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Inkle and Yarico / Sunday

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Inkle and Yarico

Sunday

by

Joanne Walen

Starred Papers

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts in

English Studies

August, 2017

Starred Paper Committee:

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Introduction

During the Restoration and 18th century in England, the tale of Inkle and Yarico was well-known and replicated many times in various forms, from historiography and prose to narrative poetry, historic epistle, and even as a popular opera. The basic premise of the tale—a handsome stranded English trader, rescued by a beautiful native woman, his shallow promises to and subsequent betrayal and abandonment of her—evokes strong responses in writers and readers alike. Yarico is a sympathetic character; her space of abjection inspires authors to provide her with a voice and means of expression. My interest lies in examining how the author’s gender and narrative form affect the projection of the native female voice in *Inkle and Yarico*, and how the concept of alterity comes into play in these works.

Richard Ligon (1657)

Yarico first appears as an historical figure in Richard Ligon’s 1657 narrative, *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes*. Ligon travelled to Barbados between 1647 and 1650, under some duress, “left destitute of a subsistence, and brought to such an exigent, as I must famish or fly” and felt himself “a stranger in my own country” (1). Frank Felsenstein notes that Ligon accompanied his royalist friend Colonel Thomas Modyford there, sailing first to the African coast “on the good ship called the *Achilles*...to trade for *negroes*, horses, and cattle...to sell at the *Barbadoes*” (56).

Many of Ligon’s observations are based on his time at the sugar plantation of Major William Hilliard, whose estate Modyford had bought into, and it is here that we first encounter Yarico:

We had an *Indian* woman, a slave in the house, who was of excellent shape and colour, for it was a pure bright bay; small breasts, with the nipples of a porphyry colour, this woman would not be woo'd by any means to wear clothes. She chanc'd to be with child, by a Christian servant, and lodging in the *Indian*-house, amongst other women of her own country, where the Christian servants, both men and women came; and being very great, and that her time was come to be delivered, loath to fall in labour before the men, walk'd down to a wood, in which was a pond of water, and there by the side of the pond, brought her self a bed; and presently washing her child in some of the water of the pond, lap'd it up in such rags, as she had begg'd of the Christians; and in three hours time came home, with her child in her arms, a lusty boy, frolick and lively (Ligon, 54-55).

Keith Sandiford notes in *Inkle and Yarico: The Construction of Alterity from History to Literature* that Ligon here “constructs Yarico as a female image of primitive heroic virtue who bravely chooses to suffer the throes of childbirth in solitude and without assistance... a noble savage figure within an idealized narrative context” (118). In the next paragraph, however, Ligon’s narrative tone changes from one of idealism to one of detached precision, as he relates the story of Yarico’s enslavement:

This *Indian* dwelling near the sea-coast, upon the Main, an *English* ship put in to a bay, and sent some of her men ashore, to try what victuals or water they could find, for in some distress they were: But the *Indians* perceiving them to go up so far into the country, as they were sure they could not make a safe retreat, intercepted them in their return and fell upon them, chasing them into a wood, and being dispersed there, some were taken, and some kill'd: but a young man amongst them straggling from the rest, was

met by this *Indian* maid, who upon the first sight fell in love with him, and hid him close from her countrymen (the *Indians*) in a cave, and there fed him, till they could safely go down to the shore, where the ship lay at anchor, expecting the return of their friends. But at last, seeing them upon the shore, sent the long-boat for them, took them aboard, and brought them away. But the youth, when he came ashore in the *Barbadoes*, forgot the kindness of the poor maid, that had ventured her life for his safety, and sold her for a slave, who was as free born as he: And so poor *Yarico* for her love, lost her liberty (Ligon, 55).

In contrast to the idealization of the earlier narrative, Ligon here finds common ground with Yarico; perhaps thinking of his own betrayal and precarious circumstances in England, his “looking about for friends, who are the best supporters in so staggering a condition, found none, or very few...”, she becomes not just the mythic figure, but someone with whom he can identify and sympathize. It is this sympathy, notes Sandiford, that “reveals a progressive dissolution of the boundaries between Self and Other” (Sandiford, 118). Ligon has become the Other in his displacement from society and as a disempowered minority in his new environs as well, and recognizes the similarities between them. He sees the powerlessness of his own situation, having little support or loyalty from those he considered friends, echoed in Yarico’s circumstances of betrayal. She becomes the “stranger in [her] own country” by protecting Inkle from her countrymen, knowing he would likely meet the fate of his companions if he were discovered; similarly, Ligon’s “staggering condition” with “none...or very few” friends to rely on allies him with Yarico, who is “free born” but must ultimately rely on herself to survive (for example, enduring childbirth alone).

Richard Steele (1711)

In comparison to the restrained style of Ligon's historiography, Richard Steele's 1711 recasting of *Inkle and Yarico* in the *Spectator* makes great use of creative license. In so doing, Steele transforms the story from simple entertainment into commentary on a myriad of issues, including relationships, gender, race, colonialism, and slavery. The setting of the account is in the salon of the character of Arietta, who recounts the story of *Inkle and Yarico* in response to her male visitor's telling of the story of the Ephesian Matron, with its cynical focus on the inconstancy of women. "The narrator of *Spectator* 11 hears the story during a visit to...Arietta, who relates it to refute the allusions made by another visitor, a "Common-Place Talker," to the effect that women are less constant in love than men and full of "Perjuries" and "general Levity" (Epley, 202).

