

Imitation and Insecurity: Writing is Personal

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Imitation and Insecurity / Hammerle 2

## **Table of Contents**

Story 1: "The Ides of March" 3

Story 2: "Quite Contrary (Annie, Annie)" 10

Story 3: "Death of a Doctor" 21

Story 4: "The Woods" 39

Reflection Paper 59

## The Ides of March

### March 15, 1918

Harold Sawyer walked out of Albita Hospital, his dying mother in the same bed as the previous year, and the year before that. She was leaving soon, though, and Sawyer could not stay for that. So, he was leaving, too.

Dr. Lanham expected Sawyer to finish the second year of his apprenticeship, but Sawyer didn't much care for how *utterly disappointed, sir*, the doctor would be. Father would notice the missing money, but even if Sawyer took everything the man owned, it still would not be enough to make up for what Sawyer lost. If Sawyer could not fix his mother during the years she'd been dying slowly, he could not fix her now that she was dying fast, and he had no more reason to stay once she was gone.

The stack of cash was damp with sweat when Sawyer dropped it into the salesman's hand. Sawyer took many deep breaths as he pulled his Cadillac V-8 out of the lot. He had reached Arkansas when his mother was declared dead in Texas. The search for him began around the time he crossed the Maryland border. By the end of April, Sawyer's father stopped looking.

### 1921

Sawyer fell in love with the Maryland mountains more than he knew he could. It was just an escape, after all, but an important one, and the fact that he felt himself grow with the trees every year made it all the more justifiable.

Sawyer kept the narrow house by the road and built onto it, adding a stone living room onto the side of the dining room, along with a monstrous stone chimney made out of rocks from the surrounding land.

Parts of Sawyer's land coincided with the forests and ran up to the edges of the valley. A few of the mountains around had names—Deer and Glade—and there were paths that led to overlooks where he could see for miles on a clear day.

Every morning he walked one path, and every evening he walked another. It was important to keep a schedule or else one was prone to go insane. Between the small tomato plants in his front yard, and the cabins that needed furnishing, and the one forest path that should be cleared eventually, Sawyer did not have much on his plate.

After his evening walks, he often wrote letters to his mother, telling her about the way the seasons differed from Texas—*so much rain in June, of all months*—and how he was getting along in spite of being so far from Mortsburg, the local town. Sawyer imagined if his mother could have read the letters that she would have been proud of him starting a life on his own and being so successful at it.

A brief moment passed when he considered getting a pet. He thought of the warm companionship between his mother and the only dog they owned during his childhood. Sometimes jealous of the attention she gave the dog,

Sawyer would curl up at his mother's feet and fall asleep. She assured him when he woke up that she would never love a dog more than her own son.

Then Sawyer thought of the dog itself and how it was more of a goat than a dog in the way it ate everything it could get its mouth around, from bark to leather pouches to clothing straight out of the wash. His desire for such a companion diminished significantly.

A companion. Perhaps not one with fur or scales but of a more human variety. His friends in Texas were more of the acquaintance sort, from school or the surrounding towns, but not casual enough to sit down and converse with or visit on a boring day. Some merely called him Sawyer and never bothered to learn the rest. Sawyer supposed it was not likely he would find friends in Maryland—all people are of the same human nature, after all—but perhaps there was potential in Mortsburg for him to find an acquaintance to force his time upon.

He drove into town the following morning.

Sawyer noticed the quietness of the town first. He couldn't remember ever being there on a Sunday before, and this environment starkly contrasted his usual experience with the bustling town. The paths and road were empty, however, and it brought to Sawyer's mind the single time he could remember his parents taking him to church. A cousin had died, and the memorial service was held more or less like Sawyer thought a church service would be

held—just without the death. It was not a bad time—excepting the death, of course—but his family was not religious, so they never bothered to go back.

The church building in Mortsburg seemed to be almost in the exact center of the town, by Sawyer's estimation. He pulled his car to the side of the road nearby and heard a booming voice the moment he stepped out of the vehicle. Sawyer approached the building and listened for a moment.

“My friends, nothing in all the world is so much worth thinking of as God, Christ, the Bible, sin and salvation, the divine purposes for humankind, life everlasting.”

Sawyer opened one of the large wooden doors and sat himself in the back of the room. A few heads turned his way, but the preacher's focus was not shaken.

Sawyer paid little attention to the words being said and rather took the time to scan the room for someone with whom he could affiliate himself. Interactions between him and potential acquaintances would need to be regular as well as reveal a large portion of their personal interests before he could make a proper judgment. Sawyer would tell them about his gardens and the natural spring he'd discovered nearby. They could talk about books or the prohibition.

Sawyer was slightly dismayed at the gray heads around him. He could not see anyone who could be under the age of 40 and was not a child attending with their grandparents.

The service ended not long after he sat down, and people began to move past him toward the exit. Having been unsuccessful in even finding someone his age let alone one he may bond with, Sawyer assumed it would be best for him to join the crowd in leaving. He exited the pew after the largest portion of the crowd had passed only to be clapped on the shoulder and turned around. The preacher stood in front of him.

“Glad you decided to join us today, sir. It is not often we get new people in this building, and even less often do young men like yourself deign to sit in for a service.” The preacher reached out his hand.

Sawyer accepted it. “Thank you. I enjoyed the small portion I was present to hear.”

“It is a shame you did not arrive at the start of the service. It would have made a great deal more sense.” The preacher chuckled, and Sawyer laughed briefly with him.

“Perhaps next week I will keep a better eye on the time.” Sawyer began to turn away and head back to his car but was stopped by the hand on his shoulder a second time.

“What is your name, young man?” the preacher asked, dropping his hand. “I make a point to know the names of everyone in this town.”

“Sawyer, sir.”

“And what is your background, Mr. Sawyer?”

“I studied medicine for a time.”

“That is wonderful. I am sure the hospital would love to have a young doctor like you on their staff.” The preacher smiled.

“If I am ever looking for a job, I will remember that.”

“Well, I won’t hold you up any longer, Doc. Don’t be afraid to stop by if you find yourself needing anything.” he smiled again. “Oh, and my name is John. It’s only fair, I guess, since I know yours.”

One of the gray heads from the service joined Sawyer and Preacher John in the aisle. The woman took advantage of the silence and, after a short “Excuse me, sir” to Sawyer, began to speak to the preacher about his lovely sermon and the lunch she was making next week and *Oh, I would love for you to join us, Preacher. I’m making ham.*

Sawyer startled slightly at the speed of the woman’s words and stepped back. She finished her speech and turned to Sawyer with a smile.

“Well, hello, sir,” she spoke evenly and with confidence. “Apologies for my interruption. I wanted to make sure I caught John for a moment before he slips away again.”

“Of course, ma’am. I was about to head off in any case.” Sawyer said.

The preacher gestured to him, “This young man’s a doctor.”

“How great is that? We haven’t had a young doctor around here in quite a long time.” The woman continued before Sawyer could comment.

“What’s your name, sir?”

“Sawyer, ma’am.”



“None of that ‘ma’am’ nonsense. Call me Bev.”

“It’s lovely to meet you,” Sawyer smiled briefly. “Unfortunately, I think I must be getting back, now.” He glanced behind him toward the large wooden doors.

“Well, if you must.” Bev seemed the smallest bit offended that Sawyer would leave, as if she wasn’t done with him yet. “You should stop by the store on Tuesday. The other ladies and I work in the afternoon.”

“The store?” Sawyer asked.

“Yes, the grocery on 5th Avenue. Glenna and Gara would love to meet you, I’m sure.”

“I will do my best.” Sawyer turned to the other man. “Thank you for the sermon, Preacher.”

“Anytime.” He smiled and nodded at Sawyer.

“It was lovely to meet you, Bev.”

“You as well, Doc.” She grinned.

As Sawyer was pushing open the large wooden doors, Bev yelled after him.

“Don’t be a stranger!”

## **Quite Contrary (Annie, Annie)**

### **May 1925**

Annie Aberworth met Doc Sawyer exactly three times. The first time, her husband Dan was wary of the idea. Annie was adamant that they go somewhere involving nature but had to convince Dan, whose only impression of rural areas was an emotionally scarring incident with a cow when he was a child. Annie promised they would never take a vacation in such a place again if Dan did not like it. Dan knew he would give Annie anything she asked for, so he agreed. Both husband and wife were shocked to discover the depth of Annie's love for all things natural and forested as well as Dan's comfort in the environment once he discovered there were no cows.

Annie spoke to Doc on a daily basis about his medicinal theories involving natural healing, and he was somewhat pleased to pass it on to such a passionate student, of sorts. Dan followed them around and occasionally asked questions. He knew Annie would not be kept from what she wanted. He loved her for it.

The young couple left after their week's stay in good spirits and confident they would return again. The second time, it was summer.

