

# Atlas Falls To Earth

a novel  
by  
ashley  
christopher  
leach



# *Table of Contents*

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)


[Author's Note](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[October](#)

[November](#)

[December](#)



**Atlas Falls To Earth**

a  
novel  
by  
ashley  
christopher  
leach



*For Andrew,  
See you on the other side, Bunny.*

### Author's Note

*Atlas Falls to Earth* is a self-published book and therefore, unedited by a professional. Any grammatical and spelling errors, which do not pertain to a character's regional dialect and unique way of speaking, are an oversight and completely unintentional.

*Lost. He understood that men were forever strangers to one another, that no one ever comes really to know any one, that imprisoned in the dark womb of our mother, we come to life without having seen her face, that we are given to her arms a stranger, and that, caught in the insoluble prison of being, we escape it never, no matter what arms may clasp us, what mouth may kiss us, what heart may warm us. Never, never, never, never, never.*

-Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*

## *October*

The boy, diminutively framed for his age, knelt on the uneven wooden floor of Jason's farmhouse. He wore one of his Daddy's old t-shirts and a pair of sweatpants, both of which were covered in dried paint, and his hair, long and matted, fell in thick strands just over his brow. Nervously, he twitched his fingers. "Go on and pick it up," Jason said between small sips of black coffee, his hands mottled with wood stain and paint. Briefly, Jason thought back to the time when he was the boy's age and how he had already shot and skinned a few rabbits and eaten a couple of squirrels he had cooked in a campfire built by him and his cousins. Or this is what his memory told him. Now, he looked down at his boy. How did his boy end up so- his mind stopped. With this thought came an uneasy pang of failure and disgust. He quickly winced himself away from the past. The boy kept his attention fixated on the small hunting knife ensconced in crumbled newspaper. He felt a sense of guilt as he thought about the walnut acoustic guitar with maple neck he had seen resting in a pawnshop window a week prior in town. Daddy said it was impractical, and besides, he could not afford it. The boy closed his eyes, and imagining it was the guitar, he slowly took the knife with its antler handle into his hands. A wild and strange melody came to him beneath the weight and feel of the knife. The notes flowed up and down as if they were the fluttering wings of a newborn bird, desperately attempting to catch flight. Clenching his eyes tightly, he held onto the tail of the melody, anxious to hear how it would end. "Happy Birthday, Atlas," said Jason brusquely. The boy opened his eyes and looked up at his Daddy. Jason could barely form a smile, so he opted to take the last sip of his coffee instead.

Jason casually held the steering wheel of his pickup truck with two fingers as it meandered down a solemn country road. The interior of the truck showed signs of age and disrepair, adorned in twenty years of dust, discarded fast food cartons, styrofoam coffee cups, and latticed duct tape shielding cracked upholstery. The light syrupy sway of an old country song played softly from the radio, lulling Atlas into a light slumber. A cloudy sky and shriveled tawny leaves casually drifted into blackness. But no sooner had he closed his eyes when two loud, successive buzzes interrupted the country song. A prolonged buzz followed and then an automated voice. "The following message is being transmitted at the request of the Governor of North Carolina and the North Carolina state police. An inmate escape has occurred at the Gum Neck State Penitentiary in Hyde County, ten miles west of the Alligator River. At 3:30am this morning an accidental fire broke out at the Gum Neck State Penitentiary in Hyde County. Airlie Temple, age 79 and standing at 6 '4 and weighing 300lbs escaped the facility and is believed to be heading westward. All residents in Eastern North Carolina should monitor local and radio news announcements. Considered armed and dangerous, Airlie

Temple is currently serving a life sentence without parole for the murder of—” Unaffected, Jason reached over and flipped the radio to another station. Atlas, however, cowered beneath the impenetrable fear of what he had just heard, unaware that the small hunting knife had slid along the truck seat and landed up against his leg as Jason maneuvered the truck along the bend of the road.

Standing in a clearing, an egret lifted its white head from a muddy pool of water and took flight just as the truck sped by. It towered over the sentinels of long-leaf pine and bald cypress, who readied their foliage for shedding in aiguillettes of red and gold. As the bird aimed higher into the sky, the fortress of trees balked against a large field of bloody clay, dismembered trunks and branches, and an assortment of bulldozers and asphalt pavers. And just as the bird touched the bottom hem of the clouds heavy in the sky, the field ended, and newly constructed houses stood clustered together forming the design of a suburban housing development. Finally, the egret reached the altitude where nothing could be seen of the wounded earth and the slow moving disarray yet to come.

Somber clouds consumed the afternoon sky, and an unusually cold breeze shook the leaves on a grove of oaks and cottonwoods. A light mist dampened the ground. Jason and the boy sat in the bed of the pickup truck. Atlas fidgeted with a pebble while Jason prepped two banana and mayonnaise sandwiches. The boy studied the shape and color of the pebble before he tossed it. Hitting a tree, the pebble startled a skittish creature that rustled deep in the woods. Jason gave his son a disapproving stare, and then refocused his attention on the sandwiches. They had traipsed through grassy fields for the past two hours, and Jason was ready to call it a day. “You mad?” asked Atlas. “Naw,” said Jason as he wiped his nose with the back of his hand and handed Atlas his sandwich. “Reckon, we ain’t doin’ nothin’ but gun hikin’.” Atlas took a healthy bite of his sandwich. Removing a glob of bread and banana from the roof of his mouth with his finger, Atlas cleared his throat. “Maybe if we got a dog.” Jason grinned. “Shit, boy. You really aimin’ for a damn dog, ain’t you?” Atlas smiled. “I’ll think ‘bout it,” Jason said, polishing off his sandwich with a final bite. Atlas studied the palm of his right hand, and with his left index finger, he traced one of the palm’s deep grooves. He wondered if he was the only thirteen year old boy with such small hands. “Damn. Look there,” Jason whispered. In the distance, just beyond where the grove of trees emptied into a cottonfield, a bobwhite quail trotted along the edge with a hobbled gait. The rotund bird shook the dampness from its feathers and rested. Atlas could see the bird was injured, but before he could say anything, Jason had his shotgun pointed at the bird. The gun gave a loud crack, and then- “Damnit!” Atlas shoved his hands into his coat pockets and looked at his father; the man gazed into the ineffability of his miss. Jason leaped from the bed of the truck and trounced through the wet brush toward the bird. Atlas followed.

A minute passed, and Atlas anxiously awaited the moment when Jason would give up his hunt for the day. But just as Jason let out a long, extended sigh, Atlas caught the sight of blood speckled across one of the white cotton bolls. Close to his feet lay the injured quail, heavily breathing with its left eye wide and full of terror. "Is it-?" he asked. "No," his father replied. The boy watched as Jason grabbed the quail by its neck and wrung the life out of it.

Sitting against the worn pillar of the back porch, Alex rested her tired head and turned her gaze out beyond the backyard into the dense wilderness, which had already fallen into shadows beneath the heavy weight of night. She listened intently for the rumble of Jason's truck but for the first five minutes, she only caught the stray barks of some aggravated dog. Her dark face, still traced with youthful beauty, appeared as a discarded bouquet of wildflowers, nestled within the forlorn frame of the farmhouse, and as she quieted her mind to the stillness that precedes a coming storm, Alex thought of her mother and how her skin always felt warm to the touch. Then through the shrouds of blackness, which cloaked the pines, emanated the glow of headlights, and finally she could hear the truck's heavy breath panting through the long entrails of the driveway. Alex relieved herself from the support of the farmhouse and saw the boy's face, forlorn with sunken eyes behind the dirty windshield. Then she saw Jason and knew. Jason exited the truck and grabbed his shotgun and the dead quail from the back of the truck. He tossed the bird onto the ground. Atlas slowly opened the truck door and slid from the seat onto the ground. "How was it?" asked Alex out of politeness. Silence. Atlas's face remained downward. "It went that well, huh?" she remarked while Jason set a plastic bucket next to an old stump. He stopped as if he were about to say something but all he could manage was another long-winded sigh. Then he placed the dead quail onto the stump. "Go get your knife," commanded Jason. Atlas did not move. "Atlas." The boy turned and headed back toward the truck reluctantly. "Not a bad lookin' bird. Did you shoot it? Or did-" Alex looked at Jason, who simply gave her an expression of irritation. Opening the passenger door of the truck, Atlas spied the small hunting knife on the seat. He thought about what his father would be asking him to do. Instantly, he caught a mental image of the quail's eye full of fear looking at him, and instead of grabbing the knife, he pushed it deep into the break between the seat back and bottom. Then he shut the truck door. Atlas ran over to Alex and Jason. "I can't find it. I must've dropped it in the woods," he said, punctuating his words with fake heavy breaths of disbelief. Jason stood upright and leered at his son. "Go inside and get me a pair of kitchen shears." Atlas began to turn. "Not you. Alex." He continued to stare at his son. Alex moved away from them toward the back porch. "That knife belonged to your granddaddy," Jason said plaintively. "And that's all I'm gonna say about that."

Next to a roasted sweet potato and a mound of chopped collards sat three pieces of quail meat, battered and fried, still sizzling with bursting pockets of hot oil. Atlas ate around the quail but kept all of his attention on it as if at any second the dismembered morsels might chirp in agony. "I can fix you something else," Alex said, watching as the boy crammed the remaining bit of sweet potato in his mouth. Jason answered by grabbing Atlas's plate and placing it on the opposite side of the kitchen table. Atlas glanced at Jason, who casually sopped up the grease and pot liquor on his plate with a small piece of white bread and tossed it in his mouth. Whatever misgivings he had about the deceased quail evaporated with the self-loathing he now experienced, the knowledge he had disappointed his father. When he looked to Alex for assistance, she had gone to the sink and begun washing the dishes. Atlas looked at the grains of salt and specks of collards and sweet potato that littered the kitchen table. Soon they would be wiped away with a few sweeps of a dampened washcloth. Once more, he turned to Jason, who now worked a toothpick into the tight spaces between his teeth and cast his iron stare into the dense region of his thoughts. This was the time of night when loneliness entered the farmhouse, and the unimaginable nightmares of his own creation lay waiting for Atlas in his bedroom. He exited the kitchen and lumbered up the wooden staircase, committing himself to the grim confrontation of solitude.

Atlas entered the coldness of his room with trepidation and then quickly threw on the lights. He had undressed and put on his pajamas before he saw the brown package tied with periwinkle ribbon centered on the quilt that covered his bed. Before he opened the package, he could tell it was a book, and he read the tiny card attached: *To Atlas From Alex. Happy Birthday.* Atlas ripped the brown paper slowly, revealing a maroon bound text in gold trim. On the cover was a pencil sketch of two malformed creatures dancing in the woods and written in gold, shiny calligraphy was the title: *Misadventures in Being: The Strange Tale of Bunny and Munk.* After climbing into bed Atlas shimmied under the quilt and opened the book.

## Chapter One

*Munk was not a boy, although he very much wanted to be one. He had been born with an insatiable itch to know what it would be like to be a boy, and as much as Miss Beulah warned him about the OOmans and their terrible ways, Munk could never quell this hidden curiosity to know what it meant to be something other than an animal. This was the risk of having half of a child's heart sewn beneath his furry chest, and although his brother Bunny, who shared the other half, never had this desire to know, Munk could not quit his imagination and what he envisioned to be an extraordinary existence amongst the OOmans who lived just beyond the forest.*

*“Dey is a great chasm between knowin ‘bout duh OOmans and bein one,” Miss Beulah would warn, attempting to steer her son's curiosity elsewhere. But it was no use. This was Munk's deepest and darkest desire, and whenever he was alone in his thinking room, a teeny space the size of a treasure chest, which sat along the upper bough of the oak tree, Munk would cradle this secret like a precious gem and his half-heart would ache and long to be whole, long to be an OOman. All matters of his existence burned in those troubling ruminations, and thinking back on his birth, he could never quite figure out why he had not been given the chance to be a boy.*

*On that late, autumn night with a warm fire keeping the dankness out of the cellar deep beneath the roots of the massive oak tree, where Miss Beulah lived, the piquant aroma of tea tree oil stung Munk's nose, and he was yanked from the clarity of pre existence and delivered into the stark contrast of a hazy reality. He could now smell, if he knew what smell might be for he did not quite know the sensation before then. But could he hear or see? Then like the magician who pulls handkerchiefs, one knotted to the other, out of his seemingly bottomless pocket, Munk's ears cleared, and the most mellifluous voice careened through the dimly lit space like the sweet cadence of a dove. “Come intuh’ duh world, little ones.” Ones? More than one? Munk heard a high pitched giggle next to him. Something shuffled across the floor, and Munk could hear a fire crackling in the distance. Then the most dreadful pain singed the brow of his face, but before he could scream in agony, an opaque green light filled the void and the pain abated. The green blariness cleared and through his now eyes, Munk could see a crumpled rag with glassy marbles shielded in spectacles staring down at him. Frightened, Munk wanted to jump from where he lay, but before he could move, the rag transformed into a face, a shiny piece of coal, sleek and smooth around the edges. The coal face placed a damp cloth against his forehead, and the coolness eased his nerves. Strange black spirits danced on the ceiling, and hoping they could tell him what was happening, he tried to speak, but no words came out, only little, broken gasps. “Yuh settle down now. Theah be time for*

*dat later,” the coal said. It smiled, and Munk could see opals with bronzed tops peering down at him. The coal was not coal at all but a real thing, perhaps like him. But he was in his head then, and he clung onto what he thought he knew to be true. Why could he not get back to what he was before and who was he now? Nothing made any sense; it was all too heavy and unsustainable for his new mind. Another playful squeal shot up beside him, and Munk turned his head again to witness the noise. Beside him, a white, hairy mass speckled with coarse, fawn splotches squirmed. The wiggly lay inside a large wicker basket, and upon closer inspection, Munk realized the basket ensconced them both. The coal face, who now stood as more than just a piece of coal but an old creature with a hundred gray roots growing out of its head, held a pewter chalice over the wiggly and spooned out molten sapphire, dabbing the liquid into the wiggly’s darken eye sockets. The squeal erupted again, this time in a frenetic surge, which terrified Munk even more. Then the coal face pulled out a tiny, leather pouch and with its elongated, chipped nails removed two small onyx stones and dropped them carefully into the pools of hardening sapphire. “Dat’s your bruhder, Bunny,” the coal said thoughtfully. “And I’s your mama, Miss Beulah.” In his first attempt to feel, Munk reached up with his claw and touched her skin. Munk wanted to be like the spirits dancing across the ceiling and walls instead of crammed inside the basket. Then with songlike intonation, he decided he would trust Miss Beulah, and he gave over to life and left his head completely. Joyous rapture came over him, and he too began giggling in syncopation with his Bunny, who still wiggled next to him. Miss Beulah gently cooed once more in his ear. “Munk, this be your name,” sang Miss Beulah, separating his coarse tangled hair into flowing, black reams. Munk felt her nails scratching his scalp; it felt wonderful. She then wiped away a little of the peridot running down Munk’s face, not because it had not hardened but because he was crying, and he did not know why. His Bunny, caught in the throes of happiness, burped, and a little spit shot from his throat and landed on Munk’s forehead. Bunny continued to hiccup rapidly between each broken laugh. Miss Beulah cleared the fluid from Munk’s forehead and removed a dusty jar from off one of the shelves. She removed a ragged, gummy sprig no bigger than a cricket’s leg and nestled it between Bunny’s lower lip and gums. “This be snaggloroot,” she whispered, and instantly, the Bunny’s rambunctious squeals morphed into snores as he drifted off to sleep.*

*So began Bunny’s penchant for the opiate root, which grew only in the fetid bogs of the swamp. As Bunny grew to a six foot five oaf with flat feet, a pot belly, and a single tuft of blonde hair on his otherwise bald head, his cravings blossomed into a lifelong love affair with snaggloroot, which resulted in a perpetual idiotic grin across his cartoonish face. While sucking on the gummy sprig and letting its syrupy juice drip down his throat, Bunny enjoyed the simple life of chasing a tail he did not have and licking his palms and sticking them together just so he could take pleasure in seeing*

*the black goo spread out in thin streams. A falling leaf would easily rouse him into frenzied play, and if the March winds were strong enough, Bunny would spread his arms and pretend to soar his way down to Wisteria Creek, which ran just below the hill from the oak tree. Although burly and intimidating in stature, his doltish behavior precluded any sort of anger or brute force. Bunny lived merely to relish life. He had no need to know life or question it; he just wanted to be in it, and with only half a heart, it was hard to imagine how he had so much love for the forest, Miss Beulah, and his Munk.*

*Munk, on the other hand, took to life like Spanish moss takes to the Quercus Virginia. What he lacked in height and physical prowess, he made up for in his precocity. He was considerably shorter and skinnier than Bunny, standing a mere three and a half feet and weighing only fifty pounds (although once he tied his wrists to a tree limb and had Bunny pull his legs, so he might grow a few inches, but he only ended up breaking both his ankles, which Miss Beulah had to reset with cypress boughs). Munk's thick black mane, which sprouted from his scalp like thistles, constantly reminded him of his animal form, so he kept it tucked beneath a tattered coral bonnet. Very early on Munk developed the remarkable ability to store copious amounts of thoughts in his rather diminutive brain, and while this somewhat pleased Miss Beulah, Munk's overt inquisitiveness and rapacious appetite for learning also troubled her. He would spend hours observing Miss Beulah practicing her witchcraft, and even under Miss Beulah's suggestion that he play in life rather than scrutinize it, Munk begged his mama for material, which would satiate his hunger for thinking. On his first year anniversary of entering the world in an attempt to show his erudition, Munk donned a pair of welding goggles he had termed his "visionary goggles," paraded downstairs in a black tailcoat and soldier boots, imitating his best Ooman's gait, and recited his best interpretation of Hesiod's Prometheus myth. Such blatant hardihood displeased Miss Beulah, but she could not contain her laughter when she saw the outlandish getup. Eventually, she conceded to her son's wishes, and Miss Beulah taught Munk the basic syntax of formulating language through letters and symbols. He did not have to growl and whimper anymore to express his thoughts and ideas; he could now talk although not as eloquently as his mother.*

*Once Munk had been blessed with the precious gift of speech, he spent countless nights pouring over the ancient and classical tomes nestled on the bookshelves in Miss Beulah's library. He loved the philosophical musings of Cicero and Plutarch, laughed like he had never laughed before as he romped through Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and grew increasingly frustrated over the Hebrew and Christian theologians, who claimed there was only one, vengeful god in the heavens. But he had a special affection for the plays of Shakespeare, specifically the comedies, and although Bunny had no understanding or need, for that matter, of such florid prose,*

*Munk readily made him reenact Bottom's transition from possessing a human head to that of an ass from A Midsummer Night's Dream. Bunny snorted around the front porch of the oak tree, and the sight elated the impish Munk. Even after Miss Beulah rebuked him and told him to quit such foolishness, Munk would still slip into a silk peignoir and pretend to be the poisoned Titania, falling in love with the loutish Bottom. These colorful jests only flourished Munk's thirst for knowledge, and once he had finished reading and rereading all of Miss Beulah's scholarly texts in her thorough collection, his fiery interest in the tangible world of the OOmans escalated into an incurable itch-an itch to think as many thoughts as possible. Still, Munk was forced to spend his days as an animal, roaming the countryside with his Bunny. Their symbiotic pairing had become the perfect ingredient for Dionysian ecstasy. They behaved like ribbed sprites, tumbling through tree holes without worry and wallowing in creek mud just to see how dirty they could get. They traipsed about the swampland on each other's back, imbibing nature as if it were some orgiastic potion used to heighten the senses and promote reckless hedonism. Overall, Bunny and Munk were the princes of the forest, and their lively adventures caused the sparrows to sing in the trees and the crickets to chirp at night. They had no need for time and only ended their day in the swamps when Miss Beulah's cooking could be smelt, wafting through the pine trees, calling them back to the oak tree.*

*At home the duo would share in a glass of chicory whiskey, sing primordial ballads with Miss Beulah about the olden days, and then they would all sit around the fire and listen to Miss Beulah tell stories about the OOmans and their devious ways. They were a family, the tight knit musicians of a raucous juke joint, bawdy and forbidden, sitting on the outskirts of town, churning out rhythmic clapping, falsetto howls, and hair-raising yelps, which rang across the ripples of Wisteria Creek into the dark Carolina night.*

*But as much as Munk loved his life as an animal, at night when his itch was at its worst, he would sit in his thinking room at the highest point of the oak tree and mull over the one thing he intrinsically knew connected him to the OOmans. Miss Beulah always discounted what Munk felt in his heart to be true, and she did her best to dissuade the inquisitive Munk from thinking about it much further, lest he discover something he would rather not know. "Dig deep enough," she would say, "and you's a gonna find a mirror." Then one summer night, while Miss Beulah slept, Bunny and Munk crept into the cellar for a late night snack. Normally, Bunny and Munk were not allowed in the cellar, but as they had gotten older and shown themselves to be more responsible, Miss Beulah had given them the duty of hauling up spices for her while she cooked. Since they had been down there before, the two brothers saw no problem in going into the cellar to munch on some squash pickles and butterbean jam. While Bunny rooted through a canister of dried turnip flakes, Munk snooped*

through the remote recesses of the cellar. Back behind barrels of blackberry wine, Munk stumbled upon a small, metal door, no taller than he. Confident Bunny was preoccupied with licking away the turnip flakes, which had gotten stuck to his underarms, Munk tugged and twisted at the iron doorknob till the door finally gave way and opened. Peering into the darkness behind the door, Munk could not see anything. He removed his visionary goggles and sniffed the musty air. The area behind the door seemed to be relatively small, maybe the size of a fireplace, and budging the door a little further, Munk slipped through the narrow cranny and slowly walked inside. He reached around the cold, stone walls with his claws and continued sniffing the air, but before he could go any farther, he ran into the opposite wall. Why would Miss Beulah need a room this small, he thought. Patting the wall with his claws, he felt around for anything, which might indicate to him the room's purpose. Munk made it nearly to the floor when he discovered a heavy, metal ring attached to one of the stones. Immediately, he tried pulling the ring, but the wall would not budge. By this time, Munk could hear Bunny whining, scared that he may have been left alone in the cellar. "I's back heah," he yelled to Bunny without breaking a whisper. Bunny bounced his way to Munk, nearly knocking him over when he found him; the room behind the door was terribly cramped. "Bunny. Take dis and pull," Munk instructed, grabbing Bunny's hand and putting it on the ring. "Yank!" he ordered. With one mighty heave Bunny pulled the ring as hard as he could. The wall cracked, letting loose a horrendous din, which rang throughout the roots of the oak tree. Munk scurried to the front of the cellar and grabbed the lantern he had brought from upstairs. "Move yore butt, Bunny! Lemme see," he said, shunting his brother aside. Thinking there might be snaggloroot hidden behind the wall, Bunny mounted Munk's back to get a better look. Munk held the light forward. He could not believe his eyes. The ring was attached to a small, metal box no bigger than a desk drawer. An inscription had been chiseled across the front. *My Little Prince, Requiescat in Pace.* Munk's Latin was fairly rudimentary, but he was able to discern that the words indicated the drawer was some sort of sleeping chamber. Oddly, the inside contained nothing more than a little pile of ashes, but as Munk brought the light closer, he revealed a moldy skull. Munk stared at the object dumbfounded, unable to unthrust a lump, which had developed in his throat. Bunny moaned and slithered off of Munk, completely disinterested because the fruits of their labor had yielded no snaggloroot. Munk, however, was absorbed in the skull. There was no indication of its owner inside the box, and apart from a few fissures and holes, the skull lay altogether intact. Trembling with excitement, Munk reached into the drawer and ran his stunted claws carefully across the skull's surface. The exterior felt cool and hard, but within Munk, there developed a strange sense of fright about the artifact of death before him. What tremendous wonder and amazement? He had found an Ooman skull, an elusive object! Sure, he had seen an Ooman. After all Miss Beulah was one, but to be holding the remains of one caused the itch in his brain to seethe with excitement. For

*all their turmoil and strife, was this the inevitable end of all OOmans? “Who down heah?” called a voice from the top of the cellar stairs. “Quiet Bunny!” Munk whispered, blowing out the lantern and pulling shut the chamber door. In the dark Munk grabbed the skull and tucked it between his tailcoat and his bushy tail. The two brothers stood motionless, holding their breaths, so Miss Beulah could not detect them. “Wheah you rascals at?” she snapped. Munk could hear her work boots scraping along the floor. “I know’s you down heah! And you done ate all my squash pickles? Bunny!” During the most inopportune times Bunny always got the giggles, and as Miss Beulah sifted through the mess angrily, Bunny could not control himself. First his nose twitched. Then his two front teeth, the size of Brazil nuts, protruded from his quivering lips in a mounting grin. Munk sensed Bunny shaking. “Don’t little Buddy! Don’t” implored Munk. And then like a tidal wave retreating from the shoreline before it lashed again in one indomitable crash, Bunny inhaled a might breath to keep from laughing, but his lips would not hold, and a guffaw the like of which is similar to a donkey’s bray, steamrolled from Bunny’s mouth and blew open the chamber door. Miss Beulah promptly grabbed the two marauders by their hair and dragged them upstairs to her study for punishment. Bunny was sentenced to a month without snaggloroot, although such a sanction had been enjoined before and was never upheld for more than a week. But Munk, on the other hand, received a stern rebuking, especially for allowing his brother to consume the provisions Miss Beulah had put up for the winter. Then Miss Beulah delivered her final punitive action, for fate twiddles with those who meddle where they should not, and Munk was no exception. Sitting Munk on her lap and wrapping him in some of her ropelike braids, Miss Beulah told him the truth: the heart he shared with Bunny had once belonged to her Ooman son, who tragically died when he was only three years old. She never told Munk how the boy died, only that after he had died, she removed his heart. Then with a fox’s head, the paws of an otter, and the bodies of a squirrel and opossum, she constructed Munk. She constructed Bunny mostly from the remains of a boorish hare, but she shaved him bald and put his tail on his head. Their eyes she sculpted out of gems, but more than precious than gems, she divided the heart with a paring knife and gave each of them half, the final act, which brought her sons into the world. But then came her warning. “Half an Ooman heart does not an Ooman make; steppin’ too far into Ooman temptation gonna be Bunny and Munk’s gravest mistake.”*

A solitary reading lamp illuminated the living room in a soft golden hue. Underneath the gentle tick-tock of the grandfather clock in the hallway the wind whistled through the tight crevices of the windows. With a pair of reading glasses resting on the bridge of her nose, Alex mended a hole in one of Jason’s shirts, working the needle and thread as if she were writing a formal note in calligraphy. Jason lay sleeping in his recliner with a

frayed quilt wrapped around the upper half of his body. A gong denoting half past ten rang throughout the downstairs, and Jason woke, knocking a couple of empty beer bottles out of his recliner onto the hardwood floor. He rubbed his eyes and nose. "Damn." He lingered with his attention forward for a moment and then looked where Alex was knitting. Strands of her long, dark hair sat tucked behind her ear, revealing the full, delicate features of her face: the long, wisp of her lashes, the curve of her nostrils, the volume of her lips. He could not remember all the moments they had shared together since when they first met nearly two years ago, but somehow they all added up to this night with her, sitting in his house and holding his shirt in her hands. Should he be thankful or would there be a day when the pain and anger shattered the perfect stillness of this quiet night? "Hey." Jason reached out and grabbed Alex's arm. His touch startled her but she relaxed as his fingers moved along the bare skin just beyond her elbow. "I'm sorry," he whispered. But before Alex could ask him what for, his hand was collecting hers, and he pulled her into him, only to bandage the anger and pain for another night.

The autumn night wind bristled along the eaves of the farmhouse, and strange creaks and aches whistled throughout Atlas's room as he pulled a quilt over his head. Dark shadows fell across the walls of his room, creating terrifying shapes of creatures that only reared their frightful disfigurements when night had commenced. Peering out from the quilt, Atlas spied one of these horrible beings prostrating across the rug that lay in the center of his room, and another perched itself against Atlas's bookshelf as if lounging hospitably in the boy's terror. He tried to imagine they were the playful creatures from the book Alex had given him but to no avail. Scooting himself deeper into the center of the queen bed, he felt a bit more protected within the strong confines of the pewter bed frame. Soon, sleep got the best of Atlas, and he drifted into a dream about Bunny and Munk, jumping into a pile of leaves that quickly morphed into snowflakes as he stood on the banks of the Tar River, stretching out his arms, which were now adorned in black feathers. Just as he stepped into flight, a shotgun cracked through the October sky, splitting the river into two bodies of murky water. Atlas sat up in his bed.

There was no concept of time when he opened the kitchen door of the farmhouse and bolted into the night, which had caused him so much terror only minutes before. He tightened his grip on his flashlight; his silhouette moved across the yard with the alacrity of an owl searching for its morning meal. Then the flicker of the flashlight stopped and within its orb Atlas saw the gutted remains of the quail strewn along the base of the tree stump. He steadied the light onto its eye socket and filled its vacancy with his own brooding stare.

A black ant scurried into the empty eye socket of the quail head, which rested askew on a mound of brown and white feathers, bloodied bone fragments, and liberally applied gunk from a glue gun. What remained of the quail had been reassembled and placed on a large, tin coffee can. Dancing in his pajamas, Atlas imagined the quail born again and in flight, and he improvised a discordant song as he blew into a wooden recorder. The morning sun barely rippled through creped clouds onto the planked floor of Atlas's treehouse. After a final extended jangling note, Atlas completed the melody and dance. He quickly pressed the stop button on a dusty tape recorder Jason had thrown away years ago but Atlas had secretly salvaged from the trash. Immediately, he played what he had created, this time the tune warped from the distortion of a worn tape and the rusty mechanisms of the recording device. The disenchanting sound-Atlas loved it.

Jason had built Atlas his treehouse eight years prior when his hours at the plastic factory had been reduced and he started carpentry in his extra spare time. Housed inside the sprawling branches of a live oak, Atlas's treehouse rested on top of Jason's carpentry shed, where on this morning, he sanded vigorously an item he had labored over for days. Shavings and miscellaneous chunks of pine covered the shed floor, illuminated in sunlight saturated with billions of dust particles floating adrift like nameless planets in a distant galaxy. Oblivious to the ambient sound echoing from Atlas's treehouse, Jason fixed his tired eyes over his creation. He sipped his black coffee. A simple wooden chair. He exited from the shed moments later with the chair in tow and loaded it into the back of his pickup truck, which held an equally modest table. With a thermos of freshly brewed coffee Alex stepped into the backyard from the kitchen door. As Jason climbed into the truck, Alex handed him the thermos and kissed him tenderly on the lips. He offered her a gentle smile of hope and contentment in return. She watched as the truck pulled away and then turned toward the treehouse. "You can come down now," she said. A warm breeze carried the scent of burning leaves. Atlas climbed down from the treehouse.

Alex parked her beige sedan in front of Josephus Daniels Middle School. "Middle school. You know back when I went here it was a junior high." Atlas stared out the window. "How do you like the book?" she asked inquisitively. "I've never read it, but the squirrel or fox or whatever it is on the cover reminded me of you." "I like it," he said simply. Then another minute of silence. "I can pick you up this afternoon when you get out." "I wanna walk." "I don't mind," she said. Atlas made no reply. In the distance a fourteen year old boy with blonde hair and athletic build bantered with his best friend, another boy, who had chronic conjunctivitis, which had glazed the white of his eyes in red. They tested each other's endurance as they wet two of their fingers and smacked them against the underside of their opponent's wrist. The blonde boy scored a winning

blow over his friend, and as he grimaced in pain, the boy with chronic conjunctivitis looked in the direction of Alex's sedan and narrowed his eyes at- "Atlas?" Alex placed her hand on the boy's leg, but immediately, he flinched and hurried out of the car. With his head down, Atlas walked briskly toward the front of the school. He furtively tilted his head up but the boy with chronic conjunctivitis was gone. He stopped and looked behind him. Alex waved at him from inside her car.