The tale of the Ephesian Matron, as originally told by Petronius, relates the story of the Widow of Ephesus, who, "on account of her great fidelity toward her dead husband...accompanies [him] to his tomb, with the intent of starving herself to death by his side. After several days, a soldier ordered to guard nearby crucified bodies ventures into the tomb and eventually seduces the weak and distraught woman. While pursuing his amorous inclinations...he unwittingly permits a grieving family to remove one of the crucified bodies. He will be killed for his failure...the widow instead offers the body of her dead husband as a replacement...thus saving the soldier's life" (Horejsi, 208). The widow is, however, seen as unfaithful because she chooses to sacrifice the body of her late husband over losing her living lover. Arietta counters the Common-Place Talker's conceit by telling the story of *Inkle and Yarico*. The account begins:

Mr. *Thomas Inkle* of *London*, aged 20 years embarked in the *Downs* on the god ship called the *Achilles*, bound for the *West-Indies*, on the 16th of *June* 1647, in order to improve his fortune by trade and merchandize. Our adventurer was the third son of an eminent citizen, who had taken particular care to instill into his mind an early love of gain, by making him a perfect master of numbers, and consequently giving him a quick view of loss and advantage, and preventing the natural impulses of his passions, by prepossession towards his interests. With a mind thus turned, young *Inkle* had a person every way agreeable, a ruddy vigour in his countenance, strength in his limbs, with ringlets of fair hair loosely flowing on his shoulders (Felsenstein, 86-87).

Here, the Englishman of Ligon's account is given a name, and, by identification, culpability. He is no longer the anonymous young Englishman or the "Christian [white] servant" of Ligon's tale, but a specific character with ulterior motives. Ironically, Steele "may have chosen the name [Inkle] as a wry allusion to the young man's upbringing as a small tradesman, for *inkle* was a common haberdasher's term for "a kind of linen tape" (*OED*), sometimes of an inferior quality" Felsenstein, 81). Steele continues:

It happened, in the course of the voyage, that the *Achilles*, in some distress, put into a creek on the main of *America*, in search of provisions: The youth, who is the hero of my story, among others, went ashore on this occasion. From their first landing they were observed by a party of *Indians*, who hid themselves in the wood for that purpose. The *English* unadvisedly marched a great distance from the shore into the country, and were intercepted by the natives, who slew the greatest number of them. Our adventurer escaped among others, by flying into a forest. Upon his coming into a remote and

pathless part of the wood, he threw himself, tired and breathless, on little hillock, when an *Indian* maid rushed from a thicket behind him: After the first surprise, they appeared mutually agreeable to each other. If the *European* was highly charmed with the limbs, features, and wild graces of the naked *American*; the *American* was no less taken with the dress, complexion, and shape of an *European*, covered from head to foot. The *Indian* grew immediately enamoured of him, and consequently solicitous for his preservation (87).

Each is struck by fascination with the Other, but their differing motivations are already apparent; while they are attracted to one another, Yarico is moved to protect Inkle from danger, provides him with comforts, and selflessly places herself in harm's way to do so. She is solicitous of his care, placing his needs above her own, thus taking on the role of "wife":

She therefore conveyed him to a cave, where she gave him a delicious repast of fruits, and led him to a stream to slake his thirst. In the midst of these good offices, she would sometimes play with his hair, and delight in the opposition of its colour, to that of her fingers: Then open his bosom, and laugh at him for covering it. She was, it seems, a person of distinction, for she every day came to him in a different dress, of the most beautiful shells, bugles, and bredes. She likewise brought him a great many spoils, which her other lovers had presented to her; so that his cave was richly adorned with all the spotted skins of beasts, and most party-coloured feathers of fowls, which that world afforded. To make his confinement more tolerable, she would carry him in the dusk of the evening, or by the favour of moon-light, to unfrequented groves and solitudes, and show him where to lie down in safety, and sleep amidst the falls of waters, and melody of

nightingales. Her part was to watch and hold him in her arms, for fear of her countrymen, and wake him on occasions to consult his safety (87-88).

Inkle's only contributions are intimations of love and vague promises of a future life of ease:

In this manner did the lovers pass away their time, till they had learn'd a language of their own, in which the voyager communicated to his mistress, how happy he would be to have her in his country, where she should be clothed in such silks as his waistcoat was made of, and be carried in houses drawn by horses, without being exposed to wind or weather. All this he promised her the enjoyment of, without such fears and alarms as they were there tormented with (88).

Inkle mistakenly assumes that Yarico, like him, and by extension, the women he is presumably familiar with, will be enticed by material wealth, since she is apparently a “person of distinction” who brings him “a great many spoils...so that his cave was richly adorned” (87). Sandiford comments that Inkle's position is “perfectly reasonable...that Inkle should define the New World and its contents—from his central utilitarian ethic—as Others, readily available for his commodification” (Sandiford, 121). Whereas Inkle *promises* Yarico silk finery and carriages before safety, Yarico *provides* Inkle with protection before material comforts. During the months they spend together in their idyll, they “learn a language of their own”, implying a deep intimacy and connection, yet this language is misinterpreted by both as they each view the other's motives through opposing lenses, which becomes painfully clear when they leave the mainland on a ship “of his countrymen, bound for Barbadoes”. Yarico and their unborn child are to Inkle simply

another commodity in the “immediate market of the *Indians* and other slaves as with us of horses and oxen” (88), and he lapses into silence:

...Mr. *Thomas Inkle*, now coming into English territories, began seriously to reflect upon his loss of time, and to weigh with himself how many days interest of his money he had lost during his stay with *Yarico*. This thought made the young man very pensive, and careful what account he should be able to give to his friends of his voyage. Upon which considerations, the prudent and frugal young man sold *Yarico* to a *Barbadian* merchant; notwithstanding that the poor girl, to incline him to commiserate her condition, told him that she was with child by him: But he only made use of that information, to rise in his demands upon the purchaser (88).

