to the far reaches, and God still there.”

Sauerkraut stuck in the driver’s teeth. He felt cold. “Must be your delivery truck out there. What is it you deliver?”

“Used to be the word a God. Truck’s near empty.” The man unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his black sleeves, studying the clock. He rubbed his hands together, as if at a spigot. He turned, coal-black eyes set in a ghost’s face, and the driver’s cold sank into bone. The man raised his voice: “‘I’ll pour out my spirit,’ sayeth the Lord. ‘Your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.’ Blood and fire and billows of smoke. Day’s a coming.” His deep voice nearly sang, such timbre.

The driver thought him drunk, but saw only a coffee mug by the plate of food.

“I see things.” The man looked up at the clock again, as though expecting someone. “I see dark things, boy. Coming at me, like”—he took a quick swipe with his right hand. “I see the cat’s dumb, ain’t mewling no song, right there in the straw.” He pointed to the floor, under the stools between them. “Little bird caged up. Don’t nobody know to splint its wing? But nobody doing it. And that ain’t all.” He slid off the stool, wagging his finger, and walked over to the driver, who’d quit chewing. “I seen a serpent, by and by, one a them thick, rope bodies you could pull out the ground to no end. It’s waiting in a burlap sack—hot. Mean. It waits for a fool to take it up in the name a hisself. You deal in fire again’ God, you get paid in burns.” Rubbing his arms up and down, eyes black, but each swirling, the white of them like ice vapor. “I see it, I can almost reckon the hands who’s doing it. Now you tell me”—he slapped the counter hard—“is them visions, or is them dreams? Young men’ll see visions, and old men’ll dream dreams—which is it, boy?”

Sirens sounded right outside the diner, and the driver jumped, police lights bluing the walls and the man’s pale, steady face.

“No telling which,” the man said. “I ain’t young, I ain’t old. I see more besides, some from the past: a baby dead ’fore it got born. I still see that, and some still to come. All of it bitter.” He pulled a key from his jeans pocket and set it on the driver’s scribbled bill. Car doors slammed shut outside. “You take the truck. Them sirens for me. Day’s come.” He walked slowly to the door, muttering,

“Sun shall be turned to darkness on that day, alright, and the moon to blood.”

“What’s your name?” the driver blurted.

“Got no name.” The man didn’t turn. “You call on the Lord’s name, son. Them that call out shall be saved.”

The bell shivered, and the waitress came out from the kitchen with her hand on her hair. She and the driver watched the window as the man raised his arms in surrender, his sleeves still rolled. He raised them high and outspread, the way the driver had once seen a TV preacher, sweaty and gold-toothed, lift his hands to shout praises, to say *Glory*.

# Aimee

.....

THE LEMLEY SISTERS HAD DECIDED they would drive to the prison on the first Monday in August, but on that morning Aimee woke with bad pain. It was still dark—not yet five. She peeled off her blanket and top sheet, rolled to her side and drew up her body. She pulled her knees to her chin like a child, her cotton nightgown worn sheer.

Aimee wondered if she would be able to go through with it, and if she did, if she stood before him like some shy, sweet thing in the doorway, what would she say? She felt her hair, the black waves just long enough to fall onto her lips as she lay there. Would he say something about it being cut short? Would he say anything at all?

Aimee unbent herself and rose from bed, walked barefoot down the hallway laid with yellow linoleum. She splashed her face at the kitchen sink, since you could hear the bathroom faucet rattle the pipes from any room in the doublewide, and she didn't want to wake Crystal yet, or their mom, Dotte. She touched her abdomen, hot through the gown, where the pain slowly lazed into her with bitterness—a cramp that would set in. She ate a slice of American cheese and left the wrapper, started coffee. She put her hand to the warped window-screen above the sink, trying to feel a breeze that would not come. These endless days of drought seemed to Aimee like a punishment, for though the sky was burdened with rain, it refused relief. If that thick air could somehow be gathered like a dishrag, then she—Aimee Jo Lemley—would wring the rain from it, would bring on more rain than had flooded the Donnie Manse River in 1985.

A car passed on the road, throwing its lights against her. In the flash, Aimee looked to the back of her hand, trailed her eyes up her arm, then down to her breasts, to her belly rising with breath under the thin cotton, that pink-white

skin showing through. She fixed her eyes on her flesh in the brief light, memorizing what she saw like it was Scripture. Then it went dark.

Crystal came into the kitchen through that long-chute hallway, silent as a ghost in the doorframe. Color-poor and mannish, she had already dressed in their daddy's old work jeans, same as the day before, and a throwaway blouse with a soiled front missing the fifth button.

"Shouldn't go to such trouble to dress up," Aimee said to her, meaner than she meant. Behind Crystal, she could see a smoky light float out from under Dotte's door at the end of the hall, but nobody came out.

Aimee drove the white pickup north on Route 40 and carried on her usual one-sided conversation. Crystal hadn't spoken in ten years, and silence had changed her. For the most part, she moved more like other people's shadows than like her own self.

They had never seen the Cuzzert Correctional Facility, but they knew where it was. A big sign marked the turnoff, but even without the sign you could tell when you were getting close, because the pavement on the road in was all new, starting right around King's Service Station. Pitch-black asphalt and perfect, like no other road in the county. When Cuzzert people talked about the prison, they talked about the road that got paved, not the facility itself. In truth, hardly any of them had seen it—it was a country, or maybe a whole world, apart.

"Aubrey ain't there yet," Aimee said. "He don't teach till nine. Should probably wait till he's there, so he can set up everything. We go this early, and we gonna sit and wait it out. Too damn early, 'fore work like this. Crys, you bring cigarettes? I need a damn cigarette." She rolled down the window and propped her arm up to feel the wind. When Aimee swore, she still sounded new at it. She said only a few words—*damn, shit, hell*. She never swore to God or said *goddamn* or even *for Christ's sake*; she'd say *for Pete's sake, for goodness' sake*, which put her swearing off-kilter. But she'd heard once that taking the Lord's name in vain was a new nail in Jesus' palm, and besides Crystal and maybe Aubrey Falls, Jesus was the one Aimee adored and protected. She knew Crystal hated filthy talk, and she knew Crystal had no Pall Malls. She also knew—because Crystal sat with her left hand in an absolute, unyielding fist like a knot of pine—that it would not be easy for Aimee to turn around and drive right back home, which she very much meant to do.

"Hershel Dunmire come into the shop the other day, give me grape Bubble Tape. That stuff'll cost a buck-fifty at the Family Dollar. Well, I chewed it all

morning, and it turned to paste on my teeth, so I look at him pouty, you know, and give it back to him. 'I can't have this,' I told him, 'it'll make my teeth ugly.' He looked about to bawl, but he took it back. Sat in his chair the rest the day holding it. His poor mind's so balled up, Crys. He don't always wash, you know. He shit his pants that once, but I act like I don't know nothing. Can't do nothing else. I done told his sister-in-law who keeps him, but she's up in her seventies like him, so she can't do him no better."

Aimee bounced her hand on the gear shift as she talked. Crystal was looking out the window, toward the fence posts along the road, their rusted barbwire lost to thicket. She nodded to Aimee now and again, seeming not to affirm any one part of the monologue, but it was clear she listened. Even more than that, she suffered Aimee's meandering and heard the deepest tones beneath, like the unsung harmonies of a hymn. Aimee never thought Crystal vacant, but that didn't mean she didn't feel lonely in the truck cab with her sister's silence and her fist, with that calm way she slipped her yellow hair behind her ear.

"Hershel's stuck on me like a fly on barn tape," Aimee chattered on, "and Jimmy don't care if he's there, 'cause he's back in the garage all day. None of them guys mind him. They think he's a piece of furniture, 'cept for Aubrey. Sweet Aubrey Falls buys him a Coke every time he comes in, opens the damn can for him. If Aubrey ain't showed up to teach, then we probably can't get in anyhow. Probably need permission from some guard. Whole world's drying up, seems like. Hotter than the hubs of hell, and it ain't even six, yet. Shit, Crys, this ain't getting no better—my stomach's killing me."

Crystal looked over at her, and Aimee thought she saw something give, a small flow of pity spurting forth that would surely grow to a gushing and allow her to turn the truck around. But Crystal's fist stayed tight on her thigh. She looked past Aimee then, out the driver-side window. Aimee followed the path of her eyes to the Cuzzert Pike sign as they passed it, to the turnoff down a gravel road overhung with the shaggy gray of barren crabapple trees. To the goldenrod, dying of thirst but almost pretty, lining the pike's ditch. To Glorybound Holiness Tabernacle where they knew it sat, six miles down the gravel road, out of sight. And beyond that, to the strip mine. After the Cuzzert Pike junction, the only breaks in the fencerow with its attending brier bushes were the occasional dirt drives and a few right-of-way swaths for power lines.

Aimee kept quiet for awhile and tugged at the collar of her long-sleeved top. She'd taken it from Dotte's closet the night before, along with a skirt to her

ankles. Her mom wouldn't miss the clothes, since she'd grown too broad to wear them.