The morning sun had retreated behind a thin veil of midday clouds. Jason wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his flannel shirt as he pulled the last of his wooden creations from the back of his pickup truck. Behind a painted sign, which read, "North Carolina Handmade Southern Furniture," Jason had lined several wooden pieces along the edge of a two-lane highway, and reclining in a camouflaged hunting chair, he waited for that one lonesome car to come around the bend and slowly pull into the open field next to him. Instead, Jason drifted off to sleep and only woke when the heavy-set woman sneezed. "Ha, that got your attention," she remarked in her hardened New England tongue. "Ma'am?" Jason pulled himself up from his slumber and adjusted his eyes. With her arms tucked behind her back, the heavy-set woman moved along the carvings and furniture, occasionally stopping and sizing up individual pieces with a furrowed brow and a judgmental sigh. "Bird feeder?" She looked under the wooden box for any indication as to what it might be. "Squirrel feeder," replied Jason. "Squirrel feeder?" The heavy-set woman straightened her back with a scaffold of incredulity. "Feed squirrels? Who wants to do that?" She dropped the wooden box as if she had pulled it from the sale bin at a ninety-nine cent store. "You make dollhouses? I'm looking for a dollhouse for my granddaughter in Connecticut." "No, Ma'am." The heavy-set woman reached the painted sign. She stopped-her eyes focused on one word. "Southern? Isn't this more mid-Atlantic? But I guess whatever sells, right?" It was not even a joke, but somehow, the heavy-set woman got herself, chuckling as she turned back toward her car. She made one final stop at a small table where Jason had arranged a menagerie of figurines, grouped in pairs and standing in front of each other as if in conversation. The heavy-set woman picked up one and ran her thumb over it. "How much for a couple of your army men?" "Army men?" "Yeah or soldiers or whatever you want to call them." Perplexed, Jason lifted himself up from his chair. Then he realized. "Those ain't army men." "No?" "No, ma'am. They're penguins." "Penguins? Are you sure about that?" Jason tensed his grip as he readjusted his ball cap and settled his attention back into the comfort of his chair. "You have them lined up here like they are talking to each other. That doesn't make any sense." "Yep. That's sort of the point." Immediately, the heavy-set woman cast Jason a disapproving stare. But he had retired from the false belief that the heavy-set woman had any intention of buying a dollhouse and instead, drifted into a realm where penguins discussed philosophical quandaries

akin to Plato or Descartes but resorted to performative animal docility as a form of self-preservation at the first inkling of humanity's presence. Within minutes he was asleep.

The boys' locker room had a perpetual scent of disinfectant and fresh paint, indicating what even the most feral among them knew—an aversion to bathing was the default state of the adolescent boy. Furthermore, within this realm of pubescent grime thrived the proliferation of ego and pride. The frenzy of hormones coupled with tiny black hairs on areas of the body where hair had never existed before fomented a space, which represented a primordial cave ensconced in towering metal lockers and illuminated in the abrasive wash of fluorescent lights. It was here where innocence was routinely sacrificed, thrown into the detritus of childhood and devoured with wanton glee. On this day the fumes of disinfectant and fresh paint had become the noxious barbarism of unabating fear. Asbestos discovered in the walls of the gymnasium, which had been built in the 1950's, had forced the county to condemn the structure in the preceding Spring, and the entire summer had been devoted to rebuilding both the gym and the locker rooms. Two months delayed, the construction was finally complete, and the crew was slowly sweeping the adjacent athletic fields of their equipment. Atlas had survived the merciless trial of pubescent boys hurling their angst at the weaker of the species with over a month of health classes, but today, all that changed. He watched while the other boys changed into their gym uniforms. Alex had bought him a second hand pair of navy blue sweatpants and an orange t-shirt, two sizes too big, but at least they were the school colors and he could show his pride, she had remarked. The sweatpants and t-shirt remained wadded in his backpack, and he walked into the new gymnasium and sat cross-legged on the floor. Mr. Sticknetty, his seventy-five year old gym teacher who should have retired ten years prior, sat at a wooden desk and flipped through a sports catalog. Behind him stood a roll-away chalkboard, and another boy, much taller and lankier than Atlas, doodled "Sticknetty's Bar and Grill" behind the clueless teacher, who breathed heavily through his mouth. Finally, other boys dressed in their gym uniforms filed into the gymnasium and sat down. A second bell rang. Mr. Sticknetty licked his forefinger and pulled a white sheet of paper out from under the catalog. "Abernathy," he grunted. "Here," squeaked a boy. "Anderson." "Here," spoke a voice much deeper. "Carson." "Yo." Giggles rippled through the twenty-some students, but Atlas sat quietly, dreading the moment when the grizzled man with sweat beaded around his neck said, "Raisin." Cackles erupted from the boy, and Atlas sunk deeper into himself. "Raisin!" gruffed Mr. Sticknetty. "Rayson," mouthed Atlas but nothing came out. "Huh?" "Rayson," he said this time with a little force. "Huh," the old man grunted, making a correction with a tiny putt-putt pencil. Then Mr. Sticknetty peered over his dirty glasses, stained with weeks' old sweat, coughs, and sneezes. "Where's your gym clothes?" Atlas attempted a shrug but then said, "My back hurts." "Huh?" Sticknetty

wheezed. “He said his back hurt.” Atlas looked over at the blonde boy, who was sitting next to the boy with chronic conjunctivitis. They whispered to each other and laughed. “Huh,” said Sticknetty. He pulled out a tiny notepad and scribbled something on it. Then licking the same finger as before, he ripped the tiny note and held it in front of him. “Go to the nurse,” he said, to which Atlas leapt and grabbed the note. He held his head low as he passed by the blonde boy and the one with chronic conjunctivitis, and just before he parted through the gymnasium doors, he heard the boy with chronic conjunctivitis whisper in an effeminate tone, “Bye, Raisin.” Again, the classroom burst into laughter. Atlas rushed out of the gymnasium.

The nurse’s office lay on the other side of the building next to the principal’s office. Atlas trudged through the labyrinth of hallways, corridors, and steps, finally arriving to the front of the building. He approached a much older student seated at a wooden desk and handed her the note. She did not even bother to read it but directed with her pink, glittery pencil toward the door marked “Nurse.” Atlas retrieved the note and then knocked on the door. “Come on in. It’s open,” said a voice with a sugary drawl. Cautiously, Atlas entered. It was a tiny room with a small bed, medicine cabinet, desk and shelf, and no windows. Everything was orderly and neat, rows of jars holding cotton balls, bandages, ointments, and one with peppermint candy. No attention was given to anything that could have been seen as superfluous or excessive. A wellness chart hung on the shelf. A stethoscope hung on the handle of the medicine cabinet. And the only object that seemed out of place was a golden wedding band which hung on a silver-chain around the neck of an older, full-figured woman with her hair well-coiffed and her eyes behind a pair of blue speckled reading glasses. She smiled as she busily wrote something in a notebook. “You can have a seat on the bed. It will be just a minute, sugar,” she said, her attention never dropping from what she was writing. Atlas slunk on top of the bed and crumbled the note in both of his hands. Casually, Atlas looked up and saw a small placard on the woman’s desk. “Verla, School Nurse,” it read. “Sorry for the wait, good sir.” The woman stopped her writing and closed the notebook. “What’s your name and what’s ailing you?” He handed her the pink slip of paper. Verla took the paper and quickly scanned it. She gave a motherly smile. “Atlas. Now, that’s a strong name. You forgot your PE clothes, didn’t you?” “My back hurts,” replied Atlas. Verla grabbed her stethoscope. “Do me a favor, baby, and lift your shirt.” Atlas lifted his shirt tepidly and pulled it over his head to hide his face. Verla shook her head lovingly and placed the face of the stethoscope against Atlas’s back. Atlas winced slightly; it was cold to the touch. “Breathe in deep for me, baby.” Atlas took a deep breath. “Another. And one more time.” Then Atlas could feel Verla tracing her finger down along his spine. “Hmmm. Well, I don’t detect any scoliosis, but how old are you Atlas, baby, thirteen?” Atlas nodded. “Probably some growing pains, and we don’t want to make an unpleasant

situation worse, now do we?” Verla sat back at her desk and scribbled on another pink piece of paper. Atlas remained with his shirt over his head. “You can report to the library during PE Monday thru Thursday the next couple of weeks, but you still have to go to Health class on Friday, okay?” Atlas nodded. “And then after Halloween, we’ll see how you feel, okay?” Atlas nodded vigorously. Verla clipped her giggle by pursing her lips. “You can pull your shirt back down now, baby.” Atlas yanked his shirt back over his head, teasing his longish hair into a frenzied mess. Verla handed him the pink slip and a piece of peppermint candy. Atlas took both and quietly slipped out of Verla’s office.

Tattered streams of black and orange fabric greeted Atlas as he entered the library. A rickety wooden stool held a plastic Jack-O’Lantern, which cackled and flickered an eerie sanguine light. Above his head hung a wooden sign, which read, “Enter the Haunted Library...if you dare!” scrawled in thick, black paint. Slowly pushing his way through the fabric, Atlas encountered more elaborate Halloween decorations, each one more fantastical than the last: three haggard witches crooning over a smoking cauldron; shrilling diaphanous ghosts bobbing up and down; and the piece de resistance, a haunted house built from Halloween themed books with dimly glowing lights in each of its four windows. Standing on his tip-toes, Atlas tried peering into one of the windows, but then he heard a bold, smoky voice remark “Stupid.” He turned and saw the school librarian standing behind a counter and holding an electric scanner. The man in his late-sixties had a mustache and wore what appeared to be a wig, salt-and-peppered and cropped short. He tried to scan the barcode of a book and angrily tapped a keyboard a few times. An elongated sigh. Unnoticed, Atlas waited patiently at the counter. He saw an advertisement for the school Holiday Talent Show. “Show off your school spirit and talent with the Josephus Daniels Middle School’s Annual Holiday Spaghetti Dinner and Talent Show. December 18th at 6:00pm.” Under the heading, a rosy cheeked Santa with spaghetti sauce dripping down his beard slurped a noodle into his mouth. Slightly amused, Atlas smiled. “You must be the one Verla called me about,” said the librarian. He extended his hand to Atlas. “I’m Leonard.” Instead of shaking Leonard’s hand, Atlas handed him the pink slip. A group of older boys, studying in the corner of the library, snickered, but Leonard quickly quieted them. “Gentlemen.” They immediately returned to their books. “Let’s put you to work,” said Leonard to Atlas. He led the boy through a small maze of Halloween book displays. One featured books about thunderstorms and Egyptian mummies. Another highlighted the Salem witch trials and the Legend of Sleepy Hollow. The display about science experiments particularly intrigued Atlas, especially since it featured a portrait of a mad scientist, whose eyes followed Atlas with each of his steps. Atlas tried to outsmart the mad scientist’s gaze but could not move fast enough. “His name is Edmond, and no matter where you stand, he is always watching

you,” remarked Leonard in a creepy voice. Embarrassed, Atlas turned his attention to several books stacked over by a wall. “Now, all of these books need to be assorted by theme, so all you have to do is match each of them with its appropriate display. For instance, one here on-,” Leonard grabbed a book with a treasure chest on it and perused the title “-pirates it looks like. I’d put this one with the display I have on sea monsters.” Leonard placed the book upright next to another entitled *Giant Squids*. “Think you can manage this?” Atlas opened a book. A drawing of a seventeenth century witch soaring through the night sky appeared on the page. “I’ll be up front if you need me,” Leonard said as he patted the boy on the shoulder and walked back through the displays toward the front of the library. Atlas took another look at the book on witches in his hands and set it back on the ground. Then he picked up another. *Monster Make-up and Show: How to make yourself look like a real monster*. With a cracked spine and worn edges, the book had seen better days. Atlas opened the book carefully. *Dr. Frankenstein’s Monster. You will need a bag of all purpose flour, water, green food coloring, a black eye-liner, a black wig-*” Atlas sat the book down and pulled *Misadventures in Being* from his book bag. He opened the book to the next chapter.

## Chapter Two

*Now that Miss Beulah had confirmed his deepest suspicion that he was somehow akin to the OOmans, Munk's curiosity eventually got the best of him. He spent more time gallivanting around the edges of Beulah's Landing without permission and less time playing with Bunny. Although he vaguely understood the implications of Miss Beulah's warning, Munk still stuck to the outskirts of town, where a few OOmans lived, and he studied them performing their daily activities. These observations were a considerable source of excitement as well as vexation for Munk. He wanted to know why OOmans behaved the way they did, what motivated them, how they worked, or better yet, why they worked at all. What were OOmans if not animals? If animals, why were they not living in the swamp like all the rest, seeding their urges with digging holes without purpose, jumping from tree to rock in order to travel without destination, splashing in creeks, not to wash or bathe but to feel the sensation of water flowing along their hairless backs? And if OOmans were not animals, then what were they? These questions confounded the meddlesome creature, and despite Miss Beulah's contempt for his inquisition, Munk never quit wondering about the singular creatures.*

*On one early July day, as Bunny and Munk wrangled each other in vines down at Wisteria Creek, Munk decided he wanted to play a new game. Cocking a long branch from a long leaf pine as if it were a rifle, Munk pretended to be an OOman hunter, prowling around the forest for Bunny, who pretended to be a ferocious grizzly bear. As Munk snuck up on him, Bunny started a rhythmic "hum-bum" with his lips, imitating the beat of a drum. Spotting the grizzly bear's rump poking out of a kudzu patch, Munk pounced on Bunny and rammed his makeshift rifle into the bear's lumpish buttocks. Bunny let out a shrill and scurried through the briars with Munk quick on his tail. The chase then transpired in the sunflower field, where the two actors, consumed by the roles, mocked the hunt for hours. Finally, as Bunny went flailing down the hill to the pond, Munk leaped in front of him, cut him off at the bend, and shot at the fearful bear. Bunny, seeing his life pass before his eyes, screamed in horror, threw some crushed rose petals from his chest as if it was a wound spurting blood, and then proceeded to perform his best dying animal routine, ending the hunt with a belly flop into the pond. Munk joined him in the pond and all sense of assigned parts shattered under the playful splashing of water. But before the two brothers could carry on any further, Miss Beulah was standing at the banks of the pond, just beyond where the cattails jutted up from an otter dam. Immediately sensing her presence, Munk knew he was in trouble. "I thought I done told you tuh quit wit dis nonsense, Munk," chastised Miss Beulah. "Git on up to duh house and give your bruder a bath! Den we gonna have a serious talk," she said, turning back*

toward the dirt path that led to the oak tree. Munk slunk out of the pond, flicking the water with his claws as he went. Bunny stood waist deep in the pond with a dopey expression across his face, unsure of what had just happened. That evening after combing the briars out of his brother's fur and giving him a bath in lavender and rosemary so he smelt especially nice, Munk sat in Miss Beulah's study, waiting for his punishment. The old witch, her back now bending with age, entered the study with the support of a gnarled cane she had whittled from a Judas tree. She poured herself a thimble of buckeye brandy and settled in her favorite rocking chair. Munk just stared at one of her bookshelves, wishing he could grab a novel and scuttle away to his thinking room "Well," said Miss Beulah. Her eyes sparkled with the reflection of a hundred and one lighting bugs busily illuminating the room from an amethyst glass feeder hanging from the ceiling. Reading the titles on the spines of the books, Munk pretended he did not hear her. "Munk, now, don't you go makin dis difficult. Yuh know yuh done wrong. Speak up about it. Be truthful." Munk turned and looked at his mother. She had aged rapidly over the years, and he was beginning to see a subtle lassitude in her once vibrant eyes. "Mama, we was just playin," he said nervously, twisting a little fur on his chest. "Just playin? Dat's some kind of playin, strutting around duh forest like an OOman hunter, and den havin your bruder pretendin tuh die. Yuh know what dyin is, honey?" Munk thought about it for a minute. He remembered the story Miss Beulah had told him about her son; how he came to possess a human heart, but he never quite knew what death really was. Furthermore, he dare not admit that he and Bunny had once taken a mini excursion to the old OOman burial grounds on the other side of Wisteria Creek. Munk had always known about the cemetery, but Miss Beulah had forbidden him to visit it. Wandering around the graveyard was rather perplexing. Munk had studied the chunks of concrete from behind his visionary goggles; their once stone craftsmanship now bedecked with moss, lichen, and weeds. Most of the chiseled lettering had eroded on their ceremonial faces, but Munk had been able to surmise that the gravestones were markers, carved placards serving as reminders of OOman existence. Bunny's concept of death, however, was a bit simpler compared to Munk's. He assumed one day someone of greater importance than himself, someone like Miss Beulah, would command him to die. Envisioning death as a process by which one animal must give up his space in the forest for another, Bunny lost little sleep over the matter, and therefore, for him the cemetery had resembled nothing more than a garden full of decorative rocks. Thinking he would be really smart about Miss Beulah's question, Munk blurted out, "Dyin is when my OOman heart give out," he smacked. As soon as he spoke those words, however, Munk wished he had not. "Curse you," bit Miss Beulah. The old woman eased up from her rocking chair and pulled a piece of dried parchment out from her writing desk. She then dangled the paper in front of Munk, making sure he could see it in its entirety. Delicately, Miss Beulah blew on the paper, which instantly disintegrated into a billion pieces. The particles floated to Munk's

*feet, and within a matter of seconds, they disappeared into the cracks of the wooden floor. Munk was astonished. Death could not possibly be that precipitous and tragic, he thought. Then clearing the residue from her throat, Miss Beulah recited a doleful rune, which Munk would never forget:*

*Of which plants do we eat the leaves,  
the roots, the stems, and the tiny seeds?  
How do the pumpkins grow?  
Like the potato? The turnip? Or the pear tree's toes?*

*Bunny and Munk must know,  
That they do not know  
That their time is to live and play.  
For if they stumble upon OOman knowledge,  
They must surely question the day.*

*Play with life and challenge its fun.  
Converse, be merry, and do the undone.  
But be warned of applying too much thought  
For that is the life that OOmans have bought.*

*Take time Bunny and Munk to sit and dine  
Frolic in existence before the mind.  
You will grow by instinct and verdant nature  
The perfect lesson of earthly nomenclature.*

*Then when your head falls down and weary,  
and your bones begin to break,,  
here comes Death to relinquish you  
from Life's ceaseless headache.*

*Go find yourself a cool, damp spot,  
And rest your tired feet upon a rock.  
Then away you will go back into the soil,  
free from all instinct, hunch, and toil.*

*These are my precious gifts to thee,  
Creatures born here, in being,  
Both my babies.*

*When she was finished, Miss Beulah rested her palsied hand on Munk's shoulder. "Be careful my son, because one day duh wind is gonna blow through dis ole oak tree, and all duh leaves are gonna fall off, and dey ain't ever gonna grow back." As she leaned over to kiss him on the forehead, Munk could hear the old witch's bones crack. With that she exited the study without issuing his punishment. For a moment Munk felt vindicated in the exercise of his playful attitude toward death, but soon that feeling was replaced by a heavy sense of foreboding.*

*The next afternoon, Munk and Bunny went swimming in Wisteria Creek. After the two brothers waded in the mud for a few hours and sang a few rounds of Hoe Dee Toad-EE with a family of harmonizing tree frogs, they rested on the shore and watched the puffy white clouds play a game of tag with the hot sun. Bunny fingered his belly button and chuckled as he cleaned the grime from the knotty, hairy hole. Munk peered up at the sky and contemplated Miss Beulah's words from the night before. Her instructions on dying did not really satisfy his itch, and he remained rather estranged from this notion of death. He could not fathom that the inevitable end was nothing more than the damp, wet caress of Mama Earth. Rubbing his claws along the protrusion of his jaw and the bridge of his elongated snout, Munk thought about his own skull. What did it look like? He had the head of a fox or so Miss Beulah said, but was a fox skull the same as an Ooman's? What did his fur and flesh conceal? Munk rolled over on his naked stomach and gazed at Bunny, who continued to excavate the gravel from his navel. Did Bunny have the same skull as him? Satisfied with the banal merriment of his belly button picking, Bunny had no concern other than what he could find in his navel. Maybe he would find some snaggloroot crumbs. Staring at his brother, Munk wondered why the oaf even lived at all if he was not going to invest in a more thorough understanding of life. The thought was crass. He loved his brother; he truly did, but he never understood why they were so different. Why did he want to know more? Why did he have the feeling he was much more than Miss Beulah would allow him to be? Bunny's physical appearance, especially his ruby lips, coupled with his tame personality, was attractive, comical, and cute. Munk's lips were thin, barely noticeable, and he did not have the appeal of Bunny's charming, unassuming demeanor. And although Miss Beulah occasionally scolded Bunny for his silliness, the creature was never reprimanded like Munk, who suffered under his mothers' relentless castigations. Sometimes Munk wished he had been born the same way, without the itch. While Bunny dozed lazily, purring softly through his two front teeth, Munk crawled over and nestled up next to him. His brother's fluff tickled Munk's nose, and lying peacefully next to him, Munk thought he could die just like this. He sighed. That evening, Munk slept with his arms around his brother in their bedroom, leaving all thoughts of the befuddling Oomans tucked away in his thinking room.*

The bell rang, and Atlas jumped up from where he had been lying on the library floor. He had not shelved any of the books. “That’s the bell, folks. Get to class, or I’m releasing the zombies.” Leonard’s voice echoed through a sampling of eerie noises he had playing through the PA system. “And I see my helper today didn’t get very far.” This time, Leonard’s voice was normal and calm. Atlas dropped the book and darted through the back exit of the library into the hallway congested with other students. Lost in the throng of rambunctious boys and cliquish girls, Atlas scanned the hallway for authority figures. None. So he slipped out one of the side doors and darted down a dirt path into the nearby woods.

It was cloudy with a slight chill in the air. Atlas hooked his thumbs underneath the straps of his backpack and walked contently along the dirt path. Occasionally, he checked behind himself to see if anyone was following him. He whistled the song he had been playing on his recorder that same morning. Eventually, the path emptied out into a harvested cotton field. A few sprigs of unpicked cotton fluttered with a passing breeze. In the distance a large flock of crows hopped about cawing at each other. Atlas stopped. He studied the crows and then, spreading his arms as if they were wings, he charged them. “Caw! Caw! Caw!” Immediately, the crows dispersed into the bruised clouds just above Atlas’s head. Briefly, a ray of sun broke through the billows of grays and purples, and feeling it against his forehead, Atlas closed his eyes and welcomed it. Then with his arms still spread, Atlas began spinning in place, picking up speed as if he were about to ascend into the air. Within seconds the ray of sun succumbed to the encroaching clouds and the brilliant light that once christened Atlas’s forehead disappeared. He lowered his head and resumed his gait through the field. A deep, uneasy laughter broke through the peaceful serenity of the afternoon. Atlas stopped. He surveyed the landscape, and just as he was about to run toward the path leading home, he spotted a tall, rotund man, disheveled and unkempt with white long hair and a scraggly beard, walking with a wooden stick made from a fir tree approaching him. The old man wore a dark red jumpsuit, and all told he looked like a deranged Santa Claus. Before Atlas could run down the path toward home, Santa Claus crossed in front of him and stopped. Their eyes met, except Santa Claus had one eye that seemed to be made of reflected glass, and Atlas barely made out his own reflection, small and distant. Then Santa Claus erupted into another hysterical fit of wheezing laughter. Terrified, Atlas darted into the woods. A crow took flight from a naked cypress, and Santa Claus resumed his walk.

Crackling embers illuminated the living room in a soft, orange glow. With a book about carpentry resting on his chest, Jason slept in his recliner with a nearly empty beer bottle perched in his hand. Alex peered into the living room from the kitchen and carefully shut the sliding door that connected the two rooms. At the kitchen table Atlas shuffled a deck

of playing cards and dealt a hand to Alex as she took her seat adjacent to him. She picked up her playing cards. "Wait," said Atlas. "You can't look at those." "Right. Sorry," smiled Alex. She placed the cards back on the table. Atlas finished dealing. "Now, you can look at them." Alex collected the cards in her hand. "Highest to lowest?" "Or lowest to highest. It don't matter. Only if it makes sense to you." Atlas busily arranged his cards while Alex adjusted her own deck. "And what are my trickster cards?" "Whatever you want them to be. You choose. But once you choose, you can't go back on it." "But I get two?" "Yep." The pair continued to arrange their cards. Alex took a sip of some Russian tea she had made. Then- "Your school nurse called today." Atlas ignored her. "Don't worry. Your daddy don't know." "Jokers are your steal card," Atlas said, trying his best to divert the conversation. "I just want to make sure you're all right. That's all." "And Kings are bad unless you have a Queen that's the same symbol. You know like you can play a King of heart with a Queen of heart but not a Queen of diamond. But if you have a King of heart and not a matching Queen-" "Atlas." Atlas stopped talking and laid a card down. Ace of Spades. "What does that mean?" asked Alex. "Unless you have a heart card, you lose."

Atlas faced the mirror in his bathroom and flexed his right bicep. A tiny muscular bump formed along the ridge of his arm and then retreated. He sighed and pulled a tube of toothpaste from the bathroom drawer. Squirting an inch of toothpaste along the bristles of his toothbrush, Atlas paused. He had an idea. Quickly, he turned on the faucet and cupped some warm water in his hand. Then he pushed the water into the thickness of his hair, pulling the strands back from across the top of his eyes. He narrowed his gaze and contorted his face into his best monster scowl. Grabbing the tube of toothpaste, Atlas squirted a liberal amount into his palm and rubbed the mint-smelling paste across his forehead and cheeks. Just as he was about to perfect his devilish grin, the burn from the toothpaste set in, and Atlas immediately began dousing his face in cold water. Minutes later, Alex was dabbing white ointment on the red blotches covering Atlas's forehead and cheeks. The ointment smelt like Verla's office, thought Atlas. Alex blew her cool breath across Atlas's face, which covered the smell of Verla's office with the smell of cloves and cinnamon. "Better?" Atlas nodded. "Let that sit for a while." Alex ran a washcloth under cool water trickling from the bathroom faucet. "Daddy won't let me go trick or treating." Alex rinsed the toothpaste from the washcloth and set it on the edge of the sink. "I think I can convince him," she said. She pushed the limp hair from off his forehead. "But for now, don't you worry about it. Get some sleep." She turned to exit when- "I ain't built like the other boys." Alex turned back to Atlas and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. So much age had settled in her face, but she did not feel old. "They make jokes about me, so I went to the nurse instead." Alex rested her hand on Atlas's shoulder and took a seat on the edge of the bathtub. He looked at her with his

deep hazel eyes flecked with hints of amber. She had never felt connected with the boy, but somehow, in this moment, she felt an overwhelming sadness. “When I was your age, I was, well, how do I say this. I was a late developer. Boys wanted nothing to do with me because-you know.” Atlas didn’t know; those eyes looking back at her seemed to change from hazel to gold to blue. “My sister called them mosquito bites. Boys called them bee stings.” Atlas understood then and cracked a smile. “But soon I hit my growth spurt and I grew into myself. I just needed a little more time; that’s all.” Alex rubbed the back of her hand across Atlas’s cheek, an action she thought she was supposed to do and not necessarily one of spontaneous concern. Then Atlas winced and pulled back. “Sorry,” she said. “Didn’t mean-” “It’s okay.” Alex looked into the boy’s eyes one more time, but now the color was absent, and the dark nothing she saw staring back at her made her uneasy. She stilled her nerves and managed a comforting smile. Then she exited the bathroom. Atlas sat in silence for a moment. He stood and looked at himself in the mirror. Lifting his shirt, he turned and looked over his shoulder at his back. Two long faint bruises appeared along the sides of his spine.

Atlas tossed and turned all night, unable to sleep because of the pain in his back. But eventually, he wrestled himself out of bed and headed to his treehouse. Standing in front of the reassembled dead quail, he played the song on his recorder from the previous day. When he finished playing, he stopped the old tape player and pressed rewind. Then he pressed play. He picked up the quail and flew it around in his arms as the warped song filled the treehouse.

Although the day was warm, rain from the morning soaked the earth, and the clouds lingered as if they were too tired to move. Jason sat in a folding chair amongst his furniture pieces along the highway, and he read the “Sports” section of the local paper. An old country song wailed from inside his pickup truck. Finishing the “Sports” section, Jason flipped the paper over and discovered he was now reading the section “Career Opportunities.” Several tiny blocks with small print covering an array of jobs were crammed into two pages. Overwhelmed, Jason tossed the section into the grass and rested on reading the “Comics.” A newer pickup truck pulled along the side of the road and parked itself behind Jason’s truck. Exiting the truck, an elderly man, wearing a button up plaid shirt and pressed slacks, arched his back and perused the various furniture pieces. “Howdy,” he said. Jason looked up from his paper and gave a casual nod. “Mind if I have a look around?” “Go right ahead,” said Jason. He returned to the comics while the elderly man meandered through the furniture pieces, taking a minute to inspect one chair more closely. “Never too early for Christmas shopping.” Jason forced a smile. “Don’t find too many folks who make their own furniture no more.” The old man dithered for a moment, and then- “Name’s Charlie.” Again, Jason feigned interest.

Charlie waited for Jason to provide his name, but when no name was forthcoming, gritted his teeth and returned to the chair, which had caught his attention. “Huh. How you cut your bevels?” Jason ignored him now. “How you holding your saw?” Slightly annoyed, Jason stopped reading. “It’s just a little off. Lookie here.” Jason rubbed the stubble on his chin. “You wanna buy the chair or not?” he asked sharply. “You’re using a handsaw, ain’t you? You need to be pushing along the teeth. This cut here-well, it’s just way too hard.” Charlie steadied himself against the chair as Jason looked where the old man was pointing. “Don’t mean nothing by it. Used to make furniture myself until-” Charlie held up his hands, displaying the bend in his fingers and a long battle with arthritis. Still, Jason disregarded the old man’s friendliness and plopped back into his chair. “I do like that chair. I ain’t got money on me now, but if you hold onto it for me, I’ll come back in a few days and buy it off of you.” Charlie stumbled back to his pickup truck and climbed into the front seat. As the truck pulled away, Charlie rolled down his window and said, “Okay then. Don’t sell it on me now.” He extended a wave, but by that point, Jason had returned to reading the comics.

Chatting about popular television shows they had watched the night before, a few teachers congregated in the hallway. Their cheerful banter seemed a warm spot in an otherwise cold and sterile hallway. Then a loud bell rang, and the warm spot dissipated with the onslaught of screaming boys and girls filling the hallway. Atlas trudged solemnly alone through the crowds as if he did not exist. Stepping out of the auditorium, Verla spotted Atlas and walked up beside him. For half of the hallway, Atlas stayed in his own world and did not notice Verla, who playfully tried to get his attention. Eventually, a slight pinch on his elbow woke Atlas from his daydreaming. “Mind if I walk with you?” Atlas gave an indifferent shrug. “I hate walking through these halls when there are this many people. Especially when you’re taller than most. Makes me feel like some kind of big ole troll.” Two especially rowdy boys bumped into Verla. “Quit running you two!” They stopped playing just long enough for Verla to pass by them and then quickly resumed flicking each other’s ears. “Half of them treat me like I’m some kind of terrible monster out to make their lives miserable. But I’m really just here to help. Any-hoo, enough about how *I’m* feeling. How are you doing today? Get into a fight with some poison ivy?” Atlas looked quizzically at Verla, who noticed the faint red blotches across his face. “No,” he replied. “Well, this is where I get off.” Verla stopped in front of her office. Atlas kept walking. “You can always come see me if you need to, Atlas.” He turned as he walked and gave Verla a look of acknowledgment. Then, he continued on his way.

Atlas entered the library and sat his book bag behind the counter. Leonard was nowhere to be found, so he began stacking the books, which students had placed on a book cart.