Taken (albeit willingly) from her homeland to a strange new place, cast aside, and enslaved, *Yarico*'s pleas for justice fall on deaf ears, yet come through in her elevated place in *Arietta*'s narrative, “aimed at inventing a plausible voice for *Yarico* and appointing herself *Yarico*'s historian and legitimizing *Yarico*'s selfless devotion towards *Inkle* by giving those relevant actions higher profile” (Sandiford, 120), and the silent tears shed by the Spectator “with tears in my eyes, which a woman of *Arietta*'s good sense did, I am sure, take for greater applause, than any compliments I could make her” (Felsenstein, 88).

The representation of women in literary works, notes *Arietta* in Steele's account, is unbalanced and biased. “You men are writers,” she states, “and can represent us women as unbecoming as you please in your works, while we are unable to return the injury” (Felsenstein, 86). By utilizing *Arietta*'s voice, Steele refutes the *Commonplace Talker*'s misogyny and

underscores the connection between Arietta and Yarico and their marginalized positions. Both women, as Horejsi notes, are Others in a male-dominated society. Although their situations are very different, they both experience marginalization due to male attitudes toward women; through Arietta's retelling of the story, Steele focuses on "male readers' responsibilities as determiners of culture, and attempts...to offer a corrective for the inappropriate masculinity of the fop and Inkle" (Horejsi, 217).

Frances Seymour (1726)

From Ligon's historiography and Steele's imaginative version of the Inkle and Yarico story, we turn to Frances Seymour, Countess of Hertford. She wrote two companion poems, "The Story of Inkle and Yarico, Taken out of the Eleventh *Spectator*", and "An Epistle from Yarico to Inkle, after He had Sold Her for a Slave", both published in 1726. The first poem is in third-person narrative form, the second in first-person heroic epistle, which "is the distinction of Frances Seymour...to have publicly initiated both forms...anonymously...and their authorship was ascertained only after two centuries by her biographer, Helen Sard Hughes" (Felsenstein, 89).

In Seymour's "Story of Inkle and Yarico", Inkle is introduced as a charming youth seeking his fortune, though he is not labeled as an Englishman, and the only reference to his name is in the poem's title. As to the first, Seymour's lack of identification of Inkle as English "may have been deliberate: "A direct admission of his nationality would have been painful to the poetic countess and her readers" (Felsenstein, 90).

Conversely, this paints Inkle, as does the lack of referring to him by name in the body of the poem, as more of a universal European trader or fortune-seeker. Another effect this

exclusion, whether deliberate or not, has on the poem is to amplify Yarico's voice by acknowledging and giving greater credence to her selfhood and experience.

Seymour utilizes a variety of descriptions for the setting and for the person of Yarico. In the first, Inkle lands on "a barb'rous coast (12) with descriptions of "horrid *cannibals*" (18) and "tigers speckled skins" (41). Yarico is depicted as "A negroe virgin" (24), "an *Indian* virgin"(46) and "*Indian* maid" (86). The interchangeability and seeming incongruity of these descriptions could be seen, as the lack of identification of Inkle or his nationality in the text, as an attempt to universalize the experiences of diverse countries and peoples.

Of the works discussed thus far, Seymour's "Story" is the first to include dialogue, beginning halfway through the poem, with Inkle's declaration of love for Yarico, and plans for their future together:

He whisper'd vows of everlasting love;
 And as upon the verdant turf he lay,
 Oft he wou'd to th'attentive virgin say:
 "Oh! cou'd I but, my *Yarico*, with thee,
 Once more, my dear, my native country see,
 In softest silks thy limbs shou'd be arrayed,
 Like that of which the clothes I wear are made;
 What different ways my grateful soul wou'd find,
 To indulge thy person, and divert thy mind!" (56-64)

Yarico's attentiveness and assumption that Inkle's motives are upstanding, as are hers, leaves her unprepared for his betrayal. Seymour describes her as an "artless nymph" (28), and

several times as a “virgin”, implying a naiveite and innocence. Merchant notes that Seymour’s poem is “structured very strongly around all of the defining oppositions of the typical colonial encounter...the central antithesis between Yarico the “artless nymph” and Inkle the heartless European (44). Yarico trusts Inkle, accepting what he says at face value, with the assumption that his words and actions reflect one another. She is blinded by his “enticing accents...which smoothly fell from his perswasive tongue” (65-66).

Inkle is anything but grateful, and the only person he is interested in indulging is himself, as evidenced by his inner dialogue once he and Yarico are aboard the ship and he is surrounded by his peers, immersed again in a culture preoccupied with monetary gain:

A *European* vessel she espy’d,
 And made them signs to touch upon the shore,
 Then to her lover the glad tidings bore;
 Who, with his mistress he descends,
 And found the crew were country-men and friends.
 Reflecting now upon the time he’d pass’d,
 Deep melancholy all his thoughts o’ercast:
 “Was it for this,” (said he) “I crossed the main,
 Only a doting virgin’s heart to gain?
 Was this the treasure which I hop’d to find,
 When first I dar’d the seas and faithless wind?
 I needed not for such a prize to roam,
 There are a thousand doting maids at home” (68-80).