Aimee had no dresses of her own that would suit a prison visit. She no longer kept the high collars and long skirts. Dotte used to make all the girls' dresses, stiff calico prints, blouses buttoned to the top or hooked into an eye in back, close to the neck as a choker chain. Aimee's dresses were flimsy now, not like the ones handsewn. She'd just bought a mint sundress, low-cut almost to her navel. She safety-pinned it some, but that made little difference in what it showed off. Her dresses were mint, now, and black and hard yellow and indigo; they fell mid-thigh in a ruffle. They were red-ribboned, like a bleeding fish in water. In the truck cab, she pulled at her collar and flipped the visor down then up, traced the circle of the steering wheel round and round. Crystal kept looking out the window. Her cornsilk hair, tied back, lay limp across her left shoulder. Beside Crystal's drab stillness, beside the fist she kept firm in her lap, Aimee's constant hand movements, with her nails painted red, were wild and frantic, as though she were trying to get unstuck from a web of wet spider thread. Flamboyant. Even her despair was flamboyant.

As soon as the road looked smooth up ahead, Aimee held her breath long enough to hear the tires hit the seam in the asphalt where the new paving started. Then she saw the steel sign grow from the berm as they rounded the bend: *Cuzzert Correctional Facility for Men, 15 Miles*. So strange and foreign, bright heavy letters coming out of nowhere like that. The old wood fence posts bowed low before the sign.

Aimee took an immediate left and pulled into the lot at King's Service Station. She let the engine idle, then stall, and she didn't start it again. *In service to the King*, it said on the awning over the single gas pump. And beside the pump, on a new sign staked in the gravel: *Year 2000 Coming Soon—R U Ready 4 Jesus?* in big black letters. At one time, a sign like that would have pricked Aimee like a thorn and made her anxious, but this morning she read it with a stone face and squinted at the service station window, looking for the poster that announced the price of cigarettes. She adored Jesus, but she felt he would take his good-old time coming back to this world, and she wasn't too sure he'd be looking for her when he came.

King's wasn't open yet. The sky was barely turning light, but the August heat already brought sweat to Aimee's underarms. She propped her left arm on the door again to let herself breathe.

"You know the prison people bought the Sisler farm for like half of what they shoulda paid? Aubrey told me that; I don't know how he found it out. He

just knows things 'cause he's college educated. It was still a shitload of money, though. Was Ronnie Sisler between us in school? I think he was. Remember how foul he was 'fore he got saved? That boy liked to butcher with his daddy when they did the broilers. Pushed on their bellies to make 'em squawk through their windpipe when they didn't have no heads. He brought a chicken head to school one time, I remember that. Then his daddy died, and he met the Lord. Just like that—gentle as a pup.”

Aimee looked out the window as Agnes Felton pulled into the lot. Agnes took her time gathering herself and her purse from the car, plucking at her perfect crown of black curls before unlocking the front door of the station. The lights came on, and the *Open* sign burned bright green. Aimee wanted to buy a pack of Pall Malls, but she didn't get out.

“Ronnie quit school when we did—or did he finish? I think he finished maybe, 'fore his mom shipped him out. Buddy, he learned that church guitar quick, after he got saved, had that sweet voice. You two was right much the song-birds.” She looked hard at Crystal, harder than she meant. It was cruel to speak of Ronnie, but she needed Crystal to break apart, to let their old pickup turn back toward home and let that prison stay fifteen miles out, a world unto itself.

“You know, you never wore no filthy blouse like that when he was around, and them big jeans. You almost twenty-six years old, and you dressing like a damn hobo.” Crystal didn't look over, but she held her fist in her other hand, cradled it. “Ronnie done went down to the city, right? Down Charleston? I remember Mom said he took up snakes down there—down in the city! Doing strychnine and everything, copperheads. It's the damn nineties for Pete's sake, they living in the dark ages. And people say *we're* backward holy rollers and shit. I never thought Ronnie'd turn like that—too soft. I expect he's probably dead—you know if he's dead?”

Crystal unlatched her door and got out of the truck. She stood facing Route 40, her fist at her side like she was ready to take a swing, and Aimee suddenly wanted to feel that fist hit her mouth. She clutched the steering wheel and felt mean and sank down into the meanness—not sure how else to be—the way she sank down onto her pile of cheap dresses on the floor of her room, all those dresses she heaped around herself like costumes, none of them fitting right. Even though she picked them off the store racks herself, somebody else was pulling them onto her doll-pretty body. Aimee knew Crystal knew everything she did about Ronnie Sisler and more besides. And they'd both heard the stories Dotte told from inside her cloud of smoke, her new glory—a Pall Mall glory—in her cardigan sweater tied with a skirt belt overtop of her

nightgown. Dotte had just started dressing like that when this Ronnie Sisler episode came across the church prayer chain over the phone with a call from Miriam Louks. The way their mom told it, with her yellowed eyes, put it in Aimee's mind like a movie scene, and she dreamt about Ronnie that night, his neck lined with a coil of innumerable snakes, and he was singing "Victory in Jesus." She never told Crystal that dream because she was afraid it was a prophecy, and she knew Crystal loved him.

"I do wonder if Ronnie Sisler's dead," Aimee said to herself. "Might as well be. People that up and leave us, they might as well be dead." She got out of the truck and went around the front end to where her sister faced the road.

"You really wanna go?" Aimee asked.

Crystal kept fixed on the road, on where it disappeared around a bend up ahead, black and wavy like thick oil.

"If you wanna go, you can walk from here."

Crystal didn't budge.

"If you want to go, say so, dammit!" Aimee laughed a dry laugh then sent her voice into a deeper pitch, loud like a preacher's, like their daddy's preaching voice.

"See here, Sister, I see signs that it ain't yet time," and she made a big mocking sweep with her arm toward Route 40, as though showing Crystal the breadth of the given signs. "No, it ain't yet time."

Aimee laughed again, softer, and let her voice slide back into a plainer register. "I for one ain't ready, Crys. I ain't ready to look at Daddy's face through a piece of damn glass and say who the hell knows what."

Crystal finally looked at her then, and Aimee felt see-through and let herself stay that way for as long as Crystal looked. When she looked back at the road again, Aimee whispered, "Please. Can't we just wait till tomorrow? I promise I'll go tomorrow." She went back to the truck and got in the driver seat.

Crystal turned from the road and climbed back into the other side of the cab. She put her hands in her lap, her fist relaxing, opening upward in a pale cup. When Aimee saw it, she felt the submission, and she turned the key. They were two weak sticks—bent then stepped on. They cracked so easy.

But it was going to be hard to explain to Aubrey why they hadn't shown. He would be watching for them, a boy too sweet for his own good. He'd be eager for the reunion of the daughters with their convict daddy, pretty as a picture.

"You see that heat lightning, Crys? Just now? Weird in the morning like that. 'Course it won't rain, though." She shifted into first and pulled out, taking a right, back the way they'd come.

“We dying for the rain. But I got wash to do anyhow. I’m so cramped up, I’ll call Jimmy and take off sick. And I’ll do the wash.”

# Aubrey

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THE FIRST TIME AUBREY HAD MET HER, he'd called her by the name embroidered above *The Muffler Barn* on her shirt. *Aimee* in yellow curlicues. The shirt hugged tightly to her chest, unbuttoned low in the front. Aubrey looked everywhere except down that shirt, then tried to buy the first pack of cigarettes of his life.

It was the fall of 1998, and Aubrey had just moved to Cuzzert, West Virginia. He felt reborn and purposeful, or at least tried to convince himself he felt that way. He was about to start up classes in town and at the nearby prison. He'd also started drinking percolated coffee that made his head buzz as he would repeat to himself, "I'm really doing something here," a mantra that helped him overcome his shyness. He was muttering this affirmation as he walked into the Muffler Barn with a flier about the GED class and saw Aimee pull a wholesale carton of Camels from behind the counter. She slid them over the dirty Formica to a shuffling woman who wore house slippers and whose hair, when Aubrey got in line behind her, smelled like motor oil and sulfurous water.

"Sign here, Esther," Aimee said. She glanced at Aubrey, then slipped her short black hair behind her ear to show a naked lobe, no earring. She shifted her weight and flicked at the counter with her red fingernails. Her eyes were such a pretty black—almost too pretty—and Aubrey had to look everywhere but at those eyes and at that shirt that clung to her. But nothing he looked at in the room registered, except for an old man sitting on a wooden office chair next to the counter, fiddling with a collection of rubber bands around his wrist.

Esther took what felt to Aubrey like a decade to sign the yellow paper that had written on the top—he had plenty of time to read—"IOU for 1 box," and across from it on the right-hand side, "\$17.00." No date and no shop insignia of any sort, nothing else at all but Esther's painstaking, childlike signature.

“See you next month, then,” Aimee said, and the old woman scuffed out with the Camels pinned under her armpit and her hand in her slacks pocket, the way a businessman carries a newspaper on the street.

“You got a car needs worked on?” Aimee asked Aubrey without looking at him as she stuck the signed slip onto a nail behind her, on top of a collection of identical slips punched through with the nail.

He blanked, forgot about the flier he held at his side.

She turned around. “I ain’t got all day,” said her perfect mouth.

Then he said, too loud, “I’ll have a pack of cigarettes please, Aimee.” Either her face or the thought of smoking a cigarette, or both, produced an acrid taste in his mouth like metal.

“We don’t sell cigarettes here,” she said. “If you want a oil change or a tune up, or you want Jimmy to look under your hood, that we do.”

