

1 *Backstitching Time*

Likely it was only two dreams crisscrossing paths, one snagging on the other in passing, but somehow the face that walked by me this morning, not four feet away, got tangled up with one from my past. The way-back and way-faraway, all quiet and almost forgotten, got yanked up and placed alongside today, where two minutes before I'd have told you I was: in Boston. At the Public Garden. Not a stone's throw from Beacon Hill, where I live and work, and pay as much for my own private parking space as folks back home do for a decent slab ranch and enough acres for the dogs to tree themselves something other than city-soft squirrel.

I was cozied up on a park bench in the Garden to cool my espresso and pry off the pumps I despise and I wear every day. Then the face passed by my bench. I lurched forward to stare, then back—to cover for staring—and splashed espresso clear down my front.

And I swear time backstitched on itself, and at that very moment, I was barefoot—not with black pumps stowed under a park bench, but the right kind of barefoot. The kind of barefoot that went with the truck bed of a pickup. I was back with the wind standing my ponytail straight up over my head, the Blue Hole just around the next curve. And I was tracing my cheek where a kiss had just landed.

So there I sat in the garden this morning, tracing my cheek, feeling my heart seize up in my chest, and the ache stabbing down to my toes, and my toes going cold in the wind off the truck. In that moment, the smell of espresso got overpowered by the scents of my past: pine needles and boy-sweat, salted peanuts and Coke. I heard bluegrass guitar and banjo all mixed up with rhythm and blues and a rope swing ticking

forward and back, keeping time. I was barefoot in the back of a pickup, believing that it was love that makes people brave and gorgeous and clever and kind. Believing, and being wrong.

I haven't often—or ever, actually—told the story of that summer, because its beginning, when the new girl lifted her brown legs up over our tailgate, never connected up with the end, with the goodness or the fire. Brown was what that leg was, back at the beginning, and not just tanned into dark. It was me who'd said we should stop for her, and me who knew first that our troubles had just dug in deep, a fat tick way down into fur.

“Shoulda known better” was what people said. “You mix up your colors like 'at and you got yourself mud's what you got.”

Thing was, I *did* know better. Brought up in those mountains where the pines grew tall out of clay the color of blood, I knew what was what, and who was who, and who was not.

Plenty of folks said what happened that summer was my doing, and plenty said it was all Jimbo's fault. But I'm saying it was the fault of the Blue Hole.

“All sunk sweet and sacred” was what Jimbo called the Blue Hole back then.

The son of the First Baptist Church preacher—a kind of Little League pope in a small Southern town—Jimbo handled words like electrical wires he just might dip into water. And though he favored the peculiar or crude, he'd often come out with something like that—some musty old word like *sacred*—and make us all jump.

Sacred's not a word I've ever much liked—says to me bad organ music, the celesta stop out, and sopranos with skin like cheap parlor drapes hung from their jaws. But maybe some things, and some places, just are. And maybe the Blue Hole was one of those places. Even more so, perhaps, after

that one August night when men in white bedsheets paid house calls all over Pisgah Ridge, and made sure we all understood that although times had supposedly changed, some kinds of thinking, and some kinds of hate, had not. It was the men in white bedsheets that changed us—they and the Blue Hole changed us forever.

I've learned, now, not to speak of these things to folks here in Boston, especially the men that I date. Early on, before I'd learned better than to talk of back home, they would fumble their lobster forks into their chowder. "How *old* must you be?" they would ask—the ones whose mommas must not have harped much on manners. Like living through one race of people not being real kind to another takes a whole lot of age. Sometimes inside the main course, I might try to explain George Wallace, the before and the after repentance—was that what he called it?—and Reconstruction and Rosewood. Then they had to know why, did I think, Huey Long got himself shot and Strom Thurmond didn't.

"Pass the drawn butter please, sugar" is how I come back.

