

## *Sarah Schiff*

### **Bigger and Better**

A serial rapist is on the loose in Greenwood, Georgia, the fully gentrified, college-adjacent, intown-smalltown where Benjamin Adams grew up. Where he's returned.

He's the suspect, of course: black male, defiant hair, low pants, that gait. Echoes of his face stalk the nightly news. They have for as long as he can remember. He's not new to the town, but he is to its citizens. The indigene has come home.

It feels strange sleeping in the house where his grandmother just died, in his old room, in his childhood bed. But it beats the 1990 Accord he's been wandering and sleeping in since his other-than-honorable discharge from the Army. He lies partly covered by the faded quilt that his Gran inherited from hers, and the springs of the mattress shriek beneath his body with every turn. Between the shrieks, the house is silent.

The funeral is tomorrow.

From what he's heard, Gran had become a loveable staple of Greenwood: the batshit-crazy lady who wandered the streets, humming, draped in afghan, passing out fuzzy licorice to the white kids who bounced their backpacks to and from school. They'd been taught not to fear her, so they didn't.

Benjamin had been in the Army during the incursion of whites. No high school diploma, a couple wars abroad, a jammed-up yearning for unspecified vengeance had brought him there. When other men's bodies quaked in anticipation of a firefight, his released into stillness. He could will and wield fury with the ease of breath. Sometimes when locked in position, silent, in the slow-moving hours of night, in the white dust of desert and concrete, when the only light was the flicker of the moon glinting off metal roofs and shot-out vehicles, he imagined

the muscles on his arms smooth-hardened and veiny like black marble, only his eyes shifting with movement—a statue possessed.

He and a fellow grunt once spent an entire afternoon posed behind a charred half-wall as Iraqi soldiers disguised in civilian clothes regrouped over tea and strategy. The gritty wind needled his cheeks, and he tasted it when he sucked his tongue against his teeth. He envied them their *ghutras*, flapping ridiculously in the wind. His troop finally circled back and brought with them the element of surprise, and he was glad when the enemy declined the offer of surrender. It was his first big kill and over too soon. Since he was the virgin of the troop, they had him perform the dead-check. The lieutenant told him to use the butt of his rifle, but he poked his index finger into each insurgent's left eye. None of them flinched.

War offered directives for every unknown. It also gave him time to read. An incipient interest in books had long ago been bullied out of him, but in the Army, he could be anyone. Already across the globe, reading took him into even further distances.

His high school English teacher, Ms. Garden, had given her students an assignment: tail a stranger, imagine yourself in their shoes, write a story from the stranger's point of view. "The idea is to use the power of your imagination to enter another life. The world is a completely different place when seen through someone else's eyes. And it will teach you empathy. To write is to empathize."

The only black kid in the class, Benjamin wasn't going to get arrested for doing homework. He wrote his story from the perspective of a dog he saw running through the street. Its fur was matted, the color of dirt, and he could hear its nails scuttling across the pavement with a reluctant death wish.

He got an A.

The Westward School was happy to have him, eager to diversify for the sake of brochures and taglines, and he'd been glad to escape the resigned despair of the old Greenwood public school system. Classes were interesting enough, and he got decent grades, even when he didn't do the work. The assumption was he'd go to college, first generation,

win a scholarship. But everybody else wanted it too much. Wanted it for themselves.

“Nigger,” the students said.

“Nigger,” said Ms. Garden.

They were reading *Huckleberry Finn*.

“Is this OK with you?” Ms. Garden asked Benjamin in the middle of class one day.

Benjamin shrugged, but the word felt like a gut-punch each time they choked on it. Ms. Garden kept looking in Benjamin’s direction until they moved on to another book. Then she could check in with the white kids about Holden’s angst. That kid couldn’t deal with *fuck*, but Benjamin walked the halls hoarding the rage that prickled beneath his sleeves. He was mostly alone but ate lunch with the school’s five or six other black kids at the bench they’d designated theirs by their habitual use of it.