Aubrey felt her black eyes studying him, looking him over; he thought she lingered on the white *Loyola* on his green T-shirt neatly tucked in. She slurred the word “oil” into a single syllable—“ole change,” she said it, so sweetly. He thought she was making fun of him, or herself, as though she were acting out a caricature. Still, he liked the way it sounded.

“But you just sold that lady a whole carton,” he said, aware of his own crisp voice.

“To Esther Moats, yessir, every first of the month on credit. What you got there?” She nodded at the flier in his hand.

The old man on the wooden office chair beside the counter quit playing with the rubber bands on his wrist. He looked up and said, “Esther Moats, first of the month. And Gary Wayne, but he come in for chew.” And he bowed again over the rubber bands, reordering them or counting them like a rosary.

“Well,” said Aubrey, feeling his body go stiff.

“What you got, I asked?” Aimee started to smile.

“A flier.” He handed it to her. “We’re starting a GED class and job training in town. Maybe you could post this on your door.”

“I got a job and don’t need no GED.”

“It’s a high school equivalency. For people who didn’t graduate.”

“What’re you assuming?”

“Nothing. I’m not assuming anything. I just thought you could hang it up, for customers.”

“This made on a computer?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t need no diploma if you gonna be a woman-prophet of God.”

"Excuse me?"

"You done heard me."

"A prophet of God. Are you—a prophet?" He was ready to laugh, but not until she did first, and once she laughed, then he'd be able to leave and spit out this metal secreting from his gums.

"I will be," she said, straight-faced. Even her smile disappeared.

"But you're not yet?"

"Nope, not yet."

"What are you waiting for?"

"God's time."

"How long have you been waiting?"

"Almost ten years."

"Ten years?"

"You asking a hell of a lot of questions."

"Sorry." Aubrey could see the dull silvery top of her camisole as she leaned forward, lower and lower, over the counter. "Sorry," he said again.

"What for?" Her smile crept back into her mouth.

"Why'd you quit, Aimee?"

"Quit what?"

"School."

"Cause my daddy died, and the sun come up. Why you looking down my shirt?" She wasn't wearing a bra, and he couldn't look anywhere anymore except at that silver camisole. "You're slick with my name, so what's your name, guy?"

"Aubrey Falls."

"He falls, indeed. You tell me, Mr. Aubrey Falls, do you know the Lord Jesus in a personal way? As the Lord of your salvation?"

He said nothing to that, just exhaled a quick, metal-coated breath. He retreated quickly into himself. He felt like a character in some ridiculous movie, playing the butt of the joke, how he'd always felt when he left his college friends' late parties alone and walked down the streets in Chicago, looking at his face in shop windows, in search of someone who took him seriously. This strange woman, this angel-faced girl with a skimpy work shirt and a voice that slipped its long fingers around him, did not take him seriously.

"Come here," Aimee said quietly, glancing over at the rubber-band man who didn't seem to be watching. "Lean on over here for a girl gonna be a woman-prophet."

Aubrey couldn't move. He heard his dad's voice in his head, that doctor-voice

speaking under an icy sheet of irony when they had once watched a televangelist endorse a city councilman on his show, the two suited men shaking hands on the screen. “Politicians and prophets,” his dad had said. “Two roles played by the same clown.” When Aubrey’s dad had died, another physician had offered the eulogy in that same clinical voice.

“Come on,” Aimee said, and Aubrey leaned in with some effort, his body like lead.

“Little closer,” she said. He was close enough to taste the smoke and, underneath, the black coffee of her mouth, and she whispered, “Do you know that I’m a virgin, and I plan to stay one till I’m a prophet, till after the trials and the tribulation and the Battle of Armageddon, when the trump shall sound?” She reached down in a flash and swiped her hand hard over the front of his pants, and he leaped back stunned.

“Ain’t nobody who flinches worth the powder to blow him up!” she said and started laughing, and the rubber-band man, who had in fact been watching, cackled harshly. Aubrey backed up to the shop door, feeling his whole body turn red, feeling the buzz in his head swell with his purposeful mantra and this woman’s gaping shirtfront and his dad’s voice, and it all burst into tiny shards of laughter that pounced on him from everywhere in the shop. He felt his own recognition of himself dissolve into the black pools of Aimee’s eyes as she laughed.

“Yeah,” she said. “I’ll stick this here flier up for you, Aw-brey.” And she pierced the flier onto the nail, on top of Esther Moats’ credit records.

# Aimee

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IT WAS STILL EARLY MORNING when Aimee pulled the wet laundry from the washer on the back screen porch. After she and Crystal had come home from King's and emptied out of the truck cab like heavy water, Crystal had left for work on foot. Aimee had watched her out the window until the pale ponytail went blurry. Now, Aimee hefted the basket to her hip with one arm, pulled on Tingley overshoes without her canvas shoes underneath and slipped out the screen door, careful, out of habit, not to make the spring whine.

Morning fog was burned off already. A few of the trailers in the Painted Rocks Estates park had lights on, enough to show Aimee a number of faces still creased with sleep, and they could see her if they looked out. The Lemleys' was the only doublewide in the park, the first place on the left as you pulled in. When the park had been new, theirs was the showcase trailer you could walk through, and then you put your name on the list for one of the others. The guy would say, "Remember it'll be half this size," but people most likely forgot. The Lemleys got the place years later, after the bank foreclosed on whoever had the doublewide at that time. It was no longer a showcase by then, but blue lattice framed the front door and front cinder-block steps, and Aimee and Crystal had found that pretty, along with the rocks at the park's entrance, with red paintings on them. Indian paintings, the bank man had said, unearthed when they'd dug for the park's septic tanks. Later, Joshie Dixon, who lived one trailer back, told Aimee the paintings weren't done by Indians at all. "Girl, everything 'round here's a sham." He had looked sad for a second, then he'd twisted his face up and pinched her.

Aimee started with the underwear on the clothesline at the back of the three lines that ran the length of the trailer, post to post, gathered and propped in the middle by a long stick cut like a slingshot. The lines were shared by the

eight trailers on the Lemleys' half of the park. She started with the underwear on that line, farthest from the road that pulled in from Route 40, closest to the Dixons' kitchen window, but their blinds were down.

She pulled each piece from the broken Rubbermaid basket, shook it once, clasped it to the line, and let the wind slip through and around. She hung the towels in a solid sheet of terry, the socks haphazard among the work pants and blocky shirts that Crystal wore and the few underthings that Dotte had put in the wash. Not much else from Dotte, since she hardly ever dressed. And then Aimee's own dresses, upside down with the slight sleeves or straps dangling.

Before starting the green washing machine, Aimee had changed from the blouse and the long skirt, though she didn't return them, and wouldn't till midday, when Dotte would come out of her bedroom and drink her coffee cold. Aimee had peeled her slip from her sweaty body and found a spot of blood on the back, her period coming early. So that's what had summoned the pain in her abdomen. She had put the slip in the wash and kept near-naked for three cool minutes. She'd chosen her new, short, mint dress, hadn't safety-pinned it, low in the front and all but backless, made of T-shirt cotton.

Now, between her legs, a hum—always there when she hung the dresses. She felt her body when she pinned them up. She felt a peculiar union between her body and her spirit and her wet dresses, all three flying just a little off the ground, wild but held fixed by two clothespins.

She pulled her peach-colored dress from the pile and shook it. It was the only dress in the basket that her mom had made for her. It was simple and unadorned, yoked at the waist; she'd had it since high school, but her figure hadn't changed much even into her early twenties, so it still fit. On Sundays, she wore the dress to Glorybound Holiness Tabernacle. The short sleeves of the dress ended blunt. The neckline veed just to her collarbone—no lower—and into a line of pearl-headed buttons rimmed with fake silver. Aimee despised the dress but loved the buttons—always had. She fingered them and saw that one was coming loose. They were hard to keep on the dress, the kind of button sewn on through the post sticking out the back not through a pair of holes or a set of four with a sure crisscross of thread. The buttons flopped and could catch easy on a table if she bumped it, but they were elegant if you didn't look too close.

"These buttons would break your heart, Daddy," she said out loud. And her body hummed; it hummed deep. Her cramps still twisted inside her, but the hum was more and more, the hum that was always responding, like a hymn of response after a Word, responding to a nonspecific shame.

“Break your heart, bray-ek your heart,” in a sort of airy song she said it. The tiny straps of an upside-down dress caught at her bare leg. “Nunh-unh,” she said. “No you don’t,” and she kicked them away. She looked at the peach dress with the pearls going down single file, and she gently plucked a button from it.

“And this is for old June, may she rest in peace,” making like she was placing it on a gravestone in front of her. “We still breaking hearts.” And she laughed and threw the pearl button hard toward the road. It skittered to a secret spot in the ditch, and the humming slid all up inside her. Her love for June was a bronzed, blessed thing that she reached for when she couldn’t shake off the shame.

June Tatum was dead now four years, but during services at Glorybound her chair was still unfolded with the rest and set with white asters, or dried bitersweet if it was winter.

When Aimee had been a child and had looked at June, she’d felt hints of things she hadn’t understood: sympathy, gratefulness, awe, blackness, a mean little joy.

June Tatum had been a regular at Glorybound, considered by the small congregation to be a woman-prophet, different from men-prophets in that she had been allowed to prophesy but not to lead from up front. It was the men who led. It was Aimee’s daddy, Reverend Cord Lemley, who led.