Forty-five minutes passed and as he finished stacking the books, Atlas spied the advertisement for the school holiday talent show. There was a slight temptation to sign up, but then Leonard entered the library. He was wearing a black, knit cardigan with ghosts, witches, and pumpkins stitched on it. Holding an orange plate with various Halloween cookies, Leonard greeted Atlas with a smile. He extended the plate as an offering. "Left over from the staff meeting." Atlas shook his head no. "This is a fine job, Atlas," Leonard said, inspecting the boy's work. "A very fine job." An arrogant and ill-mannered fourteen year old boy, who flipped through a National Geographic Magazine searching for naked pictures of Indigenous women, mocked Leonard in a derogatory, effeminate tone. "Fine job, Atlas. Just a fine job." Leonard turned quickly to the boy. "My, aren't you observant? I'm glad you noticed too." Immediately, the boy blushed. He tossed the magazine on the shelf and exited the library. "Kindness always has the upper hand," Leonard remarked brightly. He offered the plate of cookies one more time. "Go on." Atlas pulled a pumpkin cookie off the plate and nibbled on it. "Thank you," he said softly. "Oh, by the way." Leonard sat the plate on the bookshelf and pulled a paperback book from one of the pockets of his cardigan. "This book is from-" he flipped to the front of the book, looking for the publication date "-the nineteen seventies, and well, most of the youngins here won't touch nothing that don't talk back to 'em, so if you want it?" Leonard handed the book to Atlas. The title read *Movie Monster Make-up*, and images of Lon Chaney as the Phantom of the Opera and Boris Karloff as the Frankenstein monster adorned the green, cracked cover. "I'm partial to the Gravedigger look on page eighty-nine. Take another cookie for the road." Atlas slid another cookie off the plate and tucked the book under his arms as a doleful clang echoed from the hallway.

A whirlwind of adolescence swarmed the hallway, and protecting himself, Atlas ducked into a small enclave underneath a set of stairs. He untucked the make-up book from his arm and opened to page eighty-nine. "THE GRAVEDIGGER: Nothing says macabre more than a man who buries bodies for a living. YUCK! To resemble this lover of the dead, you will need to look as though you, too, are on the verge of entering the Netherworld." Beneath the set of how-to instructions, a scrawny, pallid man displayed his crooked, jagged teeth with a horrifying grin. Atlas tried mimicking the Gravedigger's evil snarl, and excitement ran through his body. Then imagining he was in Munk's thinking room, Atlas tucked himself farther beneath the stairs and opened to the next chapter of *Misadventures in Being*:

### Chapter Three

*A few months passed and the New England cold eventually seeped into the warm wildflower fields of the South. The leaves on the oak tree changed from their waxen green to a crinkly, decadent brown, and the horizon was freckled in a perpetual rose gold. When Bunny and Munk stepped outside in the morning to haul pumpkins in from the garden, the air had a crispness to it. Miss Beulah put up jars of her sweet scuppernong wine and made enough Jonagold and ginger cake to last the entire winter. All Hallows' Eve was a special occasion in the swamp. Miss Beulah hosted a raucous celebration, filled with apple dunking, jack-o-lantern rolling, and soul rousing. Anxious for the festivities, Bunny and Munk woke early on All Hallows' Eve morning and rummaged through their closets, sifting through chests of musky clothes trying to find the perfect costume. Hours later, Bunny donned a risqué, pink party dress, which he spiced up with a lacy white shawl. Cutting out the toes to fit his big feet, he put on a pair of black Victorian laced boots, which were still too small for him. Then he tied a pretty pink bow in his tail on top of his head. Munk sported an oversized pair of tweed woolen knickers, which luckily came with some adjustable braces, and a tuxedo shirt he doctored up with a polk-a-dotted bow tie. He wore a weathered tailcoat and his black boots as well as his coral bonnet. And of course, he had his visionary goggles pulled tightly around his eyes, which he now wore all the time. The brothers could hardly wait for midnight when the party would begin. Souls of deceased animals would wake and join in the merriment, lighting the entire woods in their ethereal glow. Miss Beulah would cast apricot flames in the trees and play spooky dirges on her organ; the haunted sound would emanate from the branches of the oak tree and echo throughout the swamp. Munk snuck into Miss Beulah's study to look at the grandfather clock to see what time it was. To his disappointment it was still morning, so he and Bunny headed to Wisteria Creek to play with some of the other swamp critters, who were equally excited about All Hallows' Eve. Now, about this time, the OOmans had built a road just east of Wisteria Creek, and Munk had witnessed strange contraptions whizzing by at alarming speeds. He had only seen a handful, and he could never make out exactly what they were. After a few raucous rounds of alligator lily slaps, a game equally fun and exhausting, Bunny and Munk ate their dinner of Bungleroot cornbread and Tortoise Pea soup and then climbed into their favorite cottonwood for an afternoon nap. But while Bunny whistled in his sleep, Munk fixated on the road the Ooman's had built, hoping to see one of their contraptions come racing by. Around dusk, however, both Bunny and Munk were curled up next to each other, and the last rays of the autumnal sun cast a shiny bronze over their enmeshed fur. Suddenly, a pop rolled loudly through the swamp somewhere from the west. As animals are prone to do, both Bunny and Munk jumped up from their slumber with their senses at attention. Bunny whimpered, but Munk*

scanned the horizon through his visionary goggles. At first he saw nothing, but then on the Ooman road he spied one of the contraptions, silver and sleek, which looked to have lost one of its wheels. He focused his visionary goggles to get a better look, and what he saw nearly made him fall out of the tree. "It can't be," he said with the grit of sandpaper in his voice. Bunny's whimper grew louder. "Shhh, now," Munk said. "Giddie up." Immediately, Bunny hopped onto his brother's back, and the two brothers descended from the tree. With Bunny hoisted onto his back, Munk crept through the swamp like a weasel stalking its prey, edging closer to the Ooman road. Within fifty feet of the pavement, he came to a stop. Bunny's eyes widened into gigantic sapphire saucers. "Yuh see it too," remarked Munk. There, standing outside of the contraption, was Miss Beulah or so Bunny and Munk thought. "That's Mama's cape," he whispered. "And Mama's pointy hat. Those look like Mama's boots and crooked nose and long gray hair." Munk could not believe his visionary goggles but he dared not take them off. Then Bunny tapped Munk on the shoulder and pointed toward the inside of the contraption. An oversized baby bird with blue feathers and a tiny pumpkin on its head sat in the backseat, except upon closer inspection it had no beak or feathers on its face. Just two eyes, a pudgy nose, and mouth. "Be right back, baby," Miss Beulah said to the baby bird. Munk arched his eyebrow. "What's Miss Beulah doing in an Ooman contraption with that Big Baby Bird?" he wondered. While the two brothers watched safely from a distance, Miss Beulah grabbed a small contraption from the back end of the large contraption and began replacing the wheel. The whole ordeal took only a matter of minutes, and before Munk knew it, Miss Beulah had returned the small contraption to the back end of the large contraption. Then she did something quite odd. She contorted her eyes and mouth into weird faces and aimed them through the glass window at the Big Baby Bird. "Thruuuuummp," was the noise she made when she stuck her tongue out at the baby bird. "Did she je'st cast uh spell on duh Big Baby Bird?" Munk could not believe it. Finally, Miss Beulah climbed back into the contraption and proceeded to drive it away. But before the contraption pulled out of sight, the Big Baby Bird saw Bunny's enormous blue eyes, and it shrieked with laughter. "Bunny!" it shouted, and because of his keen sense of hearing, Bunny heard this. Within seconds his right leg began thumping on the ground, a clear indication he was getting increasingly excited. "Wut's wrong, Buddy?" asked Munk. He tried to quell his brother's anxiousness. "Der must be uh good ex-pluh-nachun," he said as he grabbed a hold of Bunny's neck. But before he could think about what that might be, Bunny lifted off the ground and gamboled down the Ooman road in the direction of the contraption, hauling Munk with him.

The Ooman road twisted and turned for miles, but Bunny's stamina never let up, even as Munk attempted to talk him down. "Buddy, yuh' goin' tuh fast! Slow down!" Bunny bounded down the Ooman road, skidding through sharp turns and leaping

over bridges. Just as the full moon cast its glow over the pines, giving the bristles on their heads the appearance of ice crystals, the two brothers came upon a sign, which read "Beulah's Landing. Population 942." Bunny stopped, and Munk climbed down off his brother. Beyond the sign Munk saw faint lights that stood on top of black poles, and just beyond that, he saw tiny white huts with glowing pumpkins resting nearby. At this point Bunny's fear kicked in, and he wanted to leave. However, Munk's itch had become insatiable, and he just had to know what this place was. "We je'st go and look," he said to Bunny calmly. "Dis mite be wher's Mama be." Grabbing Bunny by the ear, he pulled Bunny with him down the Ooman road past the sign. They crept down the Ooman road cautiously. So far there was nothing out of the ordinary, except for the lights on top of black poles and an occasional white hut with a glowing pumpkin. Some of the white huts were covered in spiderwebs and others had purple and green lights hanging in their windows. "Dis cud be wher's uder witches liv," said Munk proudly, slightly confident that he had solved the mystery. But then he saw a strange sight. OOmans, mostly tall but a few short, were walking about the Ooman road, and with them were groups of odd creatures. Some looked like bones assembled and upright. Others looked like some of the swamp animals Bunny and Munk knew. And some...well some frightened Bunny and Munk terribly. Furthermore, as they approached, the OOmans and their creatures simply ignored Bunny and Munk. Even when Munk jumped on Bunny's shoulders and gnarled his lips and hissed, the OOmans passed them by. One Ooman clapped and said, "Great costumes you two," and a creature with shiny, metallic-like skin and green lips pointed at them and laughed. "Wut is dis place?" said Munk, sliding off Bunny's back. Was Miss Beulah secretly having an All Hallows Eve celebration with the OOmans? Munk and Bunny wandered through the growing crowds of OOmans and their weird creatures. Then out of the corner of Munk's eye, he spotted Miss Beulah with the Big Baby Bird, standing on the porch of a white hut, which had large bales of hay and cornstalks in its yard. "Dey's Mama," said Munk excitedly. "But wut she do?" He watched as Miss Beulah helped the Big Baby Bird grab something from a bowl, which a round, bald Ooman held just inside the hut. Then Miss Beulah grabbed the Baby Blue Bird's wing and walked slowly with it off the porch. Bunny mewled softly. "Shhh," Munk said, shoving his paw over Bunny's mouth. "We's follow 'dem," he said. Munk mounted Bunny, and they followed Miss Beulah and the Big Baby Bird from a careful distance. As Miss Beulah and the Big Baby Bird walked along the edge of the Ooman road on what looked like a smaller Ooman road, they occasionally stopped at another white hut and grabbed another object from an Ooman. Munk ascertained that the glowing pumpkins in front of the white huts were jack-o-lanterns, and some of the white huts had music similar to Miss Beulah's organ dirges blaring from their windows. One of the white huts had tiny spirits hanging from a tree, but when Munk passed beneath the spirits and they did not disperse, he realized they were nothing more than rags with black eyes and mouths painted on them. "Wut a weirdness!" he thought. Soon,

*the bundles of OOmans and their creatures thinned out, and Munk and Bunny followed Miss Beulah and the Big Baby Bird back to the contraption, which was parked at what looked to be the center of all the white huts. Munk noticed much larger huts, which were made of brick and stone. Then Miss Beulah picked up the Big Baby Bird and strapped it into a holding device, something Munk had not noticed before. "Mama knows tuh' leave baby birds in dey nest," said Munk smartly. "Wut she fixin?" Once again, Miss Beulah contorted her face and hurled strange noises at the Big Baby Bird, who giggled and sputtered back at Miss Beulah. "She castin' uh' spell?" thought Munk. Then Munk witnessed something that caused him to fall back against a large pine tree. After stretching her arms Miss Beulah tossed her hat and cape into the contraption, pulled over her gray braids to reveal younger, blonde hair, and then ripped off her crooked nose. At first Munk thought Miss Beulah had transformed herself into a beautiful, young OOman, but then a strong sense of betrayal came over him, and his half human heart sank into his stomach. All this time Miss Beulah had pretended to be something she was not, and this caused Munk to seethe. Curling his lip above his sharp teeth, Munk galloped over to Miss Beulah right as she was sitting inside the contraption. Startled, she turned to Munk and smiled. "I'm sorry, sugar. I ain't got no candy, except what belongs to my little baby back there, and that's hers," she said. "'Er 'ittle baby?!" thought Munk incredulously. "But we's yore babies!" barked Munk. "Go on and run along to your Mama," said Miss Beulah, running her fingers through her hair. Then she shut the door and turned on the contraption.*

*Then what happened forever changed the course of events in the lives of Bunny and Munk. For in this one chance encounter, the winds of misfortune radically altered how the two brothers perceived the world, especially Munk. While Munk growled at Miss Beulah, who laughed at how ostensibly playful he was being, Bunny had freed Big Baby Bird from the back of the contraption and hoisted her up onto his shoulders. Within seconds Miss Beulah screamed. "He's got my baby," she shouted at the top of her gullet. "He's got my baby!" Munk immediately turned to his brother and joined Big Baby Bird on top of his shoulders. "Go, Bunny!" he yelled, and with the command Bunny bolted down the OOman road quicker than a cat could lick its behind. Bunny raced swiftly through the white huts, knocking over jack-o-lanterns and corn husks. He lept over a yellow fence and into a gathering of OOmans and creatures, who were dancing to music. "Hey!" shouted an OOman woman, who swatted at Bunny with a broom. "Get out of here!" Terrified, Bunny toppled over a cauldron full of punch; a little splashed into Big Baby Bird's face, and she giggled in delight, licking her lips. "Grab that boy!" Munk heard Miss Beulah holler. "He's got my baby!" He tugged on Bunny's tail like it was a set of reins, and Bunny knew to veer to the left back over the yellow gate and into the woods. Across more familiar terrain, Bunny galloped briskly with Munk and Big Baby Bird hanging on tightly to*

tufts of his fur. "Don't yuh' worry's none, Big Baby Bird! We's gonna save yuh," said Munk, but Big Baby Bird simply laughed as she was jostled around on top of Bunny.

For what seemed like hours Bunny romped throughout the Carolina night, and it was not until Munk sensed it may be safe that the trio finally slowed their journey along the banks of a muddy stream where they could hide amongst a thicket of cattails. Eventually, they heard the "hoo-hoo-hoooo" of the Great Horned Owl, and Munk answered back, "We-we-weeee." "Me!" chirped Big Baby Bird as Munk lifted her off of Bunny. "By golly she uh talks!" commented Munk. Dunking his entire head into the muddy stream, Bunny drank as much water as he could get down his throat. "Wut did uh Miss Beulah want 'wit yuh' and why you's her baby?" Since her face did not look like that of a bird's, Munk thought that Big Baby Bird might also have half of an Ooman heart. Before he could assess the matter any further, Bunny scooped up Big Baby Bird into his enormous arms and cradled her. "My Baby!" he said thickly. Then Bunny nuzzled his nose against Big Baby Bird's, and she let out a happy squeal. "She 'uh baby burd," scolded Munk, "and she 'uh don't 'elong tuh yuh." He then snatched her from Bunny's arms. Within seconds both Bunny and Big Baby Bird began to wail and cry. "Shhhh!" he clapped. "Dey OOmans gonna hear us!" But his reprimands were no use, and he tossed Big Baby Bird back into Bunny's paws if only to keep them both temporarily quiet. While Bunny rocked Big Baby Bird and fed her grub worms he dug up from the mud along the banks of the stream, Munk set himself on thinking what they should do next. To help him think better, Munk ascended the trunk of a swamp tupelo and hung himself upside down. He peered upward into the night sky; it was black with a sheen of moon glow. Initially, Munk felt alone and afraid, although he did not dare express this thought to Bunny. He questioned all he knew to be true about Miss Beulah and the stories she had told him. Furthering that thought, he wondered if the books he had read in the oak tree were actually true or if they too held a dark lie of fiction. Swinging back and forth on the tupelo bough, Munk reckoned that he and Bunny should free Big Baby Bird before they did anything else. After that they would find their way back to the oak tree sometime in the night; gather their things and some of the vittles Miss Beulah had in the cellar; and then set off on finding a new home somewhere far, far away. He let out a long half cry-half gnarl and looked over at his brother, who had fallen asleep with Big Baby Bird in his arms. She slept as well, holding a handful of Bunny's fur near her heart. Then Munk got to thinking some more. Maybe, just maybe, Big Baby Bird had a nest, and maybe, just maybe, she could lead Bunny and Munk to that nest, where she had a Big Mama Bird, who was worried sick about her. Then maybe, just maybe, Big Mama Bird would let him and Bunny stay with them for a while until they figured out what to do. Munk swung on that thought for a little bit and decided shortly thereafter it was the best thought he had thunk about the whole situation. He climbed out of the tupelo tree and tip-toed over to Bunny. "Heya' Buddy! Wake up," he whispered into Bunny's ear.

Bunny gave a whimper, smacked his lips, and then looked lazily over at Munk. "You's like your Baby, yes?" he asked. Bunny nodded. "And you's like 'aybe tuh' live wit your Baby, yes?" Again, Bunny nodded agreeably. "Den how's 'bout we's let Big Baby Burd take us tuh 'er nest where's 'er Big Mama Burd be, and we's cud' live wit 'dem." Bunny thoroughly liked that idea, and with his paw he gently tapped Big Baby Bird on the temple. She yawned, giving a little peep when she did. Then Bunny set Big Baby Bird on the ground. As he did, she nearly fell over, she was so tired, but Bunny tickled her chin with the tail on his head, and she perked right up, laughing and giggling. "Kay Big Baby Burd! U fly on and show's us where's yuh live," said Munk. He patted Big Baby Bird on the backside, anxiously awaiting for her to take flight. Instead, she teetered forward a bit and then fell head first into the mud. Rolling over, Big Baby Bird steadied herself upright and blithely smacked her hands into the mud and onto her face. "Dat's awfully queer," said Munk, ignoring Bunny as he joined Big Baby Bird frolicking in the mud. Then Munk snapped his claws. "I's got it!"

Minutes later Bunny and Munk stood at the edge of a ravine. Looking down into the craggily abyss, Munk tapped his foreclaw against his chin. "Dis had to work," he thought. He had explained the idea to Bunny the best he could, and he hoped his brother understood what he needed to do. He turned and watched as Big Baby Bird sat on Bunny and rode him like a mule. Bucking and snorting, Bunny hopped in circles until eventually he got sick and vomited. "'Nuff playin'" said Munk. "We's got work tuh do." He pulled Bunny to his feet and then gently lifted Big Baby Bird from the ground and tossed her onto Bunny's shoulders. "You's remember wut' tuh do?" asked Munk while he lifted Big Baby Bird's wings so they stuck outward. "'Jes like a Big Mama Burd pushin' 'er Big Baby Burd from a nest," he said rightly. Grabbing Bunny by the tail on his head, Munk pulled him far away from the edge of the ravine. Big Baby Bird had dropped her wings and refused to keep them up, so Munk broke an oak limb into two pieces and tucked a piece under each of her wings at an angle to keep them from falling. Then he jolted back over to the edge of the ravine and turned to give Bunny the signal. "Now's 'emember! When yuh's git tuh me, push Big Baby Burd a' flyin'" he shouted from afar. Bunny nodded his head. Scratching the ground with his left leg like a bull ready for a bullfight, Bunny waited for Munk to give him the signal. "'Un!" Munk yelled. "Toooo! Tree!" Munk pulled a red maple leaf from his pocket and flailed it in the air. With the speed of a thousand horses, Bunny charged toward the edge of the ravine, kicking up dirt and gravel as he went. Big Baby Bird squirmed on top of him but could not get down because of the two sticks stuck under her wings. And with that as Bunny reached the edge, Big Baby Bird sailed into the air. The last thing Bunny and Munk heard was her little voice singing "Wheeeeeeee!"

The milky haze of a dying autumn day sifted through the pale, yellow curtains Alex had hung in the kitchen window months before. An uncarved, misshapen pumpkin sat on a blanket of newspapers by the kitchen sink, and next to the kitchen sink sat Atlas, his hair powdered in white flour and teased back off his forehead. He wore an ill-fitting black suit Alex had purchased for him at the local thrift store, and he tensed as she applied the last bit of plum colored lipstick across his pursed lips. "Relax," she said cheerfully. "I can't get things even with your lips all bunched up like that." Atlas opened one eye and watched as Alex delicately applied the last bit of makeup. She looked again at the *Movie Monsters Make-up* book she held in her left hand. Then with a long contemplative sigh- "Okay. Remember. I ain't an expert." Alex set down the book and grabbed a hand mirror. "Ready?" She handed Atlas the mirror. The transformation amazed him. So much so, he was almost terrified of the grotesque reflection staring back at him. He gave a wicked smile, revealing the moldy discoloration of his teeth, which Alex had achieved through a mixture of food coloring and baking soda. "Well? What do you think?" Atlas wanted to hug her, but before he could throw his arms around Alex, the sound of a truck door slamming in the backyard cast an interminable dread between the two of them. "Run out the front door, and I'll meet you in my car in five minutes. I'll get rid of stuff here!" Atlas jumped off the counter and bolted out of the kitchen. Alex calmly tucked the mirror into a drawer and threw the homemade makeup into the sink. She slipped the lipstick into her pocket just as Jason opened the backdoor into the kitchen. "Any luck today?" Jason said nothing and tossed his keys on the kitchen table. He opened the refrigerator and grabbed a beer. The beer can cracked and hissed as Jason plopped into a chair by the table. "You know, I was thinkin' maybe you could put an advertisement in the paper," said Alex as she busily washed the plate she had used as a makeup palette. "I could pay for it. I don't mind." Jason spied the *Movie Monster Make-up* book and picked it up. He thumbed through it and then tossed it aside. "Jason." "Tell him not to leave his stuff on the kitchen table. This ain't a desk; it's where we eat." Alex pushed the book aside and joined Jason at the table. The two stared at each other but neither spoke. Then- "They're playing *Frankenstein* at the old movie house. I told him I'd take him, if that's okay with you." Jason took a swig of his beer. He got up from the kitchen table, grabbed a bag of chips from the cabinet, and then disappeared out the backdoor. Alex stood and peered out the kitchen window. She watched as Jason withdrew into the darkness of his shed.

Several minutes passed while Atlas hid in the backseat of Alex's car. He could feel a tiny drop of sweat trickling down the side of his face, which had mixed with the flour in his hair. Slowly, he sat up and looked out the backseat window toward the direction of the farmhouse. An unnerving stillness. He expected to see Jason storm out of the farmhouse at any minute, but again, all remained quiet. Atlas turned his attention

forward and relaxed. Ripples of wind scurried through the crimson leaves of a sweetgum tree. For a split second Atlas perked up in his seat. He thought he heard the chilling laughter of Santa Claus. “Boo!” He turned sharply toward the driver’s side as Alex jumped into her car. “Ready to get some candy?” The warm expression on her face mollified his angst, and Alex flipped on the radio as she pulled her car down the driveway. From the car’s speakers Cab Calloway crooned spookily about the Ghost of Smoky Joe. “*You didn’t see me climb through the window. Nobody had to open the door.*” As Calloway yowled his haunting story, Atlas peered into the deep uneasiness of the woods drowning beneath the chill of night. He sensed someone was watching him.

On the other side of town from where Jason’s farmhouse stood, there sat a sprawling and newly constructed housing development with large cookie cutter homes. Fresh, smooth pavement covered the streets, which weaved around perfectly manicured yards, even white fences, and a golf course. Alex pulled her car into the housing development and parked along one of the sidewalks bustling with kids dressed in Halloween costumes. Atlas hung his head low. “He ain’t gonna find out. I promise.” Atlas sat unconvinced. “I’ll order us a pizza later, and we can stay up watching some old monster movies.” “Night of the Living Dead?” he asked, casting Alex a glimmer of excitement. “I hate zombie movies, but after that we get to watch Teen Witch.” “Is that scary?” “It’s about a teenage girl, who becomes a witch and uses her powers to become popular and win over the hot boy in school.” Atlas rolled his eyes. “Pretty scary, huh?” Alex remarked sarcastically. The two exited the car and walked past the clubhouse toward the first house. A group of younger children galloped around Atlas, who stood on the corner feeling out of place. “Maybe this was a bad idea.” “I don’t think so. Look, if I could trick-or-treat, I would. So what if you just turned thirteen? I guarantee there’s some boys out here your age, probably even older, doing the same thing.” Atlas looked around diffidently. “But the longer you stand around worrying about it, the less candy I’m gonna get to steal from you.” Alex nudged Atlas toward the first house. “Go on and score us some chocolate,” she said, grinning as Atlas walked slowly up the pathway to the first house. Eerie sound effects of thunder and creaking doors spilled from a speaker, which rested in one of the downstairs windows. On the porch a plastic jack-o-lantern rested against a cheap plastic sign, which read, “Enter if you dare.” Under the lettering was “Jack Golding’s Halloween Party” scribbled in cursive. Atlas approached the door, and the eerie sound effects melted beneath the beats of a popular Hip-Hop tune. Timid and unsure, Atlas rang the doorbell. He waited patiently on the porch. A silhouetted figure passed in front of the window and stopped. The door opened. Dressed in all black with a pentagram etched on his forehead stood the boy with chronic conjunctivitis. Atlas then found himself on the edge of catatonic fear. “Want chocolate or something sweet?” he asked as he rummaged in a large bowl, completely unaware of Atlas. “Or looks like

some sour stuff-” The boy with chronic conjunctivitis looked up and studied Atlas’s face. “Hey,” he said. But before Atlas could say “hey” in reply, the red crust lining the boy’s eyes intensified. “I know you. You’re that little faggot in my PE class.” Atlas stepped backward. “Look, Jack. It’s the littlest faggot!” the boy with chronic conjunctivitis cackled. Dressed as a hillbilly hunter with crooked teeth, the boy with blonde hair stepped into the foyer and narrowed his eyes at Atlas. Silently, he lifted the toy rifle he held by his side, and just as the boy with blonde hair mouthed the word “BANG,” Atlas dropped his trick-or-treat bag and leapt from the porch. He bumped into Alex, who stood conversing with another parent. “Ouch! Damn, Atlas!” she cried out. But when she looked at the boy, cloudy sweat streamed down his face and his eyes were consumed with fear. She quickly tried to grab him by the elbow. “Atlas! What’s wrong?” He pulled away from her instantly and sprinted down the sidewalk, knocking over a smaller child dressed as a unicorn. “Atlas!” Alex screamed. She chased him through an adjacent yard and then into a neighboring street. Just as Alex was about to catch up with him, Atlas turned sharply into the narrow strip of yard separating two houses, and exited into an adjoining field. By the time Alex got to the edge of the field, Atlas had disappeared into a sea of shriveled corn stalks.

Moving unbelievably fast Atlas dodged the corn stalks, gaining more and more speed as he charged forward. He stripped off the black coat and pulled at the button up white shirt until it ripped. Its tattered pieces fluttered down to the dusty soil beneath Atlas’s feet. The last ray of the Fall sun cut across Atlas’s naked back as he emptied into an open field. Streams of sweat murky with makeup and then blood flowed down Atlas’s torso. He could not believe how fast he was running. Then a sharp pain seized the muscles in his back, and right before the spasm crippled him, the pain dissipated as two gossamer webs uncoiled from his shoulder blades and expanded into bruised colored wings. Atlas tripped on a wooden birdhouse, rotting into the earth, but instead of falling, Atlas took flight. He soared forward and upward as if he had been shot from a cannon. High above the trees, he saw the vast wilderness and farmland, which ensconced the housing development. Soon, the twisting streets and block houses appeared as a patchwork of stitches stapled into the skin of a wounded land. A surge of energy propelled Atlas higher into the atmosphere. The swamps and creeks vanished below the clouds, and streaks of light tinged in pink and violet flickered all around him. Lightning strikes and cosmic whirlwinds blinded Atlas as he ascended higher into the outer stratosphere of both physical and mental ecstasy. The ethereal universe in majestic vastness lay in front of him. And then he flew before the sun, fiery and pulsating in brilliant white light. The hypnotic beauty called him forward, and Atlas soared into it. He hovered in this liminal space, embracing its pure, heavenly beauty. Complete awe overwhelmed him. The light removed all sense of direction; Atlas flew within its core.

The emotion and energy rose within him and then outward. He looked up and the face of his mother appeared before him. Angelic. Unadulterated beauty. Her crystal eyes. Her tender skin. Her pure smile. Tears filled Atlas's eyes. He blinked, and then- Atlas looked down. Impenetrable darkness lay beneath his feet, and the heavy anchor of self-consciousness pulled him back to earth. In that last second of desperation before he hit the ground Atlas looked up. The face of his mother was nowhere to be found.

The smell of wet mold woke Atlas, and a fire, barely keeping itself alive in a wood stove, did nothing to cure the sickly chill of darkness. Opening his eyes, he could see dirty newspapers and empty soup cans strewn on the floor next to a filthy mattress and crumbled woolen blanket. A cracked coffee table held several empty cartons of cigarettes and a stack of playing cards, a few lined next to each other where someone had been playing solitaire. Atlas lay in terror on a threadbare sofa, and a smelly cotton blanket covered his body. This was an unfamiliar place, so he lay extremely still. Then he heard the sound of whistling, at once faint and then growing in loudness with each passing second. The tune sounded like the one he had recorded but this time distressed in a minor key. His eyes moved around the shadowy room of the shack. Nothing. Then a can of hominy landed on the coffee table with a thud. "Thought you might want something to eat." Although he had never heard him speak, Atlas knew the voice belonged to Santa Claus. He turned his eyes toward the direction of the voice. The paltry fire barely lit the worn face of the old man, who now sat on the mattress and removed his dirty boots. His feet were bare, no socks, and he lit himself a cigarette. "That ought to be cooked. Can been set on the wood stove when I was out and found you. Should be plenty hot." Santa Claus chuckled and blew a cloud of smoke, which swirled into wispy spirits. The flames from the fire flickered and for a quick second, Atlas could see the cold, vacant eyes of Santa Claus staring back at him. Without thinking about it he jumped from the sofa and headed to the door of the shack. It was locked. He scrambled to unlock it but could not get the bolt to budge. Santa Claus steadied himself on his feet with his walking stick carved from a fur tree and lumbered over to where Atlas stood. He reached in the direction of the boy, but instead of grabbing him, he grabbed the lock and twisted it. Click. The shack door swung open, and Atlas sprung from the porch, running aimlessly into the cascading shadows of the dark night.

Hours passed as Atlas roamed the tenebrous woods, groping for an identifiable landmark, which might lead him back to the farmhouse. Reaching a small creek bed, he caught the wobbling shrill of a barred owl, and he waited minutes after its cry had subsided before he had enough courage to sojourn forward. Finally, right as the morning sun had started to crest, Atlas spied the faint glow of the porch light at the back of the

farmhouse. It was then that he realized he was fully clothed and his shirt was no longer ripped. Approaching the stairs to the back porch, Atlas expected Jason to be waiting for him in the kitchen on the other side of the backdoor. He could already smell Jason's full-bodied coffee, which he brewed in a pot on the back burner of the stove under constant low heat. Jason would not speak; just a wide-eyed non-verbal stare. Atlas would then go to his room and not leave until Jason arrived with the punishment. But when he opened the backdoor to the kitchen, the smell of cold, raw pumpkin inundated Atlas's senses. The jack-o-lantern Alex had carved sat in the kitchen sink; its comical smile cutting through the impending dread that permeated the kitchen. Atlas cautiously stopped. He listened for the sounds of worry pacing back and forth along a creaky floor or concern mumbling behind drafty cedar walls. Instead, nothing but the tick-tock from the mantel clock in the living room. He moved stealthily through the kitchen into the foyer of the farmhouse and arrived at the foot of the stairs. As he took the first step upward, the doors to the living room opened. "Atlas! What happened?" whispered Alex. She stepped into the morning light streaming through the glass pane of the front door. A fleeting second of the cosmic journey Atlas had experienced the night before flashed before his eyes. "Are you okay?" Alex took him by the hand and led him to the bathroom upstairs. She wiped the matted hair from his face and sat him on the edge of the bathtub. Then she wet a washcloth with lukewarm water and wiped the dirt and stale makeup from his face. For a few minutes Alex busily cleaned Atlas with the washcloth with nothing but the sound of trickling water breaking through their silence. Then- "Is he mad at me?" Atlas asked. Alex paused and stared at the boy in front of her. His cheeks were red from where she had scrubbed too hard. "He doesn't know. He's-well he's been asleep since I got home last night." Rinsing the washcloth, Alex set it on the side of the sink. "Go on and finish up here, and then get into bed." She thought about kissing him on the forehead but brushed his reddened cheek with the backside of her hand instead. This time Atlas did not wince. He sat on the edge of the tub for several minutes after Alex had left him, trying to recall everything he had experienced the night before. All he could see were the fragments of a breathtaking array of light, color, and sound. Nothing of it made any sense; just one encompassing feeling that oscillated between unimaginable euphoria and unrelenting despair. He stood and turned on the faucet to the bathtub. As the water collected into a small pool, Atlas removed his coat and shirt. Then he saw something in the reflection of the water. He turned and faced the bathroom mirror. A deep breath. Shifting his body slightly sideways, Atlas saw what he could not believe: two, long web-like wings, limp and deflated, protruding down the whole of his back.