There was a squirrel that used to visit one of the classroom windows. The other students named it Romeo, but Benjamin didn’t think that suited him. He didn’t run with the other squirrels along the tree branches. He would perch on the sill and look in on the kids scribbling away at their desks, as if they were marvels of nature. Sometimes the squirrel would fall asleep, half his body pressed against the glass, his fur poking up like tiny sunrays. Then spring came, and the squirrel didn’t anymore.

Not-Romeo probably knew Benjamin better than his classmates did. They were polite, indifferent, and only saw him for what they could see. They didn’t miss the twenties their mothers slipped into their backpacks and that Benjamin spent on weed or to help Gran with the bills. If he brushed up against a girl at the lockers, she would recoil then try to take it back, palm on chest: “Oh, you scared me!”

Benjamin wasn’t absolved from all the disappointment he caused as a dropout, a pothead, a waste of the white people’s largesse, until he took the GED and enlisted.

After his unit deployed, Gran filled her letters to him with reports of the changes to the town. Friends dying off, others selling

their homes for more money than they'd saved their entire working lives. The teardowns, the mini-mansions. Her neighbors' yesterdays leveled into dusty lots. The rising taxes, questions about how to pay them. The campaigns preaching "go green," "farm to table," "buy local." The award-winning schools that had so recently been failing. The joggers, the strollers, the bikers. The parks that were actually safe to walk through after dark.

He rarely responded to those letters; there was nothing to write. Killed five ragheads today. Watched an IED implant itself in a bunkmate. Jerked off to the image of a 13-year-old girl's ankle.

He kept re-upping, and the letters kept coming. She'd request pictures of him in his fatigues, a display for her friends, an alibi for his failures. But the renewed approbation faded as senility crept in and set up shop in her brain—a languorous decay chronicled in scratches of ink. The letters that had initially sounded like the stuff of fantasy devolved into sci-fi. In one, she claimed there was a huge white cloud always surrounding the house. Another described undersized squawking men with leaky green noses parading across her driveway morning and night. The people buzzed; they smelled of grass; they rode their dogs like horses; they ate trash and threw away diamonds. She said she laughed at them but they came knocking in her dreams.

It was during his fourth tour that the letters stopped.

When he'd come through the weather-peeled front door a few days prior, he'd found a tipping pile of returned letters addressed to him on the front table. "Benjamin Adams. Care of: the Army, Afganistain." He stopped reading before he'd gotten halfway through the stack. When he burned them in the cast iron stove downstairs, they shriveled like curling toes in the fire.

Benjamin's Gran was a woman who had hardened herself against disappointment and sought to make all around her hard too. But there were times when she showed him she knew how to love. She took him to get ice cream the day he was accepted to Westward and said he could order a milkshake. He'd let the silky vanilla linger on his tongue but

started to feel sick toward the end of it, wondering if people who could regularly afford milkshakes went through life with upset stomachs.

But those memories are the few grains of sugar in an otherwise bitter drink. He remembers his childhood mornings spent out in the backyard, before sunrise, weeding Gran's measly garden. When the moon wasn't full enough, he would twist the butt of a flashlight into the clay and squint into tangles. He once blindly plucked a tomato plant from the roots, flung it into the neighbor's yard in a panic, and spent the rest of that morning plotting a story about green caterpillars terrorizing the plant. When he told Gran the story later, he could nearly envision the rippled crawlers, horned and camouflaged. He'd had no choice, he said, but to destroy their base.

She bought it.

The morning of the funeral, the sky droops gray and close, and it is uncharacteristically cool for an Atlanta August. The turnout is huge. Gran's new neighbors are there. So are the old ones, at least those still living and in range. It's a regular MLK dream: black children and white children praying together, singing together, mourning together in the same funeral home where they'd buried his mother, Leesa. A bare wooden cross looms above the open casket, and Pastor Magnus smiles down on the rainbow coalition brought together to mourn Gran.