June was both revered and pitied. She sat in the front row of metal folding chairs beside the altar bench and *amen*ed and *praisejesused* with her deep-toned voice when Aimee’s daddy would get preaching. June was a big woman, and she wore the same dress every week: a two-piece skirt and top, dark blue with huge white lilies all over it, with strained elastic around the skirt’s waist, short sleeves that puffed then narrowed just above the elbow where her fleshy arms bulged out. And the dress top had five big buttons down the front, each a diamond set in a rim of metal—maybe pewter—in a pattern that reminded Aimee of the wrought-iron railing on the Tabernacle steps. Five fat jewels down June’s mountainous front. The buttons sparkled if the Sunday light found them through the single window.

As a little girl, Aimee sat with Crystal in the second row, opposite June, beside their mom and behind their daddy’s preaching chair, where he sat before worship began. Once it began, he stood up front and paced and swaggered and jumped like an acrobat on fire. The people of Glorybound Holiness Tabernacle met in the redone basement of a coal company house, owned by Miriam Louks’ aunt before she died and donated it for the church. It was built in the thirties,

when Cuzzert was a coal mining town and every man was either a miner or under the age of fifteen.

Miriam, skinny and tough as a strip of leather, lived upstairs and kept the basement clean. She broom-swept the green carpet that covered the cement floor, the carpet worn thin from the stomping and dancing that people did when they rose from their folding chairs. Miriam washed down the bathroom where, beside the toilet, she'd written on a card in neat cursive: "Please don't flush tissue down unless you truly must." She had plugged a Glade potpourri fixture into the wall outlet, but she'd never replaced it; it had browned, and it clung there like a locust hull. She and Dotte had decorated the Tabernacle with various framed pictures of Jesus: him under rays of light or in bronze shadow, with the thorny crown and then without, with the beads of blood-sweat and then a clean, pale-marble forehead. Miriam also managed what Aimee and Crystal called "the numbers." On a board she got from the Methodists—a hanging board with slats and movable numbers—she recorded the weekly attendance, the record attendance, the love-offering amounts. None of the numbers she posted ever went above thirty.

The girls braided each other's hair or rooted around in their mom's purse for the first half of every service, until Cord's preaching went loud and the electric faith of the Glorybound worshippers shot around the room. Then the girls sat up and watched and raised their hands and waved the handkerchiefs they'd pulled from the pockets of Dotte's purse. They watched June Tatum as she rocked, second row back, as her buttons glinted then went dull. Aimee wondered—though she never asked—how June Tatum, who wore the same dress every week, could have those special buttons.

June walked with a cane. She was a couple hundred pounds overweight and blind, which was one reason why they said she was a woman-prophet, because a prophet has to go without something, and she went without sight. Even though she was blind, people said she could open the Bible and speak the Word on that page, and Aimee and Crystal believed it was true though they'd never seen her do it. June wore her gray hair back in a ratty ponytail, in a white scrunchy, like the kind Aimee saw the high school girls wear. What drew Aimee's gaze, besides the buttons, was June's grizzled face. June shaved her upper lip and jaw and chin, just like a man. She was the only woman with stubble that Aimee had ever seen, so she obsessed over June, wondered when she had started shaving and why. If she was blind, and she felt hair on her face, then how did she know women shouldn't have hair there? Did she go around feeling other women's faces for comparison? Or did somebody tell

her about it—Aimee suspected that the leathery Miriam Louks was the kind of person who would tell her about it. And since June was blind, did she cut herself ever? Aimee knew June missed some parts altogether; some patches were thicker than others, varied like a cut field. She couldn't have shaved very often, because the stubble was thick whenever Aimee saw her, on Sundays and on days when they spotted June at the Save-a-Lot grocery and Dotte made a point to speak to her.

When June rocked forward into a shout and back into a murmur, the chair strained under her. Aimee watched and wanted more than anything to touch June's face. She knew a prophet was meant for something, and in secret she thought maybe the stubble proved June was meant to be a man, a man who would lead from up front, different from the way her daddy did. And she wondered if the stubble would be soft. Not like Daddy's—sandpaper half a day after he shaved.

One Sunday, Crystal leaned over to Aimee's ear, just before the hymn of invitation when the church would get wavery and hot, and she whispered: "Dare you to touch June Tatum's face." That was all she said; then she straightened her sock on her right foot to make it look like that's why she had leaned over. Aimee sat very still. She had never breathed a word about June's face to Crystal, but Crystal always knew more than she said, even before she stopped speaking. Aimee nodded her head down as their daddy moved into a prayer of preparation and getting-right before the hymn started, but she nodded back up and shot a glance at June.

June's eyes, mostly white like a poached egg, were wide open, and her head, instead of bowed, was facing up, blotchy red with sweat and shining some. The mixed feelings sputtered up in Aimee: she felt so sorry for the huge woman, and she felt so cruel, but she also felt so much hope. She touched her own face absently, a face she knew to be pear-colored and smooth and rosy in the right spots. Lovely. She knew it even young—before everyone said so—a face framed by her long, black hair that held its waves like shelves for the light to sit on. She could not interpose herself, she knew—could not take on June's self and give June her own doll self. But that is what she wanted. Out of pity and envy both.

"Okay, I'll do it," she whispered, "but next week."

Crystal grinned with her eyes squinted shut.

The following Sunday, as the people filed in, Aimee sat in the chair beside June's. June tapped her way to the chair and sat, seemingly unaware of Aimee's presence. June had worn the same dress, of course. This was the closest Aimee

had ever been, and the buttons lured her. She sat close enough to see June's nostrils flare as she breathed heavy—close enough to see that the diamonds in the buttons of the dark blue dress were fake—maybe even plastic—glued cockeyed in their mounts of dull, tin grate, which looked itself to be gray plastic, but she couldn't tell without touching. And she remembered that's why she was there—she'd planned all week to touch June's stubbled jaw line during the opening prayer when everybody would be bowed down and no one would see her do it.

Aimee felt hot as her daddy started with a prayer murmur, a murmur that she knew would crescendo into a calling-down of the Spirit to anoint him with a Word to say in the name of Jesus. She felt the heat drift down from June's body, too, and drape her face, her bare ankles below her dress and her hands, like a hot mist. Both of June's hands perched on her cane in front of her. They were pale and helpless, strangely small compared to the rest of her, and they quivered to the rhythms of her watery breathing. June's hands looked to Aimee like the small minnows she'd caught when she had gone fishing with Crystal once at their cousin's pond, and they'd not pulled the line quick enough, and the minnows had swallowed the oversized hooks. Their stomachs tore when Aimee and Crystal pulled; the girls knew no way to get the hooks out. Crystal cut the lines on both of their poles and lay the fish side by side on the bank of the pond. One flopped over on top of the other, as though to die in a small heap were a comfort.

"Might we be supple in your hands, O God—break us and make us, O God, O glory, *break* our hearts and make us again, like clay in your hands." Her daddy was praying, getting louder now, with the soft, cooing, *yes-oh-yes* chorus of the people in the folding chairs gathering after his words like the little minnows in Aimee's mind, swimming after baited hooks.

"Make us bold, Lord God, in the Holy Ghost power." Cord stomped, then. "Yes, Lord, I say 'yes,' and we ain't leaving till you do, I say." He stomped twice, and a cry came from the back, a shrill echo, "*Ain't* leaving," and Cord answered the cry, "We say, '*ain't* leaving,'" and some chairs grated on the thin carpet as a few people stood. The final "amen" was nearing when Aimee knew all would stand and swerve and sweat and the basement would tremble, so, with no further meditation, she reached up to June Tatum's face and stroked the thick jaw with her fingertips.

At Aimee's touch, June shot up out of the chair quicker than Aimee would have thought possible. Crystal laughed a choked laugh from the other side of the room. June's empty eyes looked wildly around, obeying instinct. When

she stood up, the third fake-diamond button on her dress caught on the back lip of the chair in front of her, and the button shot off onto the green carpet in the corner. June wheeled around, pivoted on her cane looking lost and walked out of the basement as quickly as she could, which was a halted and awkward operation even so. The “amen” must have come by then, because eyes were open and looking at the door that June left ajar behind her. Aimee held her left hand in her right and searched for any eyes that had seen what she’d done. She found Miriam Louks watching her from a few seats back, that prim mouth in a sour pucker. Aimee’s daddy emerged from his prayer as though from a deep cave and plowed right into the Word without looking up. Later in the service, maybe missing June’s usual affirmations, he glanced at her empty seat, and then at Aimee hugging herself and crying silently. Then he went on.

After the service, Miriam Louks scuttled around picking up, and she found the escaped dress button that Aimee had watched sparkle and dull intermittently in that corner all morning, a tiny reprimand. Miriam turned to two of the other women who were trying to figure out what had set June off—the Spirit? The toilet? Some kind of coughing fit coming? Aimee stood apart from the huddle of women, and Crystal slipped up beside her.

“What on earth moved her?” one of the women said, meaning to ask what had moved her heart but conjuring up in Aimee’s mind the difficulty of moving a mountain.