So I generally don't talk much of the past anymore, my own or the South's. I don't stamp myself with stories that might limit my shelf life, making me sound even older than these Boston winters already have made me look. I rarely refer to Carolina at all, or to the mountains, or to my little town on the Ridge. If I mention the Blue Hole, it's only in passing, and I take care to skirt real far around the topic of riots and rope swings. I skirt further still around the story of Jimbo and us and the new girl who tore up our calm, or the good that snuck up on us in the dark. I don't mention crosses, either burning or strung up by the neck in a church. I don't mention Mecca or Jesus, or why just yesterday driving the Pike, when Daniel Shore on NPR said "Sri Lanka," I let go the wheel and made a map with my hands, just like I have now for twenty-five years, every time I hear the country's name spoken.

They all—these men who buy me dinner at Legal's—once read O'Connor and Tennessee Williams and Faulkner at Harvard. That was

years ago now, back before their first marriages—but it's clear they've looked ever since for Misfits and Snopses and Stellas, for lovely, loose women who smell of magnolias.

I don't line out for these men, or for anyone else, why my adult life takes place a good thousand miles from the only place I'll ever call home, or how no manner of grace—a word Jimbo used—can undo what gets done. I don't say this either: that my home is a beautiful place, a terribly beautiful place that gives birth to traitors and cowards and heroes, sometimes all in one skin. And I never say why—because I don't know—I long like I do to go back.

They say you can't go home again, ever, can't relive the past—and until this morning I would have said that was true. But something about the face I saw in the garden got me to wonder if maybe time does have its backstitches and snags like the physics professors all drone on about, though no one believes them. Maybe some parts of your past don't stay just where you thought your life left them all shredded in pieces.

This morning I wondered, nearly knocked to my knees with the scent of espresso and pine needles and peanuts and sweat all at the same time, if maybe there's some other end to my story still to get made.



In that summer of 1979, we all ran together in a mangy pack—that's what Jimbo's mother called us, *y'all's mangy pack*, and she liked us better than most. My brother Emerson and his best friend, Jimbo, had started their landscaping business—their work always centered on Miss Mollybird Pittman's impossible yard—and I helped out some when Momma allowed. It was the summer when everyone else bought albums and '45s of the Bee Gees and Eagles and Peter Frampton, but Emerson's white pickup truck held only an eight-track tape player, which soundtracked our shoveling and planting and hauling manure. The only tapes the three of

us owned came from Jimbo's purchase at a garage sale down in the valley where a woman was unloading her entire eight-track collection, the tapes' slick paper labels already bubbled. Jimbo loved his collection, and we loved Jimbo, so we labored under a Southern Appalachian sun to decade-old Motown. Diana Ross and Marvin Gaye oversaw our planting magnolias; James Brown set the beat for our sinking azaleas into peat moss and mulch.

That summer the temperatures soared, even up on our mountain, and stayed there—and I, ever since I'd studied Icarus that spring at school, was sure we'd all just melt and plummet on down to the valley.

"If I keep sweatin' like this," Jimbo would moan every morning while he flopped himself into Emerson's truck bed, "y'all gonna have to call me a lifeguard." Or sometimes, "Can't hardly stand to strap on underwear."

"Gave it up yesterday myself," Emerson would tell him, or "I'm saying we give up the pants, too"—which was likely why my momma didn't much like my going along.

We survived the heat that summer by piling into Emerson's pickup and heading into the woods. We carted along a cast-off Styrofoam cooler pieced back together with electrical tape, and Emerson's Big Dog, a remarkably chubby golden retriever with a weakness for pork barbecue scraps and Dr Pepper, which she drank straight from the can. Jimbo was learning to play Em's guitar, and from the truck bed, he fingered out strange medleys of "Stairway to Heaven" and "Holy, Holy, Holy." In four-wheel drive, we jolted down old logging trails—Jimbo fumbling chords as we went—through tangles of loblolly pines and post oaks that hid the secret we teenagers had found—or maybe created. They were deeply eroded, those old logging trails, ragged gashes in that dark red clay, like a knife had gone slashing through flesh.

