

SHORT STORY COLLECTION:

*FERMENTED SUMMER*

By

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## **THESIS CERTIFICATION**

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## ABSTRACT

### FERMENTED SUMMER

Chaise Jurnee Waller

*Fermented Summer* is a collection of three stories: *Fermented*, *Evaporated*, and *Distilled* that explore themes of Southern Gothic American Literature in a modern, short story format in a small fictional Floridian town surrounded by swamp land. The characters experience troubles of southern culture: alcoholism, prejudice, alienation, poverty, transgression, and decayed settings. Each story depicts encounters of a different time in the same place whilst switching between central figures' narration. The expectation of *Fermented Summer* is to examine the multifaceted relationship of humanity and its ecological surroundings, putting pressure on the already brittle bonds with nature. Its purpose is to explore the degree to which humanity is recognizable without its ancestral and nearly primal synergy with the land and life. The figures of *Fermented Summer* highlight not the struggles of impoverished southerners, but the degrading relation of humanity to the earth itself. Each character has their own conflicts and challenges, ultimately placing the troubles with Del, the youngest, to sort through the remains of her dying homeland and familial relations.

## CHAPTER I

### *Fermented*

Before my feet even reach the concrete of the old bus stop, the scent of rotten citrus and cypress fills my lungs. I'm the only one who gets off at this stop. The lingering smell of dead fish must lure in tourists. The dense air makes it tough to breathe, and I can already feel my legs sweating, sticking to my jeans. Dim streetlights flicker above me, and mosquitos buzz around my frizzing hair. There is a large welcome sign that looks tattered and worn from years of hurricanes and torrential downpours, with the hardly legible words: "Welcome to...Hell." The other word must have been scratched off by some kids as a joke or worn off over the years.

This humidity around me is intrusive, yet invigorating – such a change from what I'm used to. Summer in the city was never anything like this, the air here is wetter. My pores fill with the fresh, dank air. It reminds me of memories I no longer have, ancient stories of my childhood. I'm still not sure if they're real, or if I just made them up to make sense of time. I hear the squeaky bus doors shut and it drives off and reveals two, equally shady looking buildings.

The first one must be the motel I looked up before I came. It had bad reviews and I now understand why. Thick sawgrass adorns the sides of the building, nearly blocking the entrance. The grass looks dead, too, even in the dark. The lights flicker through the windows in what looks like a reception area. The lights from the large sign that shows the hourly rates bounces off the evenly lined pine trees on the left side of the building. The other is a brick, windowless building lit with neon beer signs. There are motorcycles out front, lined up in a row like chrome troops. I can just hardly see the smoke hanging above them. I make my way across the street in their direction, away from the single bus stop. I hear a small pitter patter approaching behind me, and I look to see an armadillo following me, almost as if it waited for me to have safe passage.

The closer I get, the clearer I can hear the muffled sound of bluegrass. Soon, the cigarette smoke enters my lungs. There are big, gnarly men who don't look anything like the ones back in the city. Those men wear scarves and have clean-shaven faces, these men look like they only shower in the front yard with a hose. The bikers stare at me with confused looks like I'm the first new face they've seen in decades. They whisper about my long hair and freckles, guessing my age incorrectly.

"Got a light?" I ask a huge, sweaty man covered in tattoos. He looks at the man next to him, raises his eyebrows, and reaches deep into his pockets. He pulls out a book of matches and swatches one as I lean into the flame. He extends his hand, beckoning to take the match book for myself. I hesitate, but take it.

"Well, who the hell are you?" he asks. I'm sure they keep a close eye on who comes and goes.

I take a deep drag and exhale, "I'm Del, Sam's kid."

"Sam? Sam Broussard?" I nod my head as I turn away from him toward the door. He says something else and laughs a little with the other men, but I can't hear them now that I've let the sound of loud bluegrass out of the heavy doors. Waving the matches over my head in a gesture of thanks, I enter the building.

Inside the air is smoky and the lights are red. The small puffs of AC blow across my face granting relief from the summer night. The metal staircase winds downward, and the walls are covered in old stickers and sloppy marker writing. When I make it to the bottom, everyone is already looking at me. They must have heard my loud steps echo from below. I try not to make eye contact with anyone and sit down at the bar.

“Whiskey?” I ask as I shove my backpack under the stool. He sets down a glass in front of me and pours a shot of golden liquid. I peer up at him displeased, he scoffs and pours more. My throat burns as I drink, muddling the sounds of everything around me: darts hitting a board, pool balls bouncing off each other, glasses clinking, slurred words, and boots scraping across the floor. I can hear the eyes behind me, tracing the back of my skull. I order another round.