Inkle's view of Yarico as a "treasure" here is not as someone precious to him; indeed, he seems to be questioning the value of the relationship. He sees her as a generic female, easily replaceable with any other woman, who, he expects, would be just as faithful and doting (and likely, more socially acceptable amongst his peers). In addition, by objectifying her, "the treasure/a prize", she is reduced to a mere commodity, and his "mind by sordid interest swayed" (84), and he sells her to a planter immediately upon arrival in Barbados.

Here, the reader is privy to the full vehemence, pain, and outrage of Yarico upon realizing she has been betrayed by the one she trusted implicitly and risked her life for:

Low at his feet for mercy she implor'd,
 And thus, in moving strains, her fate deplor'd:
 "Oh! whither shall I turn to seek redress,
 When thou'rt the cruel cause of my distress?
 If the remembrance of our former love,
 And all thy plighted vows wont force to move,
 Yet, for the helpless infant's sake I bear,
 Listen, with pity, to my just despair.
 Ah! Let me not in slavery remain,
 Doom'd all my life to drag a chain;
 It cannot be—Surely thy generous breast
 An act so vile, so horrid, must detest,
 But if thou hat'st me, rather let me meet
 A gentler fate, and stab me at thy feet;

Then I will bless thee with my latest breath,
 And sink, contented, to the shades of death” (89-102)

Yarico’s love, freely given ultimately costs her her freedom, and the language that she has been taught to communicate with her lover now becomes a language of lament, without the attention or the presence of the audience she intends it for. “Her entry into language,” writes Gillian Beer, “takes her out of innocence and into contradiction and privation: the colonizing male sells her into slavery...the black slave-woman is left with nothing but the white man’s language; and with that she can protest, but not find freedom” (Beer, 129-30). (Note: The use of the term “black” is a British convention, and would not be used by Americans to describe Indians).

Seymour’s second poem, “An Epistle from Yarico to Inkle, after He Had Sold Her for a Slave”, is a continuation of Yarico’s lament, written in heroic epistolary form, seen in Ovid’s *Heroides*. Before the novel, notes Wechselblatt, the heroic epistle “was the preeminent form...for ventriloquizing the female voice and representing women’s inner lives...through which its authors could create a public revelation of interiority, otherness, and the private, “feminized” qualities increasingly defining the social identity of women in early modern Europe” (202).

Since heroic epistle is traditionally structured from a woman to a lover who is absent in one manner or another, and who does not expect a reply, it is a fitting form for “Inkle and Yarico”. Although it is implicit that there is no reciprocation by the intended audience, the voice of the abandoned woman is projected here through the power of pen and ink, becoming physical, concrete words on a page.

In this work, Yarico begins by recounting her relationship with Inkle and the true cause of her lament, “’Tis thy injustice, thy destructive scorn/And not the chain I drag, for which I mourn” (6-7). Not only has her love been spurned, betrayed for profit, the child she bore, a tangible, painful reminder: “My sufferings were thy wretched infant’s death/who in one hour, receiv’d and lost his breath” (37-38). At this point, she segues into the present tense, “Yet still I must my hated life sustain/Still linger on my anxious hours in pain” (39-40), suggesting that her present state is futile.

Heroic epistle has the obduracy of hope and passion at their final stretch before despair. It never represents the possibility of the woman’s whole self reviving after the breakdown of sexual love...if it suggested that women could find the apex of significance for their lives only in love, it suggested too that the experience of the slighted, the abandoned, the powerless, mattered. (Beer, 129)

As in Seymour’s narrative poem, Yarico alludes here to death as the only viable option, warned by the “hoary Christian priest” (441) that those who commit suicide are doomed to hell:

But those who (tir’d of life) themselves destroy,
 He said, must never taste celestial joy,
 But, underneath the earth, to pits retire,
 Where they will burn in everlasting fire;
 And, spight of all the ills which I endure,
 I dare not venture such a dangerous cure (53-58).

Yarico’s ambivalence about the priest’s promises and admonitions are evident: when she is describing the priest, whose (“...every act strict piety confess’d”) (42), evidence of the

cognitive dissonance she now experiences; does she or does she not trust the priest, someone who with the appearance of age and wisdom purports to be telling the truth, as she trusted Inkle's innocent youthful appearance and his promises of love and fidelity? Is this the paradise the priest talks about, "Where, after death, those souls would surely go/Who here unjustly were depress'd with woe" (45-46) meant for her? One could argue that in the 18th century, deism was moving toward a more Universalist understanding of religion, which emphasized inclusiveness at least as far as salvation was concerned, although this is of little comfort to Yarico, who sees that only death will free her from bondage.

Seymour concludes the poem by skillfully turning Yarico's ambivalence about the afterlife and issues of trust back onto Inkle:

That perjur'd men, wou'd to the pits be driven,
 And ne'er must enter thro' the gate of heaven.
 Think, if this sad conjecture shou'd be true,
 Dear faithless youth (oh think!) what wilt thou do? (61-64).

Conclusion

The works of Ligon, Steele, and Seymour each allow the projection of Yarico's perspective and voice to be heard within the spaces of the texts to varying degrees. Although Ligon's text obviously tells less of Yarico's selfhood than do Steele's or Seymour's, the historic basis he provides is crucial to the chronological development of the story. Steele's version, by offering a "female" perspective, shows a greater sensitivity and awareness of a point of view that, as the character of Arietta notes, is easily maligned. Seymour's poetry, finally, lends itself to the

universal expression of women's experiences within relationships. Her heroic epistle, in particular, "separates ("feminized") language from the world of (male) action...articulating the contradictions in women's lives, while circumscribing what one is to do about them" (Wechselblatt, 206).