### **July 1926**

The black car pulled up to the front of Doc's best cabin, and Annie popped out with a small bag in hand. Dan barely made it to her side before she could pull out another bag. Her skirt was nearly caught in the door as she

slammed it shut behind her. Dan took the largest suitcase and followed her to the cabin. Doc emerged from his house on dusty shoes. He moved to help, but the couple was already waiting at the front door of the cabin, Annie jiggling the doorknob. Dan shrugged his shoulders with a smile.

"How are you today?" Dan asked.

Before Doc could respond, Annie shouted, "Hello, Doc! How do you do!"

"I'm quite well, I appreciate your asking," Doc said.

"And I presume this door is locked because of all the nice things you keep inside?" Annie asked. "You don't actually want us to wait out here forever, do you?"

Doc chuckled lightly. "I lost track of the time. My apologies."

Doc stepped onto the cabin porch and picked a set of keys out of his pocket, expertly sliding one in without checking it. He pushed the door open.

"Ah, is this what you were locking us out for?" Annie picked up a small blue vase with two bright flowers in it. "How much is it worth?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," Doc said. "And the flowers are local. There's more money in the walls themselves than all the furniture and decorations combined. But, for the most part, most guests seem to prefer the outdoors."

"As do we, Doctor," Dan placed one of the suitcases in the bedroom and stepped back toward Doc. "However, we appreciate the care you have put into your housings and furnishings. They show true consideration for your customers."

"Thank you," Doc said. "I'll leave you to settle in for now, but do come over if you need anything at all."

"Oh, we will, Doc. Don't you worry!" Annie flitted between rooms, opening curtains and fluffing pillows.

"I will try not to. Enjoy your stay."

Doc closed the door behind him while Dan suggested to Annie that they take a walk after they unpack. Doc did not stay to listen. He proceeded to his home and sat down with a book, falling asleep on the couch before long.

He was not surprised to hear a knock at 5 o'clock in the morning. His extra hours of sleep made no difference to his current fatigue.

"Doc! Where's the best place to watch the sunrise?" Annie asked. "It'll be happening soon, I think."

"The best spot is up the Deer Mountain path," Doc said. "Unfortunately I don't think you'll make it before the sunrise today, but the Glade overlook is close, and I can show you the Deer path for tomorrow."

"Sounds lovely. I'll go fetch Dan." Annie ran off.

When she came back, Doc walked the couple to the trailhead and wished them well, advising them to look out for wild animals in the dawn light. They returned two hours later unharmed but exhausted. Annie insisted they rest for the morning and take another walk in the afternoon up Deer Mountain to find the overlook.

Annie drove herself and Dan plenty without Doc's input, so he left them to it for the most part. Every day, Annie would show up at his door with some inquiry or strange observation. One morning she requested a forest tour to show her all the edible and medicinal plants in the area. Doc of course could not stay away. It was his favorite type of tour, if he had a favorite, and he could not find reason to deny Annie the knowledge she longed for—especially when it was such useful knowledge.

Dan followed along and smiled accordingly. He supported his wife in a way that many deemed irresponsible, but it suited him, and it suited her. It was what Dan knew from his private moments with her that made the criticisms of others seem nonsensical. Never was a man more confident in something than Dan was in Annie's love for and devotion to him. She presented herself to the outside world as she wanted to be seen, but she saw no need to present herself to Dan in that way. He adored and respected her without posturing or control. They did not clash; rather, they disagreed. The discussions following their disagreements more often than not prompted a deepening of their bond, and it was enough so that they never felt the need to explain themselves.

Doc saw less and less of Annie and Dan as the week went by. Evenings were the loneliest, as the couple tended to stay inside with the curtains closed and door locked.

Doc waved goodbye on a Friday afternoon as the couple drove away. Annie visited the Deer Mountain overlook that morning without company.

“I wanted to feel the air again,” she said to Doc.

While Annie hiked, Dan packed. Doc dropped off a stack of books about plants and small, wild creatures so that Annie would feel less separate from the natural world during her absence. He also hoped it might one day motivate her to visit again. Rarely did Doc value someone’s company as much as he did these young people.

Doc wished them well as he walked away from the cabin upon Annie’s return. He sat motionless in his house until he heard the car move down the road.

## **November 1926**

Doc opened the envelope from Dan and read quickly.

*Doctor Sawyer,*

*I am not sure that regret is what I feel in writing about this subject, given the nature behind it. Perhaps there is more of a celebration to be had. However, it is quite the regretful situation.*

*Annie is with child. I was pleased when I found out, but Annie has never wanted to be a mother. She wept for hours at the news. In spite of my joy, I will do everything in my power to ensure Annie is not required to live in a way that constricts her dreams. Carrying a child to*

*term would be more than that. It would be the end of her life. I am afraid it would affect her more strongly than I even know.*

*This may be a strange and somewhat terrible request. My hope is that with your medical background you may be able to direct us to someone who can take care of this issue discreetly. Please respond if you are aware of such a practice. Cost is not a concern.*

*We are constantly appreciative of your presence in our lives.*

*Annie reads your books every day.*

*Sincerely,*

*Daniel Aberworth*

Doc reached for a pen and paper almost before he had finished reading. The only abortion doctor in his limited range of awareness was not known for his safe practices, and why would Doc direct them elsewhere when he could handle the issue himself?

He drove into town and mailed a response as quickly as he could. It was mid November, and the storms were coming.

There was no more word from Dan, but he showed up on Doc's stoop a few weeks later, just before Christmas. The snow had subsided from an increase in temperature, but inevitably there was more to come.

Annie sat in the car, not looking at the men. She watched bare branches blowing disinterestedly.

“Doctor Sawyer,” Dan started. “I regret the purpose of our visit, but it is good to see you again.”

Doc reached out to shake his hand. “The pleasure is mine, of course. Please, come inside. Will Annie be joining us?”

“Yes. She was not sure if we would be staying in the cabin again and did not want to expose herself to the cold unnecessarily. I’ll invite her to join us.”

“Please do. I have the stove on. You will be staying with me.”

Dan stepped down to the car and leaned in to speak with his wife. She wordlessly opened her door and stood, following behind Dan into Sawyer’s house.

“Hello, Annie. You look well.” Doc closed the door behind them and motioned for them to sit on one of the nicer couches. “I have hot tea, if you are interested.”

“No.” Annie responded quietly. “Thank you,” she added as an afterthought.

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Annie’s procedure was successful. She rested a long time afterward, and Doc made sure to keep her comfortable while he invited Dan in to see her. After she finally woke up, Dan asked if he could move her, maybe take her to the cabin and get her out of Doc’s hair, but Doc insisted that she stay.



“It will take too long to warm the cabin, and I would rather she not be moved at this point in the healing process, especially given the cold.”

Dan said that he understood and thanked Sawyer profusely for his help.

Annie woke several hours later. Doc left the couple alone for a long time until Dan joined him for a cup of hot tea before turning in for the night. He thanked Doc again.

Two more days passed before Dan approached Doc with a suitcase. He insisted that he take Annie home. There was bound to be snow soon, and he preferred they were not trapped in the mountains indefinitely. Doc was reluctant but had to agree. Annie was vibrant and awake. As long as she rested for a few more days upon their arrival, Doc said he would let them go.

Doc wished them well and insisted that they write. He also insisted that they return someday and visit him.

“We’ll be back shortly, Doc. Don’t you worry.” Annie smiled and closed the car door. The couple drove away as snowflakes started to fall.

## **March 1927**

Doc tore open the envelope with excitement when he saw that it was from Dan, not even bothering to hide that he missed the young couple and hoped they were scheduling their next visit.

*Doctor Sawyer,*

*I regret that my letters to you only seem to bear bad news. I won't waste words: I am in mourning. My lovely wife has passed. Annie experienced over the past few weeks what were likely complications from the procedure, and she did not survive them.*

*Enclosed is a short letter Annie dictated that she insisted I send. Perhaps it will explain some things, perhaps it will only bring you remorse. I do hope that you are able to move forward and not let this one occurrence do to your life what it has done to mine. You, Doctor Sawyer, can leave this behind. One day perhaps I will do the same.*

Doc turned to a second page in the same writing.

*Dear Friend,*

*I know you have learned of my death, if Dan has sent this to you. It is the most impending possibility I have ever felt. The real meaning of looming was not clear until I felt this sickness over me.*

*The doctors here suspect that I went through a procedure, but I will not acknowledge it. They turn people away for that. I refuse to be turned out into the streets to die like some dog. If I die, it is their fault. It is my fault. It is my father's fault. It is not yours.*

*Doctor Sawyer, you were the first and only person besides my dear husband who truly put forth effort to improve my life. Without you, these past three months would not have been worth living. Do not think of the end. It does nobody good.*

*I hope you live a long life, Doc. Take all of the years I was not allowed. Hoard them if you must.*

*Sincerely,*

*Annie Aberworth*

Doc shifted to the final page, brushing passively at the dampness around his eyes, and saw that it was nearly blank. He paused for a long moment, breathing slowly. Annie would never again knock on his door in the early morning or walk beside the stream while reading books on Maryland wildlife. She would not beam at her husband or hike to watch the sunrise. This letter ended her, Doc realized.