Pastor Magnus runs the service with his fair share of Hallelujahs but keeps his characteristic shouting to a minimum. He knows his audience. The *amens* and encouragements from the congregation are constipated murmurs. Mr. Fulman, the principal of the elementary school, delivers the eulogy. He's a balding redhead with a dainty beerbelly overhanging his belt like a fanny pack. Patches of eczema form deltas at the corners of his lips. "Gran was the guardian angel of our children. A woman who put everyone else's needs before her own." He speaks too quietly into the mike, but it picks up the smacking of his dry mouth. "She serenaded them on their way to school and made sure they wore sweaters in the cold. Even when we couldn't really understand her words anymore, her face always wore that bright moony

smile. She could make us laugh when the day was rough. We can all learn a lesson from our Gran, from the pure joy she took in life.”

Benjamin sits in the first pew alone, rubbing the seat’s worn maroon velvet, both rough and delicate beneath his thumb, and wonders how their Gran could be so different from his. He can just see the brim of her favorite red hat poking out of the bargain-priced casket. He thinks the hat twitches, he squeezes his eyes, and he can see her hoisting herself up out of the coffin, tall and imperious like a spider, as she was in life, pointing her crooked finger at the congregation and demanding they return to their homes, to school, to work, to where they belong. When he opens his eyes, his peripheral vision is gray, he feels unfixed like a neglected balloon, drifting and looking down on the rows of downcast heads forming fields of maize. He trembles, then the room is as it was: Mr. Fulman swallowing hard, sniffles behind him, restrained low-pitched moans of agreement, but mostly the sounds of restless children who won’t miss Gran.

It’s nothing like his mother’s funeral.

Benjamin had been twelve, stuffed into a suit too small. Everyone he knew was there. Makeshift fans moved the spongy summer air but gave no relief. Pastor Magnus was at his height, praying with eyes shut into little hills, his voice pitching and hoarse. “Dearest God, it is good to talk to you today.”

“Yes, it is.” Benjamin could feel the pew quiver beneath him with the deep-bellied keens of the congregants.

“Through prayer, hallelujah, we talk to you.”

“Yes, we do, sir.”

“We need you to hear us today.” Several women stood in the aisles, careening.

“Hear us!” Gran’s breathing was shallow, and she leaned her sharp elbow into the crook of Benjamin’s neck. He stared at the thin loops of thread worming away from one of the slits on her collar, the translucent button dangling and vulnerable.

“Thank you for hearing us—amen—even on this darkest of days.”

“Thank you!”

“Thank you for our daughter, Leesa, for sending her to us, for her love, for all the goodness she brought to this world.” Pastor Magnus and his purple robe swayed by the coffin where she lay, looking more alive in death.

“And thank you for bringing her home to you to rest—amen—to give her rest after all the hardship and torment she faced here on earth. Thank you for the model citizen she was, for our sister Leesa taught us how to live—amen—with suffering and pain, with dignity and grace.”

Benjamin remembered his mother’s screwed-up face when they found her that last morning.

“Take heed of our sister’s mother and son, grant them strength and courage to get through this difficult hour. We say goodbye with them, we feel their pain with them, we are here for them.”

Hats bobbed mournfully, handkerchiefs flourished tears away. Hands clasped, shoulders shook, Gran fainted. Benjamin snuck out amidst the chaos of rousing her as the choir struck up “When We All Get to Heaven” and didn’t go to the gravesite.

But he has to go to Gran’s. At the burial, the funeral guests who haven’t made an early exit keep their distance from him. They bend their heads and wear diligently solemn faces, and when he catches their eyes, they look away. One mother has to keep chasing her kid who wants to play hide-and-seek behind the tombstones. She drags him away in shame. Another child throws a stone into the grave. Benjamin focuses on the clouds above when they lower her in and exhales relief when the first shovel of clay hits the wood.