Yarico, like her female English contemporaries, is provided with a voice, a means of expression, but like them has little or no power to alter her circumstances. Ligon, Steele, and Seymour all utilize Yarico's space of abjection; her "otherness" lends itself to the authors' imaginations, intent, and emphasis. That authors of differing times and backgrounds were compelled to retell the story, to "create meaning" (Sandiford, 123) indicates that some part of *Inkle and Yarico* spoke to their own times and circumstances, and that, as Todorov writes, recognize "the other in ourselves...we are not a homogenous substance, radically alien to whatever is not us" (Sandiford, 118).

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Sunday

By

Joanne Walen

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Sunday

The call had come at five a.m.—her mother always said that late night or early morning phone calls were never good news—and A.J. had to admit that Delores was right in this case. A death, an accident, or Dennis, slurring and apologetic, who would not remember the call or that they had broken up.

A.J. swiped at the alarm several times before realizing it was her phone. Delores' voice was faraway and hollow: grandma isn't doing well. You need to come home.

She stumbled through her apartment, gathering a change of clothes, her phone and charger, toothbrush, and tripping over Mr. Jinx, who wound his orange tabby body around her ankles. She poured an entire day's worth of food into his bowl, which he would eat within five minutes, and added a handful of ice to his water dish before she left.

The three-hour drive was interminable. Maybe this would finally be it, A.J. thought, and felt ashamed at her relief. She passed farmhouses, somnolent small towns, collapsed barns softly rotting into pulp. With the passing miles, A.J. felt herself growing younger, smaller, becoming Agnes Jane (“A perfectly good family name, Agnes”) again, even though no one except her mother and a few older family members called her Agnes anymore. She'd given up correcting them years ago.

Agnes, mired in a sea of girls named Jennifer or Brittany, pudgy and awkward. In school, she'd been “Haggie” or “Haggis” in a bad Scottish accent, the boys making retching noises, the girls whispering and giggling as she walked by, sick heat rising in her face. They wouldn't tease you if they didn't like you, said Delores. After graduation, A.J. found a job as a school custodian

in a place where no one knew her. She liked the solitary, routine evenings. The job provided insurance and paid for her car and her apartment.

The apartment was a full second-floor walkup in a house built by her landlady's grandfather. It had ornate, peeling trim and clanking radiators, the kind of place that could be backdrop for a photo shoot, she thought—women in high-end, ethereal gowns posed languidly against the cracks and patches of the walls, watery light filtering in through the high windows. She filled it with secondhand books and otherwise neglected odds and ends she found at garage sales. The landlord's son had done the renovations, converting two of the tiny bedrooms into a bathroom and a kitchen, prompting Delores to ask A.J. whether he was single.

Just turn the car around now, she thought, panic pricking the back of her throat. Her phone rang and she let it roll over to voice mail. She cranked up the radio's volume, concentrating on the bass thrumming through the floorboards (Dennis had installed it for her, and fixed her car for the cost of parts). Going to blow out the speakers one of these days, she mused—then her mother could be right about that, too.

Ten miles outside of town, she blew past a cop going the opposite direction. Seventy-two in a sixty. Shit. She couldn't afford another ticket. She pumped the spongy brakes (really should get those looked at) and held her breath, waiting to see cherries swirling in her rearview mirror. The police cruiser kept going, disappearing around a curve into the glassy waves of heat rising from the road, and she relaxed her clammy grip on the steering wheel with a sigh.

She turned off the highway and headed northwest, where the corn and soybean fields stood placidly beneath stick-insect irrigation grids, past the lake where she had taken swimming lessons, now mossy with algae and smelling strongly of wet dog, and into town. She slowed,

passing Kleinschmidt's Tavern, St. Mary's (Catholic), St. Peter's (Lutheran), the post office, drug store, Altmann's Grocery, Kramer's Emporium (Going Out of Business! Everything Must Go!), and the boarded-up movie theater, tagged with blue and silver spray paint, undoubtedly by some bored kid. All closed today except the convenience store off the highway and the churches. She vaguely recalled an old joke, something about needing the bars the other six days of the week to pray for forgiveness on Sunday. She never could remember a punchline.

A.J. clicked the radio off as she turned into the winding driveway, and cruised the newly sealed lot for a shaded parking space. The car sputtered and hiccupped as she killed the engine. She sat behind the wheel until the windows fogged from the humidity.

Willow Creek Retirement Village loomed ahead, its sun-bleached yellow bricks interspersed with darker patchwork where old Mr. Johnson had driven his Buick into the building, thinking he was pulling into his garage. He now lived with his wife down the hall from her grandmother and wandered the halls in a jacket and battered gray fedora, insisting that someone had stolen his car. New concrete pylons now stood like sentries at the edge of the parking lot.

Red and yellow daylilies bloomed lazily along the front entrance, wavering in the August heat. An ancient willow draped its hazy yellow-green shroud over the barely trickling creek, water lines etched into its dusky rocks like growth rings on a tree. Last time she was here, spring runoff had obscured all but the largest stones.

As she approached the entrance. A.J. caught a smudgy glimpse of herself in the glass doors and cringed. Jeans, the t-shirt she'd slept in and realized halfway here that she hadn't changed, dark hair spilling out of a hasty bun. The doors slid open and she stepped inside. She

pushed her glasses back up the bridge of her nose, breathing in burnt toast, a whiff of ammonia, and fresh paint. It was nearly as warm in the building as it was outside.