*November*

## Chapter Four

Bunny and Munk waited on the edge of the precipice and looked toward the night moon to see where Big Baby Bird had taken flight. Sniffing the air, Bunny looked over the ravine into the vast downward spiral. "Where's she?" Munk wondered. Bunny whimpered. "It's 'kay, Buddy. She's 'kay." But Munk was not quite sure Big Baby Bird was okay. They waited a little while longer until Munk thought Big Baby Bird perhaps was not quite ready to fly. "She's fluttered tuh duh ground," he told Bunny confidently. "Let's go's und see," he said. He slid onto Bunny's back, and the two trotted down the side of the ravine. The moon had fallen behind a grove of loblolly pines, so it was extremely dark when Bunny and Munk reached the bottom. Focusing his visionary goggles, Munk scanned the horizon looking for Big Baby Bird while Bunny twitched his nose and sniffed for the scent of Big Baby Bird's feathers. Nothing. Munk scratched the top of his head beneath his coral bonnet. "'Aybe she's flyed 'way," said Munk flatly. Then Bunny whined and began to cry. "Wut, Buddy?" asked Munk. "She's free now, so we's happy!" But Big Baby Bird was not free. Bunny hopped toward the banks of the muddy stream and then over a large boulder. "Where's yuh go?" asked Munk, following his brother. On the other side of the rock, Munk saw what Bunny had sensed: Big Baby Bird lay face down in a pool of shallow water. "But...but...but," stuttered Munk. Bunny nudged her with his great big paw, but Big Baby Bird did not move. "Wut? Wut? Wut?" repeated Munk, confused and agitated. "Dat can't be!" he said to himself. Again, Bunny pawed at Big Baby Bird. A little of her blood stained his paw, and the sight startled him. He held it up for Munk to see. Although Munk had an inclination about what had occurred or did not occur for that matter, he dared not mention it to Bunny. The Great Horned Owl called from a distance, "Hoo-hoo-hooooo," but Munk was too nervous to respond. Although Bunny knew something bad had happened, he could not comprehend what Munk thought he himself knew. While Munk mauld over his thoughts, Bunny reached down and lifted Big Baby Bird from the pool of water. "Peep! Peep!" he chirped, hoping to hear a response. Blood trickled down her face. Then Bunny shook her and gently tossed her into the air. She fell with a thud. "No, Buddy! Stop!" yelled Munk, turning his attention to his brother. "She-she..." Suddenly, fear struck Munk's half Ooman heart. He fidgeted with a button on his tailcoat. A brilliant lightning bolt flashed in the distance, and Munk knew within a matter of seconds a roll of thunder would rumble through the trees. Without much forethought he grabbed Bunny by the tail on his head and looked him straight in the eyes. "We's got tuh go, Buddy! We's got tuh runaway now!" As soon as he let those words out, the thunder coursed through the woodlands, shaking the muddy ground beneath Bunny's and Munk's feet. The din frightened Bunny terribly, and before Munk could mount his brother properly, Bunny vaulted forward like an untamed bull from a rodeo gate.

*The two brothers traveled for the rest of the night, keeping tightly within the confines of the swamp so as not to be noticed. When morning came, Bunny was tired and hungry, so he burrowed in the ground and rested while Munk forged for something to eat. Scouring the countryside, Munk hunted for wild greens and chicory root but came up empty. At one point he discovered several trees abundant with ripe, golden apples, but before he could snatch two, a male Ooman in overalls spotted him and discharged a shotgun that created a horrible POW-POW! Eventually, Munk gave up and headed back. Letting Bunny sleep, he perched himself in a long-leaf pine and steadied his thoughts so he could think on what to do next. Looking out at the vast swampland, Munk contemplated step-by-step all that had occurred the night before. He rolled through the images in his mind like the flickering of a silent film. Was Miss Beulah not Miss Beulah? Why had she lied to him? Why did Big Baby Bird not fly? How were he and Bunny going to get out of this mess? Then he thought about Bunny and how his brother simply could not think the way he could. He tried to think of this as a good thing, but the more he spun this thought in his head, they always fell on the side of bad. Before long, all of Munk's thinking had tired him, and by early afternoon he had fallen asleep curled up in the sticky, prickly needles of the pine. By the time Munk woke, it was twilight, and the faint glimmer of an early star shined just above the setting sun. His thoughts swirled around haphazardly in his brain and took awhile to collectively mold together and make sense, so for a few minutes, he labored out of sleep with the crutches of instinct rather than with the legs of reason. Munk smacked his lips and scratched his ear with his hind leg. But the smell of smoke wafting upward into the pine wrestled him back to reality, and he jumped up on his hind legs. Smoke meant fire, which meant danger! Munk pointed his focus through his visionary goggles down below and looked for any sign of orange and yellow flames. Within seconds he spotted the fire a few feet from where Bunny had burrowed himself. About this time Munk heard the sound of a harmonica playing an upbeat tune, and then he saw Bunny dancing near the fire. As he slid quickly down the pine tree, Munk noticed that Bunny was not alone. An old Ooman with a scraggly, short white beard and thinning gray hair sat on the ground near him, and it was he who played the harmonica. Fearful Bunny might be in danger, Munk growled and began charging toward the old Ooman. "Whoa, there partner!" the old Ooman said, bracing himself against his knapsack. "Don't mean no harm." Before Munk could get to him, Bunny stepped in front of the old Ooman and shunted Munk out of the way. "Wut yuh do 'dat for?" gruffed Munk as he flipped back onto his feet. Bunny squatted next to the old Ooman, who reached over and scratched Bunny's ear. "Dis here a friend of yours?" asked the old Ooman. Bunny nodded. "I's 'is brudder," said Munk. "That so. Well your brother here is a darn good dancer. He should be on the stage in front of an audience. Got 'uh pretty good act." "Act?" said Munk quizzically. The old Ooman twisted Bunny's tail and then patted him on the head. Although Bunny did not*

*mind the old Ooman's gesture of affection, Munk found it to be somewhat demeaning. "Didn't mean tuh startle you," said the old Ooman as he removed a skillet from the fire and set it on a stone to cool. He lifted the lid and revealed bronzed potatoes, turnips, and onions with a healthy side of sizzling mustard greens. Munk caught a whiff of the food, and his stomach grumbled. "Hee-hee," laughed the old Ooman. "Me and yer partner here done 'et," but before the old Ooman could offer him any, Munk had already snatched a whole potato from the skillet and gobbled it down. "Here, have sum more," he said, holding the skillet in front of Munk. Then he pulled from the fire a pot of grits, which were slathered in butter and lots of pepper. Bunny dipped his paw into the pot and grabbed a healthy scoop. "Boy's got an appetite. That's good," said the old Ooman. Then he turned to Munk and extended his hand. "Name's Red." Munk looked at the old Ooman's hand. It was hairless and smooth, slick...and covered with grease.*

"Stupid," he muttered as he wrestled with a large cartoon turkey cutout he tried to hang from one of the ceiling panels in the school library. Brushing his head against the ceiling, Leonard jostled his wig askew and his forehead grew by an inch. Atlas cracked a smile as he stacked books about Thanksgiving on a display shelf. Frustrated, Leonard tugged at the sleeves of his rust colored cardigan. Sweat had started to bead beneath his neatly pressed golden dress shirt. A few of the wild turkey feathers Leonard had glued to the cartoon cutout fluttered to the floor, and Atlas rushed to pick them up. Nearby, he spotted the headline from the local newspaper Leonard had been reading during his lunch. "Escaped Convict Still Loose." A little further down from the headline, "...after a jury found Temple to be criminally insane. Temple was serving a life sentence at the Gum Neck State Penitentiary in Hyde County for the 1978 gruesome murder of his seventy-year old, invalid mother and her two pet parakeets." Leonard climbed down from the top of a step ladder and caught the boy reading the newspaper. "Stories like that are not for boys your age." He grabbed the paper and tossed it into a recycling bin. "Shouldn't have left it there." "He killed his mama?" Atlas asked meekly. Leonard grunted, pulling a rogue turkey feather from his cardigan. "Yes. He did," he said flatly. "And don't you worry none. They'll find him. Done with the books?" Atlas turned his attention back to the display shelf. "I think so." Leonard perused the boy's work. "I made a section about food down here. And then this section is about native tribes. And then this one up top is about Thanksgiving in general. It's so Thanksgiving is on top and everything below is all the things about Thanksgiving." Leonard smiled contently and patted Atlas on his shoulder. "You've plied your ingenuity astutely as always, good sir." "Except this book-" Atlas grabbed a book on maize and moved it to a different shelf. "Yeah?" Leonard mulled over his thoughts for a second, and then "Have a seat for me." The two gathered at a small table by a window, which peered out onto one of the somber cotton fields plowed a few days prior. Leonard cleared his throat. "Miss Verla

came by this morning and told me you have to start attending PE again tomorrow.” Atlas shifted in his seat. “Atlas, tomorrow during this period you will report to PE instead of the library,” Leonard said clinically. Silence. The hair covering the boy’s forehead had fallen across his eyes. “I see.” Sitting back in his chair, Leonard looked at the barren cottonfield. “When I was a little bit younger than you, maybe I was ten or even nine, my daddy took me scuppernong picking on my granddaddy’s farm just south of here. You know what scuppernongs are don’t you?” Atlas shook his head no. “They’re a type of grape, indigenous to the South. Really big with a tough skin, and they’re real juicy and sweet on the inside. Got seeds in them, and I used to love them but because of my diverticulitis I can’t eat them nowadays, but, you know, I did read an article recently about some medical technique-” Leonard stopped his rambling. “Sorry. Back to what I was gonna tell you. This was back in the sixties, and there’s a shopping center where granddaddy’s farm used to be, but back off from the tobacco barn ran a creek where I would catch crawdads and box turtles and back from there were a bunch of woods. Well, on this day, my daddy and I were out picking scuppernongs and came up on this junk heap, where people had thrown out old tires, tore up mattresses and box springs, junky car parts-all kinds of garbage. Sitting on top of the junk heap was a black and white striped convict outfit, what criminals used to wear when they worked on the chain gang or were in prison. I saw that thing, and immediately, I was petrified. I thought for sure some convict had escaped from prison and was lurking out in the woods, waiting for me to go to sleep at night so he could snatch me out of my bed.” Leonard flung his arm wildly in order to punch up his story. “Daddy could see how scared I was, but instead of carting me off back to granddaddy’s farm, he grabbed my hand and led me right up to that junk heap to get a better look. Lord, I was scareder than a cat in a room full of rocking chairs, but when I got up close to it, I could see that laying on top of that junk heap wasn’t a black and white convict suit but a busted, mangled up brown and white lawn chair. That was it. Nothing at all.” Smacking his hands on the table matter-of-factly, Leonard sat up straight proudly. “I had gotten scared over a lawn chair!” “I guess that was supposed to make me feel better?” said Atlas, dismissing the message of the story. “Hmm. From the sound of your tone I’m afraid it didn’t.” Atlas shook his head no. “Of course, it didn’t.” Leonard deflated in his seat. “Truth be told, I hated PE too. I won’t even go to that end of the school. Middle school locker rooms are a breeding ground for all kinds of nasty little critters.” He shuttered. “Tell you what, though. I always need library helpers during the lunch period. If you don’t mind eating with me every day, you can come then. That work?” Atlas lifted his head, and the hair covering his forehead slid from his eyes. “Sure,” he replied. “Great. Consider it done.” Leonard stood from the table and furtively adjusted his wig. “I still liked it,” said Atlas. “Like it?” Self-consciously, Leonard primped the collar of his shirt. “Your story. I liked it.” “Oh. Well thank-you very much, good sir. I’ve been told I’m good at spinning a yarn.”

Leonard chuckled as Atlas looked at him quizzically. Then the bell rang. “Okay you turkeys. Gobble off back to class.” “Okay you turkeys,” hissed an older boy in an effeminate tone from across the library. Leonard turned to him and warbled loudly. He then spied Atlas leaving the library and gave the boy a friendly wink.

Atlas stepped into the throng of middle school madness, a hallway crowded with boys taller than him, who high-fived each other as they passed by, and girls more social than him, who gathered in talkative pools up against their lockers. He begrudgingly meandered down the hallway. As he passed the office he heard a voice call to him. “Hello there, Atlas.” Verla smiled at a parent she had been talking to and caught up with Atlas. “How’s your day going?” she asked him. He did not respond. “I guess Leonard told you the news, huh?” Atlas kept his head down. “So you’re mad at me. Well, I don’t make the rules, sweetheart. I have to treat everyone the same.” Atlas hurried his steps. “I know. I’m just a mean old monster.” He turned for a moment to catch a glimpse of Verla, who had stopped in front of her office. Her forlorn countenance stung his heart a little, but such emotion could not distract him now. He had vital business to attend to, so he turned around and scuttled down the hallway. Although it was not a cold day, Atlas could see his breath as he exited from the schoolhouse doors, and when he squinted his eyes, the needles on the pine trees, glazed in drizzle, looked like sparkling ice crystals. Looking around the back parking lot, he saw no teachers in sight and hurried through the cars toward the grove of long leaf pines that sat on the edge of the football field. There he rested a moment and waited to see if anyone had spotted him. Briefly, he thought about Jason. A ray of sunshine poked through the canopy of clouds above, and he wondered if his father saw the same ray of sunshine, wherever he was selling his furniture.

Jason tossed a pair of his work gloves into the back of his truck, where a single ray of sunlight streaked across the wooden chair he had just placed in the bed. He cleared his throat and yanked up the hand-painted sign, advertising his furniture. “Hey there, young man!” called a voice. Jason turned and saw Charlie rolling slowly by in his pickup truck. “I ain’t forgot about you. I still want that chair.” Jason followed the truck as it passed by with his eyes. The sheen of the chrome and the flashy red newness bothered him. “I’ll be by this way in the next week or two, so hold onto it for me now.” Was this man serious, thought Jason. The old man extended a friendly wave before pulling away, but Jason ignored him. As he lifted the tailgate to his truck, Jason let out a frustrated grunt, followed by a word that he had never said with the intent to hurt anyone. Growing up, it belonged in the mouth of his granddaddy, who grew up a sharecropper’s son on a cotton plantation somewhere outside of Rocky Mount. For him it existed as common parlance. “That’s just what we called ‘em,” his granddaddy would say. But for Jason on

this day the word had a foulness to it, that if it were not for the slam of the tailgate, he would have heard his voice actually say it.

The slam of Jason's tailgate echoed the splash Atlas made in the Tar River. He surfaced from the water and swam as quickly as he could to the shoreline. His lips quivered as he climbed out of the water; he wore only his underwear, and the white briefs sagged from his backside like the gossamer webbed wings hanging from his back. A little sunlight warmed his body while he stood perfectly still. Every afternoon since he first saw the wings he had spent at the river, running briskly down a small embankment and leaping into the air, hoping to fly but crashing against the brackish water in disappointment. He thought about jumping from a nearby bridge but worried that someone might see him. Here in the shade of the cypress trees covered with their gray beards of Spanish moss he could attempt to fly without strange eyes gazing upon him as if he were some sideshow freak. Using his shirt to blot his wet skin, Atlas quickly dried off and then brushed the mud and sand from his feet. He sat quietly in the untroubled calm of the day. A large white-tailed buck with enormous antlers caught his attention in the distance, and he watched the magnificent beast take a drink of water from the river. Its black, glossy eyes did not see Atlas, who grew increasingly mesmerized at the animal's august beauty. The deer lifted its head as if it heard something. Then emerging from an unknown point, a large arrow pierced the deer's chest, and the violent look of terror across the animal's face interrupted Atlas's field of vision. The deer staggered forward a couple of yards and then buckled beneath the weight of a body dispossessed of life. It collapsed into the river with a thud, and tiny bubbles gathered around its nostrils as it drew its final breath. Atlas gasped and looked wildly for the culprit of such a heinous act. Then he saw the outline of a red jumpsuit, maneuvering its way through some fallen branches. Santa Claus approached the dead deer, whose blood commingled with the gentle flow of the river. He knelt before the carcass just as the deer had knelt before its life, and he unsheathed a jagged hunting knife and stabbed it into the neck of the animal, releasing a valve of blood, which trickled onto the old man's hands. Atlas could not look away from the ghastly sight. He could hear the tear of the animal's flesh as Santa Claus sliced along its stomach toward its back leg. It was an ungodly sound, and Atlas hearkened back to the terror he had witnessed in the quail's eye as it rotated in meteoric cycles between life and death. Finally, Santa Claus sat down from his work and wiped the back of his hand against his mouth, smearing the animal's blood into the thick tangles of his white beard hair. He huffed and chomped his teeth. Then he turned and saw the boy watching him in the distance. Atlas attempted to yell but all he managed was a timid cough. Their eyes locked, and neither Santa Claus nor Atlas let go. Somehow in this observation of each other, separated by the flow of the river and blood, they were bound. Together. Closer. A pair of something. Santa

Claus smiled, but before Atlas could determine if the smile was friendly or deranged, he had unveiled himself of the old man's stare, grabbed his clothes, and escaped into the sanctity of the woods.

## Chapter Five

*Red camped with Bunny and Munk for the rest of the evening. Although Munk was apprehensive about the old Ooman, Bunny seemed to like him. He danced jigs around the crackling fire while Red played his harmonica. At one point Bunny lifted Munk onto his shoulders and tried to get his brother to join in the merriment, but Munk did not want to participate. He prepared a tiny pallet amongst some pitcher plants, curled up there, and pretended to sleep, keeping a watchful eye on Red. By midnight Bunny had worn himself out, but instead of burrowing a bed in the ground he lay near the fire with Red, who used Bunny's belly as a fluffy, warm pillow. Just after one in the morning Red's thunderous snores indicated to Munk he was sound asleep, so he crept over to Bunny and whistled gently into his ear. "Get's up, Buddy. It's uh time tuh go." Bunny lingered in sleep for a moment but then woke. Carefully lifting Red's head from Bunny's belly, Munk moved the old Ooman's noggin onto his knapsack, and then with his hind legs, Munk kicked dirt onto what remained of the fire to extinguish it. Red had a small coffee can of leftover turnips and greens, and as much as he did not feel right taking it, Munk snatched it and tucked it inside his trousers. Then he and Bunny quietly set off on their journey to a place neither of them knew.*

*For three long days Bunny and Munk traveled aimlessly. During the day the two brothers slept, Bunny burrowed in the ground and Munk perched high in a pine tree. Then when the sun set, they moved throughout the night. Soon Munk knew they were traveling north; the landscape had changed from the cabbage palmettos and water oaks of the lowcountry savannahs to the birches and evergreens of the hardwood forests. Occasionally, they stumbled upon an Ooman hut and found sustenance with a pithy, rotten apple or stunted parsnip, but mostly the two were content eating wild dandelion greens and chicory roots. To prevent Bunny from getting anxious and scared, Munk sang the same old tunes Miss Beulah used to sing for them back in the oak tree. While these songs mitigated Bunny's nerves, they made Munk lonesome and sad for they would recall their life in the oak tree with Miss Beulah. How he longed for a plate of her black walnut flapjacks smothered in molasses, flaxseed butter, and strawberry dollops. He thought about how they used to gallivant down by Wisteria Creek and after a long day of play cuddle up on a patchwork quilt in Miss Beulah's study while their Mama sang and read to them. Then he tried to recall one of the wondrous and exciting stories he had read in Miss Beulah's study, and while he could remember a little of the plot of "Beowulf" or "The Tell-Tale Heart," he realized he could not think and speak some of the colossal words he had learned while reading them. Moisture gathered in Munk's visionary goggles as tears fell from his beady, peridot eyes. Shielding them with his coral bonnet, he hid his sadness the best he could from his brother. Then on the evening of the third day just as the brothers were*

about to set off, Bunny grew listless and refused to budge. "Wut's 'matter wit yuh?" asked Munk. "We's slept's all de'day und we's got's tuh move." But Bunny did not want to travel any farther until Munk told him where they were heading. "I's dont's-" but Munk stopped himself. The thought that he had no thought of where they were heading struck him hard. Where were they going? How were they to live? What was their purpose? With each passing question a fearful, sterile emptiness passed through Munk's body and he sunk deeper into existential despair. Now they were in a strange, dark forest where all the leaves had been shaken from the trees, and critters they did not know and had never seen before leered at them with suspicious eyes. "Yowl! Rawr-Caw! Eeeeer!" The scary, creepy sounds came at Bunny and Munk from all directions, and the two brothers grabbed onto each other tightly. Bunny's lip quivered, and Munk knew if he did not act fast, his brother would exhale a mighty yelp that would draw even more attention onto them. "Buddy, pwease' dont's be's scared," Munk said, but even his voice trembled when he spoke. Then before Bunny let go of his tremendous yelp, he and Munk heard a familiar noise simmering beneath the wild, frenetic calls of the unknown. Bunny's ears twitched, and Munk stepped out from beneath his brother's backside. The noise was a melodious, jolly jig, and it came from a direction just beyond a row of gigantic boulders. As if it had a mind of its own, Bunny's belly shook to the rhythm of the song, moving to a beat that pulled the rest of Bunny in the sound's direction. Quickly, Munk saddled onto Bunny's back, and the two bounded swiftly over the boulders to the other side of the forest. Losing his step on a slippery crag, Bunny fell into a holly bush, knocking his brother off his shoulders. Munk somersaulted forward and landed at the feet of Red, who was happily playing his harmonica. Polishing off the last note with an extended breath, Red finished his ditty and then saw Munk looking up at him from behind his raggedy boots. "Howdy, fellers!" he said, giving a playful salute. "Wondered what happened to yuh's?" Red got to his feet and pulled Bunny from the holly bush. Slightly embarrassed, Munk attempted to formulate an excuse. "Yuh' see's, we's wuz-" but before he could finish, Red interrupted him. "Think nothin' of it. I've been travelin' the road since I was knee high to a pig's sty, and I've run intuh every crook, criminal, cheat, charlatan, shyster, pickpocket, conman, and wim-wad this side of the Mississippi, and near as I can tell, yuh's-in ain't 'em. If I had tuh do some figurin' on it, I'd beg y'all's as runaways, am I right?" Red curled his lips, closed his left eye, and arched his eyebrow so high, his right eye bugged out directly at Munk. "Us-uh-uh," stammered Munk. "Yee-hee-hee!" laughed Red, his face returning to normal. "I's knew it! I's knew it! Cain't pull a fast one on me! Nope. Got's me a big toe 'dat tells me when it's gonna rain and got's me a big brain 'dat tells me when I's bein' fooled." Red slapped his knee and lit a rolled cigarette. "Well dat's something we's both got in common. Runnin from somethin'. Might as well come square with each other. Here fellas. Have's a seat. Was je'st finishin' my concert and 'bout to lights me some dinner. Care tuh join me and y'all's can share wit ole Red watchuh' runnin'

*from.” Before Munk could say no, Bunny had already taken a seat next to Red and grabbed a roasted potato from the old Ooman’s skillet. “Hee-hee,” laughed Red. “You’s je’st a big ole jackrabbit!” He tugged at Bunny’s tail, which as it had done before, made Munk uneasy. But at least Bunny had his spirit back, and if that meant he and Munk had to tag along with Red for a while, then so be it. In the meantime, Munk could go fishing deep in his thoughts and hopefully catch one, which might be a prize winner, the thought telling him what he and Bunny should do. So Munk took a seat on the other side of Red and cupped himself a handful of kidney beans from a pot. “Please. Eat as much as yuh’s want. I got’s this grub from a dim-witted bastard this morning. Proprietor of a tackle shop je’st east of here; didn’t know what-fer till’s I come along and sold him some of my magic hair tonic.” Red pulled a tiny brown bottle from his bag and popped open the cork. “Or wuz it a gut cleanser he wuz after.” He tapped his chapped lip with his gnarled forefinger. “Or maybe he wuz lookin’ fer twenty-twenty vision. Cain’t say fer sure, but he got jolted. Hee, hee, hee!” Red’s hand shook as he took a generous swig of whatever was inside the tiny brown bottle, but Bunny and Munk were so thankful for food and to be in the company of someone that wasn’t out to eat them, neither of them seemed to care.*

The morning fog had yet to clear as Atlas finished the chapter in his book. Next, he lay on the floor of his treehouse and listened to the ethereal melody he had recorded and played back on the old tape player. He stared at the dead quail perched on the coffee container and wondered if the bird’s spirit lived elsewhere in some higher realm. Perhaps it lived in the same place where his mother now lived. Maybe their spirits had joined together and were part of some larger spirit that consumed all things living when they died. The deer Santa Claus had killed would live with them and someday, he, too, would take flight from this horrible place and live with all of them. “Atlas. Come on.” The sound of Jason’s voice shattered Atlas’s daydream, and he slowly peered out the window of the treehouse. He watched while Jason piled a cooler and hunting chair into the back of his truck. Alex stood with her arms folded on the back porch, and she looked up at Atlas, expressing a look of surrender and pity. Atlas resigned himself to another hunting trip with his father. He exited the treehouse just as Jason honked his truck horn and shuffled along the sandy path toward his fate. Before he climbed into the truck, he looked back at Alex but she had already retreated inside the farmhouse.

Clouds and cold filled the air. Jason and Atlas traipsed through the wet leaves littering the forest floor. A shotgun lay tucked beneath Jason’s right arm, and Atlas carried a pair of binoculars around his neck. They settled into the same spot where Jason had wrung the neck of the quail nearly a month earlier. And then they waited. A few drops of rain pelted the remaining leaves, wilted and eager to let go from the branches that had held them throughout the summer. Jason coupled his hands together up toward his mouth and

let out a garbled yelp. “Hand me them,” he said to Atlas, pointing to the binoculars. Atlas removed them from around his neck. As Jason grabbed the binoculars, he handed the shotgun to Atlas. “Don’t you dare touch that trigger,” he said, cautioning the boy just as he took the weight of the shotgun in his hands. Atlas held the elongated, cold metal, cradling its power within his small arms. Peering through the binoculars, Jason spied a wild turkey, full breasted and trotting along the edge of the woods. “There’s one,” Jason said softly. “Lift it.” Atlas heard his father, but the words did not register. “Atlas.” Jason grabbed the gun and rearranged it properly in Atlas’s arms. “Keep both eyes open,” he said sternly. “See it.” Atlas lifted the gun and peered along the barrel toward the head of the turkey. “Not so close.” Jason moved behind his son and coupled the gun, moving it like a trombone toward Atlas’s eye. “I can’t-” He tried to slip away, but Jason had him bound within his arms. “Together. Hold the trigger and the forestock.” Jason placed Atlas’s left hand on the forearm and led his right around the grip and trigger. “There he is.” Atlas could not see his father’s face, but he could sense his excitement tinged with angst. The shotgun was aimed directly at the turkey’s head. “You see it.” Again, Atlas followed the barrel’s end to the head of the turkey. “You see it,” Jason snapped a little louder. Atlas could see the bird perfectly. It stood proudly, its plumes puffed and full of glory. “Yes,” he said in one meek syllable. “Okay. Now. When I say so, pull the trigger.” Atlas could feel his father’s breath on the back of his neck, and he trembled beneath the long pause between his father’s words. Then he saw the turkey’s eyes, wide and alert-then the quail’s one eye-and then Atlas saw his own. “Shoot,” commanded Jason. Atlas held the trigger firmly but did not pull it. “Shoot. Pull the damn trigger,” Jason said with a hard whisper, his hot breath curling the whole of Atlas’s neck. “Shoot, God damnit!” Atlas shut his eyes and tugged slightly on the trigger-BANG.

Tea-stained leaves streamed past Atlas as he raced through the woods. “Atlas!” Jason’s voice echoed from every direction, but Atlas kept running. A steady shower blinded his vision. He stripped off his coat and then his shirt. His heart pounded inside his chest, almost as if it were propelling him forward like some combustible engine. A gust of wind shunted the rain from down Atlas’s back, and the drops joined the sweat trickling down his shoulder blades and spine. The two, black gossamer wings, once matted and smashed together, unfurled and expanded. Atlas approached the river, where he had spent the last couple of weeks trying to fly. He gained more momentum as he ran out of the woods and hit the tiny hillside just above the riverbank. The energy surged throughout his entire body. “Atlas!” One last desperate call from Jason, somewhere faint in the distance, and Atlas leaped into the air. Flight. He ascended quickly at first, but as soon as he looked down and saw the river below, Atlas panicked. His arms flailed like a marionette that had lost its strings, and as quickly as he went up, Atlas

crashed into the murky waters below. Confused and shaken, he surfaced to the top, gasping for air. The rain pelted his face and for a moment he thought he was still resurfacing. But he rubbed his eyes and looked around for any sign of his father. While wading in the water, he saw a flock of geese in a perfect V formation passing by overhead. Shocked back into reality, Atlas swam to the shoreline with a flushed face and cold, wet hair matted across his forehead.

For an hour Atlas sat with his knees pressed against his chest on the riverbank. The wings lay limply like strands of seaweed against his back, his hair in long damp strands covering his eyes. Had he actually flown? Maybe he had just jumped really high. Defeated, cold, and most of all, unbearably sad, Atlas stood and slunk back into the dense woods with the pelting rain overtaking his tears. By the time he had found his shirt and coat, the rain had ceased and a little light from the midday sun weaved through the dissipating clouds. He pulled his shirt over his head and then pulled his hair from off his face. When he went to grab his coat, he noticed it had gotten twisted around some brambles. His teeth chattered as he worked to free his coat, but then he stopped. An unnerving quiet. He sensed he was not alone. Atlas turned sharply. In the distance amongst a band of cherry laurels a scarlet splotch moved closer toward him. Atlas fumbled with his coat, yanking and tearing at it until he began scratching up his hands from the thicket of briars. He turned and saw the long scraggly beard, deep set eyes, and the burning tip of a cigar. "Stop," Atlas screamed. "I know who you are!" The boy's desperation mounted, and he cursed the coat as it started to rip along one of its seams. "I know who you are," he repeated with mounting tension. Santa Claus's pace was even and calm. He puffed gingerly on his cigar as he approached methodically. Atlas tugged fervently, even more terrified now that he knew who the old man actually was. "Ahhhhh!" He let loose a scream both fearful and cautious, warning the old man not to approach any farther, but Santa Claus maintained his steps forward in a rhythmic syncopation with the puffs from his cigar. The fear within Atlas reached a level that seized his actions, and he froze when he saw the faint glint of the paring shears Santa Claus unsheathed from his waistband. It took only one snip for Atlas's coat to become free, and without thinking about the old man's unprovoked assistance, the boy grabbed his coat and sprinted past Santa Claus. Again, Atlas ran at lightning speed, traipsing over rotten logs and through bramble thickets without flinching. He did not think about his wings or taking flight; he just ran until finally his breath gave out. Then-he stopped. He peered around the woods, saturated with rain water. A few lost leaves, red and orange, drifted softly to the bed of the forest, but everything else appeared still. He turned back toward the direction from where he had run. No red splotch disturbing his sight; Santa Claus was gone. "Jesus Christ, Atlas! Where the hell have you been?" Jason

jerked the boy by his arm. Atlas looked up at his father's eyes but already the man had turned away, dragging his son toward the back of the farmhouse.