*I would not let you think Annie and I had forgotten the great service you did her. There were few opportunities for her to explore her excitement with the natural world, the exception being when we were in your company. You have my thanks.*

*Best wishes for the future,*

*Daniel Aberworth*

Doc folded the pages. And she was gone.

## Death of a Doctor

### August 1929

Doc Sawyer left his home every Tuesday afternoon to shop. It was possibly the most routine thing within his routine, simply because without it he ran out of food by Wednesday. Doc made sure he had just enough to sustain him until his weekly trip into town—no more.

The shop ladies were kind enough. Doc didn't need to speak beyond a few useless pleasantries to keep from rousing suspicion about his life. Gara, an elegant lady in her 60s with waist-length white hair, was there every Tuesday. She rang up his flour and crackers without a word. If Doc had a favorite person in Mortsburg, it would be Gara. She never even looked up some days but took his money and moved onto the next customer, the curve of her mouth remaining neutral as he passed, just the way Doc liked it.

Bev was often stocking shelves when Doc came through to get his two boxes of wheat crackers. She pretended not to remember his name and thought it was extremely amusing. Often she would drop a package of flour and he would swoop over to pick it up for her. She would guffaw and say, "Well thanks, Sir. Haven't seen you around much lately." Bev knew Doc came in every Tuesday. He played along.

Glenna, the third woman Doc met at the store, didn't show up until a few weeks of his visits had passed. She was a commanding woman who spent most of the time Doc was inside the store following him around. Her words

reached his ears as soon as he stepped through the doors between 3:15 and 3:20. He traipsed down the aisles to the sound of her ramblings about current and local events, such as her grandson's closest friend getting married, or her grandson marrying his closest friend, or something of the sort. Every item Gara silently slid across the counter and back to Doc was not-so-silently acknowledged by Glenna. She never commented on Doc himself, of course, just on her own life and the world around her. After only a few weeks of this, Doc Sawyer felt like he knew nearly every detail about the women by way of his own groceries.

Putting up with the women every Tuesday proved to be a useful practice when guests at his resort would inevitably stop in town before continuing into the mountains. It was the last completely civilized area before reaching Doc's land that offered services such as grocery stores. Mortsburg was small, and everyone seemed to know everyone else in some way or another, but nobody knew Doc better than the three women at the grocery—even if their knowledge was minimal.

Guests on their way to Doc's resort would inevitably ask what the women thought of him. They were not wary, per se, simply curious. Gara would tell them he was a man of habit and had a calm, quiet demeanor. Bev would say he had a sense of humor. Glenna would scoff lightly and mention that a man who owned a car in that area of the country was likely to be worth something. It was for this reason that Doc made such an effort to possess

such qualities in front of the women. He knew his clients, and he knew how to keep them happy.

Inevitably, every few months a couple who stopped in town on their way to the mountains would be the wary type. Doc could not keep himself from worrying that they would be the ones to ask too many questions and not get enough answers to satisfy them. Gara and Bev and Glenna were typically the best at putting to rest the nerves of these guests. Everyone was happy to listen to the older women, particularly when Bev compared Doc to someone in her own family. Doc's guests would enter the store wondering if there even was a resort in the mountains, and they left assured that they would be well taken care of and relaxed. Gara smiled warmly as she waved goodbye to each one.

On a particular Tuesday, Doc Sawyer entered the store to see Gara smiling at him and Glenna standing at the other end of the counter, silent. Then, to top things off, Bev poked lightly at his arm as she passed and said, "Hey there, Doc. You're in for a fun week."

Doc looked at his watch. 3:14. He was tempted to walk out of the store and reenter a minute later to see if the women would behave normally if he came in at his usual time. Before he could decide, however, the watch ticked to 3:15, and Gara beckoned him over to the counter.

"I'm coming to stay at your resort," Gara said.

"Is that so?" Doc placed one hand on top of the counter and cocked his

head to the side.

“Yes,” she stated. “Charles and I want to rent out one of those cabins of yours and enjoy nature for a while. Lucy’s kids are old enough now they don’t need much help, so we’re looking to take a vacation.”

“Well I’ll just have to give you the family and friends discount, won’t I?” Doc asked, attempting to look excited, or at least amused.

“Aren’t you sweet,” she doted. “Will Thursday be all right?”

“Of course,” Doc smiled thinly and nodded. “All of my cabins are open right now, so you won’t run into anyone.”

“Wonderful. We don’t plan to stay very long. A week at most.” Gara clapped her hands together. “Oh, won’t this be fun!”

“I agree. Well, I best be getting back, then.” Doc started to walk away from the counter.

“Have a good afternoon, Sir,” Bev said with a smirk.

Doc left the store. Halfway home he realized he hadn’t bought a single thing while at the store, so he sacrificed his eating habits for an evening and returned the following day. Glenna, Bev, and Gara evidently did not work on Wednesdays. The bald man Doc paid did not soothe his worries like the ladies did.

Doc met Gara and Charles outside one of the cabins on Thursday. Charles grabbed a suitcase from the carriage and stuck his free hand out to Doc. They shook hands and nodded at each other, and Charles disappeared



inside the cabin. Gara didn't smile at Doc as she approached him, but her face was pleasant. A fall breeze shuffled branches against the cabin windows a few feet away.

"Glad you remembered we were coming, Doc," Gara said. "I have to admit, I worried for a moment when you left the store on Tuesday without buying anything."

"A small oversight," he replied. "I assure you the cabinets and ice box are well-stocked for your stay."

Gara shook her head softly and followed Charles into the cabin. Doc walked her to the door. He invited them to join him for a meal at any time then left them alone to settle in.

On the first day, Gara and Charles took a walk. They woke early, even earlier than Doc, but not before the sun started to rise. They found the easy walking path by following written instructions Doc left on the counter. Late morning, he welcomed them in for lunch—just salads and sandwiches and water. Gara appreciated the small effort.

After lunch, they went to the bench Doc set up in the woods that overlooked a stream and a large collection of mossy rocks. Everything seemed damp in the dim light even though it hadn't rained in days. Charles commented that Doc was a decent man. Gara agreed.

It rained on the second day, but only in the morning. The couple stayed inside and read, Gara sitting by the window and Charles by the fire. When

the rain turned into more of a fine mist, Doc came to the cabin with a stew he had prepared. They ate together and saved the leftover portions for dinner. Doc said he would be working through lunch the next day, but he would be available for supper.

The third day passed quickly, and they only had one left, so Charles and Gara savored it. Charles suggested they take their books on their walk rather than reading in the tightness of the cabin. Gara responded enthusiastically, and they set off on one of the paths. Gara took a nap when they returned, finding herself tired and slightly sore from all the activity. She stated that she wanted to be awake and attentive during their dinner with Doc. As the sun began to set, they stepped outside and crossed the short distance to Sawyer's house.

Doc moved to the door. Having participated in a few conversations with them during their stay, Doc felt a sense of ease with Charles and Gara that he hadn't encountered with anyone in the past few years. He realized during their last day—while he was taking some well-deserved time off—that he knew them. He may not know Charles as well as Gara, and he may not know Gara the way he had known the Aberworths, but he spent time around her on a regular basis. He heard her tell the other ladies about her family and activities. He had met Charles more than once. Doc stopped berating himself with worry over their presence in his life. He invited them in with a genuine smile.

Gara commented on how much she loved the woodsy feel of his house. It was much larger than the cabins but had minimal furniture, few personal touches, and even fewer knick-knacks. Gara assumed this was because he lived alone and perhaps had no family nearby, or even alive. Doc Sawyer led them around the first floor, through the stone-walled living room with the fireplace, the pinewood dining room with a grand, glossy-looking table, and briefly into the modest kitchen with its plain white walls and plain cabinets and plain stove. He then directed them back toward chairs in the living room near a crackling fire.

“Please, sit, while I finish everything up,” Doc said, moving to the kitchen quickly.

Gara did not sit but instead walked the perimeter of the walls and laid her hand across random stones.

Between the mild weather, the fire, and her coat, Gara warmed up quickly, and called to Doc as she reached the doorway nearest the kitchen.

“Is there a place I can hang my coat?” she asked. “I don’t see a rack near your door.”

“Oh, yes,” Doc replied. “There is a closet by the back door. I should have taken it when you came in. I’m afraid my hands are covered in cream at the moment.”