In the restroom near the beauty shop, she stopped to splash cold water on her face and smooth her hair, frizzy with humidity. She walked out, took a left, then a right, and another left, a mindless, endless walk she could trace back for years. Nearly every Sunday after church from the time she was twelve until she was eighteen, she and Delores had come here. It was always a version of the same visit, a long, hushed hour in the dayroom with her grandmother, who spoke little and remembered less, while Delores hovered over them both.

The door to her grandmother's room was closed. High-pitched, chattering voices came from behind it.

"Agnes." Her mother's voice. A.J. turned. Delores was sitting in the dayroom across the hall, her usually neat silver hair skewed to one side and her clothes rumped. "Finally. They're getting grandma cleaned and turning her right now. They should be done in a few minutes."

A.J. went to hug her mother. It was like hugging a bird. "How is grandma?"

"She won't eat or drink. She turns her head away when I try. All she will take is ice chips."

A.J. nodded. "Did you sleep here last night?"

Delores laughed brittlely. "If you can call it sleep. They moved a recliner into grandma's room for me. Not the most comfortable, but I managed."

The scarred door to her grandmother's room swung open, and two nurses' aides in light blue scrubs exited, a petite, round girl with glossy dark hair, and a tall blond with her hair in a

fancy plait that looked as though it had taken days. “Miss Mary is all ready for you,” smiled the blond. “I’m Jen and this is Kelly. If you need anything else, let us know.”

“Thank you, girls,” said Delores. A.J. smiled politely.

The pair sauntered purposefully down the long hallway, heads together, pink gait belts slung low on their hips.

A.J. followed her mother into the dimly lit room. Like a cell, she had always thought, gray and cramped. It took her eyes a moment to adjust. Her grandmother’s room was private now. She had outlived four roommates in seventeen years, five if you counted Mrs. Kowalski, who moved in one afternoon and died the same night, still gazing out of the window from her bed.

The bed had been moved closer to the window. The frame was lowered to bare inches above the floor, and there were thick green mats next to it on both sides. Her grandmother was lying on her back, a hatchling propped in a nest of pillows and sheets, eyes closed, shallow breaths interspersed with the static hiss of an oxygen machine.

“She’s been sleeping more now, about 20 hours a day,” said Delores. “When she wakes up, she keeps trying to take off the oxygen. It’s only to keep her comfortable, but I don’t know if she understands that.” Delores leaned down to touch Mary’s arm and spoke loudly into her right ear. “I’m back now, mom. Agnes is here to visit, too.” She straightened and rubbed the back of her neck.

“I’m going to tidy up and get some breakfast while you stay with grandma. Do you want anything?”

“Just coffee, thanks.”

“You really should eat something. You never did eat breakfast like you should.”

A.J. bit the inside of her lip. She would pick her battles. “A bagel, I guess.”

Appeased, Delores rummaged in the leather overnight bag she'd gotten as a wedding gift over thirty years ago. A.J.'s mother had kept the luggage, but not her father Lloyd. After the divorce during A.J.'s senior year, he had joined AA, found Jesus, and Rachel, a kindergarten teacher only five years older than A.J. They moved two states away and now had two small towheaded children, Kieran and Kaylee, whose pictures she received every Christmas; in the latest, the kids were wearing red and green t-shirts that read “big brother” and “big sister”.

A.J. had flown to visit her father the previous summer, without telling Delores. She didn't want to hear the stories about how her father had insisted that one child was enough when he and Delores had married (Delores had had an emergency hysterectomy after A.J.'s birth), or that he couldn't stop drinking for *her*, or a hundred other bitter complaints.

Delores gathered her clothing and a hairbrush and went into the white-tiled bathroom. The astringent smell of disinfectant came stinging into the room. In the mirror, A.J. watched as she leaned her cheek against the cool tile and closed her eyes for a moment before turning to latch the door.

A.J. moved to the window and groped for the wand to open the blinds, still closed against the night before. Shafts of morning light streaked across her grandmother's translucent skin. The delicate bones of her hand stood in bas-relief, looking as if they would crumble into ivory dust at the slightest touch. A.J. knelt at the bedside, feeling the air whoosh in the mat under her weight.

“Hi, grandma.” She gently touched a hand. Cold and still. When she was little, she thought they were like butterflies, gossamer-light and always in a blur of motion, cooking,

gardening, mending. Her grandmother would motion for her to come near, patting the chair next to her to help shell peas or snap beans, or standing over the farmhouse stove to stir soup or showing her how to tell a weed from a plant (grandpa Cleo leaned in and said that if you watered it and it died, it was a plant, and grandma would wave him away like a pestering child). A.J. stroked her grandmother's fingers and smiled.

The bathroom door opened and Delores stepped out, red-eyed, putting her neatly folded dirty clothes into a grocery bag. Delores tied the bag shut and placed it on the small dresser with her overnight case. She slid her purse over her right arm, the straps digging in slightly. You could survive the apocalypse with all the contingencies packed into that thing, thought A.J.

"I'm going to the coffee shop now, Agnes. You stay with grandma. I'll be back soon."

"Okay, mom," she said, setting her teeth and hoping Delores didn't notice. "Are there any extra blankets?"

"Her quilt should be on the top shelf of the closet. I found it in storage in her old cedar chest a few weeks ago and had it cleaned. Surprising, really—I thought it had been lost. Great-grandma made that one for her as a wedding gift."