Jason scrubbed his fingernails with a bar of red devil lye soap and rinsed them beneath the scolding water pouring from the kitchen sink faucet. They were clean but he repeated the process as if he saw the dirt that he could never wash away. Atlas sat quietly at the kitchen table while Alex stood at the refrigerator and poured him a glass of milk. She set it in front of him. The phone rang. "Hello. Yes it is." Alex's voice barely rose above a whisper. "Just one minute." She held the receiver against her chest. "It's Cecil over at the Sheriff's Office." Jason twisted the spigot off and shook his hands. He grabbed the receiver from Alex. "Cecil? What y'all find?" Atlas could not escape the look from his father's eyes as Jason leered at him from the other side of the kitchen. "Uh-huh. No, no. He's-he's fine, just a little shaken. No, I'll handle it from here. Yeah-" Jason forced a laugh, a pleasantry extended to the joke coming from the other end of the line. "Sure thing. Bye." He hung up. Atlas could see the wet imprint on the receiver from Jason's hand. "Well?" Alex rested her hand on Atlas's shoulder. Jason shook his head. "They ain't find nothing. Said they got a report last week of someone seeing him somewhere down around Elizabethtown but that don't mean it was actually him. Regardless, unlikely he would still be hanging around this area. That old codger's probably a million miles from here by now." The boy wanted to defend himself. He had seen the escaped convict. Been in his house, where he must be hiding, although he did not know exactly where that was. But he had seen him. Many times. "But I'm telling you the truth," pleaded Atlas, but Jason cut him to the quick. "Get upstairs." "Jason, maybe he did see him," but Jason ignored Alex. "I said get upstairs." Jason's words were locked and firm. Atlas slowly stood, never once dropping his attention away from his father's piercing stare until he was safely out of the kitchen. A minute passed in silence before Alex emptied the glass of milk into the kitchen sink. Jason remained by the telephone, just standing with his hands still wet. "He obviously saw something, Jason. Wouldn't have killed you to believe him for once." The setting sun had fallen below the pines that lined the backyard, and Alex wondered if she would wake the next morning to its rays or another doleful day consumed in clouds and fits of rain. Life had chosen this for her, and as she rinsed the glass of its milk residue and watched it trickle into tiny white streaks with the sink water, she conceded to its folly. "Why do you care?" he said. "You ain't even his Mama."

The wind howled outside, and it reminded him of the terrible animal noises Bunny and Munk had heard in the unfamiliar forest away from home. Pretending to be Munk, Atlas hardened his focus as if he were wearing the creature's visionary goggles and scurried along the upstairs hallway, following the stream of moonlight illuminating the stairs. He

had to be as quiet as possible, he thought, and he licked the back of his hand and ran it through his hair like a cat cleaning itself. When he reached the top of the staircase, Atlas got to his feet and grasped the strap of his backpack tightly as if it were his tail. Maybe Alex had some leftover sweet potato or fried cornbread in the refrigerator, he thought, planning for how he would survive once he made his great escape. But as he reached the bottom step and landed into the foyer, he could see a warm, whispering glow emanating from a crack in the doorway of the living room. He peeked inside and barely made out the burning embers of the wood stove and the ethereal body rocking in a chair nearby. Both the moon and fire light created a mystical incandescence, which gave the appearance of a ghostly woman. Atlas held his breath in the middle of his throat. *Mama. Is that you?* The woman rocked gently in the chair. Atlas opened the door slightly. Creak-the rocking stopped. *Mama. It's me. Mama.* Above the subsiding howls of the wind-stricken night, they both called to each other. "Jason?" "Mama?" Atlas stepped forward into the living room only to have the ghostly figure reveal her face in a wash of moonlight. Alex reached out. "Atlas. What you doin up?" Disheartened, the boy retreated into the shadows of the foyer. "Atlas?" At first he thought about exiting through the front door, but another gust of wind reverberated through the spine of the farmhouse, and he dropped his backpack and waited. "Come on in here and sit with me awhile." Stepping into the living room, Atlas felt the warmth of the fire. "Cold out tonight. Gettin close to our first hard freeze," she said, smiling as she resumed her rocking. Atlas took a seat in Jason's recliner. "First freeze of the year, " she trailed. Then they sat quietly. Occasionally, the farmhouse trembled from a strong wind, but otherwise the crackle and snaps of the wood burning provided the only sound. "I'm sorry about today." Alex did not look at him but kept her stare on the light from the fire. The faint glow made her face appear like a mask as if she were some mythic, incorporeal creature, who at any moment would vanish into the gravity of darkness that blanketed the rest of the living room. "Think it'll snow before Christmas?" he asked. "Not here. Maybe up in the mountains, but here-" A memory stopped Alex from rocking. "There was a December when I was round seven or eight. Christmas Day. Got up early. Went downstairs. Waited for 'nother hour or two for everybody else to get up. That year I wanted an Easy Bake Oven. You don't know what that is, but it was like a mini oven for kids. Daddy hid it behind his easy chair, so after I opened all my presents and thought I hadn't gotten one, he told me to check behind his chair and there it was. He was always playing with me like that. Then me and him and Mama went to church, and it was raining pretty heavy, and it was warm out. We all three had parts to sing in *Children Go Where I Send Thee*. Mama sang *Three for the Hebrew Children*. I sang *Two for Paul and Silas*. And daddy-" Her voice broke for a second. "*One for the little bitty baby. Who was born of the Virgin Mary and born, born, born in Bethlehem.*" Her words stumbled into song before she continued. "By the time we left church, temperature had dropped

considerable, but it was still raining out. Got home and daddy made a fire and Mama finished fixing dinner. Grandma come over and all my cousins, and we had ham and collards and cornbread stuffing. Then by that evening just as everybody was fixing to leave, the rain had changed to snow.” The fire had reduced itself to a few neon ashes. Atlas looked over at Alex, and he could not see if she was asleep or awake. “Did any of it stick?” “Hmm?” “The snow. Did any of it stick?” Alex smiled. “No. But it was still pretty.” Alex lifted herself from her stupor. “Lemme put some more wood on that fire. Can’t ever keep warm in this house.” He watched as Alex grabbed a few pieces of kindling from a bin and tossed them into the wood stove. Sparks ricocheted off the iron walls of the inside, but soon the wood settled, and the fire melted back into a gentle murmur. Alex tucked her nightgown between her legs as she took her seat back on the sofa. “You better get back into bed or else your daddy-” she broke mid-sentence and then just shook her head. Atlas did not say anything, but he did not need to. She reached over and stroked the strands of hair around his ear. “He’s just stressed is all.” The words did nothing to draw his attention away from the fire. Then as if it were a song that brought tears to her eyes, he asked, “What happens when we die?” Alex stopped stroking his hair and brought her hand to his. Her mind went back briefly to that morning in church, the last Christmas before her father died, and how she had not talked to her Mama in years. It had been so long, she could not remember why they had started fighting. She played around with the thought of one day picking up the phone and calling her. The woman in her seventies now, drinking a cup of coffee while listening to gospel music and thumbing through a coupon paper for the Piggly Wiggly over in the small town where she lived, Erul. Everybody pronounced it a different way. Silence on the other end of the phone while she waited for her mama to say something. What would her Mama say if she knew her daughter lived with a white man and his son? What would the woman say, who used to speak so ill of those people, who lived on the real other side of the tracks, who kept all the money to themselves and only opened up the school for her and her brother when the government showed up with armed guards? Those people, who refused to unionize with her father, the grown man who could barely raise a family with the salary he got from working in the hosiery mill. Those people, who had integrated slowly into her life over thirty some years, a few she saw every day at the county high school but who were themselves the minority, the poor ones, who remained packed together for fear they would be blamed for the sins of those people, and then a few more, whom she met at the community college and were friendly, Jennifer, who had invited her to join a study group for her Statistics class, and then a couple more she worked with at the paper manufacturing plant after she gave up on her father’s dream to get a degree. Those people and the one, whose bashful smile she noticed in the reflection of the mirror while she cut his hair, who had already paid and then left the salon only to come back just to ask for her number, who kissed her at the end of the night

on their first date-an early Spring evening when the rain ended as gigantic, wet snowflakes falling against leaves colored in newborn green. Through those snowflakes, she arrived back at Atlas's question. "I kind of like to think that we are like snowflakes, all different and unique, falling in different directions through the sky. And then one day, when we die, we hit the earth and melt into a tiny drop of water, which then goes into a great big ocean where we all become one." Alex shrugged and laughed at herself. "I don't know if that makes sense but-" By the time she looked in Atlas's direction, he was already standing and staring deep into the fire. "Sweetheart?" He turned to her, and she could see his face, illuminated in the same soft glow, which had covered her face in a mask. Now his face spoke of something not real. Atlas leaned down and wrapped his arms around her. *Strange*, she thought. She reached up and placed her arms along his back. Atlas took in a deep breath as he felt her grip tighten against the wings. He waited for her to react. The snap and crackle of the fire retreated into silence. She could feel his heart beating against her chest, and then- "I'll never leave you," she whispered. "Never." She pulled him in closer. Atlas lay against her on the sofa while she stroked his hair softly.

## Chapter Six

*For weeks Bunny and Munk traveled with Red farther into the northern countryside. With each day the sunlight grew dimmer and with each night the air grew colder. Although Munk thought it wiser to travel at night and sleep during the day, Red seemed to prefer the opposite, and Munk did not object since he did not want to upset Bunny, who had grown increasingly fond of the old Ooman. In the evenings Red would write new songs with his harmonica, and Bunny would choreograph new and elaborate dances. Red had even taught Bunny had to warble like a sparrow and yodel like a goat. When Bunny warbled and yodeled at the same time, he created a singular, melodious sound Munk had never heard before, what Red termed a yarbel. More importantly, however, Red took care of everything. Every day he miraculously had plenty of food for all three of them to eat and knew exactly where they should camp and build a fire every night. This allowed Munk plenty of time to drill down into the very depths of his mind and excavate thoughts he never knew he had. He thought about the sun and the moon, the way the wind blew and how the earth smelt. He thought about the rain and how it turned to sleet and then snow, and then he reversed that thought and thought about the snow and how it melted into rain. He thought about how a seed grew into a flower and how a grape shriveled into a raisin. He thought about one strand of hair and then he thought about a whole head full of hairs. He thought about every grain of sand along the beach and every blade of green grass in the field. Then he thought more about himself and the nature of being. He even thought about what a thought was and if he thought a thought, where did that thought go when he stopped thinking about it. But the more he thought, the more Munk forgot. He had forgotten Miss Beulah's songs and the many stories he had read in her study. He had forgotten lots of the hefty words he had read in the many tomes that occupied her library. And soon after he set down all of this thinking, he had forgotten what he initially wanted to think about.*

*One day Red, Bunny, and Munk came upon a small New England town, and they entered a place Red called a diner. "Since I cain't be home for Thanksgivin', this here the next best thing," he said as he, Bunny, and Munk sat down inside a booth. A female Ooman with curly red hair and a gingham apron approached their table and set down three glasses of water and a stack of menus. "Bertie, baby!" said Red. "How's the love of my life?" The female Ooman named Bertie snapped back. "Where's the money I loaned you, Red? Huh? Haven't seen you for six months, and then you waltz in here calling me the love of your life, acting like you own the joint?" Munk could tell from Bertie's tone she was not a happy Ooman, and he sunk in his seat next to Bunny. "Awww shucks, babycakes! Lookie here! I got's dough!" Reaching into his back pocket, Red pulled out a wad of money wrapped together with a tight*

rubber band. “‘Nuff here to pay for me and my compadres’ Thanksgiving’ dinners plus a little somethin’ extra for my babycakes!” Red licked his thumb and counted out several twenty dollar bills. After eying the cash Bertie swiped it off the table and stuck it into the cleavage of her bra. “Something is better than nothing,” she said. “I’ll be back with some coffee.” “I’ll have the coffee but my fellas here only drink water.” Bertie looked directly at Munk and furrowed her brow. “Bart don’t like weirdos, Red! You know that!” Munk spied a stout, gruff Ooman with a greasy face peering over a steel counter from the back kitchen. The gruff Ooman known as Bart peeled a potato with a tiny, sharp knife. “These ain’t weirdos, Bertie! They’re my friends.” Red gave Bart a wave, but the gruff Ooman thumbed his nose at Red and resumed peeling his potato. Bertie rolled her eyes and exited into the kitchen. Then Red whistled to himself as he took the money and rolled it back into a tight wad. He tapped his fingers on the table as if he were playing a piano, and then said, “Lookie here boys. I’s got to thinkin’ that maybe we’s got somethin’ goin’ on here. Somethin’ big.” At first Munk did not quite understand Red. Was he saying that he had a big thought and did not understand it? This happened to Munk all the time. But then Red licked his lips and widened his eyes. “I know’s a feller here in town who’s got a stage and pretty good billin’ with the big wigs in the city where all the acts play. With a little tweakin’ we could pull off one hell-of-a act!” Munk soon realized he was wrong. “A act?” he asked, puzzled. “Yes sir! A act! Hee-hee!” A ravenous expression came across Red’s face, and it was not from all the food Bertie had brought back from the kitchen. Although Munk still scratched his head over what Red was getting it, he had no time to fuss with it. In front of him and Bunny sat fulsome portions of mashed-roasted potatoes, candied yams, green beans, cranberry salad, pickles, and pumpkin and apple pies. Bunny could barely contain himself, filling his plate with so much of everything the pile of food reached the tip of his nose.

When the three were finished, Red unbuttoned the top button of his pants and picked his teeth with a toothpick. He finished his coffee and ate one more spoonful of apple pie. “Mighty fine cookin’ Bertie. Mighty fine cookin’.” With the same dissatisfied countenance, Bertie topped off Red’s coffee. Then she looked over at Bunny and Munk, both of whom had leftovers smeared throughout the fur around their mouths. “Look here, boys. Y’all better watch yourselves ‘round this rat! He’s liable-” But before Bertie could finish, Red smacked her behind. “Watch it!” she yelled. “Oh now, Bertie! Don’t yuh’ go bad mouthin’ me to my friends, here! Or should’ I say business partners?” Again, Red wore an expression that resembled a wolf drooling over a lamb chop. What did Red mean by business partners Munk wondered. “You done eat, now get on out of here,” said Bertie. “And take these freaks with you.” Bertie pointed in the direction of Bunny and Munk. “Let’s go fellas. Don’t wanna stick ‘round for a woman scorned! Besides, we got big things planned!” yelled Red, just so Bertie could hear him.

*Outside, Red threw his arms around Bunny and Munk and led them down the street toward a large, brick building, which was outlined in bright lights. A glowing sign jutted out from the middle of the building, and Munk barely made out what it said: "Tuh'nite fore one nite 'lny. Mama Boom-Boom und 'her dancin' lay-deez!" Red chuckled. "Mama Boom-Boom is a different kind of act then wut we's gonna do. Nothin' but a high class act with us boyz!" Then Red rapped his knuckles on the front door of the building and out stepped a tiny Ooman, smaller than Munk, with a stogie in his mouth and no shirt on. "Yeh?" he barked. "Tater Tot! It's me! Red!" The tiny Ooman sized Red up and down. "The only Red I know is wanted in ten states plus Mississippi and owes me a thousand smack-a-roos!" Visibly nervous Red pulled at his suspenders. "That's uh-well-that's me, Tater Tot!" Red laughed anxiously. "I hate being called Tater Tot, but I hate lyin' cheats even more!" Just as Tater Tot was about to shut the door on him, Red stuck out his foot to prevent the door from shutting. Tater Tot bit down hard on his stogie and gritted his teeth, revealing they were all made of gold. "Look, Tot. I's got a dynamo act here. I promise. Give me one night tuh prove it, and you's can keep what I owe you plus twenty percent." Red grinned nervously as Tater Tot peaked around him and looked at Bunny and Munk. "Forty percent plus tips." A river of sweat trickled down the back of Red's neck. "Deal!" For at least a minute Red and Tater Tot stared at each other, looking beyond each other's eyes and at something Munk could not make out. Then Tater Tot opened the door, and Red waved for Bunny and Munk to step inside.*

Hidden beneath a set of bleachers, Atlas dog-eared the page in his book and shut it. He watched as the boy with the blonde hair and the one with chronic conjunctivitis played a game of basketball with another group of boys. The boy with the blonde hair had command of the court, darting back and forth while dribbling the ball in his hands. He made several successful shots before he lifted his shirt and wiped the sweat from his brow. Mr. Sticknetty blew the whistle, and the boys clowned around with each other as they headed toward the locker room. Shooting a few hoops on his own, the boy with chronic conjunctivitis gathered the basketballs and threw them in a bin, but before he too entered the locker room, he took the last ball and stood with it alone in the gymnasium. Then he looked in the direction of Atlas and curled his lips into a wicked smile. He threw the basketball with all his might in the direction of Atlas. The ball hit the bleachers and bounced back into the middle of the gymnasium. The boy with chronic conjunctivitis laughed and then jogged into the locker room.

The wheels of the cart squeaked as Leonard pushed it toward the table where Atlas was sitting. "Here you go," he said. "Everything on birds, aviation, flight, space...the final frontier." Atlas looked up at Leonard, who held his right hand in a Vulcan salute. The

librarian wore a feather headdress resembling a turkey's retrix and a red handkerchief wrapped around his head so the loose end resembled a wattle. "Don't expect you to get that little reference." Leonard placed the books on the table while Atlas returned to a book with an illustration of a bird's wings. Examining the feathers and skeleton, Atlas wondered if his wings were structured the same way. "Birds use a swimming motion to fly," he read aloud. Atlas moved his arm in a swimming motion but stopped when he saw Leonard watching him. "What's sparked this new found interest?" Atlas closed the book and shrugged his shoulders. "I see. Well, it ain't none of my business." Leonard perused the back of one of the books he had pulled for Atlas. "Unless you've grown a pair of wings." Atlas reached for another book and stopped. How did Leonard know? He cowered beneath the thought. Then Leonard patted the boy on his back. "I'm only pulling your leg." Immediately, Atlas was relieved. Leonard placed the book back on the table just as the bell rang. He looked at his wristwatch. "Well, that's the bell." Then he lifted a plate of turkey biscuits from the cart, and wrapping one in a napkin decorated with a print of colorful leaves, he handed it to Atlas. "Happy Thanksgiving, Atlas." Atlas smiled and took the biscuit. "Thank you."

Peaceful and sunny. The warm air flushed over Atlas's naked body as he stood on a bridge that overlooked the river. Below him, the murky water trickled gently along. Atlas held a bright, yellow leaf in his hand and blew on it so its body fluttered. Then he let the leaf go and watched as it fell to the river. It landed on the surface of the water and quickly drifted downstream. Then Atlas turned his attention forward and shook his body vigorously. The gossamer wings flailed about his back like wet noodles. He took in a deep breath, closed his eyes, and then exhaled. Within seconds the unrelenting blackness of doubt fell apart beneath the weight of imagination. The wings had expanded and Atlas leapt from the bridge. Down he went before he could feel the air rushing underneath his wings and projecting his body into flight. Exhilarating. He soared through the air and followed the banks of the river before arching upward over the trees and then high above the field near his school. The sun cascaded its warmth over his body, and he headed toward the school parking lot, where he could see Leonard getting into his car. "You do have wings!" yelled Leonard gleefully. Atlas could barely contain his laughter. He saw Verla looking up at him in awe from inside her car, and he blew her a playful kiss. Then he spotted the boy with blonde hair and the boy with chronic conjunctivitis walking home along an adjacent sidewalk, which led into town. He soared above them unnoticed for a minute or two until the boy with chronic conjunctivitis finally turned and saw Atlas flying above him. "It's a dragon!" he screamed in terror. When the boy with blonde hair saw Atlas, he took off running into the woods. Atlas swooped down and with the rush of wind vibrating beneath his wings, he knocked them both over into a slimy pool of mud. Then he arched his back and

headed straight up into the clouds out of sight. What an invigorating experience! He rushed higher into the atmosphere until again, the face of his mother appeared. His eyes met hers and then she kissed his forehead-Splash. Atlas struggled to the surface and wiped the water from his eyes. He looked up at the bridge and then the sun and then back toward the shoreline. He lumbered out of the water and rested. A dreadful sense of not knowing who or what he was came over him, and he screamed as loud as he possibly could. The screeching of his voice cracked and within seconds, Atlas had lost himself to a flood of tears.

Jason stood next to the industrial sized freezer, overflowing with mounds of packaged frozen turkeys encased in tight plastic skin, and peered up at the cardboard cartoon pig with its cherub cheeks and silly grin hanging overhead. Adorned in a pilgrim outfit, the pig mocked him as Jason wrestled with the thought of having to purchase a store-bought turkey for Thanksgiving. He wondered if the pig reveled in a holiday in which ham was not on the menu and gleefully accepted his role as sentinel over a chest of dead birds, who had lived the majority of their lives in dimly lit, cramped cages. He grabbed one of the frozen turkeys by its plastic twist tie and hauled it out of the freezer. Venturing up the center aisle, he grabbed a box of generic brand stuffing. His mother never called it stuffing, he remembered. *In the South we make cornbread dressing. Only Yankees are so uncivilized as to stuff bread up a turkey's ass and then eat it.* Jason cracked a laugh from his hardened exterior. Arriving at the checkout aisle, he tossed the turkey and box of stuffing onto the conveyor belt. "Is this goin to be it for you today?" the cashier asked in her sweet tea drawl that reminded Jason of his mother's voice. Jason nodded. "Do you have your Special Piggies Value card?" Jason shook his head no. "That's all right." The checkout lady grabbed a card from the cash register drawer and swiped it. "Okay, that'll be twenty-seven dollars and eighty-two cents." Again, the cashier's voice brought Jason memories of his mother. The way people in the South used to speak before Northerners decided they could not tolerate the cold anymore and invaded the South with their hard "r's" and nasally vowels. His mother had no problem with Northerners. *It's Yankees I don't like.* Jason laughed before he soon realized he was five dollars short of what he needed. "How much you say it was?" he asked as if maybe the cashier had made a mistake. "Twenty-seven dollars and eighty-two cents. Dollar eighty-nine per pound, and that is with the Special Piggies Value card." Nervously, Jason counted the handful of coins he pulled out of his pocket. "How's that boy of yours doin'?" the cashier asked. Jason looked up from the coins in his palm only to momentarily forget that he had a son. "Uh-he's-uh." "What you got there?" The cashier redirected his attention back to the money in his hand. Jason looked down at the wadded up bills and a few dimes and pennies. "I think-I'm-" "Don't worry about it, baby." Rummaging in her purse, the cashier pulled out a crumpled up five dollar bill. She gave

Jason a wink. "You have a Happy Thanksgiving," and handed Jason the receipt. He stood blankly for a second, and then as if he had been marked a sinner in church, Jason lowered his head and grabbed the turkey and box of stuffing. His truck raced along the edge of town, which hugged up against the cypress fields north of his house. Even though his property line began just on the other side of the swampland, he was driving the long way home. Silence except for the moan of his aching pickup truck. All he could think about was the crumpled five dollar bill the cashier pulled from her purse. Jason rolled down his truck window and flung the turkey out onto the highway. It tumbled down the embankment and splashed into a bog of stagnant water.

*December*

## Chapter Seven

*Munk wandered along the backstage of Tater Tot's theater, examining the ropes and pulleys connected to a velvet curtain and an array of multi-colored backdrops painted with various landscapes. He tried to think about what it all meant for him and Bunny, but any thinking was marred with how much he had been thinking during the preceding weeks, and it made his brain hurt. That evening he and Bunny were going to play on a stage, but instead of romping around by themselves, OOmans would be sitting in the seats in front of the stage watching them. While it all seemed exciting, he still held a nugget of uneasiness somewhere in the space between the bottom of his chest and the top of his belly. Passing a tall, narrow mirror backstage, he caught a glimpse of himself, his face smudged with dirt and matted fur; his coral bonnet frayed and askew; his tailcoat tattered and riddled with holes; and his visionary goggles seared so tightly around his head, he had forgotten the color of his own eyes. As he reached out to touch his reflection to see if what he saw before him was truly real, Bunny came bounding from behind the mirror. He wore a new, elaborate sapphire studded dress that matched the sparkle in his eyes, and the tail on his head had been neatly coiffed, combed, and curled around a shiny, pink ribbon. His thick black eyelashes stretched an extra inch from his face, and his lips were dyed purple as if he had kissed the tender flesh of a fresh plum. "Wut's wit duh get-up?" asked Munk rather meanly. All the attention from Red had been heaped onto Bunny and jealousy flooded Munk's question. "Figured it be a nice segway from Mama Boom-Boom into our act," said Red, who came around the corner donning a tuxedo and felt top hat. He clicked his heels and twirled the corner of a fake mustache, which Munk thought was a woolly worm crawling across the old man's face. "I's think me und Bunny do our hunter und bear bit?" asked Munk. Red grinned. "Of course, of course. Right after me and Dame Rabbit do our song and dance routine." "Dame Rabbit?" Munk was becoming apprehensive. "Yeah, yeah! Yuh gotta have a stage name. I's Slick Red, him's Dame Rabbit, and I's figure yer Mini Mooch. Huh?" Munk scratched his brow. "Mini Mooch?" Searching for a walking stick in a large bin full of canes, Red pulled out one composed of ivory with a shiny, bulbous gemstone for its grip. "Mini Mooch! Has uh nice ring to it, dudn't it?" Red spit on the gemstone and buffed it with the cuff of his sleeve. The name gave Munk something to think about, and while he much rather be called by his name, he acquiesced to being billed as "Mini Mooch."*

*After washing in a long hot, bubble bath and dousing himself in perfume, the scent of which caused him to sneeze profusely, Munk got dressed in the costume Red had selected for him. He put on a new pair of high waisted striped trousers, a fine-pressed club collared shirt with gold cuff links, a forest green, silk bow tie, and pair*

of oversized rubber shoes. To top it off Munk wore a bowler hat with a red feather in it. It was not quite the outfit Munk had in mind for his and Bunny's hunter and bear routine, but when he saw himself in the mirror, he thought he looked like a real Ooman, albeit a bit absurd. The only item that remained from his previous outfit were his visionary goggles. Before he could get another look at himself, Munk heard the sound of stringed instruments and drums billowing from the direction of the stage. Tater Tot knocked at his door. "It's showtime, kid," he shouted with his stogie in his mouth. Munk took in the entire getup with a fleeting air of excitement.

On stage Mama Boom-Boom and her Dancing Ladies were taking their final bow as Tater Tot stepped out from behind the curtain. "Grade A class act," he said, rolling his stogie around in his mouth and applauding with the crowd. Munk looked out at the audience from stage left. So much cigar and cigarette smoke filled the theater that he could only make out the glare from the stage lights on Ooman spectacles. "Best Boom Booms on the East Coast, am I right?" The male Oomans in the audience catcalled and whistled. "Now, normally that would conclude our show this evening, but since you guys are some of my best paying customers, I have a fine treat for you!" A male Ooman with a thick voice yelled from the back, "Double Boom Booms!" The theater erupted into more catcalls and wolf howls. "Ha, ha! No! Only I get the double boom booms!" Tater Tot laughed heartily at his own joke. "No, tonight, I have a song and dance act all the way from Carolina." As Tater Tot went on to describe the trio's act, Munk realized he had no idea what he was doing. He looked around for Red and Bunny, who were nowhere to be found. Panic set in, and his half Ooman heart vibrated rapidly beneath his chest. "So without further adieu, please welcome to the stage Slick Red and Dame Rabbit with their Little Boy Mini Mooch. "Ittle boy?" thought Munk. The lights dimmed slightly and shifted color while the curtain went up and revealed a backdrop painted as if it were the inside of an elaborate, ornate castle. For a brief second Munk thought the Corinthian columns and veranda were real until Tater Tot shoved a red ball onto his nose and yanked him by the leg, tossing him onto the stage. Munk fell into the backdrop, and chuckles rippled through the audience. Then what he thought was a snowflake landed on the red ball, dangling from his snout. Then another and then another until many snowflakes flitted from the ceiling onto the stage. How could it snow inside a castle? Sweet and euphonious music lifted from the orchestra pit, and a grand, copper staircase entered from stage right. Red's harmonica chimed in from somewhere on high, maybe from one of the balcony seats in the theater. And as if he had descended from a cloud, Bunny stepped onto the landing at the top of the staircase and yarbelled. The Oomans in the audience went wild. Munk stood and rushed over to the bottom of the staircase as Bunny took each step with every note he sang. When Bunny reached the bottom of the steps, he stuck out his paw for Munk to kiss, but as Munk went to press his lips against the silk opera glove, Bunny's entire arm fell off.

*Mortified, Munk dropped the arm and looked up at his brother. Then Bunny blew him a kiss, and a large boxing glove sprung from Bunny's hip and socked Munk in the face. Exuberant laughter rattled throughout the audience. For the next two hours Dame Rabbit and Slick Red danced and sang while tossing Munk around like a cheap rag doll. Bunny threw two banana cream pies in his face; kicked him in his bottom with a fake donkey leg; rode him around like a circus show pony; strapped him to a gurney and sawed him in half; and shot him out of a cannon into the audience, where one of the OOmans with spectacles threw him back onto the stage. During the show's grand finale, Bunny and Munk performed their hunter and bear routine, except this time Munk was the one being hunted. When Bunny finally shot him, he shoved an apple in Munk's mouth and roasted him over a campfire against a backdrop that resembled the Western prairie. When the curtain fell and Slick Red and Dame Bunny took their bows, Munk's head protruded from the castle wall as if he had been stuffed and mounted. The thunderous applause and cheers were so loud, Munk had no idea which way was up and which way was down.*

“Have yourself a merry little Christmas.” Leonard’s baritone voice carried throughout the library as he hung a red and silver sequined wreath on the center wall just above where Atlas sat, scanning books. Festooned in holly boughs, garlands with gold ribbon, and brightly colored stockings, each holding a book about Christmas, the library exuded a spirit of festive joy and warmth. *Beep. Beep. Beep.* Atlas scanned the bar codes of three books into the computer. “You’ve really got the hang of that,” Leonard said, stepping down from a small ladder. “Kids your age by the time you’re my age will be half robot.” The absurd thought caused Leonard to chuckle, but he grew quiet when he realized he was the only one laughing. The sign read, “10 days left to sign up for the Josephus Daniels’s Middle School Holiday Talent Show,” and Atlas was fixated on it. The silence caught Atlas off guard, and immediately he resumed scanning the barcode of the books. “You ain’t fooling me. You’ve been eyeing that poster since the day we met.” Atlas ignored Leonard. “Okay. I won’t pester you about it, but if I may impart some words of wisdom: Regret is a larger weight to carry than-” The librarian stopped mid sentence, his countenance still exuding the wrinkles of a clever sage but his mind dropping the juggling adages of a clumsy jester. “-than failure or something like that.” He retrieved the words from his lost musings just in enough time for Atlas to turn back to the poster. “I don’t have a talent,” he said. “Balderdash and Poppycock! Half of the kids who sign up for the talent show don’t have one either but they figure out something to do.” The words came out of Leonard’s mouth as if he was letting Atlas in on one of those grownup secrets about the inner workings of middle school life. “But only you are able to decide on that,” he said, quickly tempering his thoughts. “And now. The piece de resistance!” Leonard pulled an object wadded up in bubble wrap from a cardboard box. Peeling off the bubble wrap as if he were a surgeon performing a highly delicate

procedure, Leonard revealed a glass figurine of Judy Garland dressed in holiday attire, and he set it gently on the counter of his library desk. "I've missed you," he said to the figure with large brown eyes and lips open as if belting a high note. "See the decorations? Huh? Just for you." He spoke to the figurine as if she alone were being honored for the holiday. But Atlas had lost interest in Leonard's antics; his mind lingered on the talent show poster and the possibility that maybe he could do the unthinkable.