Gara laughed. “Don’t worry, Doc. Charles can help me.”

Charles stood and took her coat. Gara followed him to the closet. One

black overcoat hung in a far corner, and two pairs of shoes sat neatly on the floor. The shelves, however, were strewn with *things* that looked like they should be placed around the house, not buried in a closet. After Charles hung her coat, Gara reached for a stack of photographs. Flipping through them, she noticed one in particular that was familiar.

Two young men stood in the photo. The younger man—barely older than eighteen by Gara’s guess—was undeniably Doc Sawyer. Gara could not place the other man, but he was familiar. She glanced at the crowded shelves again before taking the photograph to her husband.

“Charles, who is this?” Gara asked. “I know his face, but I can’t place it.”

Charles looked at the photo for a moment, adjusting his glasses, and said, “Isn’t that Donald? The young gentleman a few streets over?”

“Yes. Yes, that’s him. Thank you, Charles.” Gara took the photos with her to the table as Doc told them the food was ready.

“Doctor,” Gara said to Doc once they sat down, “I didn’t know you’ve been in this area for so long. You and Donald are quite a bit younger in this picture.” She pointed at the top photograph in the stack.

“Donald? What—” Doc looked at the picture. “Where did you find that?”

“Oh, it was on one of your shelves in the closet. How old were you in this? Surely less than twenty, going by the looks of you. Donald isn’t much older, if I recall correctly.”

“How do you know him?” Doc asked.

“He lives just down the street from us,” Charles added. “We are not close friends, but he stops by from time to time.”

“I was not aware he lived in this area.” Doc picked up his fork and set it back down immediately.

“Come to think of it, you two look rather similar. Is it possible you’re related in some way?”

“Haven’t spoken since the day that was taken. Excuse me for a moment.” Doc stood and tried to appear calm as he walked through the kitchen to a back hallway out of sight of the dining room.

He dragged a hand over his face. His footsteps were quiet as he paced in the small area.

Once Gara had the picture in her hand, he could not deny he knew Donald. There was surely a picture of his father in that stack as well. Gara would not have recognized him, but now that Doc knew his uncle lived in the area, his position was sacrificed. There was no doubt his uncle would recognize him, and Mortsburg was a small town.

Gara would say something to him. What was he to do about that?

Before he was gone too long, Doc took a deep breath and reentered the dining room.

“I apologize,” Doc said as he sat down. “I forgot to put something away.”

“No worries, Doc.” Gara smiled at him, unaware of his discomfort.

Charles had only taken a few bites since Doc left the room. He took another, chewed and swallowed, then looked up at Doc.

“So, Doc,” he started slowly. “What inspired you to start up this resort operation? I would have assumed a young professional like you would snatch up a job at the hospital in no time.”

“I’ve always been fascinated with natural healing,” Doc said.

“Is that so!” Gara said.

Doc nodded, settling more in his seat at the change of topic. “I believe the best relief and rejuvenation comes from being in nature. This land has natural springs, extremely fertile ground, and excellent natural structures. Have you taken the walking paths? One in particular leads to an outcropping where you can see for miles.”

“We took that path yesterday,” Gara said.

“If you have such a passion for nature, why spend all the time and effort to become a doctor?” Charles watched Doc carefully.

“I’m not a doctor,” Doc said, straightening his silverware on the table.

“What do you mean?” Charles asked.

“I am not a doctor.” Doc kept his eyes away from Charles.

“Why does everyone call you ‘Doc’?”

“I don’t remember. It started several years ago. I did study medicine as an apprentice once, but it was not nearly enough training to qualify for a job

at a hospital, like you mentioned.”

Gara sat still with her hands in her lap and a confused look on her face. She asked, “Where did you live before you came to Maryland?”

“In the south,” Doc replied. He smiled at her, hoping it would deter her from further questioning of his past.

“Hm,” she paused. “Where in the south? I think Donald had a brother—a bit older than him—in Texas. Real wealthy, if I remember right.”

“Oh, isn’t that strange,” Doc said. He glanced around the table and noticed that Charles had finished most of his meal. Doc stood and gathered his and Gara’s plates. “Let’s get to dessert, shall we?” He smiled at her again. “Pardon me a minute while I set it up.”

Doc quickly stepped around the table to pick up Charles’ plate as well and took the dishes to the kitchen. He made a few trips between the rooms, carrying in a small cake, a knife, and clean plates and forks.

“We really could pick up our slices and eat them that way,” Doc said, setting each thing down in its place. “But that would likely take away from the experience of savoring, which I think is important when it comes to desserts.”

Charles gave Doc Sawyer a sort of accusatory look, seeming to say, *You’re hiding something*. Doc couldn’t argue with that, so he kept his gaze focused on the cake as he cut each piece.

“I cannot believe you and Donald haven’t spoken in so long,” Gara said

quietly. "Living in the same town for so long, not knowing the other is there? I know, you should both come for dinner next week!"

Sawyer placed a slice of the cake on a plate and set it in front of Gara. "I don't think that would be a good idea..."

"You really do look alike. Are you cousins? Do you know his brother in Texas? Donald says he owns a chain of businesses, makes a lot of money. Seems like the sort of man people in the area would know."

"The south is a large place, Gara," Charles spoke up. "Not everyone from south is from Texas." Doc walked around to give Charles a slice of the cake.

"Well, why would you live in Texas when you can live in Maryland?" Gara asked. "I never have been a fan of heat, and it gets hot enough around here during the summer. I get the impression Texas summers aren't worth the trouble. I hear even the spring is hot."

"It is," Doc responded. He paused only briefly before serving up his own cake and sitting down.

"So you do know the area, then?" Gara asked.

"I am familiar with it to a certain extent," Doc replied.

"Charles, has Donald ever gone down to visit his brother?" Gara turned to her husband. He made a noncommittal noise. She continued, "I'm sure he has. I'll have to ask the next time I see him whether he likes it better here or there. Oh, Doc, you should come for dinner. I'll visit him the moment we



return and invite him over. It'd be wonderful for you to see him again. Would a Wednesday evening be all right?"

There was no way for Doc Sawyer to tell Gara and Charles how poor of an idea it was to speak to his uncle considering what he'd done. Donald knew he had been missing. It was not a challenging puzzle to piece together between his escape and the money he had taken and how much his father would love to have both Doc and the money returned.

Gara knew his uncle. He could not let Donald know. Gara would most definitely say something. Doc couldn't let that happen. Gara had seemed to be such a lovely addition in his life. But he had no real need of her. She was not his mother. Gara was just a clerk at the local grocery. Gara was nobody, and Charles was even less than that. Gara was nothing to him. Donald can't know. No one can know. If Gara left his house, Doc's life would be over.

Sawyer ate in measured amounts and measured times. Each breath let in and out was a countdown. He knew what he had to do. Gara was nothing. Sawyer had to show her that. He thought of the wood-chopping axe in the basement, the knife in the living room side table, the gun in the upstairs closet.

Sawyer realized he didn't need to make it a clean thing. It could be a clumsy ordeal for how distanced they were from society. Gara and Charles weren't due back until the next day. He could make a mess of himself, a mess of them and the room and the table, and it would make no difference.

"The weather out here is much nicer than in town, I'll have you know." Doc began to talk, knowing that any pause in his speech would allow for more questions. "Town is full of dirty air from all the animals. This area is just the right distance from Mortsburg and Summerville to ensure its clarity—no, purity. The air is so clear and bright, even during storms. The most amazing part of this land, however, is without a doubt the natural springs. They flow down from the western mountains straight through my backyard."

Charles looked at Doc strangely again, as if to say, *I know what you're hiding.*

"That sounds lovely, Doc," Gara said between bites.

Doc eyed the knife sitting next to the cake. *How to do it. How to do it.* His mind journeyed off through possibilities, the cake morphing into sticky shapes on his tongue. He swallowed. *How to get the knife from the dish to Charles' throat or chest or thigh or temple. Which would be least traumatizing for poor Gara? Did it matter?*

"Charles. You look as though you could handle another small slice. Yes?" Sawyer stood and approached the cake dish from the side of the table as Charles shook his head and swallowed.

"No, thank you. It is good. But I couldn't," Charles said.

Sawyer put the knife down and sat again. *No worry. Another chance will come.*

Gara appeared to be mostly through with her cake and let out a small

shiver—just a shake of the shoulders that came naturally after eating.

"My dear Gara. Let me grab you something to warm you up." He stood. "Eating causes blood to rush to the stomach, you know. It can cause chills." Sawyer retrieved a thin blanket from the couch in the living room and draped it over Gara's shoulders. "Just because it isn't harmful doesn't mean it's necessarily pleasant." He patted her shoulder and looked down at her with a thin smile then turned to her husband. "Charles, are you sure you aren't in the mood for more cake?"