“Mercy, that dress,” Miriam said in a voice people reserved for prophets. A voice that coated over the mixed feelings that prophets drummed up in you, the pity and the jealousy, the gratitude and the horror, coated it all like Pepto-Bismol coats a sick stomach. Miriam closed the button into the skinny folds of her old-skin palm and looked at Aimee, saying, “Don’t those buttons just break your heart? Don’t they?” The other women *yessed* her, with the same coating-over the remorse and contempt and fear, but Aimee didn’t understand. How could buttons break your heart? Like her daddy had prayed to God to break their hearts—she’d heard him pray that a lot—to be *supple* was the word he used, and sometimes when he said it he made movements with his big hands like he was molding a pliable clay himself. *A button’s a button*, she wanted to say to Miriam Louks, and she wanted it back. It didn’t belong to Miriam, and Aimee suspected she would not give it to June to sew back on. And why didn’t her own buttons break Miriam’s heart? She thought, then, *Maybe they do*.

“What’d it feel like, Aimee? A porcupine face?” Crystal whispered.

“I don’t know. It felt wet,” Aimee said. “Maybe like grass.”

“I think she was crying when she went.” Crystal looked down, and Aimee

could tell she was sorry she had laughed out loud right when the button had flown off.

“It felt like moss,” Aimee said. It felt rough but soft, and she couldn’t decide between the two sensations. It did not feel like her daddy’s face when it was close to hers. Was it the only time June had ever been touched on the face? Sometimes people held her by the elbow and guided her—Aimee had seen that—but on her face, that was different. Surely someone touched her when she was little. Surely. And Aimee shut her eyes, tried to imagine what it might be like, hearing voices but feeling nothing for so long, seeing nothing and then, out of that nothing, the feel of fingers on her face.

Aimee shivered. She did not like to be touched or looked on as something lovely. Everyone touched her. Even now, Miriam reached for Aimee, stroked her long black hair as though petting a horse. People treated her like she was a pretty hollow bone, with no spirit whistling around inside, no prophet’s ache, just sawdust and a doll’s fiberfill stuffing.

*Now you see what it’s like*, is what she thought. It was a punishment for June, or an initiation. Or a gift.

Aimee imagined that June would feel her dress button missing, the threads spilling out loose like sprigs of a plant. June would have to get a new dress.

But the next week, the same dress had a new button—dull copper from a pair of jeans. When Aimee looked close, she read *Riders* on it. It somehow made June look more like a wild woman-prophet than ever. It made Aimee love her and follow her out of the basement that morning, to the edge of the road, like a disciple.

# Cord

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#96309

May 12, 1999

Describe a time when you made a change in your life for the better.

*This is my cursive letters. Let me know if you want print. You can maybe read it better. We do not make the changes. God does and I can tell you I been changed. I was born in 1958 close here, about a hours drive south in Roane. I lost my Mama when I was 7 and my Daddy was a drunk and growed me up to be a drunk. When I was 15 I was in sin with a girl of simple mind and I was half the day drunk and the other half fighting to no purpose. I got my girl pregnant. She was 15 also and we neither of us had money to feed a child. There aint no way to change that but by the power of the Lord. I can tell you the day and the hour when He saved me. July 14 of 1973 when the power went out.*

*It was storming and lightning something fierce. There was a Tent Preacher who come from someplace north we aint been at before. The thing was he went on preaching through the storm. That made people sit up and take notice, cause he could have been struck dead in the tent right there. Nobody went out to him. He just preached all night to empty chairs, but he knew people was watching from their windows. My girl and me did not stay near where the tent was set up, we stayed in the basement at her aunts house a mile out, but we was in town that night for a drink, even her pregnant and we could have drowned the baby in what we drank that night—mercy of God we did not. We got to watching the Tent Preacher from the bar window, we started laughing at him. It was raining hard, but we lifted up the window and started cursing at him. We called him a ugly old buzzard, cause he was bent over. He did not act like he heard for*

a long time, we just got louder, acting foul as we could, drunk out of our heads. Then he done something. He looked right to my eyes through that open window and he quit preaching. He had the Bible open, he stuck his finger in it to mark the page when he shut it and he started walking to me. It was raining so hard everything went flat, all his hair I mean and his suit clothes. He come up to the window, not even to the door, he had his eyes on me. He did not say nothing at first. He opened up the Word of God where he had it marked, there on the sill right in front of me, and he reached and took hold of my hand rougher than any man ever done me. He stretched my point finger and laid it on the open page of the Word and said—Read this here Son. I do not know what happened to me, I was mighty mad he called me Son, but I was scared too, cause I knew I was in sin and deserved to die. I looked down and I read out loud where my finger laid. I still know it by rote, from the 8 chapter of Luke—A woman having a issue of blood twelve years which had spent all her living upon physicians, neither could be healed of any, came behind Him, and touched the border of His garment, and immediately her issue of blood stanchd. And Jesus said, Who touched Me? When all denied, Peter and they that were with him said, Master, the multitude throng Thee and press Thee, and sayest Thou, Who touched Me? And Jesus said, Somebody hath touched Me, for I perceived power going out from Me.—And Buddy right then—glory to God—when I read the Power Going Out, the power in that bar done went out. Black as pitch. I mean black in that place. I lost all feeling in my fingers, my mouth went stone dry and nothing was realer to me than Jesus in that room. I started bawling like a baby and that Preacher prayed with me. God saved me right there. I was all His, I quit drinking cold turkey, I was changed inside and out. I had long hair at that time and I cut it short. My girl and me got married by the Tent Preacher, even though she was not right in the head. They said later on that lightning come in on the breaker and blew it, but that do not make it any less a sign. I spoke the Power Going Out like God calling that lightning down to me and I can tell you Buddy, God is keen to send His lightning. Do not be fooled. And up before that, about the woman having issues of blood, she was a bleeder and my Mama was too. That is what they told me when she died when I was 7—She was a bleeder, my Uncle Jack is one who said it. Then they buried her. So that was one sign. I read the signs. All of it is true. I would put my hand on the Bible and swear.

*(Boy you the only one reading this. I do not care to reveal my name here. Only that I am a earthen vessel for Gods glory. I am not one to say much to testify, cause I got a*

GLORYBOUND

*heap of shame right now, but you need the Lord. I will die here as I deserve. But we all here for glory. When I die you glorify God. This is too long now to redo the cursive in print. But let me know, I can do the next one in print.)*

# Crystal

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EARLIER THAT MONDAY MORNING, Crystal had stirred from bed before Aimee. She woke in a sweat, confusing the sounds of braking tractor trailers on Route 40 with the chorus of locusts that plagued her dream. She felt about her neck and thighs unconsciously for any locusts that might have pulled through the eddies between dream world and waking. She sat up and let the locusts' breath of fire go blue and cold.

Crystal did not sort through the vision. She dressed in the jeans and blouse hanging on the spike nail in the wall and sat on her bed, waiting in the dark. She heard Aimee's bed breathe open when her lovely body lifted from it, heard her get up and walk barefoot on the linoleum. So easy to hear through the makeshift wall of two-by-fours and particle board their daddy had put up to divide them when Crystal was fourteen and Aimee twelve. He'd promised to put up solid sheetrock when they could afford it and to paint the walls any color they wanted. Now, Crystal was nearly twenty-six, and she still lived by the rhythmic breathing-open and breathing-shut of Aimee's bed. The particle board was beginning to bow, curving slightly away. It cupped Aimee's sound and sent it through to Crystal so she could hear her sister's sleeping all the better.

When she foresaw her sister's figure at the sink—slight in the nightgown sewn for a teen girl—Crystal went to the hallway and looked down it to where the kitchen floor opened up. She remembered their daddy's tall frame and broad build, how he'd filled the long, narrow hall, blocking out the light behind him so she couldn't see his face when he spoke. She had never been sure, in those moments, whether the words had come from his mouth or from someplace else.

She walked to the kitchen, expecting Aimee to go back on her word, though Crystal hadn't decided whether or not she would let her call off the trip to the prison. Crystal also expected Aimee to say something mean and unintended

to her, as one expects a strike from a snake with its belly cut open and nothing to shield it.

Later, when they got back home from King's and closed the doors of the white pickup behind them, Crystal let Aimee go into the trailer first. She let the front screen door slap and then followed, up the two cinder-block steps. Her sleeve snagged on the faded blue lattice. Harsh splinters tore a tiny hole in the sleeve where it puffed out a little and showed the blouse to be feminine despite its work-filthy front. These splinters looked fresh, like someone had busted a piece in the lattice recently—could be the Dixon boys were throwing stones. The lattice needed fixing in other places, too, and Crystal would work at it when she got home from Cool Springs in the evening.

In her room, she changed the blouse for an old-but-clean white T-shirt of her daddy's, with *Jesus Saves* airbrushed in purple and gold. It hung loose on her torso. Her body was still young, her breasts like child breasts. She undid her hair and then tied it again, pulling its thin strings back from her plain broad face. She glanced in the mirror and closed her mouth to hide the teeth too large. With her mouth shut, she looked like she held marbles or barreled-up curses in there, ready to be spit. She left for work on foot, carrying nothing.

Crystal took a left on Route 40 for the half-hour walk into town, passing the field that served as grounds for the annual Coal Heritage Fair. It was early morning yet, and the rides were still closed up on themselves like jacks-in-the-box. Men had the tents spread flat on the patchy grass so thirsty for dew.