“Not from ‘round here, are you?” he asks, smoothing the ends of his long white beard. I scoff, he pours, I drink, and he says “Well, maybe you are, on account of how fast you’re knockin’ them back” with a light chuckle.

“I was born here” I say apathetically. I look up and study the deep creases of his face. He has a long scar from the top of his cheek down to the middle of his neck. The lines around his eyes look like he could be 50, but his sunken eyes say he’s at least 60. He looks surprised. I’m sure that’s because people don’t leave this town very often, and if they do, they definitely don’t come back.

“Welcome home,” he tells me and takes a shot with me. I can tell he wants to ask, but maybe he already knows. As I drink, I can’t help but listen to a group of younger men debating on who should come talk to me. Their voices are scruffy and deep, and take breaks to sip their beers. Eventually, ‘Jack’ is the chosen one.

He slithers up to my right side and I give him a once over as he leans cockily on the bar top. He smells strongly of sawdust but even more strongly of cheap cologne. He plucks the toothpick from his mouth and says “Pardon me, miss, trying to knock the habit” as he peers eagerly at the cigarette in my hand. His hair is messy, and his beard has little flakes of sawdust...no...dandruff in it. I can see sweat marks in his arm pits.

“Need a refill?” He motions to the bartender.



I swirl the liquid around in my glass and give him a nod. I'm not one to turn down a free drink, though I'm not in the mood for company. Another man approaches my left side before I can even say anything.

"Leave her alone, Jack, she don't want nothing to do with an old dog like you," then offers to buy me a drink. I accept, and now have three glasses in front of me. I finish them one after another.

"There's always something a little stronger if ya need it," Jack laughs, then looks up and points at a dirty mason jar half full of liquid.

The other man laughs with him, "Oh c'mon now, just cause she ain't from here don't mean you gotta be mean to her."

"Could you two, maybe, I don't know, fuck off now?" I tell them.

They both roar with laughter now. Their laughs are cruel, like hyenas nearing in on their prey.

"Gus! Bring this pretty lady a shot of your finest swamp grease!" Jack says as he mimics holding a teacup with his pinky out.

The other man joins in and they pretend to clink glasses. "You ever heard about old Sam? He was the only one who ever drank that shit, and he's long gone now! But man, oh man, that guy would have drank gasoline if you gave it to him! Anything to drown out redneck voices like old Jack's over here!" He laughs so hard that he has to clutch his guts.

My heart sinks to the floor when I hear them utter his name. My mind races with anger. I'm the only one allowed to hate him. I look around frantically and see the bartender's face scrunch up. He has to know who I am and why I'm here.

“Why don’t you have some?” I say as I light another cigarette, then blow the smoke directly in Jack’s face. The fire in my throat makes my words come out like flames. “What? Too much for you?” I say through gritted teeth.

“Oh, you really *ain’t* from here!” Jack responds.

“Maybe we should just leave her be, Jack, she don’t seem so happy.”

“I’m leaving” I tell them both, but I’m met with a firm hand on my shoulder pressing me back down onto the stool.

“C’mon, Gus, pour this outta town girl a shot.” Gus looks intimidated by the men and reaches for the jar. He takes a moment to unscrew the lid, then carefully pours it with his shaky hands from the jar into a glass. The lights refract in the drink and sparkle like moonlight on water. It’s a little muddier looking than water, though.

“Did you make this?” I ask him, trying to ignore the men on my flanks.

He solemnly shakes his head “no.” “The man who drank this always brought his own jar. He’s the only one that ever drinks it, aside from a couple people passing through that don’t know any better.” He glances venomously at the two men.

Suddenly, I am no longer at the bar. I find myself standing at the bottom of the staircase, watching Gus grab the jar and a glass for a man at the bar. The man looks worn down, scuffed up, and hunched over. His hair is a mess. People don’t say things to him, but around him. They whisper things to each other as they glance at the man. He turns to look at me, but his face is blurry and beaten. I see his body raise as he looks at me, shoulders going up in excitement. But, before he can stand, three large men crowd him, shoving him back down in his chair.

Back in reality, I feel convinced that this is a strange ritual I must partake in. After missing his funeral, I feel like I owe him something, even something as insignificant as this, even if he never gave me anything.

“Did...he make this?” I ask.

“Sam? Heavens no. That man couldn’t even walk straight, I hear he gets it from that maniac out in the swamp. He’d bring in a new jar every week or so to work on. This was the last one he brought in, but he never got to finish it.”

“You’re gonna have quite a night with that” Jack says as he laughs behind his arm, trying not to spit out his own drink.

I wanted it, though, maybe just to feel closer to him. I wanted to sit at his bar and drink his drink. I didn’t want to feel anything, and maybe this was how. The men chatted around me, but I couldn’t hear anything they said. Their faces fade from my focus, swirling like the drink in my glass. The music played louder around me, *yes, I know we all die at the end of the road...* I stand up. The red lights in the bar emphasize the smoke above me, and reflect in the liquid before me. I don’t think they notice how little I notice them.