Jason sat in his truck for a half an hour staring at the flier that had been placed on the windshield. He took a swig of his coffee. Down the street he could make out the white-pillared courthouse with its well-groomed lawn and Confederate Monument, which the county was now in the process of removing. He had sent the municipal blowhards a handwritten letter, opposing the decision to remove the monument, but now seeing the scaffolding surrounding the structure caused his stomach to turn. The last swallow of his coffee filled his mouth with bits of ground. He peered in his rear view mirror. The blue tarp he had used to cover his furniture in the back of the truck was still fastened tightly. Then he took a deep breath, started the engine of his truck, and pulled away. The flier sat folded neatly on his dashboard.

Atlas watched as Alex cheerfully tapped her thumb against the steering wheel to the beat of *Rockin Around the Christmas Tree*. He wondered briefly if she still believed in Jesus and God and the possibility that when she died, she had a soul that exited her body and traveled to a place called Heaven. The car pulled into a parking lot near the shopping mall, which the town had left open for the occasional AA meeting and grannies, who wanted a place to walk whenever it rained. "Here we are," she said, grabbing her purse. "Wait." Atlas unzipped his backpack and pulled out a slip of paper. He handed it to Alex. "Well it says here you're signing up for the school talent show-" "I'm thinking about it." Atlas did not look at her but instead, studied on a row of Christmas trees lined up against a wooden fence in the parking lot. "That's great, Atlas. What's your talent gonna be?" She asked the question with a slight tinge of doubt. He sighed. "I mean, I know you have something you're thinking about doing. It doesn't involve firearms or explosives, does it?" Atlas cut her a disapproving glance out of the corner of his eyes. "I'm only kidding. Hey. Look here." Atlas turned in her direction, but he dared not look Alex directly in the face. "I'm serious. I'm proud of you." "For what?" He tugged at a piece of upholstery that was coming loose from the car seat. Alex took his hand into hers. "For stepping out of your shell and at least trying something new." "Don't tell daddy." She grabbed his hand tighter. "Okay. But that means you can't tell him that I bought the Christmas tree." "Lie like we always do." Atlas pulled his hand away. "I'll just say one of my girlfriends at the salon has a husband who sells

them, and we got this one for free. Just gotta make sure it's pretty ugly, so he believes it was a freebee." They both stepped out of the car. Various shapes and sizes of Christmas trees lined the back end of a parking lot up against what used to be a Sears. A small red shack adorned in fake, glistening snow and plastic icicles sat at the far end, and an elderly man in his late eighties smoked a pipe and worked a crossword puzzle as he rocked in a chair before a small propane heater. "Howdy," he said with a voice one octave higher than Atlas expected. "Merry Christmas!" "Merry Christmas," replied Alex. "I'll tie whichever tree you choose to the roof of your car. Free of charge!" "Thank you. That's very nice of you." "Just let me know when you find one that suits your fancy." Alex nodded and began pulling on the bough of one of the trees to see how many needles fell off. The old man turned to Atlas and in his best Bugs Bunny voice said, "What's up, doc?" Atlas stood slightly irritated as if the old man had forgotten to wipe toothpaste from the corner of his mouth. "Racking my brain here," the man said, lifting his crossword puzzle so Atlas could see. "If you know the answer, I'll give you one of the smaller trees for free." The elderly man licked his lips and dipped his pencil against his tongue. He cleared his throat. "Thanksgiving break. Eight letters," he said, the words pronounced and pointed. Atlas repeated the clue back to himself in his mind. "This might be the first crossword in sixty two years I ain't gonna finish." "Sorry," Atlas said plaintively. "Ain't your fault, young man. Brain just giving out on me." The old man removed his spectacles and set them and the paper on a stool. He closed his eyes. Atlas wondered if he would ever get to be that old, if he, too, would lose most of his hair, wear a set of overalls, and sell Christmas trees in the back end parking lot of an abandoned mall. Soft, Christmas country music played fuzzily on a radio sitting on the floor in the shack, and the old man drifted into an afternoon nap. "What do you think of this one?" Alex asked, interrupting Atlas's daydream. He joined her near a bundle of trees at the far end of the lot. "Ain't that big. Little skinny and bare at the bottom. Your daddy will think I got this for free, don't you reckon?" Once again, Alex pulled at one of the limbs to see how many needles fell off. "I feel bad about lying," Atlas said as he sat on a small step ladder. "I understand how you feel, but sometimes it's best to keep someone from knowing the truth in order to protect them from themselves." Alex paused. She crouched down and leaned against the fence along the perimeter of the Christmas tree lot. "You don't need me to tell you this, but your daddy is a complicated man. He can be a real son-of-a bitch-" Atlas laughed- "And then. Then he can be like someone I've never met before. Kind. Endearing. Loving." She stopped herself before she lost her way into thoughts that were too painful. "Given what happened to your Mama and then getting laid off, your daddy is really tryin' to turn a lot of that anger and sadness into making stuff. That very first table he made with all the excitement, hard work, and frustration that went into it- He yelled to me from his shed, and I came running from the house. I thought he was hurt or something. But when I walked inside his

shed, there he stood next to that chair. He was crying.” Atlas turned to Alex. “Daddy cried?” “Like a little boy. And don’t ever tell him I told you that.” She held out her pinky, and Atlas wrapped his pinky around hers. “Good. So what do you think about that tree?” she asked as she stood up, but Atlas’s mind had suddenly gone elsewhere. He stood and walked over to the old man, who whistled in his sleep. “Sir,” he said, tapping the man on his shoulder. The old man opened his eyes and looked at Atlas with a crumbled grin. “Wishbone,” he said. “Wish-what?” fluttered the old man, but he immediately set up and grabbed his spectacles and paper. He pressed the pencil on the tip of his tongue and wrote out the letters in the tiny boxes as he spoke. “W-I-S-H-...I’ll be damned.” The old man’s crumpled smile smoothed into a mouth with no lips, and he put his hand on Atlas’s shoulder. “Son. Any tree in the lot.” Alex approached Atlas perplexed. “Now we don’t have to lie,” he said.

The morning sun broached the roof of the mall just as Jason pulled his pickup truck to the doors, which at one time entered into the section of the mall that housed the movie theater. He looked out the driver’s side window and saw an old man wrestling with a bundle of small Christmas trees. Then he grabbed the flier, still folded and resting on the dashboard, and exited his truck. It had been nearly twenty years since he was last inside the mall; the entire section that held the movie theater was now gutted and converted into a large warehouse space, which now functioned as an antique flea market open Tuesday through Saturday. A corpulent woman with long, stringy black hair and wrapped in a purple moo-moo with yellow flowers propped up sundry items, mostly junk she had purchased from an estate sale at a discounted price. “Be with you in a second,” she said, never once making eye contact with Jason. He nodded politely. “Percy!” she shouted. “Got another come for the bazaar!” From a twisted enclave of stacked and shelved books appeared a small man, hunched and not quite five feet tall. Even though he walked with a cane, his gait was sprightly, and he hopped up on a stool at an architect’s desk near the entrance. “Over here, son,” he said, peering over a set of spectacles and thumbing through a notebook. He picked up a pen and clicked it open. Jason approached the desk. “What you selling?” Percy asked as he scribbled illegible words in the notebook. “Carpentry,” Jason replied. The small man paused. “You mean shelves and tables-” asked Percy, not making direct eye contact since his right eye veered lazily downward. “Table, chairs, figurines,” said Jason. Percy nodded and continued his scribbling in the notebook. “Bazaar opens this Saturday. You want one weekend or two?” Jason thought for a minute and furtively looked down at the flier. He had circled a section of the flier that read something about fifty dollars for one weekend- “And seventy five for two,” said Percy, repeating what Jason had just read on the flier. “Lemme-uh.” Jason mauled it over a bit. “Just put me down for one,” he said flatly, pulling his wallet out from his back pocket. “Okay, sir. This weekend or next?”

Percy asked, his scribbling intensified. "Next." Jason pulled out a fifty dollar bill and tossed it on the desk. "Name?" "Jason Rayson." Percy stopped writing. "You Walter Rayson's boy?" he asked, revealing a missing front tooth when he smiled. "Uh-" Jason could barely get out a yes before, "I knew your daddy and your granddaddy. I thought you looked familiar. Spitting image of Walter. Your daddy grew some of the best collards I ever did eat, I tell you." Percy giggled as he continued his writing. He grabbed the fifty dollar bill from the desk and plopped himself off the stool. "That it?" asked Jason. The small man hobbled over to a cash drawer, where he exchanged the fifty dollar bill for a crinkled twenty. He hurried back over to the desk and leaped back onto the stool. "Here," he said, pushing the twenty in Jason's direction. "Friends and family discount." Jason almost took the twenty but stopped himself. "I can't do that sir. I don't-" "Yes. Take it son! Your daddy was good people." Jason smiled. He grabbed the twenty and placed it in his wallet promptly. "Thank you," he said. "My pleasure. See you this Saturday. Doors open for vendors at 5:00 am sharp and the public starts coming in as early as 6:00." Percy cleared his throat and spit the contents into a tattered handkerchief. "Right," said Jason. "Thank you again," he said. But the small man was down off the stool and lost in the enclave of books before Jason could see where he went. Outside, Jason could now feel the sun on his face, and he could sense it was to be one of those warm, dry late Fall days. The smell of fir trees caught his attention as he made his way to the truck. Then he stopped and looked over at a scrawny Christmas tree. The old man sat with the same crossword puzzle he had been working on the day before. "How much for this guy?" asked Jason, tugging at one of the tree's branches playfully. "That there is a Charlie Brown tree. Give it to you for fifteen." The old man steadied himself upward and walked to Jason and the tree. A pile of needles lay clumped on the ground beneath the tree, and Jason rubbed over them with his foot. "Will you take twelve?" he asked, hoping the old man would spot the dried needles. Instead, the old man was eying the contents of Jason's truck bed and had spotted a wooden block or what appeared to be a very simple footstool. "You make that there footstool?" asked the old man. Jason nodded. "How about ten and that footstool? Doc says I need to keep my left leg elevated. Cut cancer out of it two weeks ago-" but Jason did not care to hear the particulars. He grabbed the footstool and handed it and the crimped twenty to the old man. "Right then. That's ten in change." The old man licked his thumb and from a wad of cash pulled out a ten dollar bill. "Want some rope to help tie it down?" Jason shook his head no. He grabbed the tree and casually tossed it into the back of his truck. "All right. It's your Christmas, I guess," said the old man, slightly perturbed with how Jason manhandled the scrawny Fraser fir. Then Jason jumped into his truck, his mood cheerful and content, and drove away. "Merry Christmas," remarked the old man, who stood alone with his trees. He trotted back to his chair and gently elevated his left foot on top of the footstool. Then he returned his attention back to the crossword puzzle.

## Chapter Eight

*The show that evening was more than a success; it was a blockbuster. Several of the Ooman men with spectacles piled into Tater Tot's dingy office and bid for the show's rights, so they could take the act to their theaters in their hometowns. With his stogie gripped tightly between his chintzy, golden teeth, he just leaned back and let the money fall from the tree. Slick Red had Bunny moved into a private dressing room, typically reserved for Mama Boom Boom and her Dancing Ladies, and many of the Ooman men with spectacles lined up outside with bouquets of carnations and roses and letters of fawning praise to leave at his door. Munk waited at the end of that line just to see his brother after the show. Meanwhile, Slick Red and Tater Tot worked on expanding the run of the show until Christmas with two performances scheduled for every Sunday and an extravagant, showstopping performance planned to usher in the New Year. By the time the line of Ooman men with spectacles had cleared out in front of Bunny's dressing room door, Munk lay passed out, curled up in a beaded chiffon ball gown. Around two in the morning all was still in the theater. Tater Tot and Slick Red had gotten drunk on cheap brandy with Mama Boom Boom and a couple of her Dancing Ladies, and they all were passed out at the back of the theater. If it were not for their snoring, the steady pitter patter of rain could be heard on the tin roof over the backstage exit door. Munk slept soundly and did not wake when Bunny's dressing room door opened with a slight creak. Bunny saw his brother and picked him up gently, cradling him in his arms. Then he opened the backstage exit door and stepped into the rain.*

*A single street lamp illuminated the back alley as Bunny walked with Munk in his arms. He shielded his brother from the rain with a pagoda peaked parasol and carried him to a tiny square park, which sat across the street from the theater. With their petals forming delicate pink cups, a cluster of Japanese Magnolias created a glistening canopy as Bunny sat in the middle of the grass beneath them. He cooed in his brother's ear and stroked his black strands of hair. Just as Munk woke, the rain drops transitioned to large, feathery snowflakes, and they coated everything in a shiny frosting. "Wut's happenin'?" asked Munk, who still held on tightly to his brother. Bunny gave one of his oafish smiles and kissed his brother's forehead. Then he hoisted Munk onto his shoulders, and without so much as a warning, he raced through the street, hopping along at lightning speed. "Where's we go?" asked Munk with a breath of excitement. Bunny just laughed. The flakes whisked across Munk's face, and Bunny moved so quickly, the street lights looked like falling stars within the blaze of the swirling snow. Both brothers were filled with rapture as they spun through town, taking playful slips around corners and gliding across the slick streets. Finally, Bunny came upon the top of a hill, and grabbing a hold of Munk's ankles, he*

*belly flopped against the snow and began cascading downward at a rapacious speed. The bottom of the hill stopped right before a tiny cliff that emptied into an evergreen forest, and as Bunny reached the precipice, he lifted off the earth and flew through the air. Munk squealed with delight as the two brothers were hurled through the air filled with snow. Although their flight only lasted a few seconds, for Munk it felt like a lifetime of friendship and brotherhood. Memories of Wisteria Creek, the oak tree, and Miss Beulah flooded Munk's mind, and in those seconds he saw so clearly what he had forgotten during those last few weeks. The snow clouds thinned, and the fullness of the moon cast a magical glow on the billions of flakes twirling in the night. Munk lost his breath at the sight. The beauty and unbelievable natural world that he and Bunny now inhabited. He wanted to hold onto it forever. Then Munk experienced a sensation he had never had before. Tears streamed down his face, not because he was sad but because he was so happy. These were happy, cathartic tears of complete bliss, and he did not try to hold them back. He let them flow, and there were so many of them. His mind cleared. His heart expanded. And as he and Bunny descended into a snowdrift, Munk touched the helm of consciousness and the immensity of it all. Was it all a dream? He did not care for he was lost in that liminal space between acuity and absolute surrender.*

The cacophony of middle school chatter bounced off the walls of the cafeteria as Atlas entered. So much noise and so many words but none of it Atlas could decipher. He walked directly to the elongated table where Verla and Ms. Smithermon, the Algebra teacher as well as PTA President, sat. A sign, which read "Sign up here for the Annual Josephus Daniels's Middle School Holiday Talent Show," hung from the table. Atlas approached cautiously but confidently with a piece of paper in his hand. "My mother-in-law used to make pinto bean pie, but I could never stomach the stuff," said Ms. Smithermon, her disdain clearly on display with her closed eyes and shriveled nose. "Hello young man. Come to sign up for the talent show?" she said, resuming a more ingratiating expression. "Hello, Atlas. How are you?" Verla interjected genially. Atlas handed Ms. Smithermon the piece of paper, but he did not say a word. "Still not speaking to me, huh?" Verla grinned and took the piece of paper from Ms. Smithermon's hand. "That's okay. You won't be the first young man to ever break my heart." Pressing the crease out of Atlas's slip of paper, Verla read it over, and then gently remarked, "I'm intrigued and impressed. I can't wait to see you perform, and I mean that sincerely." Still smiling, she wrote something on the back of the piece of paper and then handed Atlas a sticker, which read "Number 2." "You'll be our second performer of the evening. Make sure you get to the auditorium an hour before the show starts. And Atlas, best of luck." Atlas took the sticker from Verla and held it tightly in his hand as if it were a precious stone while he passed through the egress of the cafeteria and into the

quiet hallway. He never let go of the sticker until he had made it safely back to the library, where he placed it as a bookmark in the middle of *Misadventures in Being*.

Alex perused through multi-colored shirts on a discount rack. “This shouldn’t be takin’ so long,” she said, holding a fuchsia blouse up against her top half and looking in a mirror. “I look stupid,” said Atlas, his voice carrying throughout the tiny Thrift Store, which sat just at the end of main street in town. “You’re only saying that because you’ve never worn one before other than as a Halloween costume. Heaven forbid your daddy ever decided to present himself in a dignified manner.” Returning the fuchsia blouse back to the discount rack, Alex turned to see Atlas stepping out from behind the makeshift dressing room. The suit was slightly large in the legs and shoulders but with a few alterations, it would fit him just fine. Alex beamed and adjusted the boy’s shirt collar and the suit lapel. “I look stupid. I’m taking it off!” Before he could escape into the changing area, Alex grabbed Atlas’s arm and pulled him in front of a three paneled mirror. “Wait! Now. Look at yourself. Just for a second.” She stood behind him while Atlas looked at himself in the mirror. For a brief moment Atlas could not look away. There in front of him was another person, who looked like him but was somehow older. “See there,” said Alex kindly. “You’re a young man. You’re not a little boy no more, Atlas.”

He ignored her calls from the back porch to come to supper just so he could finish decorating the tree. An hour after Jason had started pruning the lanky and scrawny Charlie Brown tree that he had purchased with a footstool, it began to look like a midsize, healthy Christmas tree. Jason had cut off much of the bottom and beautifully sculpted the top half. Now the Christmas tree possessed the shape of an isosceles triangle rather than misshapen, obtuse trapezoid. Then Jason took his time untangling a box of white lights, which were missing a few bulbs, and wound them carefully around the boughs of the tree. After that he spent another half hour crafting tiny bows out of crimson colored ribbon with gold and silver trim. When he was finished, he fastened a star he had welded together from two pieces of discarded sheet metal onto the top of the tree. His creation was not perfect, but it was his and a rare twinkle of love for the holidays ignited inside of him; he could not wait to show Alex and his son. Jason got midway through the backyard before a brilliant multicolored light cascading from a side window at the front of the house caught his attention. He then noticed that all the other lights in the house had been turned off. As he moved along the edge of the house, the colored lights grew brighter, and they nearly lit up the entire yard. He turned the corner sharply, and immediately, the illuminated spectacle of the perfect Christmas tree washed over him. It stood erect with haughty, oversized merriment in the center of the bay window to the living room, and Alex and Atlas proudly flanked both of its sides. They

shouted “Merry Christmas!” but Jason said nothing. Instead of embracing the brilliance of their surprise, he retreated back into the fold of night from where he had come.

It was still dark outside when Jason arrived at the back end of the mall. His watch read 4:45am, and he was anxious to get inside and set up. Then Percy, who had forgotten his cane and walked hunched over this morning, stepped out from the back door and waved him inside. Immediately, Jason jumped out of his truck and began unloading his furniture. “You’re the first one here,” Percy said as Jason entered, holding two square hanging bookshelves in his hands. “Just like your granddaddy. Always early,” he said with a laugh. Jason still did not know how the small man knew his family but at the present moment he was too nervous to ask. “Where am I?” asked Jason, the question sounding more as if he did not know where he was rather than where he was to set up. “Oh right. First weekend here.” Percy turned on the lights. “Follow me.” He hobbled down one of the aisles, and Jason followed. “Not the best spot but you’re closest to the bathrooms, which can be a good or bad thing.” Percy tried to make a joke, but again, Jason was too nervous to laugh. “You have a table here and that back wall you can hang up anything you like as long as it ain’t offensive, which everybody seems to be offended about everything these days.” Percy’s voice trailed as he trotted quickly into the men’s room. “Morning appointment. I’ll be back in a sec to see how you’re doing,” but Jason had already set down the two bookshelves and was headed back outside to haul in the rest of his woodwork.

By eight am the flea market bustled with several dozen patrons, most of them still meandering through the front booths, the majority of which were dedicated to Christmas items. Percy busied himself with a string of colored lights he weaved along the bookshelves near his desk, and the heavysset woman with long, black hair brewed a pot of coffee and prepped a plate of gingerbread cookies, which she said she had baked the night before but Jason was sure she had emptied from a supermarket discount box. Christmas music played from a set of blown speakers, and the cracked, muffled version of *Pretty Paper* sung by Roy Orbison nearly sent Jason over the edge. Occasionally, he took a couple of sips of vodka from a flask to steady his nerves. He had crammed the tiny space with as many of his pieces as possible, and Alex insisted on creating a sign with prices, which she had hand painted and decorated especially for Christmas. She was going to spend the morning working at the beauty salon but planned on taking the afternoon off so she could help Jason with what she knew would be a line of customers, anxious to buy one of his mini cedar chests or maple stools. When Jason glanced at his wristwatch and saw that it was already noon and not a single customer had stopped by his booth, the nervous pang in his stomach began to swell. Fifteen minutes later Alex arrived with a shopping bag filled with Christmas chocolates as well as a carton of

eggnog and plastic cups. By her side was Atlas, who wore a Santa Claus suit he had manufactured from a pair of red sweatpants and a red sweatshirt. Alex had taped tiny cotton balls to his cheeks and chin to give the impression of a beard, and he wore a bundle of white yarn on his head for white hair, which was kept in place with a ninety-nine cent Santa Claus hat. The ridiculous sight was enough to relieve a little of Jason's anxiety, and by the time Alex had set up the chocolates and eggnog, Atlas's poor-man's Santa Claus had already attracted the attention of three customers, one of whom purchased a set of wooden bowls. "Ho, ho, ho!" bellowed Atlas as he unwrapped his third Christmas chocolate. "You'll make yourself sick," said Alex. "Enough," rebuked Jason, handing change to an elderly woman, who had bought a carved figurine in the shape of a mule. Atlas placed the chocolate furtively in his mouth, but he nearly spit it out when he saw Leonard and Verla heading straight for Jason's booth. He ducked behind the table hosting the holiday spread of chocolates and eggnog. "Verla, there it is!" said Leonard. "The simple box shelf I've been looking for to put in my office." Verla chimed in, "It sure is." Peering over the table, Atlas could see Leonard and Verla standing diagonally across from Jason and Alex. "It's rustic and simple with a nice finish on it. How much are you asking for it?" Before Jason could say anything, Alex replied, "Seventy-five dollars." "Not bad," opined Verla. "Means my sister Beulah in Rocky Mount ain't getting those new pots and pans from me this year, but she can't cook worth a shit no how." Leonard's infectious guffaw carried throughout the whole flea market, and even Jason cracked a smile. "I'll take it," he said, pulling his wallet from his pocket. "Y'all take cash or card or I can pay through the Devil's marketplace." Leonard held up his smartphone and winked at Alex. "Cash or card is fine," said Alex cheerfully. "Cash is fine by me." Leonard began counting the bills in his wallet while Jason wrote out a receipt of sale. "My word! There is Santa Claus!" Immediately, Atlas fell to the floor behind the table. "Yes, it's Santa but for some reason, he's gotten awfully shy." Alex hovered over Atlas, drawing more attention to him. "Get up and 'ho,ho,ho' for us Santa," whispered Alex, but Atlas remained motionless. "Atlas!" Once he heard Alex say his name, Atlas knew what awaited him. "Atlas! Is that you?" cried Verla. She peered over the table and saw him stumble to his feet. "Look who it is, Leonard!" He was putting his wallet in his back pocket when Leonard looked over and saw his friend, half of the cotton balls now missing from Atlas's face. "Well, it is Atlas. What are you doing on the floor?" Jason handed Leonard the receipt. "Thank you," Leonard said. "This your son?" he asked. Jason looked over at Atlas, who removed the Santa Claus hat and wig made of yarn. He nodded. "Y'all seem to know our bashful dwarf," remarked Alex. "He's my personal assistant in the library," said Leonard. "I'm Leonard, the lunatic librarian." He extended his hand to Jason. "And he's a good friend of mine," seconded Verla. "I'm Verla, the school nurse." "Nice to meet you," said Jason as he folded the money for the box shelf into the cashbox. "I'm Alex. Jason's uh-well,

I'm his-" Alex fumbled for the right word, but Verla intercepted the awkwardness. "Don't worry, sweetheart. I was married thirty years to a man I endearingly called 'my bad mood.'" "Then he mysteriously died right as she was going through menopause." Alex laughed at Leonard's joke, and she quickly felt at ease. "How are you doing bud?" Leonard asked Atlas happily. "Fine," Atlas said. "Are y'all coming to the talent show next Saturday?" Immediately, Atlas's eyes widened. "Talent show?" Jason looked perplexed. "Every year we do a different schtick. This year Verla and me are hosting as Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney." "And guess who's gonna be Rosemary Clooney?" smacked Verla. "*Here comes Susie Snowflake,*" sang Leonard, much to Jason's confusion. "Of course we are coming! Can't wait!" chimed Alex. "Please. Y'all help yourselves to some chocolates and eggnog." Leonard grabbed his stomach and moaned playfully. "We just shared a Greek salad and falafel over at that new Greek restaurant on 17." "How is the place?" inquired Alex. "Delicious," said Verla. "And now we are late to a 2:00pm showing of *It's a Wonderful Life*." She could see how tense Atlas had become, so she placed her hand on Atlas's shoulder to comfort him. Flipping his wrist, Leonard took a quick glance at his watch. "Oh yeah! And I hate to miss the previews!" "Or the chance to get his JuJu Bees," Verla said smartly. "How you want to get this home?" asked Alex, referencing the box shelf. Verla gave Atlas's shoulder another tight squeeze. "We have my husband's old pickup truck," she said. Atlas wore an expression of shock across his face. "I know," Leonard said, noticing his surprise. "She's more of a man than me." Another of Leonard's guffaws consumed the flea market. "Well," stammered Jason. "I appreciate the purchase." "My pleasure," said Leonard. With the help of Verla he hoisted the bookshelf into both of his arms. "If we had more time, I'd get the library another reading desk." He and Verla began their march to the front of the flea market. "And we will see y'all at the talent show," Leonard said with the air of a 1920's radio host. "Yes, we will," answered Alex playfully. "It was nice to meet you folks. See you Monday, Atlas." The librarian winked at his friend, and Atlas watched as the two disappeared into a mass of patrons. He hesitated a moment, refraining from looking at his father, who he knew was waiting to hear about the talent show. But before he turned around, "Jason! Is that you?" yelled a voice from an aisle away. Jason looked up from his cash box and saw a well-groomed younger gentleman with his wife approaching. "It is you! I haven't seen you in-hell, it's been years," he said. "Baby, this is my cousin, Jason. His mama was my mama's older sister." Atlas watched as Jason's eyes widened and neck stiffened. "Hey, Danny. How are you?" Jason's voice had dropped an octave, much deeper than Atlas had ever heard it. "This is my wife, Stacey from Rochester. We just bought a house in Cary." Stacey and Jason exchanged smiles and shook hands. "Hi. Nice to meet you," she said and then immediately, she lifted a bottle of hand sanitizer from her purse and sprayed her palms. "I decided to drive her out to the ole' shithole where I grew up, and she insisted on

stopping in here to find some-What is it you're looking for?" "Shot glasses. I collect shot glasses." Stacey's eyes met Alex, who had busied herself with color coordinating the Christmas chocolates. "Hi. I'm Stacey," she said, opting this time for a friendly wave rather than a handshake. "Hey. I'm Alexandra, but everybody calls me Alex." Jason seemed to stand unmoved, but Atlas could see him rubbing his hands together tightly. "That's cute," said Stacey. "I like that. And you're Jason's-" Before Alex could answer- "Is this your boy?" asked Danny. Jason looked in the direction of Atlas, who at this point had only three cotton balls stuck to his face. "That's Atlas," said Jason. "Named him after granddaddy, huh?" Instead of offering Atlas a friendly handshake, Danny lightly tapped Atlas on the chest with the back of his hand almost to see if the boy was hollow inside. "How are you?" Atlas replied with a soft "I'm fine." "Your Dad here taught me how to hunt. Or how not to." Danny let loose an obnoxious laugh. "Our other cousins used to call him 'cheap shot' cause he could only shoot sitting ducks and squirrels he had lured down from a tree." Danny's attention was directly on Jason, whose jaw was clenched. "Hey, I'm real sorry I missed your wife's funeral. That was a bad break. What are you doing for the holidays?" he asked. "It'll be our first Christmas at the house, and Mama would love to see you. You know daddy passed away about three years ago with colon cancer." "Sorry to hear that," replied Jason in that deep vibrato foreign to Atlas. "I can't come 'cause me and-I got plans with my boy and her-Alex's family over at the farmhouse." "Your daddy's ole place? Boy, that place has got to be over a hundred years old. Surprised it hadn't burnt down by now with the shoddy wiring." "Jason has done a lot of upkeep on the house," retorted Alex. "Redid the wiring himself, and it now has central air," which was a bit of a lie but Jason did not correct her. "Is that right? Well, from the look of things, you're doing a lot of work with your hands. You make all this?" Danny ran his hand along the top of an end table. "It's all so...simple," Stacey said, affecting half a smile. Atlas kept a watchful eye on his father, whose back had grown stiff and who still rubbed his hands tightly. "Well, we better be getting on. Stacey and I have some holiday cocktail party in Raleigh, part of some Civic League thing she's gotten me roped into." Stacey casually rolled her eyes. "He hates anything in which he has to put on a tie, except this year I think I've finally won him over." "Yeah, she got me a tie with Santa Claus as an architect on it." Danny's eyes beamed. "Cause he's an architect," Stacey chirped in the direction of Alex. "That's nice," Alex said just to be polite. "Well, Jason," Danny held out his hand. "It's been good seeing you!" Atlas watched as Jason quit rubbing his hands together and extended his right hand. His grip was extra firm, and Danny grinned but in a way that did not seem pleasant. "I'll be seeing you," Jason murmured in that sonorous voice Atlas thought belonged at the bottom of the ocean. Then Danny placed his hand on Stacey's elbow. "Nice to have met y'all," waved Alex. Stacey smiled but instead of saying anything, she ejected a slight squawk, a noise an agitated bird might make. Seconds later

Atlas lost sight of them as they pushed their way through a crowd of elderly men and women attending the flea market on a church field trip. Finally, he turned to ask his father about Danny but Jason was gone. Alex busily packed up the chocolates and eggnog. “Where’d he go?” asked Atlas, but Alex simply held her forefinger to her pursed lips.

Alex and Atlas cleaned the space Jason’s furniture had occupied in the flea market and packed all of his woodwork into the back of his truck. Then they shared an ice cream cone and sat quietly in the front of the truck. Twenty minutes passed, and Alex dozed off in the driver’s seat. Finally, around five that evening, Jason came around from the back of the mall and walked steadily toward the truck. He had a beer in his hand. Alex woke when Jason opened the door to the driver’s side of the truck and pushed her to the center of the front seat. “Baby, are you okay-” but she stopped short of herself and grabbed Atlas’s hand. Jason turned the key of the ignition and revved the motor. He wiped something from his left eye. Then faintly in the distance, “Ho, Ho, Ho!” Atlas turned his attention out the truck window. Santa Claus stood in front of the entrance to the flea market, and he was surrounded by a group of little children, who jumped and pawed at his beard. But his focus was not on the children. His countenance, piercing and sullen, was directly on Atlas. Jason pulled his truck away, but Atlas kept his attention on Santa Claus, their eyes locked until Jason’s truck turned the bend in the parking lot, and Atlas could see him no more. He rode home terrified, unaware that something sharp pressed up against the lower half of his backside.