"You comin', Turtle?" Jimbo'd call from the truck, Emerson slowing enough for me to fling myself in over its side. My parents christened me Shelby Lenoir. Shelby Lenoir Maynard—not too bad as Southern names

go—but it was Jimbo’s nicknaming me “Turtle” that stuck. Back when we were kids lined up on the vinyl bench seat of our father’s Chevy Impala, I’d taken my turn steering the car on a two-lane dirt road. Jimbo and Em, in giggle-fits over my barely keeping the car out of the woods, had first seen the truck coming our way and, laughing too hard to speak, only pointed, while my father, beside me, gave the order to straighten the wheel. Instead, I’d covered my face with both arms. My new name was born that very day, along with the sad realization I live with even now here in Boston that sometimes when life barrels at me head-on, I hide my head and hope the crash doesn’t land on my own little shell.

I had no female friends in those days: Girls struck me as backstabbing and shallow and silly, compared with the brutal, straight-in-front put-downs of my brother and his buddies. I never much fit in with the girls’ fingernail-polishing parties. I was skinny and awkward, and carried whatever smarts I had then like a warning, like a Jew’s yellow star, or a leper girl ringing her bell. It was the smarts, Emerson said, that messed me up most—as a girl, I reckon he meant.

The new girl in town might have counted as my one female friend. Except that she didn’t count. She’d come just the last month of school. I was a sophomore—Jimbo and Em, loud, cocky juniors—and the new girl and I had met, briefly, after nearly colliding in front of the water fountain down by the old gym.

Naturally I knew who she was, her being the only one in our school even close to her color—though I can’t say I knew anyone who’d spoken with her. At the fountain, the new girl motioned for me to drink first.

“Before me, you may proceed,” she told me, and nodded her head real formal.

“No, really, you go ahead.”

“Please, I insist upon it.” She stepped aside, and held out her hand to me, like we were both there on business. “If I may present myself, I am Farsanna Moulavi.”

I'd heard people say she was strange—more than her color, I mean—and just that one stiff, stilted speech was enough to make me wonder if people weren't right. And her face was odd too—her expression, that is. Because—and here was the thing—there wasn't any expression at all. Except in her eyes. And they looked out of her paralyzed face a little too dark, a little too deep, maybe a little unsteady, like they were black pits that might or might not be hiding explosives.

“Shelby Lenoir,” I told her. “I'm Shelby Lenoir Maynard.” And I almost added, “There's some call me Turtle.” But that was reserved for friends.

I drank, and to cover for the water dribbling down my chin, said the first thing that poked into my mind: “Cool accent.”

“The accent is to you the strange thing, no?” She asked this with an almost-smile, some kind of not-smile hanging at the edges like shadows.

“Well ... your skin's a nice color,” I told her then because it was true—though it sounded peculiar somehow, saying it out loud to her face.

Farsanna Moulavi was the color of the hot cocoa Jimbo Riggs' mother made from Nestlé dark chocolate, powdered sugar, and dried milk. The kind the Riggses drank in their basement rec room when they played Parcheesi on Friday nights.

“I come from Sri Lanka,” she said, watching me. “You perhaps know it as the former Ceylon.” She held up her right hand flat against the air, as if it were a map. “If this would be India, then this,” she placed her left fist by the lower thumb knuckle of her right hand, “is Sri Lanka.” She turned to drink, then rose up straight, all in one piece, like her spine didn't bend. “The accent and the skin, they come both from Sri Lanka.”

“Sri Lanka.” I nodded to show I'd recognized the map she could make with her hands, and that I knew where it was—close enough, anyhow. My father was the city desk editor of our local newspaper and he was a Yankee, so he likely knew all about Sri Lanka, or would sound like he did anyway—which, I've learned by living in Boston, is pretty much the same thing.

Now Momma, had she been there with the new girl at the fountain, would've offered up quick something sweet—maybe a second cousin's having seen that part of the world lately and loved it. Just *loved* it. Momma made certain everyone in her path felt affirmed at all times, even if she had to perjure herself, or her second cousin, to do it.