I hear a muffled voice say, “Moonshine is for degens, people who ain’t got nothing to lose.”

In a swift motion, I shoot the shine. My whole body burns as my feet lift off the ground. I feel my thoughts buzz around like a wasp trapped in a piece of Tupperware. The liquid enters every part of my body, fuels my veins like diesel. I open my mouth to speak but all that I hear is a chorus of cicadas growing louder. The men all stop talking and stare at me. I can feel their eyes, but I don’t care. My vision becomes tunneled between myself and the jar. I pour another, and the music enters my body like lightning. Things around me feel unbalanced, and I blink

uncontrollably. I feel both alive and dead at the same time. After throwing down some cash on the bar, I grab the jar, my bag, and head toward the same stairs I came in through.

This time I can't help but make eye contact with everyone I pass. They hang around the fans in the room, hiding from the heat. Their white tank tops adorned with black biker jackets. The heat isn't holding them back from showing what side they're on. They look like misshapen, distorted, monsters hovering around an all too small watering hole.

When I was younger, my dad always told me "Don't pick a side, ride the middle line, and no one can control you." I used to think that was stupid, that you should stand up and believe in what you think is right, but the more of these people I see, the more I understand. I shouldn't have ever started looking around, because it's starting to sink in. The hazy room spins around me, and my nostrils are ablaze with the scent, burning through my chest and into my head.

They all look beat up, scars across their drooping faces as they scowl. I don't belong here. I feel the panic building in my chest like a dam about to break, and before I even make it to the stairs, I'm breathing so heavily I can't move anymore. The few women in the bar are just as frightening, and they radiate a dangerous energy. They're tall, skinny hovering shadows. They whisper and hiss at the men, and the men growl in my direction. The red lights become brighter, and I can feel the desperation and despair in the room. It's like this place has been frozen in time. I have to leave.

A hand appears on my shoulder and I jump. It's Gus, and he's speaking to me, but I can't hear anything except the loud bluegrass guitar riff pouring out of the outdated speakers. He tries to take the jar from my hand, out of concern, I think. I pull it away from him, and he backs off. He looks concerned. I run up the stairs as my heartbeat increases with the speed of the fiddle in the song.

As I approach the top of the stairs I begin to see the door, it's like one of those horror movies where the hallway gets longer and stretches away from you. But I don't stop. I rush through the door using my entire body weight to open the heavy doors. When I make it outside I can finally breathe again, but I so desperately gasp for air that I choke. It's like I'm back from the underworld, and I can hear the faint sounds of music and people talking, but it's covered up by the sound of the cicadas again. I take deep breaths of the thick air. It smells rotten, like roadkill mixed with fish. I quickly unscrew the top off the jar and take another swig. I notice other men outside by their bikes, staring wildly at me. *Fuck them*, I think.

Embarrassed by the amount of fear I felt, I walk right up to them. I hold the jar in their faces and ask with anger, "Where is he?!" The men blink in bewilderment and chuckle with each other. "Where. The *fuck*, is he?!" I say louder. The men look taken aback, and they point behind the building, toward the woods. I flick them off as I turn on my heels in the direction they pointed. I hear them shout warnings about where I'm heading, but their voices are too muffled for me to care.

I stop at the tree line and dig through my disheveled backpack. I find my tall boots to replace my sneakers with. I struggle to pull them over my jeans which are already wet with sweat, then I stand up and stare ahead. The thick line of trees and darkness seem to sway with me. The tiny cypress trees remind me of bonsai, but I remember they are just as miserable as me – their growth halted by the hard layers of clay, preventing their roots from sinking in deeper. My cheeks are hot, and my back is sweaty. I can hardly see straight. I'm scared, but I'm angrier. All I know is that I need to talk to this man, and I have no idea why. I remember the stories my father told me when I was younger about kids going missing in the swamp, likely eaten by

gators, never to be found. I take another sip and secure the jar in my bag and walk into the darkness.

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Past the first few lines of trees, the earth feels chthonic. My feet sink a little deeper into the mud with each step. I hear little scurries all around me, things rustling among the trees. I feels like I'm dreaming, and my hands are shaking. The mosquitos are after me, buzzing around my head. Digging in my bag for another taste, I hope to be granted confidence. My head rushes full of fire, and my face grows hotter. I can feel my pupils stretch and dilate. Branches snap around me, and I begin to feel threatened by the swamp, it's telling me to turn around. I keep pushing.