Doc reached for the knife again. Charles held his hand out, presumably wanting to prevent Doc from giving him more cake, but Doc grabbed his wrist and slammed it to the table. Gara dropped her fork with a gasp.

"Now, Charles. I'll have you know this was my late mother's recipe." Doc picked up the knife and twirled it slowly in one hand, keeping the other on the older man's wrist. "Don't go thinking you'll get away without eating a second piece." He looked into the man's eyes as he brought the knife toward his throat. Charles threw an arm up and blocked him easily.

Gara gasped again. "Please, Doctor," she said.

Charles shoved at Doc and stood up, knocking over his chair as he backed away from the table.

Gara got up as well, and Doc turned to her. *She knows*. He slashed with the knife and caught the edge of her hand as she tried to defend herself. He took another step and stabbed forward. Gara stumbled away quickly but

hit the edge of the doorway just as Doc's knife caught up with her. The blade slid into her neck easily.

Doc brought the knife back out and was struck on the head.

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Doc lifted his head up but stopped when he felt a throbbing in the back of his skull. He slowly bent his fingers and toes, then his wrists and ankles, testing each extremity for similar pain to the one in his head. As he moved, the throbbing eased into an ache. He blinked a few times and tried to move his head again, more successfully than the first time.

Small trails of blood stuck strands of hair to the floor and had dried in some of the crevices. Doc pushed himself up and looked around.

Gara's body. The chair on the ground. The half-eaten cake. The large vase from the side table, chipped and lying on the ground between Doc and the fallen chair, wildflowers strewn around it. Charles was gone.

Doc's aching head remained manageable, so he stood and prepared to leave.

His hastily packed bag made a soft noise as it brushed against the edge of the table, and Doc closed the door behind him.

On the side of the house, Doc approached his car and opened the door to throw his bag inside when he noticed the gash cut into the rear tire. Doc glanced to the front tire, which seemed to be unharmed, and quickly moved toward the other side. He could see another gash before fully rounding the

back of the car.

Doc ran to the corner of the house. The carriage and horses were no longer in front of Charles and Gara's cabin, of course.

He paused to think, his head twitching back and forth, searching for something. Charles must have gotten to Mortsburg at this point. The police would come and they would find Gara and Donald would know he was here and Doc Sawyer would not get away with anything. He needed to hide.

He trudged into the woods.

Approximately two miles away, hidden under brush making it difficult to see from the road, there was an entrance to a mining tunnel. It had been abandoned since just after Doc first arrived in the area. He followed the line of the road until he reached it and dropped his bag to push at the wire fence. It came away easily. The bending of the metal knocked a sign to the ground:

DANGER

This Area Closed

Stay out! Stay alive!

Doc pulled the fence in behind him. He soon reached an area of the cavern that was too dim to see. He felt the weight of the stuffy air with every blind step. He'd brought no light with him. There wasn't time.

Doc set up his few belongings far enough inside that he was not visible to the outside world.

Hours passed, the sun set.

He had packed enough food to stretch out for another day, but a large farm across the road grew acres of corn as well as other vegetables, from what Doc had seen driving past. Around the middle of the first night, Doc stood with the intention of leaving the mine tunnel and gathering food. They would search for him soon. He may not have another chance.

He held his empty bag in one hand and felt along the wall with the other. Shadows enveloped him gradually. It occurred to him that navigating the tunnel was difficult in the dark, and the next step he took sent him tumbling down. He grasped frantically at the wall as he pitched forward. His hand found a root sticking out of the ceiling and held on until the weight of his body pulled the root down and with it a cascade of dirt and rocks.

Sawyer rolled toward the opposite wall but landed with a particularly sharp rock pressed in the middle of his spine. Sawyer let out a loud wail that was silenced almost immediately when the next falling chunk of the tunnel hit him on the head. Though the sound of the collapse continued for a few minutes, it was not the thundering sound one would expect but a series of thuds and the small scraping of pebbles skipping down the tunnel walls.

Then it was quiet. It was quiet for a long time.

## The Woods

July 2015

Monday

Brian Kelly convinced the boys earlier in the day that his stories would be scary enough for them, but 14-year-old fingers continued to tap quickly against the dirt. The dark woods contrasted the bright faces around the fire.

“Anybody know where we are?” Brian asked.

“The woods,” Curtis said.

“Well, you're not *wrong*.” A few chuckles.

“Maryland,” Ben said.

“Again, yes,” Brian said. “Technically speaking. Be specific, though.”

Silence. Brian took a moment to hear the ironic crickets in the background. “What happened—”

“Hey, why don't you just tell us?” Shawn asked.

“All right, fine,” Brian said. He folded his hands together. “The Peck family has owned a lot of this land for a long time. Almost a hundred years ago, a man named John Peck was getting ready to marry off his daughter, Olivia, to a guy named Peter. They were high school sweethearts, and they were getting married in a barn a few miles down the road.”

“Who would get married in a barn?” Scott asked.

“My sister got married in a barn last year,” Ben said.

“Ew, did it smell?” Shawn asked.

“Shut up! Just listen to the story.” Lewis, 13, favorite color green, yawned.

“Lewis, don't talk like that. Scott, barns people get married in aren't the same as barns that animals live in,” Brian said. “Barns for weddings are usually just storage. Anyway. Olivia and Peter were in love for years. Their families, friends, and anyone who passed them on the street knew it.

“The day of their wedding, Peter was waiting at the barn while Olivia got ready at her house. She left in a carriage when the ceremony was about to start. On the way, Olivia's carriage tipped over the side of the road into a ditch. She was killed instantly. Back then, obviously there weren't cell phones or anything—” Lewis sighed, “—so Peter was waiting at the altar for hours before he finally gave up. He thought Olivia had run away.

“Peter got really angry and started to flip tables and throw chairs and stuff so everyone decided to get out of the way until he finished. When someone finally showed up to say Olivia was in an accident, Peter had disappeared.”

“I mean,” Shawn said, “wouldn't he have killed himself or something anyway?”

“That's not the end. Just chill another minute. About 15 years ago, a group of people was out here camping kind of like us. Some of the kids were a little younger, though, and one night the youngest boy went missing. He was only eight years old. Another boy woke up one of the counselors, Mark—he's



actually a friend of mine—and they all started looking for the boy. They looked for hours. It was the middle of the night, so they had to use flashlights, and they didn't want any of the other kids to disappear.

"Just as the sun was coming up, Mark circled back toward the campsite and heard a voice that sounded far away. Mark looked up and saw the boy sitting 30 feet high in a tree. The lowest branch was, like, six feet high, and there's no way the kid could have gotten up there by himself.

"When they finally got him down, he was totally fine. Not shaking, no cuts or broken bones, nothing. They asked him what happened. The boy said he got scared and didn't know where he was, but he saw a lady in a white dress, and she promised to keep him safe. He said she lifted him into the tree and stayed with him until the sun came up.

"Other people saw the White Lady again after that. She seems to hang around during the night and always helps people when they need it. Almost everyone thinks the White Lady is Olivia Peck, still in her wedding dress, looking for Peter."

The boys stared at the fire.

"That was the worst ghost story ever," Andy said.

"You said it was gonna be scary!" Scott said. "Some girl putting a little kid in a tree isn't scary!"

"I had to get you guys warmed up," Brian said. "It's only the first night. At least now when you go to pee in the middle of the night, you're not worried about the Shadow Man."

"Who's the Shadow Man?" Eric asked.

"I can tell you about the Shadow Man tomorrow night. It's a long story." Brian stood and started to kick apart the glowing logs. "You guys need to go to sleep now. Come on, get in bed. Go. If you need to pee, do it now! I don't want to be holding your hand at 3 AM. 'Night, kiddos. Remember, we're hiking early tomorrow!"

Yawns and groans circled the small clearing, but soon the space around the fire was empty save Brian and his counselor-in-training, Mike.

"Learn anything useful?" Brian asked quietly, drizzling water over red coals.

"Yeah. Don't tell 14-year-old boys lame campfire stories."

Brian splashed some water over Mike's head. "We should get to bed, too. You'll want your sleep when 7 AM smacks you over the head."

"Sure. See ya in the morning, boss."

"Don't call me that!"

## **Tuesday**

"Tell us about the Shadow Man," said Chase.

"Ugh. This better be a good one," said Andy.

"Guys, stop." Lewis murmured. Nobody heard him.

“All right,” Brian started. “I promise you’ll like the Shadow Man. He’s one of my favorites.”

Mike heard this story during his training the week before. The senior staff had recounted a slew of disembodied voices, ghost orbs, and mysterious deaths in the area. Then the Program Coordinator assured them they would learn each one. Mike hadn’t learned any.

“Have I told you guys about my friend Mark?” Brian asked. The stories Brian told his boys were almost more believable to Mike than so-called reality.