After his mother’s burial, the mourners had gathered back at the house. There was hugging and laughing and stories about Leesa when she was healthy and beautiful and then thanksgiving that she had been relieved of the pain of the recent past. All spoke joy at her ascension into heaven, but the joy was underlain with resentment, that she was taken long before even her own mother’s time. Benjamin sat in a corner with a paper plate balanced on his lap, not eating the slippery ruin of casserole and cake. There was a white woman there—his

mother's old boss, the director of school transportation. She sat in another corner with a look of awe beneath her stained blond hair. His mother had lost her job as a bus driver the year before, when she didn't have the stamina or coordination to make it through a morning bus route. But the woman showed up anyway. That night, he dreamed of cornering her in the back of his mother's school bus, running his fingers down her long neck and making her shiver for once in her life. There was no emergency exit, and her body stuck to the vinyl of the seats. The dream was a reliable gateway to sleep and other forms of comfort well into adolescence.

There is no official repast for Gran, no way he'd play host to that congregation. The whites go home, and Gran's old friend Mrs. Wills invites the bygone neighborhood to her house in one of the new suburbs south of the city. It is one among many bloated pastel boxes, nestled in a community of urban emigrants—those who by some inane stroke of luck woke one morning to find their old neighborhoods had become prime real estate. White flight in reverse. He walks into the parlor, where an easel displays a blown-up photograph of Gran. It is blurry and pixilated, a cropped image that Mrs. Wills must have exhumed from her personal stash of memories. Gran looks how Benjamin remembers her: short, natural black hair serrated by streaks of gray, shadows beneath cloudy brown eyes. She is smiling, but the smile carries with it a sense of smug disgust, as if she has just predicted a slight against her—and there it is.

Mrs. Wills closes in at Benjamin's entrance and takes him in her arms. He feels the rolls of back fat chunked up by the band of her bra.

"Those are some big muscles on you." She taps him on the shoulder and hands him a beer. "You been away too long."

He disagrees silently.

"We're proud of you, but I know your Gran missed you, needed you. I tried checking in on her when I could get back to town, but you know how it is. The days get shorter and shorter, and a year's gone by."

"I know how it is."

“Seen my granddaughter since you been back? Joelle!”

“Can’t stay long.”

“Where is that girl?” She flies off in search of Benjamin’s future.

The night he returned to Greenwood, he found a girl just strolling through the neighborhood. All she thought he wanted was her cell phone. She was texting in the midnight dark, a wall of purple hair shielding her view of the world as she shuffled in flip-flops down the sidewalk. “Take it.” Her voice was surprisingly low for such a willow of a girl.

After several more beers and some indulgent war stories for the old-timers, Benjamin leaves Mrs. Wills’ house and heads to a bar where he finds another girl. She has made a hammock for her chin with the backs of her hands and stares at an empty martini glass. The bartender squints at him when he takes the stool next to hers. Benjamin has read enough to know that girls like it when you tell them they’re beautiful. Maybe he means it. Her hair is the color of adobe and loops down her back like unbroken apple peels. After a few more lemon drops, the bartender asks her if she’s all right, and she accepts Benjamin’s invitation to get out of there.

The next morning, a real estate developer knocks on the door. She has well-supported breasts with sunspots on the tops and blond hair teased out into wispy poufs. Her hair testifies to how long she spends in the mornings preparing herself to meet the world. As she cruises the house, her black pantsuit swishes between her thighs.

“This house isn’t really you, is it? It’s not for young bachelors.” She lifts her nostrils as she looks around at the plastic-coated furniture encrusted with dust. “You don’t strike me as a lace-curtains kind of guy.” She goes out into the yard. “What about these heart-shaped steel bars on the windows outside?”

Her tone is conspiratorial. “This is a grandma home.” She goes back inside and stands in the entry, arms down like a sentinel. “You wouldn’t want to bring a girl back here, would you?”