A couple dozen yards more in, warm breezes brush across my face, and I wonder if I'm even heading in the right direction. The forest breathes with me, blowing me in different directions. *I wonder if dad walked this way to get his supply.* Approaching the water, I feel a sense of calm. The humid air that once irritated me now feels like it's encompassing me. The cicadas are singing louder than I have ever heard them. The moon is reflecting across the water, which helps me see a little more. Everything is shaking with static, including me.

The water is shimmering with green twinkles of moss. There are mosquitoes and gnats everywhere in the trees, and as I look above me I notice an audience of ominous eyes watching me in a tree. A family of possums. They hiss loudly at me, but I take a deep breath and begin to sit when I hear a large splash of water. Terror fills my spine and raises me back to my feet. I look around in a panic. Across the water I see large ripples, and as I glance quickly back and forth across the water, I notice several sets of glowing eyes atop the water. Without a single thought, I sprint to my right, along the shore.

My chest is pumping with panic, and I thank God for the moonlight guiding me. Continuously looking behind me slows me down. I stumble over a thick tree root and fall with my face just inches away from the water. I am frozen with fear. I cannot see or think straight, and my legs feel numb. The dirt across my face sinks into my ears and mouth, it's wet and smells like earth. My hands drag across a family of tall mushrooms, squashing between my fingers. Their residue runs all over my hands and debris from the ground sticks to them. The stickiness feels like I'm being attacked, and in a panic I brush it off as much as I can. The sounds of the swamp have become orchestral, ringing in my ears. The frogs rhythmically croak, the tall trees sway to the music, and the natural rush and hum of water makes me feel safe. I begin to think that the bus dropped me off in Hell, but can't shake the feeling that this is home.

On the ground, in the water, I see the twinkling of lights. I shudder with fear and back away from the waterline only to realize that it's fireflies. I swat them out of my face, and they fly up and across, toward an old wooden pier that reaches inward through the swamp. With the sound of water splashing in the direction from which I came, I find the strength to get up and walk toward the shifty looking planks of wood.

The pier curves through the marshland and is obviously run down. It's missing planks and only about a foot taller than the water itself. I want to turn around and leave, but the distant humming sounds feel like they're calling to me. I imagine the goliaths under the water, swerving through the current, searching for dinner. The panthers watching me from treetops, coyotes scavenging for food, egrets flying above, snakes slithering through the hammocks... How quickly I could be attacked, disappear, and no one would ever know. I'd be like those lost children: given up on, my bones left to rot underwater, never to be found. I don't care.

Confidently, I drag my hands along the roots that took me down and find a sturdy enough stick. I light a cigarette to let everyone, and everything, know I'm here. Taking a deep drag and lightly placing a foot on the planks, testing its strength, it seems sturdy enough. I take a full step on, and I feel it rock slightly back and forth. The line of fireflies lights my way through the clouds of tobacco, as if they were trying to show me something. There are no handrails, and my legs feel weak from all the alcohol, I'm not sure how far I can make it. This has to be the right way to go. *I was born in these swamps, and fuck if I'm gonna die here, too.*

Holding my cigarette by mouth and using both of my hands as balance, I make my way. I'm sure this would be a lot easier if I was sober, but I swear the path is moving with the water, swaying left and right. I have an uneasy sense that I am anything but alone. I can hear the hoots in the trees, the shrubbery rustle, the water splashing, and mosquitos' distant buzz waiting for the smoke to clear. Each step I take I feel further immersed in the wild, the fear that I could fall in at any moment and never be found again gave me a feeling of peace. My eyes feel drawn in and my sight is pulsating with each step I take. The mixed taste of tobacco and humid air makes my throat dry.

I continue in a daze, moving my body across the planks in rhythm with the music produced by the swamp. The fireflies start to make shapes and dance around, bouncing up and down to the croaks of the frogs. I take small breaks to sip on the jar. The moonlight shines brightly across the mossy swamp, and fog rises to my waist. Heat lightning helps me see the planks every few seconds as it flashes through the fog. I can hardly see the planks anymore, but I feel like I could walk on the water. I think about my mom and how she would roll over in her grave if she saw me right now. She hates the swamp, and she used to tell me how dangerous it was at night from our cozy landlocked apartment.



I hardly remember leaving this town, but I hardly remember ever living here. By the time I was about 5 or so, I was more than familiar with the sounds of a backwoods couple arguing, chucking bottles back and forth at each other. Sometimes when people tell you a story so much, it starts to become reality in your mind. I'm not sure if the memory of my father being too drunk to notice the cottonmouth approaching my mom on a walk through the swamp even happened, but she always points to the scar and says, "this was the last straw, I had to get you out of there." She always thought she was better than this place and everyone in it. On her deathbed she asked me not to come here, and I listened for the past six years.