A week had passed, uneventful and unnoticed. The morning sun had just begun to crest over the top of the courthouse, where the Confederate Monument, now removed, had once stood. In its place a new square lawn mowed to precision. Jason could not remember the last time he had decided to have a beer first thing in the morning, but there he sat in his truck parked in the same spot as days before. He looked at his watch. 8:58am. Then he saw a stout woman in an ill-fitting pants suit unlock the door to the Beaufort County Employment Office. She flipped a small sign, which had read “Closed” to now read “Open.” Jason finished the last of his beer, crumpled the can, and tossed it on the floorboard of his truck. Minutes later Jason found himself slouched in an uncomfortable chair tucked behind a cramped cubicle. The fluorescent lights in the ceiling buzzed softly and cast a sick, pale glow over the entire space. He peered up at the woman seated behind the desk in front of him. A name plate sitting on the desk read “Denise Sanchez,” and the woman wore a crimson Christmas sweater, which had “Feliz Navidad” in ivy-colored knit lettering across the front. She tapped on her keyboard with quick precision. *Tip-tip-tap-tap*. Jason shook his leg nervously. *Tip-tip-tap-tap*. Denise stopped momentarily to take a sip of her coffee and then leaned back in her chair. “Mr.

Rayson,” she said, resuming her posture and position at her desk. “Do you have any word processing skills? Microsoft Word or Publisher?” Jason bit his lip. “I don’t even know how to turn one of those things on,” he said, aiming his attention at Denise’s laptop. “No graphic design or web design skills?” she asked as if she had not heard Jason’s flippant remark. Jason- “No, ma’am.” “And you’ve never worked in spreadsheets or excel?” This time Jason stared at her blankly. “What about your typing speed?” Jason grinned slightly and shrugged his shoulders. *Tip-tap-tap-tip*. “Okay,” Denise said plaintively. “Let me see if we have a computer available for you to take your typing test.” She stood up from her desk and exited the cubicle. A framed degree hung on the wall behind where she had been sitting, and Jason could barely read the over-designed font. “Business Administration: Leadership and Human Resources.” Next to the degree hung a picture of Denise shaking hands with an elderly white man. Beneath the picture, the caption read, “Denise Sanchez: Recipient of the 2020 Activism in the Workplace Award.” And just to the right of the picture hung a poster with several hands in different shades all holding the American flag, which had “Celebrate Diversity” scrawled across several of the flag’s red bars. The vigorous shaking of Jason’s leg ceased. Seconds later, Jason bolted from the chair in the cubicle and exited the employment office. A fine, cold mist had enveloped the outside air.

That evening Alex prepared Atlas’s favorite supper, potato soup and homemade bread. They ate it together by the wood stove in the living room and watched a silly British sitcom about a female Vicar in a small English town. Atlas fell asleep on the sofa, and Alex spent a few hours on her knitting until she could barely keep her eyes open. Then she woke Atlas just enough to lead him upstairs to his bed. He mumbled something to her about wanting to sleep in front of the Christmas tree, but she did not understand what he had said. “What was that?” she asked, but Atlas was already fast asleep. The intensity of the rain had increased, and it seemed as if it were getting both colder and warmer outside. She stood by one of the windows in Atlas’s room and gazed out into the dark Carolina night. Her eyes followed the tops of the trees silhouetted in the distance by the faint glow of Christmas lights emanating from town. Then her attention fell on the live oak in the front yard, illuminated by the Christmas lights from the tree in the living room. There was Atlas’s treehouse sparkling with rain water and the tin roof of Jason’s shed. And the place in the yard, where Jason normally parked his truck, but tonight, nothing but the earth, raw and wet with dead grass.

The next morning a faint rumble of thunder woke Jason, who had been asleep in his truck. He lay for a few minutes, staring up at the truck’s torn beige upholstery and cracked ceiling. Finally, he lifted himself onto his elbows and looked out at the windshield. He could see where he had set up his furniture along the highway the night

before as well as the handful of beer cans strewn around the damp grass. He lay back down and closed his eyes. Minutes or hours later, he could not tell, Jason heard the sound of a large pickup truck coming closer. He quickly jumped up and saw the truck of Charlie, the old man who weeks earlier had promised to buy one of his chairs. The truck slowed to a stop as Jason adjusted his wrinkled shirt and ran a hand through his unwashed hair. Then he stumbled out of his pickup and extended a friendly wave in the direction of the parked truck. As he picked up a beer can that had fallen out of his pickup when he had opened the door, the old man's truck slowly started to pull away. "Hey," Jason shouted. "I'm here!" The truck regained its speed and headed down the highway out of sight. "Hey!" he screamed one last time, and then Jason stood there. Silence except for the sound of a steady rain. Jason walked directly to the chair the old man had criticized and grabbed it with one hand. He threw it into the street. The chair busted against the pavement into four even pieces.

Evening fell with a perpetual sense of winter's unbending cold loneliness. In his newly purchased used suit Atlas descended the stairs with his wooden recorder and met Alex, who was waiting for him in the foyer. They rode in silence to the middle school. Upon their arrival Atlas watched as groups of parents and their teenage children filed into the auditorium. "He's not coming, is he?" he asked sullenly. "Atlas, he'll be here. I promise." The boy turned his attention to a thread loose on one of the buttons of his suit. "You always use that word 'promise' like it's some kind of lock or bandage or something." He was not sure what he meant, but he left the conversation there and exited Alex's car. "I'm going to park and be inside in a minute," Alex yelled from inside the car.

Atlas entered the auditorium alone. Several parents, fellow students, and teachers, whom Atlas knew by face but not name, gathered in chatty clumps throughout the auditorium. Innocuous holiday decorations of red and green, ones which did not reference Christianity, adorned the facility: hand-cut snowflakes, a chintzy plastic Christmas tree decorated with multicolored lights and tinsel, and a cutout of the middle school principal crafted to look like a snowman Burl Ives. Two PTA moms stood behind a table covered with a wintry silver tablecloth and offered patrons plates of spaghetti, homemade desserts, and beverages. A student handed Atlas a program but soon realized he was a participant. "Oh, you gotta go to the back of the stage," she said as if she were directing the performance. She nudged Atlas down the aisle, and he darted forward, so as to get her hand off his back. He walked up a set of stairs and then slipped behind a curtain stage left. Numerous talent show participants crowded the backstage area, and Mr. Sticknetty, Atlas's physical education teacher, tried to get each participant number for sign in while failing to quiet their nervous rambunctiousness.

Spying an empty chair, Atlas claimed it by removing his suit coat and draping it over the chair. Then he straightened his white shirt and walked back toward the curtain. He peered out into the audience. Alex was taking a seat in the middle of the auditorium, and she placed her coat over another, a clear indication she was expecting Jason to arrive. A couple rows down Atlas saw the boy with chronic conjunctivitis as well as the blonde haired boy. They were chowing down on plates of spaghetti and watching videos on their cellphones. "Boys," said a woman, who had eyes like those of the blonde boy. "Put those away," she commanded. The blonde boy did as he was told while the boy with chronic conjunctivitis turned obdurately in a direction away from her to hide his phone. The woman shook her head in disapproval but did nothing more. "Number two," hollered Mr. Sticknetty. "Number two!" Atlas turned around and walked over to where the teacher leaned up against a baby grand piano. He breathed through his mouth as he scanned his clipboard. "Two!" he yelled again, a bit of drool existing from his lips. "That's me," said Atlas timidly. Obviously, Mr. Sticknetty did not recognize Atlas or know his name. "At-Atlas Ray-" he sputtered. "Yes," said Atlas, cutting him off. "Right. Okay. Get in line," Mr. Sticknetty said, pointing with his pencil to a zig-zag group of boys and girls lining up stage right. Taking a deep breath, Atlas grabbed his suit coat from off his chair and pulled his wooden recorder from his back pocket. A girl with a bright red ribbon in her hair turned to Atlas and smiled. She had spinach or something like lettuce stuck in her teeth, but Atlas did not inform her. "Good luck," she whispered, but Atlas did not say a word. The house lights in the auditorium flickered, and the boisterous talking from the crowd quickly quieted. A symphonic Christmas arrangement blared from the auditorium speakers. Atlas watched as the curtains lifted on the stage, revealing to the audience red and green flats each decorated with a holiday tableau. Verla, wearing a sparkling, feminine Santa Claus suit, stepped into the spotlight from stage right. The audience clapped. Then Leonard, wearing a curly auburn wig and an elaborate red velvet dress with ermine trim, pranced onto stage from the left. The audience erupted into laughter, catcalls, and applause. "Thank you," said Verla, speaking into a microphone. "Thank you. Welcome everyone to the Twenty-First Annual Josephus Daniels's Middle School Holiday Talent Show." More applause and cheers. "I am Verla Philips, the school nurse here at Josephus Daniels. We've got a great show for you, and I do not have to tell you how proud we are of the students who are performing for us this evening." Applause. "But first-" Leonard interrupted Verla. "Let's take a moment to admire how good I look." Audience laughter. "No, Leonard. That's not what I was going to say, but I suppose now is as good a time as any to introduce my co host this evening, the lunatic librarian at Josephus Daniels's, Leonard Pugh." Hamming it up, Leonard stepped to the edge of the stage and embraced the vibrant clapping and laughter. "In the words of Mark Twain," quipped Verla, "There is a breed of humility, which is itself a species of showing off." Laughter rippled through the audience. "Why

'Humility' is the name of my perfume?" retorted Leonard. "And you wear it so well," remarked Verla. "Now, onto housekeeping. Please. No flash photography." "Unless you're taking pictures of me," chortled Leonard. "Please put all cell phones on silent," continued Verla. "Unless you're taking pictures of me," said Leonard in his best Mae West. Stepping back into the shadows of backstage, Atlas had begun to sweat. For weeks he had been so focused on the wings protruding from his back and trying to fly that he had not practiced his recorder. His heart pounded and his mind raced. "So without further adieu," boomed Verla's voice over the loud speakers. "Please welcome to the stage our first young talent this evening, Ms. Stephanie Deese." Atlas watched as Number One, wearing a shimmering silver and gold dance outfit, tapped her way onto the stage. Sweat trickled across his forehead. "*Tap-tap-tap-tap.*" What song was he playing again? "*Tap-tap-tip-tap.*" Where was he? He gripped his recorder even tighter. "*Tap-tap-tip-tap.*" His vision blurred, and his throat was so dry he could barely swallow. "*Tip-tap-tap-tip.*" All sensation and sound left his brain. Then minutes later, he heard, "Atlas, baby." Who said that? "Atlas, baby! You're on!" He turned to Verla and pleaded with his eyes. "Go on, baby!" Her hand was on his shoulder as it had been at the flea market, but now he stood in front of the garish lights on stage. Leonard swished over to Atlas and helped him into the middle of the stage. As the audience quieted, Atlas's eyes began to adjust, and he could see Alex looking at him from the center row. She was alone. His vision ping-ponged throughout the crowd. The boy with chronic conjunctivitis leered at him, and Atlas swore the boy had fangs. The blonde boy next to him appeared as a dark, black shadow with red, beady eyes. Then- "Be confident," said Leonard. "You can do this." Atlas steadied himself. "Ladies and Gentlemen," Verla said. "Atlas Rayson." A spattering of applause trickled through the audience. Then Atlas took in a deep breath. He tried to wet his lips, but his mouth was terribly dry. He placed his lips on his recorder. A note struggled out of the recorder. Dry and breathy. Then another a little less attenuated. Eventually, Atlas played some semblance of the song he had played in his treehouse back on that late, autumnal morning in October. The misshapen notes fractured the melody into a flat version of itself, but Atlas persevered through the song hitting the notes, each warbling like a deflated balloon. Then at the song's crescendo a sudden crash from the back of the auditorium stole the audience's attention. Atlas stopped playing. He searched through the spectacle of bright lights trying to see who or what had interrupted his song. Murmurs rumbled through the audience, and Atlas caught a glimpse of a table, which had held soft drinks and hot chocolate, turned over on the floor. A man grabbed onto a chair, desperately attempting to steady himself to his feet. For a brief second the man's eyes met Atlas's, and then Atlas knew. He watched as the man stumbled out of one of the back doors in the auditorium and into the middle school parking lot. The door shut with an anticlimactic thud, and immediately, the audience's attention was back onto

Atlas. But his song had ended. Atlas stood there; his face vacant of emotion. “That was outstanding,” said Leonard, who quickly diverted the audience’s focus. The audience quivered with a few claps. Leonard placed his arm around Atlas’s shoulder. “Let me just say, and I know this for a fact, that Atlas here, wrote this song himself.” His friend looked down into the boy’s face and smiled, but Atlas felt awful inside. He exited stage left and ran right into Verla’s arms. “Atlas, baby! That was wonderful,” she said, but tears streamed down his face. “It takes a lot of courage for our young talent to put themselves out here,” remarked Leonard. “I mean look at me. I give a whole new meaning to Christ-MESS!” Laughter and then applause. “Baby. Why are you upset? You should be very proud of yourself.” Verla tried to calm Atlas. She escorted him to one of the chairs and wiped the sweaty, matted hair from his forehead. “You are a very talented and special young boy,” she said deeply. Then she kissed him on top of his head and moved into the shadows backstage. Atlas sat alone, still gripping his recorder as if it was the only object holding his world together.

## Chapter Nine

*The euphoria Munk experienced on his flight with Bunny through the snow and moonlight did not last for long. By the next day, Slick Red had Bunny and Munk in a grueling rehearsal, preparing for their next performance. Munk had to concede that their hard work paid off. Each show was more successful than the next, so by the time of their extravagant Christmas show, Tater Tot and Slick Red had scheduled three performances, one on Christmas Eve and two more on Christmas Day, all of them sold out. They poured so much effort into the shows, Bunny and Munk never had the chance to see each other, unless it was in rehearsal or on stage. Bunny grew more and more distant, and on the off chance he passed his brother in the hallway backstage, Bunny would ignore Munk, never once making eyes with him. Finally, Munk felt so upset with how Bunny was treating him that he decided he would sit next to his brother and confront him at the big Christmas dinner, which Tater Tot and Slick Red had planned to host for the cast and crew between the two performances that day. With the silver candles lit and the holly festooned around the elongated dining room table, Munk grabbed the seat next to where he knew Bunny would be sitting. He waited patiently as the backstage crew and additional cast members filed onto the stage, where Mama Boom-Boom had set up the holiday spread. He anxiously looked in the direction of the backstage door, where he knew Bunny would be coming from, and the moment he saw his brother, he planned to jump up and whistle for him. But the more he waited, the more time passed, and Bunny was nowhere to be found. Tater Tot sat down between two of Mama Boom-Boom's dancing ladies, across from Munk, and poured himself a generous glass of high dollar champagne. "What's eating you, kid?" he asked Munk. Attempting to ignore him, Munk casually picked at a dinner roll and greeted the assistant stage manager. Then he heard Tater Tot laugh. The short theater owner slid off his chair and shuffled underneath the table to the other side. Then he shimmied up onto the chair, where Munk expected Bunny to be seated. "Bunny's sittin' der," Munk said sharply. Tater Tot spit the end of a fresh stogie onto a salad plate in front of him, and then turned to Munk. "Know what your problem is, kid? You're so involved in that rabbit's life, you ain't got a life of your own!" Immediately, Munk did not want to hear what Tater Tot had to say, but as he tried to leave, Tater Tot grabbed him by the arm. "Sit and listen, kid. You might learn something." Tater Tot's grip was so hard, Munk erred on returning to his seat for fear the brute might get angry. "Trust me," said Tater Tot as he let go of Munk's arm. "That's how this story starts."*

*"I can still see the farm, where I grew up. The cast-iron weather vane in the shape of a rooster affixed the top of the barn. Our cow Lulu I had to milk every morning. And we had ducks. Lots and lots of ducks. I remember Lulu swatting at the flies that*

landed on her back with her tail, and we had a watering hole where we would go fishing and swimming. I can still smell the fresh cut grass and see the way the leaves changed color in the Fall, wishing I could change colors like the leaves did. We did everything together, me and my older brother Limp. Called him that 'cause he limped with his left leg. It got run over by a tractor when he was four, and the county doctor was a quack and never set it right. Limp and me, we did everything together, and it was just us on that farm. He made the best potato and ham soup you ever did eat, and he took care of me. Limp was fond of saying 'Trust me.' If we were repairing a leak in the roof and I had to climb a ladder, he would hold it and say 'Trust me.' If we blew a fuse and had to go into the basement, which was dark and scary for me, he would say 'Trust me.' Anything that got me nervous and unsure, Limp was always there with the same phrase. 'Trust me.' Ha. Ha. Huh. 'Trust me.' Me and Limp, we had no schooling. We never knew our father, and our mother died before I was two, so it was like freedom living there on the farm with Limp. A freedom that was like your favorite toy you never want to give up. So I had this thing where I would go out and collect earthworms and beetles and ladybugs and such, put them in a coffee can, and put a lid on it to seal the air off and see how long it would take before they died. Some died quicker than others, but eventually, all of them would croak at one time or another. Then I got into taking the earthworm and cleaning the dirt off them real good and dipping them slow into a glass of water and watching them sink to the bottom until they stopped squirming. That was a real kicker. It was kind of a secret thing I did that Limp never knew about until one day he caught me. He knocked that glass over, he was so angry and glass shattered everywhere, and then Limp looked me dead in the eyes and he said, 'Don't play with the life of those worms. It ain't yours to play with.' He was so serious, it scared the piss out of me. And that look. I'll never forget that look. Limp had these blue eyes, so blue if you stared at them it was like they would eat you whole or something, but on that day, at that moment, they were black like the back shell of those beetles I was killing. Those eyes were on me, pressed up against me and when I tried to turn away, he grabbed my chin and forced me to look at them as long as he held me there. Then, I'll never forget what he said after that. He said 'Trust me.' Boy, you talk about never wanting to fuck with the life of nothing again. The eyes haunted me. They still haunt me. I didn't know it at the time but that was the last time I'd see those eyes. We went to bed that night, and when I woke the next morning, Limp was gone. Out of there like the wind that carries away the leaves on a long dusty road. Ha. Look at me being a poet, but yeah. I never saw Limp again, but it didn't take me long to figure out what Limp meant all those years ago. Never trust anyone. Don't fuck with the earthworms; you got to worry about yourself.'"

Munk hung his head low and felt sick to his stomach. He could smell Tater Tot's stogie, and he imagined it as the smell of the earthworms from his story. Then he noticed Tater Tot had stopped talking, and he looked up in his direction. The man had

*his eyes shut, lost in his memories of the past. Unsure of Tater Tot's story, Munk looked frantically around for Bunny until he felt the man's arm come across his shoulder. "Kid," Tater Tot said, pulling the stogie from his mouth. "What do you want with your life?" he asked. "Not what do you want for the Rabbit or what you think you want for yourself, but what do you want?" He grabbed Munk by the chin and forced him to look into his deep-seated, murky eyes. Tater Tot's eyebrows lifted, waiting for a response. Munk knew he could only say one thing. "I's wanna be a boy," he admitted. Just as Munk's stomach dropped and a wave of guilt came over him, Tater Tot crinkled his lips into a devilish corkscrew. "That's easy," he said, and then he popped his stogie back into his mouth.*

Moon glow shimmied through the cracks and crevices of the treehouse, creating ethereal, lustrous streams across its splintered floors and walls. The dead quail rested just beneath the only window, and the lunar light engendered an eerie glimmer in its eyes, innocent and unaware. Atlas entered from the dark recesses of the floorboard and stared intently into the dead bird's unassuming gaze. Seconds later the quail's head lay detached from the rest of its mangled body parts on the cold ground below. This time the moon exposed the whole of its face, and its vacant eye socket stared upward into the vastness of space and night.

A few days had passed. Typically, Atlas would be excited this time of year as the last school days before the Winter Break portended the arrival of Christmas festivities and Santa Claus, but this year, Atlas carried within him a sense of unforgiving dread. On the final school day before break, he listlessly removed the holiday themed books from the display shelves and cabinets and stacked them on a cart. Leonard busily packed up the Christmas decorations he had cheerfully unpacked only weeks before. As Atlas piled up the last few books, one caught his attention. *Objective Skepticism and the Santa Claus Myth*. Ironically, it lay beneath a brightly colored book entitled, *The Life and Times of Ole Saint Nick*, which was filled with illustrated pictures of St. Nicholas, Father Christmas, and Thomas Moore's jolly elf. As if it were a book Atlas should not read, he cautiously cracked it open and realized there were no illustrations, only lengthy dense paragraphs:

"The lie sustains itself on two variables: childhood innocence and parental egotism. The child is conditioned to believe in that which he knows cannot be real because the parent, the child's sense of right and wrong, has determined it must be; ergo, if the child fails to believe in Santa Claus, he fails to believe in his parents. Without Santa Claus the child is parentless."

“I think you are the first student to ever pick up that book,” said Leonard, who peered over Atlas’s shoulder. He shut the book immediately and tossed it onto the cart, but not before glancing at a picture of the author on the back cover. The old man appeared strangely familiar, an intimidating stare and scraggly, stringy grayish beard. “Little experiment of mine. Definitely not middle school fare. Just curious to see who might tempt to read it, and now, I know.” Leonard chuckled. But Atlas’s attention had turned to the library, which was now bereft of all its holiday decorations. The books and shelves possessed a clinical feel, depressingly bland and unimaginative. “It’s better this way,” commented Leonard. “Coming back from Christmas break and having to take it all down is kind of bleh. This way I can come back to a fresh, clean slate, a new year.” “Maybe we could do a snow theme for January or maybe we could have a contest and let the students pick a theme for the month.” Again, Leonard chuckled to himself. “It’s a little late for a contest, and besides, we don’t get much snow around here. No, Verla is right. January is a good month to just let the library be the library.” Picking up his cup of coffee and taking a short sip, Leonard seemed almost dismissive of Atlas’s ideas. Atlas tossed the rest of the books onto the cart haphazardly. “Hey, now. That’s no way to treat our library friends,” scolded Leonard. “Sorry,” the boy said, and he repositioned the books nicely on the cart. “Hmmm. You have possessed quite the teenage angst the past few days. This wouldn’t have anything to do with the talent show, would it?” Atlas shrugged his shoulders and drifted into a quiet lassitude. “I see,” said Leonard. “All right. Stop what you’re doing and come with me.” Leonard set down his cup of coffee and pushed the cart of books off to the side. He walked toward the back of the library and entered into a narrow, dimly lit hallway. Atlas followed. At the end of the hallway stood a door. A sign on the door read, “Warning: Librarian’s Office. Do not enter. Failure to heed the sign will result in trespasser’s ultimate demise.” From his back pocket, Leonard removed a tiny, green velvet pouch. He opened the pouch and pulled out a golden skeleton key. He looked at Atlas out of the corner of his eye with the slyness of the Cheshire Cat. Click-click. Then Leonard slowly opened the door and went inside.

Immediately, Atlas stood in awe. Singular, strange items filled every corner of the room: a stuffed raven perched on a wooden tree branch; a taxidermied toad wearing a tweed scarf and riding a miniature bicycle; a porcelain elephant with a crown on his head and wearing a green suit. Several sepia and tawny photographs, degrees, and even decrees hung in frames and lined the glaucous colored walls. Old tomes with gnarled spines and tattered manuscripts bound in string packed the many wooden bookcases. An emerald colored antique sofa with golden pillows stretched out beneath a stained glass window; its tableau reminiscent of a story from *The Canterbury Tales*. On the other side of the room sat a writing desk littered with pieces of paper, an Underwood vintage

typewriter from 1929, and a wax seal kit. Next to the desk stood a small, Art Deco end table with copper trim. On top of it sat a crystal ball and windup monkey standing on his hands. A black mantle clock ticked the wrong time, and a vintage radio from the 1950s played soft Christmas Jazz. Leonard took his seat in a rosewood chair with Mother of Pearl inlay, and Atlas sat in the rocking chair stained in maple. “What do you think?” asked Leonard. “Has taken me thirty years to get this place just the way I wanted it, but it is the best spot in the entire school. My own little corner of the world. And nobody, not even the principal, knows it’s here, except for Verla, the custodian Mr. Baum, and me. The stained glass window faces out to a row of hedges Mr. Baum keeps especially overgrown to conceal this room just for me. In exchange he has a key just like mine and is free to come in here anytime and take a nap on the sofa.” Atlas grinned. “I like it,” he said. Leonard smirked. “I’m glad, but that’s not why I brought you here.” Slowly, he took the back of his wig and peeled it off his head. Atlas’s expression dropped into a state of shock. Casually, Leonard plopped the wig onto a bust of Mark Twain sitting on the desk. Then he leaned back in his chair and scratched the top of his bald crown. Atlas remained dumbfounded. “Sometimes, it’s nice not to wear that thing,” Leonard said with satisfaction. “Then why-” but Atlas could not finish his thought. He was so stupefied. “Well, my mama was poor, and when she died, she had nothing to leave me but her wig, and since I ain’t got a lot going on in my yard, I thought that would be a nice way to remember her.” Leonard paused solemnly, and then said, “She bequeathed it to me in her will.” The thought lighted his heart, and soon, Leonard was laughing uncontrollably. Atlas joined in the laughter. “Feel better?” Leonard asked. Atlas had to admit it. Somehow his spirit was renewed.

Only a couple of hours were left in the school day when Atlas exited the library. Leonard’s story about his mom stayed with him as he walked down the hallway against the flow of traffic, the steady current of adolescence knocking up against him but not deterring how good he felt. He did not care about how embarrassed he was after the talent show, even as a couple of boys pointed and laughed at him when he turned the corner toward his final class that day. Thinking how Leonard would handle the situation made him impervious to their childish insults. He simply looked in their direction, smiled, and gave a friendly salute. Then he began to hum a Christmas song, and soon, he possessed the holiday excitement he had previously lost. Down the hallway, Verla was talking to a fellow teacher. Just before she entered the principal’s office, she saw Atlas and waved. “Merry Christmas,” she mouthed. “You too,” said Atlas from afar. Turning another corner, he approached the doorway to his history classroom, and right before he entered, Atlas spied the boy with blonde hair and the boy with chronic conjunctivitis walking toward him. “Hey,” yelled the boy with chronic conjunctivitis. Atlas stopped. “Great job last night, Ass-las,” he said, although Atlas was not quite sure if the missing

“t” was on purpose. “Yeah! You KILLED it,” remarked the blonde boy. All Atlas could do was smile, and he tried to walk past them but they stood in the doorway. He could see his teacher inside the classroom sitting at his desk, and Atlas wished at that moment he would look up and see him. The boy with chronic conjunctivitis attempted to hide his smirk. “We got you a Christmas present,” he said as the boy with blonde hair elbowed his friend in the stomach. “Open your mouth. It’s a cookie. My mom made some for the whole class.” The boy with blonde hair opened a canister he held in his hands, and Atlas saw a panoply of multi-colored Christmas cookies. “I’m not really hungry,” he said, wishing the boys would leave him alone. Once again, Atlas looked in the direction of his teacher, but he sat focused on the work at his desk. “Just open your mouth and have one,” commanded the blonde boy. “We’re giving them to everybody,” he said, desperately restraining his laughter. “My mom doesn’t want a bunch of dirty hands all over them, so pick which one you want, and I’ll get it for you.” Looking down into the canister, Atlas only wanted them to go away, so he pointed to a white and red striped candy cane cookie. The boy with chronic conjunctivitis burst into laughter and then quickly steadied himself. “I’m laughing cause that’s everybody’s favorite,” he said. Atlas tensed up, but decided the best thing would be to do as they asked so they would leave him alone. The blonde boy reached into the canister and grabbed the candy cane cookie. “Hurry and open your mouth. The bell is about to ring” he said. Slowly, Atlas opened his mouth just as the blonde boy moved the cookie in his direction. Then, before he had time to realize what was happening, the boy with chronic conjunctivitis shoved something else into Atlas’s mouth. As the blonde boy and boy with chronic conjunctivitis ran away back down the hallway, Atlas spit out the object in his mouth. Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he looked to see where the boys had run but they were lost in the mass of students rushing to class before the bell rang. Then he looked down. At his feet lay a bloody tampon.

The rain poured down so hard when he ran out of the school, Atlas was unable to discern between the raindrops and his tears on his wet face. He cut through the fence along the rear parking lot and into the woods. Fear and shame fueled his movement. Faster he ran until he could feel the wings in his back unfurling. The sweat now joined the tears and rain, flooding his whole body with moisture. His temperature increased, and he immediately seized at his coat and shirt and pulled them off. The wings fell along the blades in his back; they were limp, greasy, and black, dripping with water and tiny ringlets of blood. He upped his speed and exited into a cotton field, newly harvested with nothing remaining but rotten stalks and sparse sprouts of moldy bolls. As Atlas ran, he tried jumping in the air, wishing his wings would extend and he would take flight, but every time he just landed with a thud. Again, he jumped, grasping for the air as if every breath he took into his lungs propelled him upward, and again, nothing. He tried closing

his eyes and concentrating on his wings, sensing the nerve endings in his back and up his spine. Each breath slowed into an even rhythm, and each step landed on the wet soil with a measured beat. Then he felt something, a tingle or a tremble? Maybe an itch. The wings slipped off his back and slowly expanded. They felt more light and airy, less like bags of sand. Keep the concentration and focus, he thought. *Let the wings be the wings. Let the wings be.* His eyes remained closed, but he kept his breathing and running the same. Even and steady. *Let the wings be. Let the wings be the wings.* He did not know where this mantra came from, but he kept repeating it over and over in his mind, and with each repetition, the wings expanded. *Let the wings be the wings. Let the wings be.* A rush of air moved under the wings and caught them like the wind catches a kite. *This is it. I'm doing it all on my own. Let the wings be. Let the wings be the wings. Let the wings be. Let the wings be the wings.* All of his frustration over the months poured out of him, and his whole body tingled as if it were connected to this magnificent, universal charge. *Let the wings be the wings. Let the wings be. Let me fly. I can fly. I will fly. I will-* Atlas had run straight home. Although his eyes had been open, he was seeing for the first time the back of the farmhouse. He stopped. He caught his breath. He was freezing and shivering in the cold rain. The trunk to Alex's car hung open but no one was around. The only lights not on in the farmhouse were that of the Christmas tree, and Atlas could see adult silhouettes gliding swiftly like specters from one room to the next. Then the screaming came like the screeching of bats exiting from a cave. "Alex! Get back here!" Carrying a suitcase, Alex rushed from the kitchen door onto the back porch and then down into the yard. "Fuck you!" she yelled back as she threw her suitcase into the trunk of her car. Jason ran out of the farmhouse and grabbed Alex by the arm. "You're not walking out on me," he said just as Alex's hand slammed into the side of his face. Atlas watched from afar as if the entire interaction between his father and Alex were appearing on a blurred television screen, some evening soap opera that children, while hiding behind the sofa or lingering at the top of the stairs, observed with no comprehension or understanding of why the adult characters were fighting. Clenching both of her arms, Jason pulled Alex close and tried embracing her, but she protested, scratching at his neck and face. Far from exhausting, the rain escalated and drops pelted against Alex and Jason violently. Jason threw Alex to the ground and straddled her body in a desperate attempt to subdue her. Overcome with fear and disbelief, Atlas continued to view the fight from afar, and as much as he wanted to rescue Alex, he did not move for fear the lion would turn on him, and he would be its new prey. Finally, Alex's resistance weakened, which allowed Jason time to unbuckle his belt and unzip his pants. But then Jason froze, and before he could do that which he thought would somehow make him whole again, he, too, fell weak and toppled off of Alex into the yard. Grabbing the back bumper of her car, Alex slowly pulled herself up. She turned to see Jason lying in the mud and rain, not so much a man but the shell of one. Then she got

into her car and started to drive away. Right as Alex's car turned the bend and exited down the driveway, Atlas thought she caught a glimpse of him, but she did not brake or turn back around. She kept driving, and Atlas stood there watching until he could see her taillights no more. The rain quickly transitioned into a fine mist but the air remained cold. Atlas could see Jason's breath as his father lay quiet and still. Eventually, Jason rose from the soggy earth and plodded back toward the porch. When he got to the kitchen door, Jason turned around and scanned the woods as if he were looking for something. Then he turned and went inside.