Her breasts bounce when she coughs, and the sunspots dance.

She takes good care of her body, probably runs through the neigh-

borhood on weekends, ticking off homes next in line for the devouring. But the skin on the backs of her hands has thinned. If just a few more layers sloughed off, her veins would be exposed.

She can see how he is looking at her, but she won't be cowed. "Two hundred's a lot of money. Ever thought what you could do with that much?"

He tells her he'll think about it as he shuts the door, but he's done his research. People are desperate to get into this part of town. They lust for the tree canopy. The home values continue to rise, unfazed by the burst bubble. Minus the recent rash of rapes, it's safe.

The police come by, asking if Benjamin has heard about the missing young women.

"Not something we see a lot of here," one officer says, looking past Benjamin into the house. He is squat, his body the shape of a globe. His strained uniform labels him Officer Tracy, and Benjamin finds his attempts at intimidation equally effeminate. "How long you been living here?"

Benjamin has seen Tracy puttering around the city on a chopper too small for his roly body, leaning to turn so deeply that his knee nearly scrapes the pavement. His specialty seems to be pulling over sulky citizens for drifting through stop signs. The other officer, a lanky black woman named Morris, remains silent. Benjamin can see them inspecting him for signs of anxiety. He is sure to make eye contact with both but only addresses Tracy when he speaks.

"Just returned a few weeks ago from active duty in time for my grandmother's funeral."

Tracy leans forward onto his toes, offers his condolences, and thanks him for his service.

Benjamin feels just a prickle of sweat under his arms, but Tracy has to keep swabbing his temples. "I'll let you know if I see anything," Benjamin says, closing the door.

From the window, he watches the squad car amble away, Officer Morris eying the overgrown rose bush his mother had planted shortly

before her death. Leesa had elbow-crawled across the lawn, streaking grass stains down the length of her apron, because she'd had it in her head that she was going to leave something beautiful behind.

The doctors had explained it was a genetic mutation, a neurological disorder. When the symptoms were still pretty minor, she had joked that her nerves were shot. "Maybe if my son wouldn't give me so much to worry about." In the early stages, she couldn't feel sensations in her limbs. There were times when she'd accelerate the bus too quickly or brake nearly too late, but she soon learned to imagine the feeling of pedals beneath her feet. Then the nerve death snaked up and down her spine, and one by one, the neurons went out like light bulbs. Her muscles shriveled. Her back humped in and over her body. Benjamin started having to clean the bus on his own, fill it with gas, alert her to a turn or impending red light.

Within half a year of her diagnosis, she started using a cane, then a walker, tracking across the floor like a hermit crab without a home. Benjamin hated watching her and allowed that fledgling hate to flourish rather than cede to the grief. The Army later taught him how to keep his body in check, control its impulses. It was the best thing they gave him: the training to deny the body its deceptions. Every one said his mother was a fighter, but to Benjamin, the sickness was something she allowed to take her away, away from the cruelty of her own mother, from the memory of Benjamin's father, from the groans of the hungry bellies she drove to and from school, from a world with low expectations.

Gran hated watching her too, so they took turns guilting each other into doing the bare minimum. "When was the last time you brushed her teeth?" "I changed her diaper the last three times." "It's been a week since she had a bath."

Benjamin can still feel the ravine of his mother's spine beneath his fingers. She craved the relief that massage brought her, but he repulsed at her naked back. Her spine had sunk deep into her flesh, leaving a purple bruise coursing up its length. He would press the heels of his palms down into her vertebrae and think if he just pushed a little harder.

When she died, he moved into her bedroom from the basement, and Gran and he orbited around the house like people who finally knew what it meant to be free.

But freedom is fleeting, and the time has come for him to leave this house again.

He won't take under three hundred for it. The buyers will rebuild. 300K for a ghost of a house.