In town, she turned right on Manheim Road, which followed the Donnie Manse River. She walked past the cemetery, where the treeless river bank showed her the orange rocks and the sick sulfur water. The cemetery was only half real, people in Cuzzert said, since, when the river had flooded in 1985, it had unearthed the coffins and swept the headstones and the bodies of the dead downriver. The only grave it had left standing was that of Janey Close's stillborn baby, marked with a big stone cross, even though the baby had been buried for less than a year and its ground had not yet settled. People had reassembled the order of the graves as best they could. They'd put up new stones and chiseled epitaphs that, in spite of things, still began, *Here lies so-and-so*.

She walked past the Methodist church, with its vinyl-sided addition that had housed a number of things, one of which was a crisis pregnancy center started up by the Methodist preacher's wife. Crystal walked past where Aubrey Falls stayed in the one-room cabin he rented from the preacher. She used to pass his

cabin without waving when he'd first come to Cuzzert. Now, even though she suspected he would leave soon enough, she waved and looked to his window. But he would be teaching his class at the prison by now.

She walked faster when the unlit *Eat* sign at Cool Springs came into view around the bend.

A slow morning breeze tried to comfort Crystal through the threadbare underarm in her T-shirt as she plucked the feeding bucket from the wall of the shed out behind the shop-and-diner. Balaam stood by the locomotive husk, rubbing his neck against the hard iron. He turned toward her when she stirred a cup of molasses in with the oats chop. She held out some chop in her palm, and he raised his head, then dropped it down in a mope. She'd named him Balaam after the Old Testament seer, from the Book of Numbers, who was sent to speak a curse over Israel but who spoke a blessing instead, after his donkey saw an angel and opened its mouth and spoke.

Her Balaam and a standoffish peacock were all that remained of the petting zoo at Cool Springs. The place had been a real attraction in Cuzzert back when the town had thrived, with its petting zoo and mountain crafts for sale—quilts and cherrywood rockers, guardian angels carved of coal—and with its showcase of obsolete train and tractor engines from the thirties. Kids could climb into a caboose for the camera. They could buy a balsa-wood postcard stamped *Cuzzert, West Virginia*, or a panorama photo of the hairpin curve just past Cool Springs on Manheim Road.

Once the mines had mechanized and gone to strip, towns like Cuzzert were gutted. A Wal-Mart went up in Biggs, the town twenty minutes to the west that got lucky and kept alive, maybe because it sat where the Donnie Manse River emptied into the Monongahela—joined to something of greater speed and force. Kids wanted Wal-Mart's cheap toys and the water park that opened next door. A daytrip to climb on train skeletons didn't stand a chance.

Cool Springs had been reduced to a truck stop for drivers headed to Biggs or down to Charleston. It had attracted some prison traffic too, when the facility had first come in, but that had dwindled once the novelty of the place wore off. The owner kept Cool Springs open for the profit he made selling lottery tickets; he ordered the other merchandise at random, as if for a joke. He'd gone absentee, moved to Ohio, and hired Crystal as caretaker—she'd still been speaking then—and to serve up the coffee and cones. Some local people came to Cool Springs for buckwheat flour and the peaches from Romney, cheap at fourteen-fifty a bushel. Some came for a leather jacket with fringes, a rubber

tomahawk or a half-moon outhouse miniature. And some came for a look at the Lemley girl who'd quit talking; they came out of reverence and contempt both.

Crystal stroked Balaam's ears till he jerked away in a huff. Idle, she couldn't help but think about her daddy in a prison cell. It was a place she couldn't envision, except that she imagined everything steel gray. Aubrey had told her and Aimee a week before that their daddy was there. He'd been sentenced in April of that year, to serve time just an hour's drive from Painted Rocks, for hitting a woman on a north Pennsylvania highway. And he had stopped taking meals. He had hit a woman with his truck and become as though dead, near starved, and all but nameless until that past week when he had written in a paper for Aubrey's class his name, Cord Lemley, and his claim that, yes, he had a wife and two girls heir to his shame. Two girls he had not sent a word to of his own volition.

Crystal could almost hear his voice, the way he must whisper his prayers from his bed. Could almost feel the words strike the cold, blank walls and return to him void, filling his own ears till he couldn't stand the sound. She shook his voice from her head, but it hovered above her, first his praying voice, then his preaching voice, hard and pointed. She felt the quivering spot inside her, pulsing with Word of the Lord, the jabber of tongues she had uttered, hymns she had sung low and true at each Glorybound Holiness Tabernacle service. She willed it all inside the rough gray hide of the donkey, as though sewing a pouch of money inside a pillow. She marveled that Balaam could bear it. She nearly expected him to speak.

The peacock came around the shed's corner, its tail dragging like a fine broom. It pecked the kernels Crystal tossed it but wouldn't fan its broad beauty for her. She stood and walked the path back to the shop-and-diner, through the antique tractors and train cars, machines sprouting from the ground, truncated. A pony farm tractor had turned brown like the tree leaves in drought, along with a Shay engine that had been overworked with glory and fire. It was a museum or a graveyard. Little difference between the two.

A man-dug stream cut through the path, calling for an arched bridge, perhaps pretty once. A lethargic trout swam the stream as though the water were tar. At one time, kids must have tried to fish out the trout, because someone had padlocked a wire mesh over the stream so that only coins could drop through to line the cement streambed. These were the cool springs. Hardly the pool of Bethesda where the angel's finger stirs. Hardly enough water that the trout didn't drag its belly.

A blue station wagon pulled in as Crystal reached the front door. She turned to see the butt of the car wag as Arlene Sisler and her kids piled out. Crystal felt the sun, then, in all its force, and thought it cruel, somehow making a fool of everyone who woke with it.

“Get your sister a Hershey’s,” Arlene called, pulling her large self out the driver-side door, then pulling out her foster girl by the arm. The youngest boy, Chris, hollered his items at Crystal: pig’s-ear treats for his dog, so many lengths of heavy chain and some live bait. The older one, Loyal, had come with more Mountain Dew can rockers, peeled and twisted into shape with his pocketknife—wanting to know if she could maybe get ten dollars for one. Arlene cursed the heat, cursed her kids and their talk as it scattered like buckshot. Crystal held the door open to the shop-and-diner as the Sislers rattled inside.

“Kay!” Arlene said with a pinched moan, and Kay emerged from the extra-large hunting jackets, smearing melted Hershey’s on a sleeve. The child was nearly three and still walked naked from the waist down, wearing only a short black T-shirt that said *Princess* in faded blond print. Kay was a smaller version of Arlene, all of one piece, with a stunted neck and feet that splayed under her weight. The child answered Arlene’s call with a vague cock of her head.

Arlene began a disheveled pile by the cash register on the counter: a red oil lantern, a cedar birdhouse painted with the words *Bird Hotel*, a dozen fly traps. After years of getting a welfare check at the first of the month, she kept up her habit of doing her shopping then, even though she no longer received her government check. Since the prison had settled with them for their farm in 1994, the Sislers, by Cuzzert standards, had become well off.

“Nothing worse than trash coming into money,” Miriam Louks had said to Dotte out at Glorybound once, and Crystal had heard. Dotte had hushed Miriam because Arlene was her cousin by marriage—married her second-cousin Hiram Sisler who’d died in the mines the year their oldest son Ronnie was saved at one of Cord’s revivals. Ronnie Sisler started coming to Glorybound by himself, a thirteen-year-old quick to get the Spirit. During the hymns, his face broke out in a sweat, as though with fever, and Crystal had spent a lot of time watching his watery eyes that rolled up to the basement ceiling.

The first thing Arlene had done with the prison money was buy a satellite dish and plastic patio furniture for her new front yard on the east edge of town, just past Jimmy Shroust’s Muffler Barn on Manheim Road.

The second thing was to send Ronnie down to Charleston for auto-mechanic

school, trying to get him away from Glorybound, because Arlene deemed the path of the Spirit the path of fools. When he got into the snake-handling church down there, he wrote to her and said he had quit school and found the Lord's work. He'd given all his tuition money to the Whosoever Will Worship Center of the True Pentecost, and he'd taken up serpents.

The third thing she'd done was put five hundred dollars cash inside a greeting card with a teddy bear on it and left it on Dotte's front steps. On the inside, Arlene had written: "I blame your crazy preacher husband for taking my Ronald from me. It ain't your fault. But you ought leave that church behind you." Then, underneath the card's message, *Sending you a teddy bear hug*, she'd finished with: "Husbands don't leave nothing but bills and mouths to feed. Get you and the girls something nice. Love, Arlene."

"This here's the best of the bunch," said Loyal, his pale, freckled face beaming. He set the Mountain Dew rocker on the counter and rocked it back and forth. It sat a little crooked, but Crystal picked it up, stuck a piece of masking tape on its seat and wrote "\$10." She held the pen out to Loyal with the roll of tape.

"What she want, Mom?" he said, scratching his freckles like they were a rash.

Arlene grabbed the pen and tape and told him he was to write his own ten-dollar tags. "God, girl, it'd be easier if you just said things outright." Crystal offered no apology for herself. Arlene was on edge; she was usually kinder, or at least she didn't usually aim her meanness at Crystal.

"Man alive, if life ain't already sucked from you, you'd better die soon 'fore people take hold." Arlene shook her head, went to the door and fingered the variegated leaves on a topiary tree sitting just outside. Ivy climbed its central pole, and pink petunias vined down from a plastic pot on top. She sighed and slapped at a fly. Crystal waited at the counter for Arlene's litany of complaints and cursings, ready to absorb them like a rag wiping up a spill. Dusty miller and lobelia bushed from the big bottom pot of the topiary. The tree was ridiculous, priced at twenty-five dollars, the most whimsical thing in the row of plants that lined the storefront, wilting its fine leaves in the heat. Arlene had Chris drag the tree to the counter.