But I stood staring at the new girl's homemade-cocoa color, and thinking how Momma would whisper that *a lady does not stare* or that *Jesus would make a stranger feel welcome*.

But I was not Momma or much of a lady or Jesus, and "Oh" was what I managed instead.

I turned then to leave, but Emerson and Jimbo's baseball team was just burrowing up from the locker room. I'd had a crush all spring on both the shortstop and pitcher, Quincy and Quirt, identical twins, and one of them—I never could tell them apart—had smiled at me once from the dugout. So I dropped to retie a shoelace that hadn't come undone, and with a quick flick of my tongue, popped my retainer clear out of my mouth and straight into my gym bag.

I flashed a smile up at the new girl but mostly at the shortstop and pitcher cleating up behind her. "You liking the school and everything okay?" I asked the new girl, just like I wanted to know.

She looked startled, like our little exchange had been suddenly tossed, then retrieved—and no reason for either. But she took—after a second—the rope-end of talk I held out.

"This mountain for you has always been home, no?" she asked. I sure couldn't see how that answered my question.

"Me? Shoot. Six generations on Momma's side. But my father's a Yankee."

She cocked her head, and I noticed how still her hair lay on her shoulders. Dark as I'd ever seen. And so thick. I wondered if it were heavy as it looked.

My shortstop-pitcher matching pair had already passed—without so much as looking my way. Emerson gave me a punch in the gut. And

Jimbo gave out his signature wave, his whole arm flapping, and winked. Only at me. His one dimple dug in deep.

I winked back, just like always, but then he was waving again, a little barely-there wave, and not looking at me. And he grinned, right at the new girl, and drilled in his dimple again—which was like him, giving that smile out to just anybody happening to be standing in the same hall.

At the back of the herd moved Morton Beckwith, a Clydesdale behind skittish ponies. The other boys' cleats clattered and pinged against the hall's tile, but under Mort's bulk the hall echoed like a blacksmith's hammer against a draft horseshoe. He played catcher, and while he missed a wide world of think-quick plays to the first baseman and pitcher, he excelled at scaring runners headed home with his size and his snarl. He had the build of a fullback and the mind of one too—one who'd taken all hits with his head.

He nodded at me—it's not in the Beckwith nature to wave—and then his eyes latched onto Farsanna. He passed not more than three inches from her and never took his eyes off her face. His bottom lip jutted out nearly straight from his gums, the skin more or less permanently distended from the tobacco he dipped. For some reason, lips like his defined manly good looks on our Ridge—reminding me always of *National Geographic* full-page photos of remote island natives who weight their earlobes, stretching them down to the base of their necks. So the bulge of Mort's bottom lip in particular might have brushed up against the new girl had his head not towered above her.

Then, just past her, as if in slow motion, he spit.

It was nothing but normal, a boy—a Southern boy, and a baseball player at that—dipping tobacco and needing to spit. But brown juice did land near the sandaled feet of the new girl, and maybe splattered a little like hamburger grease onto her toes. They were brown too, though, so it didn't show.

I told myself it didn't mean anything. Though a chill did run down my neck into my hands, and maybe that's what stood the hair up on my arms as it passed.

Swinging his big head only once to glance back, the whites of his eyes always too yellow and the skin around them puffy and dark, Mort hoofed back into the herd. Quincy and Quirt were slapping each other on the behind and Emerson and Jimbo had disappeared: So the whole team had passed by, and my purpose for standing by the fountain seemed pretty much passed too.

"Well," I told the new girl, "see ya."

And I left ... those eyes, flammable-looking, just watching me go.



It did occur to me, at least once or twice, to feel guilty for walking away so awfully fast, and a little defensive, too—like the new girl might lump me with everyone else. Like I was one of those on Pisgah Ridge who might spew brown spitjuice on her bare toes, or ignore her because she was different. Far from it, though. I ignored her because she might be the same—like every other fifteen-year-old female I'd found not much worth knowing.

So the new girl walked on alone down our high school's concrete-block halls, the late spring air hot and thick, smelling of locker rooms and chalk dust and fried okra and greens, tobacco dried in linking rings on the tile floor.