Evening was fast approaching when Atlas exited from the woods near the farmhouse onto a country road. He stood by the edge of the road. It reminded him of the Ooman road Bunny and Munk traveled to free Big Baby Bird from the Ooman they thought was Miss Beulah. Without deciding which way to walk, Atlas headed toward the direction of town. Although it had stopped raining, the weather was turning much colder, and Atlas's wet feet hurt every time he took a step forward. He thought maybe he would try to find Leonard's house, which he knew was somewhere in town, but he did not know exactly where. Then as the last sunlight permeated the dissipating storm clouds, glossing them with a purple and blue sheen, he thought about Santa Claus and worried the escaped convict would finally get his chance to kidnap the boy. So many thoughts ran through his head that it began to hurt and all he wanted was to lie down someplace warm and go to sleep. After a few minutes of trudging along the country road, he heard a car approaching, but before he could jump into the woods and conceal himself, it passed by and then halted. The brake lights cast a dim red across Atlas's face. He did not recognize the car. The driver side door opened. "Atlas? Is that you, sweetheart?" But he recognized the voice.

He stared at the Christmas lights from the passing houses as they filtered through the raindrops on the car window and created beautiful multicolored streaks. The inhabitants in each of those houses were wrapping presents, listening to carols sung by Bing Crosby and Nat King Cole, and baking cookies in the shape of snowflakes and candy canes. How foreign and strange such festivities seemed to him now. "Getting warm?" Atlas looked down at his bare feet, which were pressed up against the floorboard where they were being blasted with hot air. He nodded. Verla smiled and tapped her steering wheel to Burl Ives singing *Have a Holly Jolly Christmas*. "You sure you don't want to go home?" she asked. Atlas shook his head no. "Okay. Okay," she said lightly, careful not to press the boy harder. "How about you keep me company while I make us a good supper, and we can watch a Christmas movie on TV. Sound like fun?" "Sure," Atlas said, and then he redirected his attention back to the streams of water colored lights.

Verla's house appeared like a cottage from a storybook, a place that belonged to an amiable grandmother, who loved to spoil her grandkids and never missed church on Sunday morning. Electric candles illuminated the windows and a homemade wreath made from the limbs of a frasier fir, sprigs of holly, and fastened together with a red ribbon adorned her front door. Her yard was neatly trimmed with a large crepe myrtle in the center. Verla pulled into the driveway. "Well, here we are. It's not exactly the Taj Mahal, but it's home." Inside, Verla's house was cozy, modest, and orderly. The walls were covered with prints of hellebores, faint and blushed ivory prince and molly's white. Verla tossed her car keys into a small bowl decorated with hand-painted roosters. "First thing we need to do is get you out of those wet clothes," she said, hanging her purse on a nearby hook and pulling her hair back from her face. Oddly, at that moment, Atlas saw Verla not as the school nurse, but as a woman coming home from a stressful job. She looked weary and worn down. "I had a shower put in this bathroom after my husband died. Get you a towel, and you'll find soap and shampoo under the sink." Atlas waited silently in the foyer while Verla busily prepared the bathroom for use. Minutes later, he stood naked staring at himself in the bathroom mirror while the water in the shower got hot. The wings drooped down his back like wet, slimy slugs, and he watched as the mirror collected so much steam, he could not see himself. Then he showered, washing the mud and sweat and specks of blood from his body. Finally, he wrapped himself in a clean towel, which smelled like Verla, and put on the oversized pair of sweatpants and sweatshirt she had laid out for him. "I hope you like country cookin," she said on the other side of the bathroom door. "That's fine," he replied, tugging at the corners of the ill-fitting sweatshirt. Atlas opened the door and instantly the smell of cornbread, mashed potatoes, green beans, and fried okra and squash filled his nose. Verla had set up collapsible trays in the living room in front of her television and poured Atlas a glass of ice tea. "You like sweet tea?" Atlas nodded. Then she squatted in front of the fireplace and stacked the kindling in the shape of a pyramid. "Where'd you learn to do that?" he asked. Verla cracked a grin and shook her head. "I may wear a dress but I can build a fire quicker than any man," she said smartly. Atlas peered around the room and noticed how vastly different it was from Leonard's cluttered office. There was a wooden chest covered with an ivory bedspread patterned with grapevines in colonial knotting; a handmade quilt with lavender and sunshine patches; and a magnificent curio cabinet housing porcelain figurines and dishes dyed with an azure print. Over the fireplace an assortment of nutcrackers along with framed pictures lined the mantel. The muted colors of one picture indicated it was from the late seventies, a much younger Verla with her husband standing in front of a building with a sign that read Preservation Hall. Another was black and white, the elderly couple standing in front of a large, pillared farmhouse. And another more recent with Verla and two other women of similar age, each holding watermelons in front of the same

farmhouse. “If you don’t like this, you don’t have to drink it,” said Verla as she placed a mug of warm Russian Tea in front of Atlas. He lifted the mug and took a sip. The mixture tasted of sweet citrus with a little tang to it. “You like it?” Atlas smiled. “My husband loved it. I’d have to start makin’ it for him in October, and he’d drink it all the way to New Year’s. He’d a drunk it the whole year if I’d let him. That’s him with me in Naw’lins,” she said, doing her best Louisiana accent and eyeing the pictures on the mantel. “And those are my parents, Lizzie Cleo and Jefferson Davis Pugh. And there is me with my wicked twin sisters Etta and Bev Carol.” Atlas took another sip of tea and studied over Verla’s Christmas tree. Like the rest of Verla’s house, it was not ostentatious, adorned humbly with soft, white lights and tiny red ribbons. A small, silver looking star hung on the top. It did not look like any Christmas tree Atlas had ever seen before. “What type of tree is that?” he asked. “That’s a red cedar. My daddy used to cut one down every year for Christmas. And Big Daddy, his daddy, always cut one down over at Whispering Pines, which was our family place, that big farmhouse you see in the pictures. I always get me a red cedar every year just to make me think of home.” Verla took another sip of tea and leaned back in her chair. Her field of vision softened. The two sat quietly for a while. Again, Atlas thought about how Verla did not look like the woman, who tended to the sick adolescents and those who feigned sickness at his middle school. Instead, she appeared forlorn and pensive, someone who now seemed to hold a lot of sadness. Next to Verla’s chair sat a wooden table and on top of it was another framed picture, a young man, handsome and in his late twenties. “Who is that?” asked Atlas, pointing to the picture. Verla tilted her head toward the picture and rested her sight on his face. “That’s my boy, James.” “Where does he live?” asked Atlas innocently. Verla stared at the picture for a few seconds before she answered. “He used to live in Durham, where he went to school at Duke, but-” Verla stopped herself. She eased her hand slowly up to her heart. “As Big Daddy used to say, ‘Livin’ got to him before he could get to livin.’” Verla chuckled as tears filled her eyes. Then, without warning, she wiped the tears from her eyes and jumped up from her seat. “Silly things people say to make things sound less horrible than they are! Let’s eat cause I’m hungry. What are we gonna watch on television? I think I got one of those streaming services that carries *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.” Her voice trailed while she exited the living room and headed into the kitchen, but Atlas had no idea what she meant about the things people said and why those things had anything to do with her son, James. All he sensed was the sadness had departed from her as quickly as it had come, and Verla had somehow become the school nurse again. Later, they ate persimmon pudding and watched *White Christmas* until Atlas saw Verla asleep in her chair. Strangely, Verla never asked Atlas about why he had been walking alone on the country road or if he wanted to go home. She never threatened to call Jason or asked if his father might be worried about his son. Instead, she had simply enjoyed Atlas’s company, and Atlas had

enjoyed hers. The embers in the fireplace cracked and hissed as Atlas pulled himself onto the sofa and wrapped a copper, brushed herringbone throw around himself. He looked up at the ceiling and then back at Verla, who slept soundly. At one point he dozed off but then jolted awake, unsure of where he was. Rolling over he saw that Verla still slept in her chair, and everything felt warm and cozy. His eyes grew heavy, and he thought maybe he would stay with Verla forever. This time he drifted into a nice sleep. When he first heard the rattling in the street, he thought he was dreaming. He could not move when he woke, and he felt something hard pressing against him. Immediately, he tried to catch his breath. Was there someone else in the room? He could barely open his eyes, and he thought for sure someone stood in the doorway of Verla's living room. Then he woke up. Outside, the rattling continued. He sat up on the sofa and looked out of the window. Santa Claus pulled a wiry, metal shopping cart down the street, and it was filled with dented cans of meat and vegetables. Atlas watched quietly as Santa Claus labored down the street with his shopping cart. Suddenly, he felt a deep impulse to follow him, a sensation of fear coupled with excitement and curiosity. Atlas rolled off the sofa and slipped on his shoes, which still sat muddy and wet by the front door.

Quietly, Atlas exited Verla's house and followed the trail of sound coming from the busted shopping cart. He moved at a safe distance through another side street in town, until the street came to a dead end and emptied into a long, dirt road where county maintenance ended. From afar he could see Santa Claus pushing his shopping cart through the sand and mud. It was much colder outside, and Atlas's breath trickled out from his mouth and nostrils in tiny wisps that reminded him of smoke from a pipe. For half a mile Santa Claus trudged through the mud, and for half a mile Atlas followed close behind him. After another turn down a much smaller dirt road and through several copses of cherry laurels, possumhaw, and shadblow, Atlas stood in front of Santa Claus's shack, where two months earlier he had woken and found himself inside. Resting the shopping cart up against the side of the shack, Santa Claus began unloading his cans, filling his arms and hands with as many as he could carry. As he opened the front door, a couple of the cans fell from his hands and tumbled into the mushy, dead grass. He mumbled something unintelligible and pushed his way inside the ramshackle abode. Atlas crept silently from behind a mighty oak and grabbed the two cans from the yard. When Atlas went to place them on the doorstep, Santa Claus reappeared in front of him. "Hello," he said with a solid density in his voice. Atlas stood catatonically, unable to escape, but the beastly man simply walked past him and grabbed the remaining cans from the shopping cart. It was clear now Santa Claus had no intention of hurting him and any fear Atlas still possessed wafted away like the condensation of his breath into the cold night. He held firmly onto the cans and entered the shack.

The warm glow of the fire spread throughout the one room shack. Atlas noticed it was not dirty like it had been before. The mattress had been moved to a far corner of the room, and it now contained a blanket and pillow. The coffee table was clean; the only things resting on it were a stack of newspapers and a roll of paper towels. One newspaper had been placed askew and the headline read, "Officials Closing in on Escaped Convict." Although the wooden floorboards were still stained and cracked, they had been swept clean, and the threadbare sofa, where Atlas sat silently, was covered with a wool military blanket. Santa Claus popped open a can of hominy and offered it to Atlas, but the boy declined it. "I've eaten, but thank you," he said as he watched the withered man slink over to the fireplace and take a seat on the floor. He ate the hominy with two fingers and finished the entire can within a matter of minutes. Then he erupted into a violent coughing fit and heaved and gagged until slimy bits of eaten hominy fell onto the floor. Atlas jumped from the sofa and grabbed the roll of paper towels. He handed them to Santa Claus, who nodded and wiped his mouth with the entire roll. Then Atlas took a seat next to him, and they sat in front of the fire with only the sound of crackling, dried timber. Above the fireplace Santa Claus had hung a Christmas Greeting card with a wintry wonderland print. Blotted with grease stains, it looked as though it had been pulled out of the trash. "You said you were Santa Claus," asked Atlas, keeping his attention on the fire. "I did," said the man. He belched slightly. "But you ain't really," remarked Atlas. The boy turned and looked at the man's raggedy beard and sagging cheeks. "Try me," Santa Claus said. He crumbled up the paper towels from where he had wiped his mouth and tossed the wad into the fire. Atlas watched the fire eat away at the paper. Then he stood with his back in front of Santa Claus and took off the sweatshirt. The two black, gossamer wings lay along Atlas's back like algae floating on the surface of a pond. "I can't get them to work," he said solemnly. Santa Claus studied over the wings for a moment. "Take a seat," he said. Atlas pulled the sweatshirt back over his torso and sat next to the old man, who tucked a chaw of tobacco inside his bottom lip. "Before they could fly, my reindeer were just regular ole' deer. Nothing special about them. Found Blitzen nearly dead in a bear trap. Donner had some disease of the brain, and Dasher-he was the meanest son of a bitch alive. Dancer could root the ass out of an elephant with his antlers if he wanted. Prancer was retarded. Used to just walk in circles following his tail. Vixen was fat as a brick shithouse. Ate everything I threw in front of him. Cupid just go around fuckin' all the other reindeer. Damndest thing I ever seen. And Comet, he was probably the most normal of all my reindeer, which ain't saying much. So, if I was going to deliver toys to all the chillin' of the world, I would have to do it at an alarming speed. This bunch-Shit. I'd have better luck with a passel of three legged mules. But then I got to thinking about it, and I had this idea. I hitched them up two at a time. Put Dasher and Dancer in the front cause while they was mean; they could still run pretty fast. Then the two retarded

ones, Prancer and Vixen. Then my other fast ones, Comet and Cupid, who I put behind Prancer to fuck him straight. Then the other two runners, Donner and Blitzen. Then after they were all hitched up, I ran them toward a cliff as fast as I could. Animals have instinct that we humans don't. They don't think about nothin; they just do. We humans. All we do is think. That's why were all fucked up. So here I had eight reindeer running toward their certain death, and at some point that instinct would have to kick in. They'd be so full of fear, they'd either fly or die. I only had one chance to do it, and well, the rest is history." Santa Claus spit into the empty can of hominy. Tarry chew oozed onto his beard. "Either fly or die," he said matter-of-factly. "What about Rudolph?" asked Atlas. The old man chuckled. "Shit. Rudolph couldn't lead a skateboard let alone a sled. Faggot ass reindeer. Was gonna put a bullet in his brain one Christmas Eve until the missus begged me not to." They continued to sit in silence for a while longer; Atlas thought about what Santa Claus said. The fire dwindled down to glowing ash, and Atlas could feel the wind outside pushing through the cracks of the shack. He stood and walked toward the door. Before he left, he turned and looked at Santa Claus one last time. "Why did you kill your mom?" he asked. At first the old man did not say a word, but right before Atlas opened the door, he said, "I don't know. Still trying to figure that one out." The boy hesitated and then opened the door. A strong gust of cold air entered the room. The last flame of the fire died out, and Santa Claus vanished into the cold, blackness of the dark shack.

The pine trees surrounding the farmhouse in the distance ached and bended with the strength of the frigid north wind rushing through them. Atlas shivered in the night. No lights were on in the farmhouse as if the place had long been abandoned and forgotten. Jason's truck sat where it always did in the backyard. He thought about yelling for his father but decided against it. Instead, he ran toward his treehouse and scaled the ladder to get up inside out of the cold. There he pulled a mildewed sleeping bag out of a wooden chest and turned on a battery operated lantern that barely emitted any light. Grabbing his book Atlas climbed inside the sleeping bag in the corner of the room where he could feel the least amount of the chilly wind and opened to the last chapter.

## Chapter Ten

*The week between Christmas and New Years was jammed with performances in the evening and rowdy bacchanalia at night. During the day the stagehands slept, including Tater Tot and Red. Around one or two in the afternoon everyone would slowly rouse from his drunken stupor and manage to prepare for the nightly performance. Bunny stayed sequestered in his suite, which was the entire third floor above the stage. Munk had his own room, but it was in the basement of the theater, tucked down an additional flight of stairs and through a windy corridor just past the boiler room. There he retired every night after the performance, refusing to participate in the merriment and debauchery, which transpired after every show. Besides, Bunny never attended the party after the performance, and the only chance Munk had to see his brother was on stage during the show. While he sat on the rickety cot in his damp, cold room, Munk could hear the boisterous singing from the crew, who were preparing to drink their champagne and ring in the new year. He wondered if Bunny ever thought about him and missed the old days, when they would play down by Wisteria Creek and frolic in the swamps back home. Then he thought about Miss Beulah and how at this time of year they would be having their own festivities in the oak tree, drinking cinnamon and snaggleroot punch and eating nutmeg and pecan bread with ginger icing. He tried to recall the Christmas Carols they all three would sing, but Munk could not even remember a note of at least one. Then he tried thinking about the stories he had read in Miss Beulah's study. Maybe there was one about a boy, who turned into an ass? Or was it a knight, who rode an ass, with his companion? Did they fight a windmill? Or were there animals, who used a windmill for electricity? He could not remember anything. The idea that he could not remember all of the stories and words anchored Munk's heart in loneliness. He wanted to cry. But he held back the tears and decided the best thing for him to do was sneak out when everyone was inebriated and runaway. So he fashioned a small tote out of a red handkerchief and fastened it to a broom handle. Then he filled the tote with a jar of syrupy peaches along with a brown bag of dried apples. Finally, around eleven that evening, as the laughter and singing were reaching their apex, he passed quietly through the boiler room and traversed upstairs to the backstage door. Right as Munk was about to pass secretly into the night, Red called to him from the end of the backstage hallway. "Je'st the feller I was lookin' fer!" he said brightly. Munk turned and tipped his bonnet to him. "I's goin' out fur' fresh air," Munk said, hoping Red would not notice the handkerchief tied on the broom he was holding. "You's plannin' tuh do some cleanin?" said Red jocularly. "Kid, you don't need to kid me. You wuz' runnin' away." "I's..I's.." but Munk could not come up with an excuse. "Kid, I want's tuh talk to you." Munk hesitated. "I's tink I shud leave," he said, shaking in the egress of the theater. "Yuh might want to reconsider that," laughed*

Red, pulling a rolled newspaper from his back pocket. He opened it. Even from a distance, Munk could see his and Bunny's faces plastered in black and white on the front page. Above their pictures was the word "murderers" in big and bold red letters. Munk let the broom fall to his side, and the jar of peaches rolled out from the handkerchief. Red stopped them with his foot. "Mmmm. Love me some jarred peaches," he remarked as he rolled the newspaper back into his pocket and picked up the jar. The jar popped open with the press of Red's callused thumb, and he pulled out a golden, gooey slice. He slurped it into his mouth. "Yummy!" Then he tossed the jar into the garbage and licked his fingers. Munk's face soured. He dropped his knapsack and joined Red at the other end of the hall. "'Ata boy," Red said, lifting his eyebrows and grinning. Red lead Munk into Tater Tot's office, where Tater Tot sat, smoking a stogie. "There's our pal! How you doin' kid?" the short man asked, getting to his feet and pushing a chair toward Munk for him to sit. Nervous, Munk hovered by the door. "Wut's goin' on?" he asked meekly. "Sit, kid. Don't worry. Your secret is safe with us. But we got a proposition for you," said Tater Tot. "Yes! A proposition that yore' gonna love!" Grabbing him by his paw, Red pulled Munk over to Tater Tot's desk and plopped him in a chair. Chomping on his stogie, Tater Tot rubbed his hands together. "I was thinking about what you told me Christmas, kid, about how you's want to be a real boy." Munk's head lowered. "Naw, kid! Don't be ashamed. Me and Slick Red here. We've bumped a few fellas in our day!" The two men cackled, but all Munk could do was think of Big Baby Bird and then Bunny. "We're gonna take care of you," said Red, adding his two cents. "And we've taken stock of all the hard work you've put in to make the show the success that it is." "Yes, we shore have!" agreed Red. But Munk did not feel as though he had added to the success of the show, and he fidgeted with one of the buttons on his tailcoat. "Bunny's duh real talent," he said with an air of diffidence. "True. The Rabbit's got talent, but what would that Rabbit be without his foil?" "His wut?" asked Munk. He knew that word from somewhere, but everything in his head had gotten foggy and lost. Red saddled up next to Munk and put his hand around the back of his neck. "Kid, you's like the glue dat holds this whole thing together. Without the glue, it would all fall apart." "I am?" questioned Munk. Tater Tot grinned gleefully. "Yes, kid! You are! Dat's why me and Slick Red here wanna show you our gratification, and help you with your little problem." "Help me?" asked Munk. Tater Tot rolled his eyes and stuck his tongue out from the corner of his mouth. Munk could see it was stained with tobacco juice from the short man's stogie. "Kid, me and Tater Tot want tuh' put you in our little protection program." "Protect me?" asked Munk in disbelief. "Yeah. We're gonna make you a real boy!" said Tater Tot concretely. Munk was so perplexed and agitated, he popped the button off of his tailcoat, and it landed on the floor. Red reached down and grabbed it, placing it on Tater Tot's desk. "Buh..buh..but, how's?" asked Munk. Slapping Munk on his knee, Red laughed. "Kid, don't you's worry 'bout the particulars! Ole Red here's got an elixir fer ever-thing." "A e-wix-er?" asked Munk.

*Tater Tot slid the coat button from off his desk and tossed it in his hand like a coin. Then he held it between his middle finger and thumb and flicked it. The button spun like a medallion. "Me and Slick just need you to do one thing." Tater Tot stopped the button from spinning and tucked it into the palm of his hand. When he opened his hand, the button was gone. He simpered at Munk, and his gold teeth, firmly tight against the butt of the stogie, were caked in tobacco tar. Then he pulled a bundle of grease stained papers from his desk and sat them in front of Munk. Red handed Munk an ink pen. "Wut's dis?" he asked, holding the pen between two of his claws. "This here is your ticket to freedom and boyhood," said Tater Tot. "All you's got tuh do is sign on duh last page," said Red, licking his thumb and turning the pages of the bundle to the final one. "Right 'cheer." Red pointed to a line. "My's name?" asked Munk. "Or an 'x,'" said Tater Tot. "A 'x'?" Munk looked down at the line where he was to draw an "x," but then his eyes wandered upward across the top of the paper, where there were words, many of which he recognized but could not remember their meaning. A few, though, he could make out: "Bunny," "lifetime," and "rights," although he had no idea what they meant when placed together. "Wut all dis say?" he asked Red, who immediately grew flustered. "Kid, yuh wanna be a boy, don't's yuh? Look, we could make things very bad fore yuh!" Munk shuddered beneath Red's anger, but Tater Tot kicked the old man back with his boot. "Kid, all this says here is that you want to be a boy, and we's gonna help make that happen," said Tater Tot, redirecting Munk's focus to the line on the last page. "Put a 'x' right 'cheer and boom!" Red grabbed Munk's shoulder tightly. Munk grasped the pen tightly. He could never have imagined that one day he would be a real boy, and that a few minutes earlier he was about to run away forever. Maybe, he thought, if Bunny saw him as a real boy, he might see him differently. If he were a real boy, maybe he could think clearer and better, and then he could think on how to get him and Bunny out of this place and back home to Miss Beulah. He began to sweat as he inched the pen closer to the line. "Datta' boy," said Red, guffawing at the joke he made. "Boy!" he repeated. "Yeah, boy! Boy, I can't wait!" said Tater Tot, joining in Red's laughter. Munk squinted his eyes and with the most careful precision, he drew an 'x' on the line. "Wünderbar," said Tater Tot, who quickly grabbed the bundle of papers and stacked them neatly. He swiftly filed them into his desk draw. "And now, a toast!" Red rummaged through his knapsack and pulled out the brown bottle with a cork in it. Tater Tot grabbed three, tiny shot glasses from off a shelf and wiped them clean with the hem of his dirty shirt. Popping the cork with his teeth, Red poured each of them a tippie. "Here yuh go," he said, sliding the glass to Munk. The liquid was cloudy and smelled like turpentine. "Wut is dis?" he asked. "That kid will not only make you a boy; it will make you a man!" said Tater Tot, who took the whole of the shot glass in his mouth and swallowed the concoction in one gulp. "A real man!" cracked Red, who drank the mixture even quicker than Tater Tot. Munk sniffed the glass and then studied over it. Finally, he lifted it to his lips and licked the surface*

*with his tongue. It tasted like fermented pond water, and he grimaced. "Be a man, kid!" said Tater Tot. "Yeah, kid! Be a man!" They chanted it three more times. Tater Tot pounded his fists against his desk, and Red slapped his hand against Munk's back. Munk opened his mouth and poured the entire liquid into the back of his throat. He could feel it slide into his stomach and within seconds his whole world went dark.*

*Strange sensations filled Munk's body while he lay in darkness. He heard the sounds, which indicated the arrival of midnight: the chiming of bells in town and the cacophony of voices singing upstairs. All over he felt numb and tingly, slightly nauseous but without the feeling that he was going to be sick. Memories from the past flooded his brain like popcorn popping in an enormous, black cauldron that widened and expanded as more popcorn filled the void. Bunny, Miss Beulah, Wisteria Creek, the oak tree, coming into the world, books, so many books and snaggleroot, misty rain and wind driven snow, a bridge made of logs over a deep ravine watching a pebble fall deep into the ravine, laughter, lots and lots of laughter. But who is laughing? And now crying. Who is crying? Then more laughter and then whispers. Yes. I know. Wait. No, I don't know. I don't know. No. More whispers. Who was speaking to him? Hello? No. Stop. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. A canopy of purples and pinks and blues. Who painted the sky this color? Who opened the sky like this? It's cold. Why is it so cold? Why? How? I'm hot. I'm burning up. I'm on fire. Why am I on fire? It hurts! Why does it hurt? This pain. This mental pain of ever wondering why and never being conscious enough to answer honestly.*

*Within seconds all of the memories were sucked out through a long, narrow tunnel, and then they were gone. Munk waited to see what would happen next but that was it. All he saw in front of him was a tiny speck of light, so he walked toward it, and with each step, it grew bigger until eventually, he walked into the light and then balked. The light came to him.*

*For hours he lay there silently, the world out of focus and interminable but at the very least he was comfortable. A flock of birds, maybe seagulls, passed overhead, and he listened for the sound of crashing waves, thinking that he was lying on the shoreline of a beach. After a while he decided to sit up and change his view. The landscape before him was still blurry, nothing but smudged light and color. Then he reached up to his face and pulled a set of goggles off his eyes. Somehow he always knew they were there but also, they were unfamiliar and foreign. He let go of the goggles, and they broke into a billion pieces of dust. Immediately, his world crystallized into definable shapes, lines, and curves. There were trees and clouds, grass and flowers. The air was warm but crisp, almost as if everything had been washed and was clean again. He stood up and walked over to a stream, where he looked down and examined his reflection. The face was different, angular with soft,*

*pink skin and large green eyes. His hair was shaggy in thick, dark blonde strands. Was it him? But he knew it was him, and the longer he stared at himself, the more familiar he looked. Time passed, and he dipped his finger into the water. Ripples fractured his face in different directions, but he loved how the water felt to the touch. Moments later he found himself walking into a small town. A couple walked by and greeted him. "Morning," they said. He simply replied, "Hello." The farther he traveled into town, the more the tiny hamlet became familiar. Time seemed measured, a second, an hour, a day, a week, and a year. He quickly grew accustomed to time, the town, his face, and his life. And all appeared and felt rather normal. He went to school and church; then he married and had children. Everything fit together like puzzle pieces falling from a box into place. This was life, and he forgot that there had been a time before. He had always been a boy, who then became a man.*

*But on occasion while he traveled this new life, he would stumble upon something that would jolt him with the flash of an odd image. Maybe it was the picture of a silly rabbit on a box of cereal or a jug of chocolate milk. Perhaps it was a cartoon rabbit outwitting a brainless, stuttering hunter. Or it was the drawing of a rabbit in one of his children's storybooks. Each rabbit was so variably different, yet each one seized his mental eye with the same image: an oafish bunny with a tail protruding from its bald head. He never knew or understood why Bunny came to mind whenever he saw the countless images of rabbits that darted across the road of his life.*

*Years later, as time cloaked his face with crimps and crevices and subdued his heart into slow, tender beats, he walked inside a used bookshop just outside of town, where a large oak tree shaded the shop from the afternoon soon. Inside, he perused the aisles, searching for something he could not even describe. Eventually, he found it, weathered and bound in leather. On the cover was an inelaborate drawing of a rabbit with serious, brooding eyes and no expression on its face. The title read, "The Strange Tale of Bunny and Munk" by Randolph Slick. With palsied hands he opened the book and began to read the story of a life he had long since forgotten.*

Atlas slept soundly in the drafty treehouse until the faint flicker of orange light arrested him from his sleep. He coughed and opened his eyes. Smoke wafted up from the floorboards, and his buttocks and backside were warm, almost hot. Jumping to his feet, he looked out the window and saw his father's shed bright with flames. Through the violent shards of vibrant light Jason was busting his furniture with an ax and throwing the pieces onto the fire. Atlas stepped back from the window and cupped his hand over his nose. He did not have much time to think, so he quickly stripped off the sweatshirt and sweatpants, and then moved back toward the window. The wings hung limply along the sides of his back as he whispered confidently to himself, "Either fly or die."

Stepping on the windowsill, Atlas crouched low and steadied his balance. He closed his eyes. "Either fly or die," he said again. Shaking and erratic, Jason grunted, dismembering his furniture into thousands of misshapen fragments. Then something moving in his peripheral vision grabbed his attention. "Atlas!" he screamed, his voice hoarse with smoke and anger. He lunged forward and caught the boy in his arms. They tumbled to the ground away from the fire. "Let me go!" yelled Atlas, but Jason held him firmly. Wide-eyed like an untamed animal, Atlas struggled in Jason's arms before he exhausted all of his strength. "Atlas," Jason repeated over and over as he rocked his son in his arms. The shed and treehouse were engulfed in flames, flames which lulled Atlas back into a deep slumber.

Tiny ringlets of black smoke billowed up from what remained of the shed and treehouse. There was very little morning light with thick gray clouds hanging low in the cold folds of the atmosphere. A single white snowflake landed on the stump where Jason had cut up the quail. Then another landed on a blade of brown grass next to the stump. Within minutes billions of snowflakes fluttered aimlessly toward the earth, seasoning the tops of the pines with a white, shiny dust. Atlas woke and unlocked himself from Jason's grasp. Then he gave himself a moment to take in the snow and how beautiful everything looked. He started to cry; it was all so breathtaking. But then he looked down at Daddy, who slept soundly, and Atlas knew that when he woke the sublimity of the present moment would crash into a billion particles of ash and dust. Wiping the tears from his eyes he quickly stepped barefoot through the snow collecting on the ground toward his Daddy's truck. He opened the passenger side door. Seconds later Atlas was walking up the stairs of the farmhouse. Inside his bathroom he shut the door and turned on the light. Then without much forethought he grabbed the handle of the hunting knife he had pulled from Daddy's truck and sliced one of the wings off from his back. Then he cut the second one free. Blood trickled down Atlas's backside, along the length of his leg, and began to pool where the two wings lay congealed like stillborn kittens on the bathroom floor.

When the sun broke through the morning clouds, the snow, which had fallen hours earlier, had already melted. A cardinal landed on the branch of the live oak, where the charred frame of Atlas's treehouse barely smoldered. It cleaned its beak on the wood of the oak and then lighted off into the woods. Jason woke suddenly, bleary-eyed and parched. He shuffled to his feet and wiped his mouth with the backside of his hand. His head throbbed, and while he remembered his rage, which had ignited the destruction in front of him, he had no thought of his son or where he might be, only the urge to quench his thirst. When he got inside the farmhouse, he stuck his head beneath the kitchen faucet and drank as much water as he could swallow. Then he allowed the icy water to spill

over his head, neck, and cheeks. It felt wonderful. But as soon as he turned the water off, the memory of Atlas lying in his arms shocked him into a sober reality. "Atlas," he said firmly. Nothing. He listened for any sound of movement coming from upstairs. Briskly he walked through the foyer and up the stairs of the farmhouse. Reaching Atlas's room, he knocked on the door. "Atlas." No answer. He flung the door open. Jason saw Atlas's bed, neatly made and his bookshelf and desk. Sunlight cascaded from the window directly across the room onto the wooden, barren floorboards. He paused. Again, nothing. He made it halfway down the stairs when he turned back around. He approached the bathroom door with a tension that nearly broke his stance. One knock. Then another. As the bathroom door opened, he said his son's name with the immense love that designs unspoken sadness. He would never say his son's name again.

Deep in the Carolina woods sits a farmhouse. In the stillness of the early dawn four, large copper pots rest on a stove, each filled with hot, steamy water no longer boiling but swirling in a light simmer. An elderly man lifts one of the pots from the stove and pours the hot water onto the kitchen floor. Then he bends downward and gets on his knees. Clenching a torn rag, he methodically scrubs the floor with only the cool blue of morning to light his way.

The End