“Yeah, last night.” Lewis said.

“Right! Awesome,” Brian said. “Mark’s a buddy of mine, and one time Mark told me about his friend Aaron. Aaron was the first person to ever see the Shadow Man. One weekend, he was taking the bike path that runs from Glade Mountain into Mortsburg down the road.

“When Aaron got out of the woods at the bottom of the mountain, he realized it took longer than he thought, and he wouldn’t have enough time to get to town before sunset. He started peddling faster.

“It wasn’t dark, but it wasn’t bright outside either when Aaron got to about where we are now,” Brian made a show of looking around and estimating where Aaron supposedly would have been. He was good at it, Mike noted. The action didn’t look rehearsed. Brian continued, “There were a bunch of clouds in the sky, and Aaron didn’t want to be caught in the rain or

anything like that. He started peddling as fast as he could, which was pretty fast 'cause he was a muscular dude.

“He got almost to where the main road is—the one we came in on. He was gliding down that big hill really fast when all of a sudden this man just stepped out of the woods in front of him. He couldn't stop in time. He lost his balance and fell off the side of the road onto a huge pile of branches.

“Mark told me Aaron hit his head a little. He was lying in this pile of sticks looking over the cuts on his arms and stretching out his legs when he saw the man was standing next to him. The sun was behind him so Aaron couldn't see his face. He looked like this smudgy, grey shape. Aaron started to get up to yell at the guy for wrecking his bike, but when he got to his feet, the man just disappeared.

“Aaron looked around for a few minutes, but he didn't want to be stuck when it got dark, so he picked up his bike, which had some scratches but nothing broken, and he started to ride away.

“The second he got to his car, he passed out. Mark said he thought it was a concussion, but that was the only symptom Aaron ever showed. Aaron insists the Shadow Man followed him and attacked. No one really believed him.”

“So wait,” Andy said. “Why is the Shadow Man so scary if this Aaron dude didn't get hurt and no one else believed him? You sure he wasn't just hallucinating?”

“I’m sure,” Brian said. “Wanna know why? Because Mike saw him, too.” Brian turned to face Mike, as did the entire group of boys.

Mike, who heard entirely different stories during his days as a camper, wasn’t sure if he was supposed to be prepared for this, or if this surprise story was part of his training. But he was extremely sure he had never seen the Shadow Man. He gave Brian a surprised look.

“He doesn’t like to talk about it,” Brian said to the boys. “Which I can totally understand.”

“When I camped here a few years ago,” Mike spoke timidly, “I actually had Mark as a counselor. He was great.” He swallowed, glancing at Brian. “One time, he let us have our own fires and burn whatever we wanted as long as it wasn’t food or people.”

Brian laughed and leaned away from the fire. Mike leaned forward.

“My fire was on the other side of my tent, so I could see everyone else but they couldn’t really see me. I started to burn sticks and pieces of thread I ripped off my jeans. I found a pen in my bag that I threw in. I was hoping it would explode or something, but it just melted.” Mike looked down briefly as if he were disappointed.

“I melted a water bottle and burned a bunch of paper from my notebook. I burned my shoelace, which was really stupid ‘cause then I didn’t have a shoelace. But while I was looking around for other stuff to throw in, I

saw this tree behind me. I didn't remember it being there before, but I wasn't sure.

"Then the tree moved. I realized it wasn't a tree. I thought it was just my own shadow, but it walked up to me and even when it was closer to the fire I couldn't see its face. It was just this black cloud that kind of looked like a man. I started to back away from it. I heard Mark yell something, so I just ran over to him.

"He asked me what I was doing, and I told him what I saw. Mark said he saw me stand up, but didn't see a man standing there, or even a shadow. I didn't know what to do, so I just stayed with Mark closer to the other guys and their fires. We left the next day anyway. Mark didn't tell me until we got back the next morning about Aaron and the Shadow Man he saw. I was just glad he didn't attack me or anything."

Mike sat back and picked at the label on a water bottle. The boys silently looked at the fire, keeping their focus away from the dark woods behind them.

Brian stood up and clapped his hands together. "Bedtime. More stories tomorrow, guys."

They all stood and went to bed instantly, except Lewis, who walked up to Mike. "Can I have some of your water? Mine ran out."

Mike said, "Why don't I grab you a new one?" He sent Lewis to bed before returning to Brian's side.

“Nice thinking on your feet, man. That was really impressive,” Brian whispered. He stuck his hands into his pockets.

“I just ran with it,” Mike said. “Couldn’t tell it again if I tried.”

Brian laughed quietly. “Well then, welcome to ‘The Woods.’ The unofficial one. Come with me, and I will tell you of our timeless traditions.”

They walked far enough away from the campsite to not disturb the boys. Brian talked about “customs” and “rituals—but not sacrifices or anything like that,” and Mike listened intently. By the time they went to bed, it was still only 1 AM, but Mike felt like he’d been awake for days.

### Wednesday

Brian walked confidently along the road as they passed each cabin. The boys sometimes struggled to keep up. It kept them breathing heavy, which kept them quiet for the short walk. Brian slowed in front of a large stone house and waved his flashlight up and down its face as he circled to the rear of the building.

“All right, story time!” Brian rubbed his hands together. “I talked a little bit about the Peck family before, but we’re gonna talk about a new guy tonight, and he’s actually much more important than the Pecks. His name was Doc Sawyer. He came here a while ago—before Anne and Peter—and built this house and all the cabins.

“His main goal was to host a resort to teach people about natural health. He was kind of a fanatic. Like, on the main floor of the house, there’s

a section of the ceiling you can see is different from the rest, like it was put in later. Doc Sawyer used to wake up every morning and jump through that hole all the way to the basement where he had a pool filled with natural spring water from the mountains.

“Nobody really knew Sawyer when he got here. He didn’t have family in town or any friends. A lot of people thought he ran away to the woods after he murdered somebody and almost got caught. He was a major hermit, like only left his house once a week. And he was only here for a few years before he left again. No one knew where he went after that. He just left all his stuff here.”

There was a long silence.

“After Sawyer disappeared, some people in Mortsburg—that town nearby—said the bones of someone he killed were crushed and used in the walls of the basement, but we’ll never find out. There’s probably some reason Sawyer did the weird things he did. I always thought he was some crazy wackjob. They couldn’t tell when people were insane back then.”

Brian directed his light at the ground and continued to circle the house. “Anyway, you guys can decide for yourselves.”

### **Thursday**

“Make sure to walk quietly,” Brian told the boys.

“But why?” Andy asked.

“It’s part of the experience,” Mike said. “Trust me.”



“Wouldn’t trust you as far as I could throw you,” Chase said. Mike laughed.

Brian stopped at the edge of the main road and turned around. “Okay, this is really important, so listen up. Out here, we’ve got to watch out for deer spotters. They drive around at night with huge spotlights and look for deer to shoot illegally. If we see them coming, we need to get off the road and look away from the light.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding,” Eric said.

“This is not a joke. They will look for the light reflecting in your eyes and think you’re a deer and try to shoot you. Please, please, please listen to me. Get off the road, don’t look at the light.”

Mike stood up straighter and shifted his weight, hoping he looked authoritative.

“Now count off,” Brian said.

Each boy said his assigned number in order until Lewis concluded, “Ten. Where are we going?”

“The graveyard,” Brian said. He stepped onto the road and the group followed.

The boys kept up surprisingly quiet conversations the whole time, but Brian walked silently at the front of the group. He walked quick enough that Mike’s legs were getting sore. Mike thought they must have walked nearly a mile down the dark road before they finally veered into a field.

“Count off,” Brian said again as they started into the cornfield. The boys counted.

Mike’s eyes adjusted enough to make out a large tree sticking up from the center of the cornfield. They maneuvered through row after row, and Mike saw that the tree was in the middle of a clearing next to a small graveyard. The white fence stood out in the darkness.

Brian leaned on one hand against the tree and gestured for the boys to sit in front of him. Mike joined them.

“This is the Peck family graveyard,” Brian began. “It’s been here for so long, you can’t even read most of the headstones anymore.” He turned on his flashlight and shone it around the graveyard, illuminating fungus-covered headstones of all sizes.

“Olivia Peck is buried here, along with her father and all of their descendants who aren’t still alive. Well, obviously. The tricky thing about this—”

“Hang on, Brian,” Mike said. “I’m seeing light on the road.”

Brian turned, and they all silently watched the small visible stretch of road as a faint light got brighter. Soon it was two lights, then three, with the third becoming significantly brighter than the others.

“Look away,” Brian said. “Deer spotters. Remember what I told you. Don’t look at the light.”

The car slowed to a stop, and the spotlight scanned over the field. Mike heard the boys breathing, but he faced away and kept his eyes closed.

“Chase,” Brian said. “Stop moving.”