I went to a public school, which probably goes without saying, since my father, who'd gone to Dartmouth, marched with Dr. King, sat in at a Greensboro lunch counter, and settled South only to marry Momma, who'd been shopping, right through the sit-in, at the Greensboro Woolworth's. My father believed in what he called The Enunciation, and clung to precise, Dartmouth-man diction like a lifeline, like if he let one

“g” go unsounded, he might be sucked whole, quicksanded into the slurred Southern culture around him. “What I’m saying,” my father pronounced, “is quite simply that no child of mine will be part of any white flight to the monochrome elitism of private schools.”

But there were no blacks on Pisgah Ridge, in the town or the schools, public or private. Sure, there were the ones who cleaned our houses and mowed our lawns, but they all left on the last bus every evening down to their homes in the Valley. And they knew enough to never miss that ride down.

Yet here in my fifteenth summer was Farsanna and the Moulavi family come to our Ridge, plain as Pete, just smiling, polite. And all of us wondering if they knew they’d broken the rules.



Even after school let out for the summer, my having walked away from the water fountain—the new girl left standing alone, her and brown spit—kept me uneasy. So maybe, then, it was guilt that made me bang on the back of Emerson’s truck cab several weeks later, asking him to stop at the new girl’s. Or maybe I was just too hot to think straight.

The Moulavis’ house sat on our mountain’s main road. The house—more of a box—was more painfully ugly than just nondescript, and I was cringing all over as we drove by. I saw the new girl staring out a plate-glass window onto a lawn where red clay showed through the grass like worn spots in old carpet. So from my usual spot in the pickup bed, nestled among boys, shovels, and mulch, I thumped on the cab’s glass.

“Hey, stop! Turn around, Em.”

Emerson stuck his head out the driver’s-side window without pulling over. “How come? You forget the cooler again?”

“No. Just saw the new girl back there in the window. She looked hot.”

“You know anybody in town who’s not?”

“But, come on, that yard—you see it?”

“Yeah? So what?”

“So it’s . . .” I reached for something he’d tap his brakes for, “it’s like the scorched plain in Dante’s *Inferno*.” I’d not read the *Inferno*—only skimmed the back jacket, which I’d reckoned was plenty—but I was guessing Emerson secretly had. I’d recently found our father’s college copy, not at all dusty, behind Em’s dirty clothes hamper. Me, I’d devoted my summer to the Brontës.

Emerson and I came from a family of readers. But my brother billed himself as a bona fide jock and hid books, old poetry mostly, in issues of *Sports Illustrated*, like Pisgah’s drugstore wrapped *Playboy* in brown paper. No kid sister was going to blow his cover in front of his friends.

“The what?” he yelled back. “In who’s where?”

“Nothing. You reckon she’d want to come with us?” I called.

Em likely hadn’t thought to form an opinion one way or another, which naturally argued for ignoring his sister. He opened his mouth to say so.

But Jimbo stopped his strumming on “ye saints of the Lord,” and spoke up. “Oh, go ahead. Stop,” he called up to Emerson.

“Why?”

“Why the howlin’ hole not?” Jimbo said, with a lopsided smile, because there were plenty of reasons why not, and we all knew it.

Emerson must have decided it was too hot to oppose his best friend, or to avoid appeasing his sister, so he U-turned back to the Moulavis’ house.

I poked my head around from the truck bed to the driver’s-side window. “Em, you can be real nice when you want.”

“Go jump,” my brother told me.

“I love you too, Emerson, hon.”

The house itself, a small, red brick warehouse affair, was a rectangle—and so was the front plate-glass window and the narrow, pine veneer door

and the little plot of seared, treeless lawn—all of the rectangles sharp-sided and bare.

The bed of the pickup held Jimbo and me and my cousin L. J., the pack's resident genius, and Bobby Welp, whose daddy walked out years ago but whose momma still sometimes showed up for Bobby at their trailer home. The boys kept the back of the truck full up with talk they traded like baseball cards, all about girls and cars and sports, and more girls. They curbed their comments not at all for my sake.

