

1.

*Now that your grandmother is dead, child, and some time has passed, I can finally tell you about her. Her name was Olivia. Her story is more interesting than mine, but the last moments are more tragic. I watched her die slowly with a few people in attendance. Someone said a prayer and a few others whimpered as the machines stopped humming and the tubes stopped transmitting. I couldn't feel anything. As we walked out of the hospital in Nashville, the landscape was milky, translucent like it was made of plastic and chalk dust, I kept dropping my car keys, laughing nervously and cursing. The nurse had hugged me and said "Oh, honey" and then commenced rifling through piles of folders and paperwork. They gave me back the gift shop teddy bear that was among the pill bottles and food wrappers that ended up in the plastic bag in the closet by the bed where she died. She would have always remembered your birthday, child.*

That's where he had stopped. There was either nothing more worth saying, or far too much to make the effort. Part of him worried that if he sent the letter, after it was finished of course, that big and powerful things would be over, that maybe there wouldn't be anything left. He slid the letter aside and, with the charcoal, spread wisps of lines around the edges of a blank page. The face of a young woman formed under his nimble fingers, smiling, hiding something from the world.

'Children run to their mothers when they get hurt', Sketch thought, listening to empty silence down the hall, 'but not because they want safety; fear is there to alert us to the possibility of dying, and if we are to die, we desperately want to look into a face of love at the last moment. So that it all means something important.' He was allowed to have a pen, a piece of charcoal, and three pieces of paper at a time, though he didn't often use them now. Months had passed since he wrote the beginning of a letter he wasn't sure he intended to send. He had no idea where to send it if he ever finished it.

Sketch let the charcoal drop to the floor and smeared the tips of his blackened fingers across his pant leg, stacked the pages on each other. Still the silence pulsated in the darkness outside. It had been one year since he arrived. Other inmates thought him perhaps insane, reclusive and strange. This disguise had worked well for him, and he spent most of his time drawing, thinking.

But this is not the most interesting part of his life. No, this is the last part, which is somewhat sad and a little too quiet. It was not entirely accurate for him to say that Olivia's life was more interesting than his own, but he was never good at seeing himself in the correct light. For the most part, his life was very interesting, even bizarre at times. He was orphaned at a young age, no word or sign of his parents ever surfacing. He had dull memories of wandering through odd city streets and feeling terrified of what was around every corner. He ate from garbage cans and stole food from open delivery trucks in the backs of grocery stores. Somehow, after an indiscernible amount of time, he wound up feeding off of the thrown-away remnants of cafeteria lunches behind the Kaden Hollow General Hospital. Olivia found him there, dirty and feral, surprisingly alive. Her role as a head nurse and her unwaveringly compassionate resolve imbued her with the proclivity, if not the sheer gumption, to turn the boiler-room storage space

into a bedroom fit for a small boy. She lived in a modest house just behind the hospital, so she was always nearby.

His exact age was uncertain, but at Olivia's request, several doctors examined him and agreed he must have been about nine years old when she found him, which would have made 1978 the year of his birth. He was legally adopted by Olivia after fruitless searches were made to find his biological family. Olivia saw to it that he attended school, had clean clothes, occupied his time with worthwhile activities, and, for all intents and purposes, lived a normal life.

But life was always just this side of normal. She often found stashes of old food under the metal frame of his bed or in the pockets of his jacket. Some nights he would shriek in his sleep and walk the hallways in lucid trances. As he got older, he grew tall, so tall that he had trouble managing his gangly limbs. He never got the hang of people, and spent most of his time in his room, where he took to scribbling images in notebooks and talking to himself. Over time, and through a number of shameful encounters with his peers, Sketch learned to fear and hate the bumpy terrain of the social landscape.

To make matters worse, at the age of seventeen he developed an odd condition in which his height overtook his body's ability to circulate blood fast enough, and he would often faint and fall to the ground unconscious. It was a condition that made him the object of ridicule and juvenile teasing. The black outs seemed to happen most when he was tired, which caused him to spend the last year of high school going to bed extremely early in order to be fully rested for the next day of classes. And although this seemed like a sensible solution for overcoming his plight, he began to go to bed so early, and wake up so early, that he threw himself off his sleep cycles, which eventually left him in a pattern of forcefully remaining on his feet until he passed out late at night in some random place. After high school he decided to stop fighting it and generally stayed close to his hospital basement bedroom.

Late, quiet nights left spans of time in which he roamed the dark halls of the hospital, peering in at the sleeping occupants. Many of them were temporary patients, victims of automobile accidents, middle aged men with heart issues. But a small few were residential. They were elderly, some senile, some bedridden or at least sequestered to their rooms. In his boredom, Sketch took to visiting them in the middle of the night, in silence, while they slept, to augment and rearrange bits of their rooms. He would move the shoes from one side of the bed to the other, or open magazines, or replace the television remote with a toothbrush. Nothing harmful or dangerous.

During the days, most days, not all, he worked at the Kaden Hollow Weekly, documenting local stories with charcoal and pencils. Carl, his boss, said that hand-drawn illustrations gave their small-town newspaper an authentic appearance. Sketch was deft with illustration. His real name was Samuel Thibodeaux; Olivia had coined the name "Sketch" when he was still a boy. His friends, of which there were only a few, had perpetuated the name so adequately that to hear himself called Samuel was jolting, as if Samuel were someone else.

He found memory to be a frightening and monumental thing, duplicitous in its hiding, emotionally rewarding and intoxicating. He easily recalled moments of his youth in Kaden

Hollow, and most often saw himself as much younger in those recollections. His sandy hair flopping and bouncing and cloaking his light blue eyes like curtains of straw. He remembered Katy as she was in her most innocent, petite and nimble, blanketing everything around her with her overflowing energy. He remembered how she would talk to him when no one else would. Not out of pity, mind you, but because there was something about her perception that didn't register unworthiness in people. When others mocked and teased Sketch in his awkwardness, she seemed to not know she was supposed to join in. In his memory he had leaned on her, or at least the idea of her, and had laid some part of his solidarity at her feet. That fossilized image of himself, tucked away in a corner of his mind, youthful and benign, was what he identified with forever after.

Ostensibly, the letter was meant to be a documentation of his memories, the good and bad, beginning with the death of Olivia, which broke his life into two parts. But his attempt to write it down so that it could be read and understood by another was proving futile, for the first part of his life and the second were so chronologically disproportionate. How could he say so much about so short a time? How could it be written so that one would truly feel the impact? If he sent it off, the letter would hopefully bring some sense of understanding, provided he could even figure out where to send it. But again and again he wracked his brain to wring out the details, to clarify foremost to himself what it was all really *like*. And he always began his remembering with the cicadas that lined the trees of middle Tennessee that summer, the summer that Olivia died, a summer marred by death and electrified by passionate delusions of grandeur. A thirteen-year brood had awakened and set the air on fire with their screams. So loud, so encompassing, that they dulled the ears and seemed as whispers. Everywhere he could hear the whispering: *Keep your hands off*. And this was where he started his remembering: in forests of screaming bugs.