"Thing is," Arlene said, heaving herself back over toward Crystal, "my sister told me she saw my Ronnie's truck drive up by her place just south of here a couple days back. Can't mistake it for another 'cause the doors don't match, green and black on red. I ain't seen hide nor hair of him since he went down for school—five years now and I ain't had one letter or check, not even one of them damn gospel tracts he give me when he was wrapped up with your daddy."

Crystal's face flushed hot. She started itemizing the purchases on a Cool Springs carbon paper receipt.

"I was pretty damn shore he done died from snakebite or poison, one, and I wasn't too sorry 'cause the boy robbed me blind for them fanatics down there, after I tried to do right by him and send him to school. Thing is, Miss Crystal, if he's back, I don't want him taking up with you church people again." Arlene reached for Crystal's hand and stopped her awkward cursive flow.

"Thing is, I got money hid where nobody knows it, not even these two boys here, and they ain't got sense enough to find it, but some of it come up missing yesterday. I won't say how much. Ronnie's in thick with you holy rollers, for some goddamn reason. I don't blame you, you're a victim of your daddy's foolishness. But I ain't in favor of him taking up with you again, and your loose sister and your poor mama. You all a pack of crazies." Arlene bit her lip, looked steady at Crystal and swatted at Kay who was pulling on her pant leg.

"I know your church been hard up ever since your daddy left. 'Course Miriam Louks got enough money to feed the lot of you and pay for a new preacher both, if she weren't so damn tight. It might be that Ronnie'd come by here. Maybe tell you things, or give you a little something to take care of. Seeing's how you're so nice and quiet."

Crystal looked down and drew her hand back. Arlene waited, seemed to expect her to speak her mind, but silence allowed Crystal no defense and no corroboration. She hovered, ever appearing as one without judgment. The silence hung between them and soon grew uncomfortable enough for Arlene to start bagging her own heap of fly traps and Skittles and pig's-ears. She set out a wad of cash for payment, and Crystal finished itemizing the receipt.

"Shit," Arlene exhaled. She plucked a Slim Jim from a pack she'd bought and slid it to Crystal across the counter. Maybe a sort of bribe, maybe an apology. She took on a hard pity in her voice: "What do you think about, girl? Where do you go? Don't you got words for nobody?" Crystal detached the customer copy of the receipt and handed it to Arlene.

Loyal gathered up the sacks, and Chris dragged the tree to the car. Crystal followed them out to the gravel lot, watched Kay smear the Hershey's into her hair until Arlene took and threw it in the gravel. The station wagon signaled and pulled out for the two-mile drive down Manheim to their place on the edge of Cuzzert. Crystal pictured the car for the length of the drive, the length of the worn-out mountain town that lay beside a river flowing with rust and acidic mine soup. She stood by the door in the dark wet circle where the topiary tree had sat on the ground. She squatted like a catcher and put the Slim Jim in

her mouth, to suck on the salt and smoke before she chewed it.

It had been a long time since Crystal had felt the need to defend someone besides Aimee or Dotte. Before Ronnie had left five years ago, he had taken two sixteen-penny nails and put them together in a cross, had wound it with copper wire and given it to Crystal after the sending service they'd called for him at Glorybound. He'd given it to her without touching her; she'd kept her silence and felt like she was drowning. She hadn't even shown the cross of nails to Aimee. After Ronnie had gone, Crystal had hid it under a loose corner of carpet in her room and cried.

That's what people do in Cuzzert, she understood within her silent self. They leave. They go without saying goodbye. But she stayed, that's what she did. She touched the sharpness of their small secret gifts, and she inhabited their old clothes, as she did her daddy's jeans that she bunched with a belt, his airbrushed T-shirt. When Ronnie left, she had expected it, since the tiny church was dying already. All the young people, except for her and Aimee and Ronnie at that time, had already left Glorybound for the Methodist church across from the cemetery. The Methodists had an electric guitar player, not just the acoustic and tambourines. And some drove all the way to Biggs because a church there had a whole rock band, and the young folks could forget their small assembly in the basement of Miriam Louks' dead aunt's house. Could leave behind the strange, thick vapor of waiting that the church still soaked in, as though, after so many years, they thought Reverend Cord Lemley would return. Or maybe Jesus.

Crystal rose from her squat and clapped at Balaam, who had come along the path behind her. He was chewing on the potted junipers near the door. She faced up the road, toward its hairpin turn nearly smothering under the shag of dry trees. She saw Aimee's face in it, pictured her for a moment.

That morning, when Aimee had pulled their white pickup into its dirt spot beside the blue lattice, when they'd sat there in silence before getting out—the first silence of the day after all of Aimee's hectic talk—the quiet had rung out in the cab and out the windows, had hit the remote things strewn around Painted Rocks like toys in a child's playpen and had ricocheted back in, vibrating and welling up, till Aimee spoke: "I been saying Daddy's dead for so long, I almost made myself believe it." Then they'd gotten out, Crystal letting Aimee go a few steps ahead.

Reverend Cord Paul Lemley—titled "Reverend" by self-appointment, and Holy-Spirit-anointed as a prophet of God, not ordained by any official church—had

left them ten years before. He had taken over the preaching at Glorybound Holiness Tabernacle at age seventeen. Marty Noose, the tent revivalist who had led Cord and Dotte to the Lord and to that tiny basement church in Cuzzert, had laid hands on Cord and willed the church leadership to him just before Marty followed his wife into Glory.

Dotte made dresses to sell and did some mending for people, and Cord got a job driving a truck for Biggs Wholesale during the week, delivering cases of Doritos and Fritos to the gas stations in the county, boxes of peanuts, tinfoil, Sunkist pop, everything. He preached for love-offerings at Glorybound, mostly pocket change, but he considered his preaching the work of the Lord, and he trusted the Lord to provide. Cord preached at Glorybound for fourteen years, then left in his delivery truck one morning at dawn with a suitcase and a bag of peanut butter and bread, after he predicted the Second Coming of Jesus and Jesus did not come.

It had to do with the signs. Crystal kept records of the signs in the black-cover notebook she loved, which she later stowed under the loose corner of carpet with Ronnie Sisler's nail cross.

The first sign came just after the flood of the Donnie Manse River in 1985. Every man in Cuzzert was called upon to help restore the cemetery that had lost all its dead except the stillborn baby of Janey Close. Driving there on a morning soon after the waters receded, Cord was listening to a radio preacher speaking on Ezekiel 37 and the signs of the end times and the coming-back of Jesus Christ. As he pulled off Manheim Road, where the crowd with shovels and pickaxes congregated, the radio preacher read verses 13 and 14: "And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, and shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live." Cord turned off the ignition and sat and listened for the voice of God to keep on.

That night, he opened his leather-bound Bible to Ezekiel 37 and read more about the opened graves and, earlier in the same chapter, about Ezekiel being set down in the valley of bones, and God telling him to breathe into those dry bones, that they may rise up and live, and sinews and flesh may come upon them. Cord was reading the words in the back room he called his study, and he heard a rustle outside his window, between their trailer and the Dixons'. He switched off his light, looked out the window and saw the Dixons' skinny husky wrestling with a dried deer carcass. The dog had broken his chain and the part of it he dragged behind him was tangled in the deer's rib cage.

Crystal was in the living room outside the door of Cord's study, and he called her in to show her the passage in Ezekiel and the carcass the dog had brought over to his window. He told her about the preacher on the radio that morning and said, "You know what this means, Crystal Lee Ann?" She said she did not. "It's the signs of his coming. Our Jesus coming for us, to take us to the Overjordan. You watch."

Later that night, she slipped out the door of the back screen-porch and rounded the corner to the pile of bones abandoned by the Dixons' dog. She touched a tiny bone, one that had broken like a stick, not at the joint but in the middle so that it had splintered. She kept it and put it under her corner of carpet.

Cord watched for signs for the next three years, but God kept silent. Crystal began to fill her notebook with other things. A letter to Ronnie Sisler. A poem she read at school that she hand-copied into her notebook because it sounded like a hymn. A list of things to do before the rapture—she made the list with Aimee on the back porch with their voices in a hush and their knees drawn up to let air in under their skirts.

"He's a coming," Cord preached at Glorybound on Sunday mornings and at the Wednesday night prayer services he started up. "The end times is upon us; is your heart ready? How's your heart tonight? Is it saying, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come?'" Crystal closed her eyes at the services and prayed and called up a face in her mind that might be Jesus' face, but sometimes it was Ronnie's, and sometimes, at home, she got out the splintery bone of the deer from underneath the carpet, and she pricked herself to know it was real.

Then the second sign struck. One night Cord didn't come home from his delivery run for the wholesale. It was past supper already, and Dotte was jittery. She sat at the table, taking in a skirt at the waist from a bag of secondhand clothes Miriam Louks had given her for the girls. A storm had come up in a rush, moving northward from the river and from town, a harsh choir of rain then hail on the trailer's thin roof. It didn't last more than twenty minutes, but when Crystal opened the door afterward, looked out to the road and saw a tree down on a power line and limbs strewn all over Route 40, she knew something had happened to her daddy.