Brian must have looked up to check, because only a short moment later he told them they could turn back around.

“Okay, let’s keep going. Where was I?”

Mike couldn’t remember.

“Something about tricks,” Ben said.

“Huh? Oh, right, the graveyard,” Brian said. “The Peck graveyard wasn’t always in this spot. Rumor is it used to be in the woods near where our camp is. We can’t be sure, because of the ways the land changed over the decades, but what we do know is that they missed a few graves during the move. Some of the headstones had fallen apart and no one could tell they were there. So there’s a chance your tent is over a grave.”

“Creepy,” Scott said. The boys laughed.

Mike looked around while Brian told the story about the glowing orb—another event he claimed actually happened to him. This one Mike didn’t quite understand, but the boys seemed to be startled by the smallest movements and sounds. Occasionally a car would drive past and the boys glanced up at it until they were certain there was no spotlight on the back.

There was a sudden rustling behind them. Brian stopped in the middle of a sentence. Curtis and Ben scooted forward until they were no longer at the back of the group, all while watching the tall stalks of corn.

“Probably some chipmunks wrestling,” Mike suggested.

No one moved, and there was no more sound from the corn.

Brian nodded, and continued. Mike didn't let that particular patch of corn out of his sight for the remainder of Brian's story. It was still incredibly dark in spite of the moon peeking between the clouds, and the repetitive lines of the stalks swam in Mike's vision. He blinked and shook his head. Nothing was there.

“You guys still with me?” Brian asked. The boys muttered agreement.

Brian motioned for them to stand. “All right, let's head out. It's nearly 12:30.”

The boys stood and brushed dirt off their shorts. Brian had them all count off. Mike walked over to him. The counting had stopped.

“Seven,” Scott repeated uncertainly. There was no eight.

“Who was eight?” Brian asked. “Who had eight?”

“I think it was Shawn,” Scott said.

“No,” Shawn said. “I had nine. Andy had eight.”

“Andy?” Brian asked, looking around. There was no response.

Mike circled the group and squinted at each of them, as if Andy was standing there but not speaking.

“Everyone stay exactly where you are,” Brian said.

Mike looked at the ground, the graveyard, the rest of the clearing, back to the group of boys, all the way to the road. There were no mysterious shapes and no movements.

Brian walked quickly around the graveyard. When he returned, he moved toward the corn, and was met with a flying child.

The other boys stood around while Andy dropped to the ground in laughter.

“How dare—Do not do that again.” Brian pulled Andy up by the arm. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Don’t forget about the deer spotters!” Mike added.

Brian made Andy walk beside him the entire way back to camp.

### **Friday**

“Now, the Pecks don’t let anyone go in the mine anymore. Actually, it might be some government land safety thing, cause the whole tunnel is unstable.” Brian spoke while Mike kept a light on the gate, occasionally highlighting particular areas.

The damp cavern sucked in all the light so they could only see a couple feet of the floor. A few boys moved to the center of the group so as to not leave their backs exposed.

“You can see the barbed wire woven through the gate and around the sides. There’s that super obvious sign that says ‘Stay out.’ I’m serious when I

say *don't go in there*. My buddy Jason tried to explore about five years ago, and a cave-in started. He went less than ten feet. Please, just don't go in there.

"They say Sawyer's tunnels led from his front lawn all the way up here so he could escape if they ever found him. About ten years after he got here, he disappeared. They think he escaped through here, back when it was still stable, and went down south—"

A small light flashed in the woods.

"Brian?" Lewis whispered.

"I have no idea what that was."

"Maybe it was a reflection." Mike offered. "Like, the flashlight caught a fence at that farm over there."

"Yeah, that makes sense. Thanks Mike." Brian turned to the boys, putting his back to the tunnel again.

"Are you sure that's not a person?" Lewis asked. The group bunched closer together.

"I'm sure. You think someone could get through that gate? No way."

"Do we have to stay here?" Andy asked.

"All I had left was that Doc Sawyer probably went to Georgia. Mike, you got anything?"

"Not even a little bit. Let's go." Mike moved to hand Brian's flashlight back.

“You wanna lead?” Brian asked, ignoring the flashlight.

“Sure, boss.”

Brian sighed. “You really need to stop calling me that.”

### Saturday

Brian maneuvered around the amphitheater picking up granola bar wrappers every few steps. He snorted softly, relieved this was the worst he found after the final assembly. Mark had told him horror stories of last-day clean up. All consequences of keeping pre-teens confined together for extended periods of time. Mike came jogging up to him.

“Brian! They’ve got lunch ready for us.”

“Thanks, man. I’ll be right there,” Brian said. Mike started to jog away again. “Mike, wait. Did you tell Kylie? She finished cleanup early and said she was going for a walk.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ll grab her. Thanks! See you in a few.”

Brian raised his hand briefly and grabbed his half-full garbage bag, heading up the steps to take one last look at the amphitheater.

The boys’ stuff was gone and the air smelled like dust, but he could picture them sitting in rows playing cards and trading snacks from the camp gift shop. Brian couldn’t be sure if it was his last year at camp, but it didn’t hurt to say goodbye, just in case. He ignored the not-so-subtle carvings of initials and messages on the benches. Shaking his head, Brian stepped down, dropped the trash off in a pile near the pavilion, and went to the cafeteria

where most of the camp staff was already eating a catered lunch. He saw Mike waving from across the room and went to join him.

“Hey, I have a question for you,” Mike said when Brian sat down,

“Shoot,” Brian said through a mouthful of chicken.

“Those stories we tell the boys... Which ones are true? ‘Cause I know ghosts are a long shot, but it’s also possible the noises in the woods came from somewhere and the dudes living there at the time just *thought* they were being haunted. You know? Like, *almost haunted*.”

“Almost haunted. Put that on a t-shirt, man.”

“No, seriously, I want to know when I’m talking about the legend of the White Lady if that couple actually died the ways they did or if they even existed. I get why we don’t tell the boys—ruins the ‘magic’ or whatever. But don’t I get to know?”

“Listen. All you need to know is that all those people actually existed, and all the men who first told the stories actually experienced those things. I mean, I know Jason personally and that Tom Storm guy living in the cave was for real.”

“Have you seen any of them? The White Lady? The Shadow Man?”

“As far as I know, the Shadow Man has only shown up once, and that was 30 years ago. I haven’t seen any of the others.”

Mike chewed through the last of his food. “Okay, one last one. Question, that is. One last question.”



“Make it a good one, Mike,” one of the other counselors yelled while the girl next to him shot a spitball in Mike’s general direction.

“Where’s Doc Sawyer buried?” Mike asked. Brian gave him a confused look. Mike continued, “We don’t know anything after he disappeared, we don’t even know for sure what made him abandon the place. Who’s to say he didn’t just become more of a hermit about halfway through his life so everyone just thought he left? Why does everyone assume he moved away? I mean, if I were him and I spent all that time on the land and those awesome cabins—I assume they were more awesome at the time—I wouldn’t want to leave and die somewhere else a few decades later. I’d want to be buried among my possessions, as they say.”

“Do they say that?”

“Shut up, Carl! All I’m saying is I think Sawyer is still there somewhere, maybe at the bottom of that overgrown pool.”

“I guess,” Brian said. “I always assume he went down south, to get far away from people who knew him. But there’s just nothing. Radio silence—did they have radios back then? Yeah, I guess they did—he probably moved and took a new name. Sawyer wasn’t his real name either.”

“I think we all knew that.”

“I think we all need to move on from the kiddie tales and finish cleaning this place up.” Their director, Jeff, loomed over the table as the rest of the room picked up their plates and swiftly exited the building. Brian

pinched Mike, who seemed frozen in place, and took his own stuff to the trash. Mike jolted and hurried to follow the group, but Jeff caught him on the shoulder.

“Michael. I know you’re curious. The important thing to remember is they’re just stories. Just tell them like we always have.” Jeff started to guide him toward the double doors. “Besides, it’s not like reality could have been more interesting than our stories, right?”

## Imitation and Insecurity: Writing is Personal

The first book I read when I started developing this project was Austin Kleon's *Steal Like an Artist*. The title confused me, but the message was simple: stop imitating good artists, and start stealing from them. Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 1:9, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (New International Version). Statements like this are not meant to be disheartening, but I had trouble seeing them any other way until I read Kleon's book. He encourages writers, filmmakers, and other artists to embrace the reality that there are no original ideas and they should not feel limited by that. Instead, artists should take advantage of the wealth of knowledge in modern society.

Kleon's differentiates stealing from imitation. He explains, "Imitation is about copying. Emulation is when imitation goes one step further, breaking through into your own thing" (Kleon 38). Much of the emphasis of the book is on being an individual and valuing one's own experiences, interests, and abilities. Kleon's book concludes, "Some advice can be a vice. Feel free to take what you can and leave the rest. There are no rules" (147). Editors Renni Browne and Dave King end the final chapter of their book, *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, by saying, "Realistically, we can't really come up with a list of things to watch for as you improve your voice—there are no rules to becoming an individual" (182). Embracing these ideas allowed me to begin finding my voice as a writer and worrying less about mistakes.