"You're not much of a girl," Emerson explained to me once, "as girls go." Which I reckon he meant as high praise.

But when Emerson's pickup rattled into the Moulavis' straight-gravel drive, all the swaggering talk suddenly—too suddenly—hushed. We watched the new girl, wearing a long-sleeved blouse with a high neck even in this broiling heat, and a long red cotton skirt that fell to her feet, emerge from the box. A black and white spotted dog, not much more than a pup, sat at her feet and she crouched to pet him. The dog, a not-very-lucky toss of genetic dice, had the gangly black legs of a Lab and the long, silky ears of a Springer Spaniel, and his nose bobbed up and down as he wagged, like his head had to agree with his tail on being just real glad to see you.

Bobby Welp—we called him Welp—shook his head as Farsanna began approaching the truck. The stick he'd been whittling snapped clean in two. "Y'all can't be thinking of taking her with us. *Can you?*" He raised his voice. "She don't need to be coming with us. Y'all gone crazy on me?"

Jimbo put his index finger up to Welp's lips. "Cork yourself, Welp. You're bordering on sounding unneighborly. And put that knife away before you go shishkabobbing somebody."

Emerson looked back through the cab window. "Girl's got a dog," he said, like that was some kind of powerful argument either way.

Truth was, I don't remember much caring one way or another, and then coming to think of Jimbo's grinning at her that time by the fountain, and

her following me with those way-too-black eyes when I left her alone and walked on off down the hall, I was starting to wish I'd kept my mouth shut about stopping the truck. But I'd have had my nose crocheted shut before I'd been caught siding with Welp.

Jimbo reached for my hand and squeezed it. "Go ahead, Turtle. You got a bead here on the right thing to do. So you shoot."

I no longer much wanted to shoot, but it was Jimbo asking me to, and there wasn't anything much short of illegal—and maybe a good bit of that—I wouldn't have done for Jimbo.

I made the new girl the offer from where I sat—it was too hot to get out of the truck or stand. "We're going four-wheeling and swimming at the Blue Hole." It wasn't much of an invitation—or an apology either. "Wanna come?" I threw in to be clear, since her English wasn't so good.

She nodded, but didn't move for the truck. Instead, she went on scratching the dog behind his long, silky ears.

She looked over the boys, one at a time, first Emerson, nodding to her from the driver's seat, then Jimbo, who waved, then L. J. who nodded, then Welp, who huddled down into himself, his arms crossed.

Em swung his legs out of the cab and walked toward Farsanna. "That your pup?"

Farsanna shook her head no. "A lost."

"Stray," L. J. corrected from the truck bed. Correcting was what L. J. did best—or if not best, at least a whole lot.

"However, I gave to him food this week. Now he sleeps there," she pointed, "beside the door."

Emerson knelt beside the new girl to stroke the dog's head. "Reckon he's yours now." He stood. "You know, he can come too, if you'd like. Big Dog—she's mine in the truck—never misses a trip to the Hole."

She thought about this as she rose. "Thank you. But he is most safe here. Do you think?"

Then she stepped toward me. "I have nothing for the swimming.

Would these,” she nodded down at her clothes, “be to this place acceptable?”

I could smell curry and onions on her breath—or maybe it just reeked from the house—from where I sat in the truck bed, and could feel the boys’ eyes all on me—all of us wondering in what sort of world a person eats curry in her own home smack in the middle of the day, and owns not one single swimsuit.

But this was how I came back: “Why, shoot, nobody’ll notice.”

It was what Momma would have said—I wouldn’t know about Jesus—and it wasn’t even remotely true.

She cocked her head at me, like she was deciding whether to peek around the curtain of what I’d said to see whatever really sat behind it.

“You will follow me?” she asked, already retracing her steps back up the chipped sidewalk to the front door.

“Inside?” I looked from one of the boys to the next, hoping one of them would explain why I couldn’t possibly go inside with the new girl. They studied the bed of the truck. All except Jimbo, who grinned and stood to offer me a hand to help me out of the truck.