He plants a FSBO sign in the front yard. The black-Sharpied lettering—**by appt only**—wears the deceptive scrawl of an illiterate. Gold-lined leaves gather in the yard and on the roof.

He'd missed the seasons when he was away, the fall especially, its crisp air breathing the beauty of death approaching. Cone-shaped magnolia fruits decay in abundance on the cracked sidewalk, and the spermy black seeds lie around them in mourning. It looks like they're about to crawl away.

A middle-aged lesbian couple arrives the next morning. One of them reminds him of Nell, the medic in his squad at Yusufiyah. All business, cropped black hair, boxy shoulders. Nell had lent him a bunch of her books after he'd read through the base's meager collection. Melville, Ellison, Hemingway, Wright. Her favorite was *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. "I read it every year," she'd said. The cover had been so frequently handled that it had taken on the soft consistency of fabric. When he returned the book to her, he told her Tea Cake didn't deserve to die.

Another grunt in his Afghan unit, Scotty Path, had called Benjamin "Bleinstein"—"black Einstein"—because of the books. Scotty sweat copiously, leaving track marks through the moon dust that caked his face. He beat the creeping daytime hours by hunting mountain weasels, light-brown ferret-looking creatures whose big baby eyes belied their ferocity. Scotty would batter them with the butt of his M4 until all that remained were Rorschach stains of blood on the sand. He told Benjamin he'd been doing it since he was a kid: his first kill was a bluebird that had gotten trapped behind the screen of his

bedroom window when he was six or seven years old. He'd reached his arm through the breach, scraping his skin, wrapped his hand around the bird's body, and popped its head out of the socket like a bottle top.

Benjamin didn't get Scotty. But an IED soon did.

The lesbians are too stingy. Say they are hoping to just renovate, this is a definite teardown. They finger-tip a litany of transgressions. No natural lighting or open floor plan. The laundry's in the kitchen. No central air. Only two bedrooms, no "bonus room." One impossibly tiny bathroom.

Gran and Benjamin had shared that bathroom, half of it a sink and toilet, the other, partitioned by a folding aquamarine screen, drain and showerhead. Gran used to scream at him to hurry his ass up, to stop yanking on his dirty thing, to realize there were other people in the world besides himself.

The second potential buyers walk in without knocking. They are a power couple, just oozing it. Hugh sells medical supplies. Laurel's a photographer. Her tight ponytail thwaps her husband when something calls her attention. It's clear he spends most of his free time at the gym, his pecs barely restrained by Polo cotton. One side of his blue collar is turned up, like a broken wing.

"We're expecting," Laurel says, patting her flat stomach. Her heels clack on the linoleum kitchen floor, and she releases a hiccup of a giggle after almost everything she says. Hugh grins at her radiance and shifts his weight back and forth, as if neither leg can fully support his bulk for too long.

She loves the location. "The kids could walk to school!"

She caresses the fixtures that the lesbians had sniffed at—"adorable!" to the ceramic kitten lamp jutting out from a corner of the living room, "kitchsy!" to the sun-worn curlicue drapes, "vintage!" to the mint-green fridge. "There's so much potential!"

Benjamin clears his throat and swallows down the salty mass. Her voice reminds him of the mountain weasels' chirping.

“Three hundred feels a bit high,” Hugh says in Gran’s room, what Laurel refers to as the master. “Anything to sweeten the deal?”

“Like what?” Benjamin looks around at the peeling wallpaper, doily-topped cupboard, cat-scratched armchair. The Obamas grin from their framed portrait in the living room. Benjamin hangs next to them, in his uniform.

“All of it!” Laurel swings out her arms as if the walls would rush to embrace her.

“Let’s check out the downstairs,” Hugh says.

Benjamin leads them to the basement half-door. When he was young, he didn’t have to crouch, but now they all bend and reach through to the other side, anticipating cobwebs. The wood-splitting stairs groan beneath their feet, and Benjamin can smell Hugh’s sweat mingling with the cool smokiness of the basement air. He feels for the beaded link to the light bulb. There’s an insuck of breath behind him.