I feel like I'm full of venom in the same way she was, hot and angry about a past that I can't change. Dredging through this swamp to find answers to a question I wasn't even sure I had. *I've made it pretty far*, and as I turn around I can no longer see the shore from which I came. It's like the moon is moving as a spotlight, following me wherever I go, but leaving my footsteps in the darkness. The light shines through the trees and on the water as it creates shapes and turns from golden rays to white then to blue-green hues on the moss. The mosquitos have started moving in, so I decide to light another one.

I reach behind me to dig in my bag, carefully yet clumsily pulling out a single cigarette and putting it between my lips. I start searching for the book of matches I have, but I cannot find them. The mosquitos have come closer now, and are buzzing loudly in my ears and around my face. I try swatting them away but there are too many. With panic I dig even deeper into my bag while trying to still swat them away. The volume of the swamp turns louder as I search, and my heartbeat increases. The croaks mimic my heart, and the cicadas my rushing thoughts. I turn awkwardly on the pier and can feel it sway. I take small steps and try to plant my feet firmly on the wood, but I step directly into a missing plank.

My foot crashes through and into the water. The warm water soaks into my boot and floods my sock. The mossy overlay wraps around my leg and sticks to me. I fall backwards into the water. In slow motion I watch the moon as I collapse into the water, my backpack making the first contact with the top of water. It's bright and full, and as I fall back I see splashes of the swamp riddle the pure image of the moon. The warm water rushes around my face and I shut my eyes. I'm so tired and drunk that all I can think about is how happy I am that the mosquitos cannot reach me underwater. As I slip into darkness, I think about what can reach me underwater.

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When I awake, I see the sun. My lips are dry, and I feel like Satan himself has punched me in the face. My head hurts like hell. I hear whistling but I can't get my eyes to open enough to take in what's around me. Lying flat on my back I can feel the hot metal under me burning my arms. I try to get up, but my body feels incapable, and my face feels like it's blistering. The loud whirring around me shakes my skull.

When the cold water splashes my face, it takes my breath away. My eyes shoot open, and I gasp for breath. My heart feels like it could beat out of my chest and my lungs can't pump this hard. I raise up quickly and hear laughter behind me. I turn around to see an old man, maybe about 70 or so, holding an empty bottle of water. He has a long thick beard, overalls with nothing under, arms covered in obscure tattoos, dark polarized sunglasses, and through his laugh I can see that several teeth are missing.

"Who the hell are you?" I ask him, still trying to steady my breathing. "Why the fuck am I on your boat?!"

He laughs heartily, "I coulda left ya. Hell! You can go back if ya want!" he tells me.

How did he find me? “Am I in Hell?” I ask as I rub my forehead.

The laughter is greater this time. “Shit, am *I* in hell?” He continues roaring laughing. “I found ya for dead, and ya lucky it was Lucky who found ya and not any of the other ones!” He motioned down next to the boat in the water. The raft was small and old, missing pieces here and there fixed with random pieces of junk: a milk carton, fishing net, couch cushions, and more. I tried to stand up to see where he was pointing, but I couldn’t make it. As I slowly crawled to the edge to look, I could hear the water rippling and low bellows coming from below.

Next to the slowly patrolling airboat was an alligator at least eleven feet long. Its skin was dark olive and brown, speckled with white that came from underneath. Its tail swayed and pushed its enormous body through the water, leaving a small wake of ripples behind him. Along its dark reptilian skin were scutes that looked like spikes. Its prehistoric presence left me breathless. I’ve seen plenty before on television and movies, but it’s been so long since I’ve seen one in real life. It doesn’t look up at me, but I can notice one of its eyes missing.

I quickly roll back to safety away from the edge, holding my chest in a panic. My eyes dart around, looking the boat. It’s pretty disheveled, and there are a lot of things that look like someone found at the bottom of a swamp. Tin cans, old flip flops, broken masks and snorkels, a box of scavenged mushrooms, wads of netting, buckets of trash, and painted faces on most of the surface of the boat. I turn my head around to the man driving the boat, and I see him pulling a jar of clear liquid out from the cooler, which didn’t seem to have any ice, screw off the jar and take a big sip.

“You?” I say like an accusation.

“Me? Yep, well maybe, I’m Shiny. Or maybe you were looking for David? Maybe you came to meet Lucky?” he says, motioning to the gator once again.

“Is Lucky your ... pet?” I ask with a light chuckle.

“My pet?!” He laughs so hard he chokes on his moonshine. “No, no, Lucky is my friend. He can leave any moment he wants. But he sticks around me because he loves me, and of course chicken.” He lifts his cooler again to bring out a raw chicken leg and tosses it overboard. I peer over and see Lucky swim down chasing the chicken, then return to the side of the boat. “He likes the hum of the propeller, too,” he adds.