I followed Farsanna in and saw a woman standing at the kitchen sink looking out the back window. She did not turn as I slunk barefoot after Farsanna through the living room, unfurnished except for a small, shabby couch.

Perhaps it was the sight of her mother’s headscarf, covering her wrists and ankles in addition to the top of her head, that reminded Farsanna to glance back at me—me and my cutoffs, my dirty bare feet and stork-skinny legs and tank top. She held up a hand for me to wait by the door.

I watched Farsanna approach her mother from behind, lay a hand gently on each of her mother’s shoulders, and kiss the back of the headscarf. Her mother turned then, one hand reaching to stroke her daughter’s hair. Then both hands cupped the curve of Farsanna’s jaw. Their foreheads touched, and the two stood like that for a moment. Their touches had

spoken so clearly, I was a little startled when the mother said something I couldn't make out.

Farsanna answered in English, mostly. "I am with—" she glanced over her shoulder, "with a girl from the school, *Mata*."

The mother's hands went to Farsanna's eyes, feeling their shape. The mother faced in my direction and said something.

Farsanna shook her head. "Yes, she is there at the door. What? In English, *Mata*. You know he wishes for us to speak in English, no? You know he wishes for me to know friends of my same years."

Farsanna's mother took two steps in my direction, her body pitching heavily to the right as she swung her left leg forward. Holding one hand before her, she groped for the kitchen door frame and stopped there, still facing in my direction. Though I'd no idea what she could see of me. Me and my cutoffs.

Smoothing her mother's headscarf, Farsanna kissed her mother on both cheeks. "You will not weary yourself this day, no? What? Yes. I will. Safely, yes, *Mata*."

Not sure if I should speak at all, I waved good-bye, then dropped my hand. Who knows if she could see me? I backed into the pine veneer rectangle of a door, and into the outside.

"Thank you," I mumbled from the front stoop, then added louder, "ma'am," because even if the Moulavis were odd, and not just their color of skin, and even if my stomach was flapjacking over onto itself, I'd not been raised by a pack of wolves.

I waited until Farsanna pulled the pine veneer back into place—or as much as it shut, its having warped out of alignment with the door frame. "So," I said as we walked toward the truck. I made sure my voice had a casual shrug to it. "So she..." I stopped there, a little stumped, wondering how Momma would've asked about how come Mrs. Moulavi limped, or whether or not she could see or hear like regular folks. "She ...?"

Farsanna knelt to scratch the stray dog behind his ears, then looked me dead in the eye. “She did not wish it, to go away from her home. She does not wish for her daughter to cease in wearing a hijab.” She swept her arms over her head and I gathered she meant the scarf. “She does not wish to speak English or Sinhala, the languages of business in our ho—in Sri Lanka. Rather, she wishes to speak only in Tamil. She has,” Farsanna glanced away from me toward the trees as she felt for the word, “fear.”

It was more than I’d asked for, and still didn’t answer what I’d intended to ask. I tried again. “Is your momma, um, can she see?”

“She had sickness as a child. That made her see and walk not well. Although I think perhaps,” she glanced my way quickly, “I think perhaps her fear makes it more.”

The mutt licked Farsanna’s hand and as she stroked the dog’s ears, her eyes moved to the truck bed. “He likes me,” she said, “no?”

I watched the new girl swing her leg out from under her red skirt—a brown leg, darker at the knee than the thigh, and darker still more at the calf. And I watched the boys watching the brown, or maybe the shape—I wouldn’t know what boys see when they watch—of first one leg then the other, and not a one of them—Emerson or Jimbo or L. J. or Welp—able to talk. Except for Em to the stray: “You stay here, now. You hear? You be good.”

Me, I had a spasm of wanting to stay put myself, of fear that tripped up my feet and made me wish desperately I could miss this one trip to the Blue Hole with our mangy pack and the new girl. Because I was beginning to think what a bad, what a truly remarkably bad idea this whole thing might be.