A.J. waited until her mother's echoing footsteps faded down the hall, unfolded herself from the floor, and walked to the closet. She stood on tiptoe on a folding chair to reach it, nearly losing her balance. The quilt lay in a clear plastic case. Behind it was a small gray steel box. She took both down and started with the quilt, carefully unzipping the case so as not to catch it on the fabric.

Even though the quilt had been cleaned, it still smelled faintly woody, like her grandfather's carpentry shed, when she unfurled it. The background of the quilt was ivory, with

a double wedding ring pattern in variegated shades of pink and blue, blocked by hand in minute, deliberate stitches. She ran her hand over the smooth cotton as she gently tucked it around her sleeping grandmother, who stirred slightly when A.J. carefully lifted her arms and pulled the quilt over her sunken chest.

Carrying the box to the bedside by the window, A.J. sat cross-legged on the floor next to her grandmother and struggled with the hasp until it turned with a rusty, complaining squeak, skinning her finger. Something rattled in the bottom. Inside were postcards, a stack of yellowed letters, tied with a blue ribbon, faded nearly gray, and some old photographs. Underneath was a set of battered dog tags, stamped “Henry O’Connor”. She took out the pictures; here she recognized her mother, grandmother, grandfather Cleo, with a few sepia-colored relatives scattered among them.

Here were Mary and Cleo on their wedding day, grandma round-faced and solemn, only twenty-one to his thirty-five, his arm protective around her. Another photo of them with a small dark-haired girl, dated the same year. “Our Wedding, June 18, 1946. Lydia, aged 3 years.” A member of the wedding, maybe. She put the pictures back in the box and gingerly untied the stack of letters. They were ordered by date.

In the first envelope was a letter and a picture of a soulful, dark-eyed soldier, a corner of his mouth turned up as though he were trying to contain a laugh. The letter was a lacy snowflake from a censor’s scissors.

08 March, 1942

My dearest Mary Ann,

We are in _____ with the _____ Brigade. We've only just arrived but it seems I have been away for years. I hope this letter finds you well. It is cold here, but the fellas in my unit are a great bunch and we try to keep each other's spirits up. I have been feeling a little under the weather, but not to worry. How I wish I could hold you in my arms once again, to hear your laugh and see your precious smile. Every day, I pray that this war will be over soon and I will come home to you, my darling.

Sometimes it seems that this is all still a dream and I will wake up by your side in a warm bed and not on the cold ground in _____. I thank God every night that you are mine, and are safe at home, waiting for me. I cannot wait until we can start our life together and have a home of our own, one that I hope we fill with children and music and our love. I remember our nights dancing together, and the light in your beautiful blue eyes. Well, it is almost time for lights-out, so I need to sign off as we leave for _____ early tomorrow morning. I will see you in my dreams, and I pray soon in reality. Good night, my darling.

All my love, Hal.

The oxygen tank hissed. Mary's eyelids fluttered and closed again. A muffled cry came from somewhere down the hall. Voices passed by the door.

The second letter, dated January 15, 1943.

Hal, my darling,

It has been so long since I have had word from you. I know that the mail service can be slow, but I am praying that this letter reaches you to tell you that our daughter has arrived. I have named her Lydia, after your beloved sister. Our Lyddie has a headful of

dark curls like yours, with the most unusual eyes, one brown and one green, with long lashes. She is beautiful and healthy and I tell her every day how much you love her, as I know you will when you meet her. I have enclosed a photograph of the two of us on her christening. She is wearing the gown your mother lent me for the occasion.

My parents have taken in boarders and I help with the laundry and cleaning and such. One of our boarders, Mrs. Vincent, whom you may remember from church, was no longer able to stay in her own home alone. She watches Lydia when I am tending to the wash or the garden, and is a great help. She has no family to speak of after her son Robert was killed in France in the Great War, so we are her family now.

She says that Lydia's eyes mean that she has "second sight", though I think that it's an old wives tale.

I hope to hear from you soon, and I pray you return safely home to me and our little girl. All my love, Mary Ann.

The photo showed her grandmother, impossibly young, her face shining with soft light, a baby dressed in a lacy white gown gently cradled in her arms. A.J. looked from the picture to the woman in the bed, fleshing out her frail body and painting roses in her sunken cheeks.

More letters, drifting farther apart, each one begging the same unanswered questions.

January 2, 1945

My darling Hal,

It has been months since I have heard from you. I am praying to God that you are safe and are simply unable to communicate. Some people tell me that I should be realistic and accept that you may not return, though I try to keep my chin up.

Our Lydia is growing like a weed, she is nearly two now and is a little chatterbox, talking a mile a minute to anyone or anything that will listen. She is sweet and kind, even at two years old, but she is also independent and knows her own mind, which does land her in some scrapes, like trying to collect eggs by herself. Someone must have left the henhouse unlatched, and you should have heard the ruckus! The hens were having no part of it. Lydia is alright, but I don't think she will be venturing near the henhouse anytime soon. I try to give her things to do to stay busy, as I do. The busy-ness is what keeps me going most days. We like to dance and sing to the radio. Lyddie has a clear, high singing voice and she adores music. How I wish you could sing together!

We pray every night for your safekeeping and return to us.

All my love. Mary Ann

April 19, 1945

My darling Hal,

I received a telegram today that said you were missing in action.