“Is that your moonshine? Do you live out here? Do you know my dad?” I ask, full of questions.

“Yes, Yep, and nope, well, maybe, who the hell is your dad?” he says to me.

My mind rushes with a thousand questions, but I feel silly. If he even knew my dad, why would he know anything about him besides that he was a drunk? “Sam. Sam Broussard.”

He takes off his sunglasses, and I can see that his eyes look huge. “You look just like him...” he tells me, as if he’s upset he didn’t notice earlier.

“You knew him? Were you two friends-”

“I sold him my mash,” he says lifting up his jar. “Didn’t know much about the man, though. I know he’s dead now” he tells me, but I can hear something in his voice that tells me he’s lying.

“He came and saw you all the time, to buy the shine, right? You had to have known-”

“No, I didn’t. Listen lady, it already took all of mine and Lucky’s strength to hoist you up here. We gotta get back home, I’m taking you back where you came from. Although, I’m sure you hardly remember after the evening of fun you had!” He laughs.

“No! Please, let me stay with you. I just want to buy some moonshine. You know, to remember my dad with. I won’t cause you any trouble. Please? I won’t tell anyone, and I’ll be

out of your hair before you know it.” Maybe if I could just stick around a little, he’d tell me whatever it is he’s hiding.

His deep blue eyes look sad, and he sighs deeply, “Fine, but just to buy a jar then you’re out.” He pats the seat next to him and pulls a bottle of water out of the cooler that holds the raw chicken, moonshine, and no ice and hands it to me. *He has to know something, I’m sure of it. He might even know who killed dad.*

## CHAPTER II

### *Evaporated*

On the wall hangs Great Great Grandpa's confederate kepi from the war. I look at it through the smoke of my dad's cigar as he watches the local news and drinks Budweiser. Next to the hat is a picture of Mom in her yellow sundress, standing by an old oak tree holding her bible. We always eat dinner in the living room now, to be with her. My dad lounges in the big sofa chair as he watches the tiny screen, and I always sit on the floor. I run my hand through the thick shag carpet as he spews monstrosities at the news anchors. "This summer is going to be one of the hottest summers ever, with a huge heat wave coming in from the East" the lady in the pencil skirt on the television tells us.

We sit there until he falls asleep reclined in the chair. I pry the plate from his lap without waking him. I scrape the leftovers into the trash, wash and dry each plate, then delicately stack them in the cabinet. I tie up the trash bag and take it out. Our backyard is on the swamp line, and there's always critters around seeking food. Our cans stay in metal cages meant to "keep the thieves away" as dad always says. I've already broken a sweat on my walk to the cans it's so hot outside.

As I unlock the metal door to reveal the large bins, I notice several pairs of glowing eyes in the tree line. Now, I was always taught that glowing eyes don't mean nothing but danger, bobcats and coyotes lurking for their next meal. So, in a panicked rush, I throw the bag in and with shaky hands close the cage door over it. I walk backwards to the door, keeping sight on the eyes. There are small rustling sounds coming from that direction, and I feel for the door handle behind my back. The cicadas sing so loud that despite how hard I try to listen; I can't hear much. My heart beats quickly against the humid air.

I find the handle and rush inside, putting my back against the door. My breath is heavy. The sound of Dad's snoring startles me, and I mistake it for a low growl outside. I close my eyes and turn around toward the door. I imagine the panther lurking, the bear stalking, or the swamp monster hiding. In moments like this I remember what my mom always told me: "We live in *their* home, and if we don't respect it, they'll kick us out." I open one of my eyes, and slowly withdraw the curtain from the window.

There's nothing...no eyes, no beasts, no thieves, no bumps in the night. I sigh with relief and let out a light chuckle at myself. *Got myself all worked up over nothin'*. Then I hear a loud crash outside, like metal hitting the concrete. I look out the window now with both eyes peeled open, but I see nothing except the lid of the can knocked off. *What could have reached into that? It has to be a person.* I look closely and see the can shake again. Something is inside of it? I continue to stare and see a tiny hand reach out of the bin. It's small and black, with sharp nails. My mind quickly imagines monsters and demons flooding out, but then I see him.

He peeks his head up over the can like a curious cat. His little black and white body, ringed tail, coarse fur, and pointed nose peak out to reveal a racoon. His eyes glisten with fear as he sees me, and I feel guilty for disturbing his dinner.

"What's going on, Sam?" I hear a study voice appear behind me. It sends shivers down my spine and I whip around to see my drunken father with a scowl on his face and a beer can in his hand.

"Dad!...you scared the hell out of me" I say back wiping the sweat off of my forehead.

"Language, Son. What the hell are you sitting here looking at? You better not be smoking again," he says to me.