She ran back through the long hallway of the doublewide, out the back door and up the front steps of the Dixons' trailer, pounding on the door till Joshie Dixon opened up.

"Gimme your bike," Crystal said to him, and he picked his face acne and

said something foul, but she ran around to the side where his mountain bike leaned against the trailer. Before he could stop her, she was riding south on Route 40, around the downed branches, headed toward Biggs where Cord was supposed to be coming from.

She found him about half a mile from Painted Rocks, in the hayfield that opened up from the road, the field used as a fairground every summer. The wholesale truck sat pulled off to the shoulder, its door hanging open. She left the bike and ran out toward a lump of dark clothes lying in the middle of the grass like something dead, but it moved, and she saw it was him. She called for him, and he lifted his arm, lifted his body almost, then collapsed again.

He had a small black line on his neck, in a crooked slice, and blood sat on it but didn't flow out. The chain he wore around his neck with a copper cross pendant was charcoal black, and the skin beneath it red and raw, but it was his side that he held as he moaned. A hole had burned into his work shirt there, and the skin beneath bore a black mark like the one on his neck, this one in the shape of a fern.

"I saw him, Crys," he murmured, and some of the skin of his lips peeled off like paper from a candy. "A blue robe, and his hair like gold. I saw him in the open field, beckoning to me, and I had nothing but to leave the truck and run to him, though I heard the thunder come up like a wave."

Crystal cleared the grass by his head of the old litter from last year's Heritage Fair. A popcorn cup and a cotton candy bag, the half-eaten candy wisps gone gray. A bird circled, soundless, overhead. She touched her daddy's hand, the one that didn't grasp his side but lay open on the coarse grass. It was so rare that they touched. She was surprised to find his hand cold and not much bigger than her own.

The lightning had entered the right side of his neck and exited out the right side of his torso, a curve of electrical fire. The shock had traveled around his neck in that chain, too, and the doctors at the Biggs hospital had no idea how Cord had survived. Cord knew exactly how, and he wasn't shy to tell it to the whole burn ward of the hospital. His wounded side, like that of Jesus, was confirmation enough of the coming day of Christ—Jesus coming up even in Cord's own body and showing himself in the fern-shaped bruise. He recounted for the nurses the story of how he was saved when lightning had struck that bar years ago, how the tent preacher had looked him in the eye, and the rain had poured, and how that was no coincidence, no sir.

"And my life done been spared," he claimed, "so's I can testify, buddy," and

he went on for awhile, his black hair and black eyes wild against the whiteness of the hospital walls and beds and faces. He went on till he was released, and he went on at Glorybound after that.

“I can still taste the copper in my mouth from that lightning bolt,” he said to the faithful standing up on the green carpet of that basement floor and clapping. “And I can taste glory, I can taste me that milk and honey Overjordan, yes, and I say *glory*, can you say it with me, *glory*?”

Crystal had gone back to that field the evening after the storm, and on the far edge where the tree line started, on a pile of picked rocks, she'd found a blue kite that had broken loose from its string. It had a tail of white and yellow plastic streamers, and she tore a white one off and put it in her pocket. At home, she got out her notebook and started a clean page. “August 9, 1988,” she wrote, “I saw the Lord's hand on my daddy. I am some scared, but it must be that the Lord does not make a mistake. I will make my heart ready. I will make my robe white, mine and Aimee Jo's.”

In her long skirts that her mom made and her ankle socks and canvas shoes, with her hair braided and her neckline snug, Crystal paid strict attention to her daddy's words after the sign of the lightning. She ate his words and lived by them. Almost sixteen years old, she became an apprentice to Cord in his prophesying of the coming of Christ. She had always sung strong in the service, but now he called on her to pray, even though she was shy and she was not sure what Ronnie Sisler thought of her praying. She tried not to think much about Ronnie Sisler at all.

Cord seated Crystal beside him at the Tabernacle to read Scripture and bounce the tambourine with the heel of her hand, leaving Aimee seated back beside Dotte. Aimee was fourteen years old and so much like a child to Crystal then, a sheep for her tending, a lost sheep, for Crystal had begun to glimpse in her sister's dark eyes a worrisome fear. Crystal's own eyes would smart if she looked on Aimee for too long, so she allowed a separation. She shut her eyes and prayed hard, prayed a circle of protection like a split-rail fence around her lost-lamb sister.

Crystal had learned to read with the Bible as her primer. She'd learned by the rhythms of the King James Version, the images of the seven lamps of the seven churches, the lake of fire, the dry bones coming into sinew, the woman and the beast with horns. And now in the rhythms of her daddy's voice, she knew the words already in her mind. She repeated them under her breath as

he spoke, and she expected it all, as though she foresaw it, this thing that was coming upon them. It was no longer Ronnie's face she conjured in her mind's eye when she prayed and sang and swayed. It was her daddy's face—she willed herself to see it—his face sweating from the lightning's fierce brand. That lightning that surely meant her daddy was a holy prophet of God.

The next year, in July of 1989, the strip mine out on Cuzzert Pike, a few miles west of where the Tabernacle met in Miriam Louks' basement, broke a water seam and leaked coal sludge into the well water of twelve households surrounding the mine, three of which were households of Glorybound members. The ruined water was the third and final sign Cord needed to make his prediction.

Such disasters had happened before, even to Cord's own family when he was a boy, but not on such a scale. This was the pinnacle, Cord said and Crystal recorded. The mining company, a CONROY branch run by a proprietor in Biggs, without so much as an apology put a notice in the residents' mailboxes announcing they would bring in five thousand-gallon water reservoirs on trucks to serve as the new water supply, to be refilled monthly at the company's expense. It was not a temporary remedy. Big, white, plastic tanks sitting along the road and snaking into houses through hoses.

No one filed a complaint. Crystal had learned young, like everyone in Cuzzert: people wronged by CONROY, they go without their due, and they go without a fuss, and they wait for someone like her daddy to find a holy purpose in it. Her daddy obliged.

The trucks would come on July twelfth. So Cord set the date: Jesus was to return on August 21, 1989, forty days after they'd pull the water tanks in, forty days of desert and tanked-in water that would quench no thirst.

"For the second angel sounded," Cord preached to his people, and especially to the Feltons, the Shrouts, and Ashby and Tim Welch whose wells the mine had poisoned. "And, in Revelation 8 now, 'as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea, and the third part of the sea became blood.' And Verse 10, 'the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters. And the name of the star is called Wormwood, and the third part of the waters became wormwood, and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter.' Here speaks the Lord, people, here is the signs that he give us. Here is the signs."

Cord claimed to know the day though not the hour. August 21. It was also Crystal's sixteenth birthday. He asked his congregation to pack a suitcase,

in the event that the battle of Armageddon began and they had to flee. He planned the caravan route to run north toward Pennsylvania, and he had Dotte stock his delivery truck with water, gospel tracts, peanut butter and white bread.

But he didn't call the saints to a mount, nor even to the basement church with its green carpet and metal smell of folding chairs. Instead, he instructed all to turn on their televisions to the local network on the twenty-first—that was the way Christ would come in modern times. On the screen of the TVs that sat in every household of the high and the low, so all the world would see the glory coming, as it said in Revelation 13: "And he doeth great wonders, so that he maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men." No way for it to happen in the sight of all men, said Cord, unless it's on the TV screen.

The Lemleys sat in their doublewide and watched the television that day from 4 a.m. on—leaving the living room only to pee, muting the sound during the soap operas—till the screen turned to snow at 2 or 3 the next morning. Dotte finally turned the TV off and started sobbing. She was wearing a new dress she'd made, all white with white, rose-shaped buttons up the back. The air in the trailer was hot, and Cord sat with his shirt unbuttoned down to his chest, his black, coiled hair tufting out like field grass, and he ran his fingers through it. He rubbed his side where the fern-shaped bruise showed through his thin shirt, and he said nothing except, "I done my part."

He looked at no one and peeled himself from his armchair. Crystal had fallen asleep on the couch with Aimee's head in her lap. She jolted awake when she heard the trailer's front screen door slam shut, and she slid out from under Aimee to follow her daddy.

She watched his oversized feet drag as he staggered to the delivery truck. He was, of a sudden, like a piece of burning paper to her. She saw him curl to black in a fire, as though the lightning's heat had never completely gone out of him. Some of it had stayed inside him and burned him up slow. He chose fire for his own portion, the price, he'd told her—and she'd written down in her notebook—for being able to speak the prophecies of God and the unforeseen. She was half dreaming, wiping the sleep from her eyes with the white sleeve of her blouse. In the dark, dust swarmed like smoke after the wholesale truck when he pulled out of Painted Rocks. Crystal watched from under the holey shelter of the blue lattice. She tasted the dust. That night in her notebook she wrote: "I have eaten the ashes of my daddy's fire."

Jesus didn't come. Her birthday, August twenty-first, turned still and soured  
like milk in the heat. And her daddy left.

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A WEST VIRGINIA NATIVE, Jessie van Eerden holds an M.F.A. in non-fiction from the University of Iowa. Her prose has appeared in *The Best American Spiritual Writing*, *The Oxford American*, *Image*, *Bellingham Review*, and other publications. She has taught for ten years in college classrooms and adult literacy programs, and she currently directs the Low-Residency M.F.A. Writing Program at West Virginia Wesleyan College. *Glorybound* is her first novel.