The development of my main character for this fiction project followed a similar path of revelation and self-discovery over the past several months. As each story gradually took shape, Harold "Doc" Sawyer gained an identity and a

personality. Sawyer's first appearance showed him hiding in a dark, decrepit basement; he was a stereotypical mad doctor with no motives except his own insanity. The second round of drafts provided him with a backstory as a runaway and medical school dropout. His crazed actions were replaced by careful ones that mirrored his attempts to organize his life. By the third round, Sawyer was no longer just one of my characters but his own person making decisions I could not control. I could not change Sawyer's nature any more than another person could change my voice.

Maintaining some aspects of familiarity was a guiding force through this process. All of the stories took place in an area I could describe in great detail from personal experience. This allowed me to include physical descriptions, weather patterns, and geographical aspects of the location without extensive research. Sawyer was also created from local legends about a reclusive doctor who once owned land in the mountains. However, the importance of these elements in the final drafts is not that they were easy to recreate; Sawyer and the land he lived on only became important when they were no longer attached to the originals in my mind. Sawyer turned from an imitation of a real person into a character, and many of the issues I faced were resolved.

Resolution was not quick or natural at any point in the process. Every challenge I faced required trial and error to find a solution. Writing a complete work was somewhat new to me, as was rewriting as opposed to simply proofreading. Nearly every previous experience I have had preparing a work to be submitted—whether the work was my own or someone else's—involved little more than

scanning the work for grammar and formatting issues. Writing original content seemed especially difficult until I started rewriting. All of a sudden, I understood why so many books on the subject exist.

I believe that works of fiction are never truly finished; therefore, I do not consider the stories within this project to be perfectly complete. However, each story has gone through at least three rounds of rewriting, and they are significantly more complete now compared to earlier drafts. Each new version of a story brought new problems to be solved or plot holes to be filled. Although it occurred to me many times to give up and declare the project finished, I also noticed progress being made in each rewrite. Where the first and second drafts contained dozens of continuity issues, misspellings, and technologies that did not exist in the 1920s, third and fourth drafts merely had the occasional missing dialogue tag and one plot hole that could be resolved with a bit of thought.

To assist me with fixing these issues, I had dozens of resources at hand from friends to large stacks of books. Considering writing for myself and developing an individual voice were both primary goals of mine with this project, occasionally I had to discern which advice to follow and which to ignore. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* covers a number of important writing guidelines in great detail, but a disclaimer shows up now and then: nearly every rule in writing has exceptions. Most challenging for me was my use of narrative summary—which I developed after reading a mixture of *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien and *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson.

The nature of my stories combined with the style I wanted to follow did not conform to Browne and King's rules about how much narrative summary is too much. The highly recommended method is to "resist the urge to explain" (Browne and King 9), or "show, don't tell," as every writer has heard at some point. My priority was not only to describe Sawyer's life and experiences in the most effective way possible but to also write in a certain style. This style needed to fit the feeling I wanted to give readers—like they are hearing legends being told about Sawyer. Alexander Steele says, "Rules are made to be broken" (20). Reading Browne and King's advice caused me to question my motives, but the near-excessive use of narrative summary instead of dialogue and action was purposeful and, in my mind, necessary.

The challenge with intentionally breaking the "show, don't tell" rule was deciding which portions did in fact need to be shown rather than told. Early in the drafting process, I attempted to describe everything with narrative summary and, in turn, missed opportunities for excellent dialogue and action. The few times I was able to step away from my writing and come back to it with fresh eyes showed me which portions most needed to be changed and which ones needed to be cut or shortened. Additionally, I realized that I would take responsibility for my decisions whether they were successful or not.

In my proposal, I named three goals I hoped to accomplish while completing this project. My first goal was to finish. Anne Lamott states that students always ask how to know when they are done with a piece of writing. She explains,

You've gone over and over something so many times, and you've weeded and pruned and rewritten, and the person who reads your work for you has given you great suggestions that you have mostly taken—and then finally something inside you just says it's time to get on to the next thing. (Lamott 93)

By these standards, I consider this project to be finished. There will always be something to fix or change about these stories, but the season of my life that contained this project is coming to a close, and it is time to move on to the next thing.

My second goal for this project was the most difficult to carry out. It stated that I should enjoy myself during the process. I believe there were many facets to achieving this. One facet involved writing for myself rather than trying to impress readers or teach them something. Kleon says, "The best advice is not to write what you know, it's to write what you like. . . . Write the story you want to read" (47). Similarly, Steele recommends, "Write what ignites your interest" (11). When writing and rewriting, it was easy to give into the pressure of the deadline, the obligation to show my work to the public, and the desire to impress my readers in some way. Allowing these things to pressure me caused nothing but stress and frequently inhibited my ability to make progress in my writing. My mind was constantly occupied with my potential failings rather than my potential successes.

For an extensive period of time, I was unable to push past these feelings, and my work was not progressing. Looking for inspiration, I skimmed through Kleon's book again and came to a page stating, "Validation is for parking" (111). I reread this

short section repeatedly over the course of the day and eventually took notes on it. In several places, I copied, “The best way to get approval is to not need it” (Hugh MacLeod, qtd. in Kleon 108). I started taking ownership not only of my failures but of my successes as well. In my writing, as well as the rest of my life, I was determined to approve of myself before worrying whether anyone else did. This proved to be incredibly difficult, and I regularly needed to remind myself of it in order to get past moments of panic or writer’s block. Jack Bickham urges, “Keep going. Ultimately, nothing else matters” (110). In times of extreme doubt and stress, I took a deep breath and moved on.

The goal was not to merely move on, however, it was to enjoy myself. Steele investigated writers’ motivations for writing and discovered, “Some people write fiction with no real intention of ever showing it to anyone, and often they’re deliriously happy doing so” (23). However, writing can be miserable. I spent days in a row at some points pondering the same question and thinking that there might not be an answer. Having my weaknesses pointed out—and having to point them out on my own—challenged me to examine what writing meant to me.

I wrote a short piece of contemporary fiction once during middle school. While writing my proposal, I read that piece again. It had some good elements but was mostly terrible. What I could not forget, however, was the reason I wrote it: I liked the characters. I could not think of any book I had read at the time that had those characters in it. The same is true for this project. I cannot think of a published work of fiction that has Harold Sawyer. There are certainly characters similar to him, but no one else could write stories about Sawyer the way that I have in these



short stories. I can have confidence in my unique perspective and abilities. Even if I read these stories in the distant future and despise every word and phrase, I do not regret that I wrote them. I believe that lack of regret and confidence in myself is better than simply enjoying the process of writing.

The third and final goal I set was to improve on my shortcomings in some way. I named two of these shortcomings specifically: setting descriptions, and discerning aspects of real life from the concept of plot. It is difficult to know what the standard is for whether I accomplished this or not. I am tempted to believe that I can be the only one to judge this considering that the goal was my own. On the other hand, there is no universal ruler with which to measure improvement in fiction writing; perhaps there should be no ruler at all. In spite of this, I firmly believe that the final drafts of my stories are vastly improved from their first drafts, including in the areas of weakness I previously stated. Therefore, whether or not every reader of a piece agrees that it is an improvement on previous drafts, fiction writers can determine that for themselves.

Lamott argues in *Bird by Bird*, "In order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. If not, why are you writing? Why are you here?" (99). I agree that writers should respect their craft. However, the implication of awe I feel with the use of the word "reverent" makes me uncomfortable. Years before I wrote my first piece of fiction in middle school, I consistently wrote journals and poems to understand the world around me as well as myself. Still, there are constant questions such as why characters act certain ways; I am responsible to answer those questions for myself.

Doc Sawyer, in particular, played a significant part in this process. I modeled his character from legends I was told at various points in my childhood. The stories changed and grew more dramatic over the years, and my curiosity about their accuracy brought me to look into the history of the area. Taking inspiration from the contrast between history and legend, I created Sawyer as a symbol of this disparity in order to sort out my impressions of it. "The Woods" balances Sawyer's life with local legends and demonstrates reactions to them that mirror my own experiences. This type of writing has always helped me in the past, and the development of Sawyer has been crucial in my journey as a writer.

Brandon Stanton, creator of the Humans of New York project, interviewed a woman in December 2014 who said, "I'm terrible at journaling. But I do it anyway, because I think that maybe one day I'll write something that I didn't know before, and suddenly it will all make sense" ("Humans of New York"). Writing helps me to make sense of the world and become my own person, and I will always be reverent of that.

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