What does "missing" mean? Simply that they don't know where you are. I know that I should be realistic, but my mind wanders to other possibilities. Maybe you are, God forbid, being held somewhere, as I have read in the papers of other soldiers, or maybe you have found sanctuary in someone's home, like Mrs. Vincent, who is beginning to be forgetful.

Even if it were true, and you cannot come back to me, our girl is proof that you are still with us. I see so much of you in her, the sweetness, the little crooked half-smile when she gets into mischief, the way she sings to herself. These are what I hold onto.

All my love, Mary Ann.

A final letter, un-mailed, in an envelope that read only “Hal”.

June 17, 1946

My dearest Hal,

I don't know where to start this letter. You have been gone for so long. My letters have all been returned, many of them unopened. But that means you received at least a few of them, and for that I am thankful.

It breaks my heart to write the words to you. I have consented to marry Cleo Jancik. Our wedding is tomorrow. He is much older, but he is gentle and hardworking. He adores Lydia, and has promised to raise her as his own.

I will always love you.

Forever, Mary Ann.

A.J. looked up, startled, as Delores opened the door, holding two Styrofoam cups of coffee and a small white paper bag.

“How was grandma?”

“About the same. She seems comfortable.”

“They didn't have any bagels, so I got you a blueberry scone. I ran into Carol Johnson; she's here seeing her dad and was showing me pictures of her new grandson, her third already, if you can believe it. Wasn't her daughter Jennifer in your class at school? She is such a sweet girl.”

A.J. itched to roll her eyes. Delores laid her purse on the dresser, handed A.J. her coffee and scone, and sank down stiffly onto the mat on the opposite side of the bed. Her dark bob,

now almost entirely silver, was bright in the sunlight. She reached up onto the scarred nightstand for a tube of lip balm. Uncapping it, she leaned forward and carefully traced Mary's chapped lips. "Here, mom, let's put some of this on your lips. They look so dry. There we go, isn't that better?"

She replaced the cap and returned it to the nightstand.

They sipped their coffee and absently nibbled at the buttery scones. Delores didn't seem very interested in breakfast, either. She set her coffee down and smoothed the quilt's edges.

"Oh, I see you found the quilt, isn't it beautiful? Your great-grandma Agnes made that."

A.J. held up the letters and the pictures. "Mom, have you seen these? Did you know grandma was married before?"

"Where did you find those?"

"In a box behind her quilt. Didn't you ever look at them?"

"No. I was so busy moving things out of the old house after grandpa died that it got shuffled around. I could have used some help."

A.J. reddened. "I'm sorry." She didn't remember what excuse she had made, overtime at work, her car in the shop. She handed Delores the box.

Delores slowly shuffled through the pictures, flipping them over, tracing the images with her long, delicate fingers. A smile reached her eyes for the first time.

"Grandma was so beautiful. I don't think she thought of herself that way. Grandpa used to call her Maid Mary-ann. She would get so flustered. Grandpa was a lot older than her, but he always said they were compatible because she had an old soul, like you."

She paused, unfolded the first letter, and began to read. A.J. listened to the mourning doves and chickadees calling listlessly from the woods by the creek. The only other sounds in the room were the hissing oxygen and rustling of paper as Delores carefully turned the pages. Her lips moved slightly as she read the letters, a line of concentration creasing her forehead. An eternity passed.

A.J. played with the edge of the quilt and shifted positions. A warm bead of sweat ran down the nape of her neck. Her grandmother's breathing halted, then started with a gasp. Her eyelids fluttered and closed over irises that were nearly opaque. A.J. exhaled.

Delores folded the final letter, sliding it back into its envelope. She stacked all the letters in order and retied the ribbon, and returned them and the pictures to the box, setting it down on the nightstand with a metallic clang that filled the room. She cleared her throat.

A.J. looked up. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I promised grandpa I would wait until after they were both gone, but I suppose since you saw these..." she glanced at the box and back at Mary, her mouth a pinched line.

"So grandma was married before, why would that be a secret? And what happened to Lydia?"

"Grandpa told me just before he died. Grandpa was a friend of her older brother Thomas and had always had a soft spot for her. A couple of months after they married, there was a polio epidemic and Lydia got sick. They took her to the hospital, but it was too late. Grandma went to bed for weeks afterward and grandpa and great grandma Agnes had to care for her like a baby. He finally had to send her to the state hospital because he didn't know what else to do. He was

afraid she would do something to hurt herself. He told everyone she had gone to visit relatives in California, and he put all of the pictures and mementoes away.”

A.J. put her hand to her throat.

“When she came back, she was different—grandpa said it seemed like she’d aged twenty years, mentally. She’d had shock treatments. I think grandpa carried a lot of guilt. He said he felt that he had failed them both.” Delores stroked Mary’s arm. “But she still loved him. I was born eleven years later—they thought they wouldn’t be able to have children together. I guess God had other plans, didn’t he, mom?”

“They never talked about it, at least in front of me. I remember grandma looking sad, sometimes going to their bedroom and lying in the dark for hours or a couple of days. Grandpa said to just let her be, but I would sneak in and sit by her when she was asleep. It was the only time she was still enough to hold onto.”

Delores’ voice caught in the warm, stilted air. A.J. fished a tissue from the box on the window ledge, sending a flurry of dust motes into the streaks of sunlight, and handed it to her mother. Delores wiped her eyes beneath her glasses and coughed. She patted Mary’s hand and slid her fingers around to clasp it. A.J. leaned forward and took her grandmother’s other hand, cool and light as wings, the thready pulse in the pale blue veins a tenuous connection.