"What? No! Dad, I promise, it's just...there's a..."

“There’s a what? What ya looking at?” he says and shoves past me to the door with unbalanced legs. “Oh Jesus, Sam, let me get my gun” after noticing our visitor.

“No! Dad, no! It’s okay, he’s just a little guy. I’ll shoo him off, I-”

“It’s best to deal with these problems right away. We have to stand our ground out here, or the beasts will take over.” he says to me in an eerily calm way. He turns and stumbles toward his bedroom. His shotgun always rests against the wall next to his bed.

I run to the cans, quickly opening their cage, trying to grab the little guy. His eyes gleam with fear, and he hisses loudly at me and scratches my arm with a tiny paw. Without a second thought I lift the can out of its cage and dump the whole thing out. He rolls out like a hairy roly-poly. He really was just a little guy, looking underfed and scruffy. I see a piece of chicken from our dinner and throw it into the trees. He scurries off after the food as I hurry him along.

Just as he approaches the tree line, I hear the loud ringing of Dad’s shotgun from behind me. I throw my hands over my ears and feel a tear trickle down my face. I look up and see a ringed tail sliver its way into the trees. He missed. “Huh” I say to myself, in relief.

“God dammit, Sam, you let him get away.” Before I can say anything, he walks over to me and grabs me up by the shirt. His face close to mine, I can smell the beer coming from his breath. He stares angrily at me with curled lips, then he lets me down. “Next time, I’ll make sure.” he says and then sets me down. “Now clean this shit up” he tells me, and walks back inside.

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The next morning, I wake up in a sweat as the sun shines through my window. I listen with my eyes closed to the birds singing loudly outside. As my alarm goes off, I roll out of bed and begin to dress. As I pull my Bob Dylan t-shirt over my head, I look at myself in the mirror.



My hair has grown so long, I don't think I've cut it since the last time my mom did. I grab Mom's copy of "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and head to the bathroom.

After I brush my teeth, I head to the kitchen. On my way there, I notice that Dad is still asleep in his chair, beer cans littered around him and one still even in his hands. I move as quietly as I can to avoid waking him up. There are only two slices of bread left, so I make one piece of toast with the end piece and leave the other for him. Inside the cabinet there isn't much: some stale crackers and outdated sardines. I stick them in my backpack. The back door creaks less than the front, so I slowly exit and close the door without a sound.

Outside the air is heavy and wet, and the sun brighter than usual. The sounds of birds chirping and water rushing by mixes as the shrubbery rustles with the warm summer breeze. Dad always told me and mom to watch out for cottonmouths and other snakes on days like this, days when they spend their time bathing in the sun, warming their cold blood.

I walk with caution through the trees and greet the water on the other side. The water is covered with layers of green moss and I can see fish make small ripples as they swim by. Mosquitoes buzz in my ears as I swat them away.

I continue walking next to the water. It's easy to get bored here in the summer when school isn't a thing. I mean, school sucks, but I like having something to do. There's a spot about a mile down from my house that I like to go to, a place where my mom would pack picnics for me and my dad. We'd sit on the old broken boardwalk, eat our sandwiches, and look for gators. She always packed extra sandwiches for them. Sardines and crackers aren't as good, but I'm sure they won't mind.

I make my way down the shore of the muddy water to the dock. Carefully stepping over the broken planks, I begin to smell cigarette smoke. My heart beats a little faster because there's

never anyone out here, and I don't want to have any unfriendly encounters. There's always older men out in the swamp. Dad says they're doing drugs, but the kids at school say they're feeding the gators dead bodies. They never really like it when kids sneak up on them.

I look down the dock after making a curve around a thick cypress tree and see a young boy sitting with his legs hanging off the edge smoking. Thankful it isn't one of the motorcycle men, I sigh in relief. I decide to let this kid have the spot for the day, I know plenty of other ones, but before I can turn around he notices me.

"Hey! What are ya doin out here?" He shouts at me from down there. It's hard to make out his face, but it's easy to tell that his hair is curly and messy.

"Oh, sorry, I was just-" I turn to leave again.

"Ya don't have to leave just cause I'm here, want a smoke?" His voice was deep and reverberated across the mossy water and against the thick trees. A heron flies over my head, most likely startled by the shouting. I move in a little closer.

I scratch my head in awkwardness, "No...no it's fine, I was just leav-"

"Oh c'mon, have one. Unless you're not a smoker." I anxiously take steps closer to him. He probably thinks it's so that I can hear him, but I can't help but want to see his face up close. The water was cascading across his face, shining in his deep blue eyes.

"Um, well, okay..." I say, and walk toward his outstretched hand holding the unlit cigarette. I'm too embarrassed to tell him I have never smoked before, even though dad caught me once holding a cigarette between my teeth. I hadn't actually lit it; I was just messing around.