Benjamin hasn’t packed away Gran’s life yet. It is spilling out of boxes that litter the dirt-packed floor. Props from his childhood—a skateboard, barbells, deflated basketballs, stacks of mildewed drawings and reports—shelve the walls, and he feels at once that the moment is too intimate. The basement is the house’s memory, and it is now exposed, like the naked roots of a plant. The sun, dimmed by the smeared basement windows, throws shadows in unexpected places. With each fall of their feet, swirls of moon dust flinch. A band of darkness makes a blindfold over Laurel’s face, but the rest of her body is held by the ashy light: deliciously contoured calves run up to the suggestion of oversized thighs beneath her skirt’s juvenile ruffles. She stands with her palms pressed into the small of her arching back, as if she is already nine months gone.

“What is that?” Her eyes are locked on the cast iron stove in the center of the room. Benjamin goes over to it. The top, decorated with a golden urn, nearly reaches the ceiling. The maroon paint of the body is chipped, and cherubs dance along its edges. One curved handle on the side gives the stove the look of a pot-bellied woman with hand on hip.

Benjamin looks toward the thick pile of firewood he has stacked in

the corner. Sea-green moss pimples the bark.

“It’s a wood-burning stove.”

She looks at him with misunderstanding eyes.

“It’s for heat,” he says, then adds, because he knows it’s what she wants to hear, “It’s an antique.” As far as he knows, it is. It’s been here for as long as he can remember, was probably left behind when Gran and Gramp bought the house cheap and quick from the fleeing white owners.

“How old?”

“It’s been in my family for generations.” Benjamin pretends to remember. “Since slavery times.”

Laurel grips her palm around the door handle, thumbing the coiled end. “That’s so cool!” She nods with what she no doubt hopes is a sympathetic smile.

“Story goes that the master of my great-great-grandmother, no...” She is enraptured now. “Great-great-*great* grandmother gave her the stove.” Benjamin can feel Hugh’s fidgets behind him and goes over to the ash rake. “It was a reward for providing so many slave-children.” He taps the rake against his palm like a schoolteacher.

“Isn’t it just awful?” Laurel makes a tut sound with her tongue.

Hugh reaches for Laurel’s elbow and breathes audibly through his nostrils. He is ready for the story to end. Benjamin wonders if they can see the pulse of his neck.

“What else do you know about the stove?”

“I know it warmed her own private quarters, away from the rest of the slaves. It was because she was the master’s favorite.” He leans on the ash rake, assuming a Charlie Chaplin, no, Bojangles, pose.

“Laurel, I...” Hugh’s voice rises with the hilarity of having unlocked one of history’s best-kept secrets. “I know!” He looks across the dark expanse of the basement. “This can be my man-cave!” His smile wrinkles his cheeks, the lines merging with the crow’s feet at his eyes. “I could escape down here to work out, hang with the guys, watch football, do the stuff that gets in your way.”

Laurel turns back to Benjamin. “This stove must have meant a lot

to her. And to you.”

Benjamin tells Laurel that Confederate soldiers had tried to make off with it during the war but it was too heavy to move; that, later, meetings were often held around it to plan protests; and that it warmed the skin of his drug-addicted father before he disappeared.

Laurel’s eyes glisten, as if reflecting the fire that Benjamin had burned just the night before. The smell in the air has turned to decay, and he is unsure if it’s coming from outside or here in the basement. He tries to remember the girls but imagines his mother’s spine beneath his hands instead. She was the one who disappeared.

Laurel looks to the ceiling and wraps her arm around her husband’s waist. Benjamin thinks he hears unsteady feet upstairs. Maybe Hugh and Laurel hear them too. Benjamin’s story is a good one, and so is the house.

They buy it. Story, house, and all.