I put the cigarette between my lips, and he held a Zippo lighter to it. As I breathe in deeply, I immediately begin coughing and hacking.

He laughs. "You lied to me," he says to me lightheartedly.

I look down at the water and let out a shy laugh. “Yeah, I did, I’m sorry” I tell him. We both laugh together. His smile is large and bright, despite his crooked teeth.

He motions for me to sit next to him, so I do. He smells like tobacco and sweat. It’s incredibly hot today, and he found the best spot in the swamp. The large trees bunch up next to the dock here, and create a large, cooling shadow in just the right spot.

Before we can even say another word, the water ripples about twenty feet in front of us. “Oh shit!” he exclaims, pulling his feet up from the water. I don’t move at all, and I can tell it stresses him out that my feet are still hanging over the dock.

A low bellowing rumble emerges from the water as a small alligator breaches the surface. He swims unevenly, using his large tail to propel him through the water at a slow, steady speed.

I can’t help but let out a laugh, “Not from around here, are you?” I ask as I dig in my backpack.

“No, just moved here last week from Mississippi, aren’t you gonna move your feet?” He smiles awkwardly at me, obviously trying to hide his crooked teeth.

“No, I’m fine as I am. Don’t worry, most people here are scared enough of the gators. They’re big old beasts. But not this one, this one is special. He’s what my mom calls a *swamp puppy*. He’s harmless,” I tell him. “See that? Only got one eye.” I toss some crackers in the water. The gator swims toward them with his mouth open, swallowing the crackers.

“One eye makes him harmless? Still looks like he’s got teeth, to me.” He tries to sound relaxed, but he’s obviously concerned.

“Some guys caught him up about a year or so ago.” As I tell him the story, I set my hand in the water to let the gator swim under it and scratch his back. “Luckily, my mom saw what they were doing and really gave it ‘em. They let him go, but only after one of the guys had stabbed

him since he tried to bite him. He was just a little guy at the time, and my mom and dad were able to catch him, muzzle him, and stitch up his eye. Ever since then he comes down this way and we feed him. He's not too good at hunting on his own, yet. He's been a little scaredy cat ever since."

When I look up, he's staring at me in disbelief. "Here, throw him some of these sardines." I hand the can over and our pinkies touch lightly.

He's hesitant, so I motion at them again. Reluctantly, he takes them and peels back the top. He tosses them in the water, and within seconds they're in the belly of the gator. He smiles.

"My mom called him Lucky, since you know, he almost got eaten by a bunch of hillbillies." We laughed together.

"Name's David, but you can call me Dave," he told me, reaching out his hand.

"I'm Sam," I shake his hand. "Where ya from?"

"Charleston," he tells me. "What about you?"

"Lived here all my life" I feel embarrassed that I have lived here my whole life. I hadn't always felt that way. "I can show you around, maybe? Only if you wanted..." He looks me in the eyes, and something about the way he stares makes me blush. I feel jealous of his ocean eyes, when mine are the muddy color of a swamp floor.

"I sure could use a friend, since I'm the new kid and all" he said with a soft smile.

*So could I.* I instantly think how nice it would be to have a friend, and follow up the thought with fear as soon as I remember the other kids. He'll probably ditch me as soon as school starts after he realizes I'm not anyone special.

I smile back, and we walk back down the dock together. I point out all the loose boards and holes along the way for him.

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Dave hands me a cigarette as we sit in the truck bed of his mom's old Dodge. It's the hottest day I've ever experienced, and the heat isn't letting up. The sun sits at the top of the sky, pounding our faces with heat rays. We drink warm Coca Colas and stare angrily at the construction site.

"This is bullshit, man. I can't believe your dad works for them" Dave says.

I start to respond but the sound of heavy machinery drowns me out. I watch as the men put logs through giant mulchers after other men chop them up. My mom would turn in her grave if she saw them cutting down the old cypress trees, clearing land for something as useless as a shitty motel in a town that no one ever travels to. I watch as they begin working on the old oak tree, the same one my mother liked to sit next to and read.

"Hey, let's get out of here."

I sigh, then agree with a defeated nod. "My dad won't be home until past sundown, we can go to my place and watch T.V.," I offer.

It only takes us about four minutes to get to my house from the construction site in Dave's mom's truck, and once we get inside I quickly round up all the empty beer cans and trash around the living room.

"Sorry about all this," I tell him. He waves his hand as if to say he doesn't mind, but I can't help but feel embarrassed of my father.

I go to the fridge and take out two of Dad's beers, and I hand one to Dave.

He nods in appreciation, then says, "Are you sure?"

I look back at him and say, "Screw him, he can spare a few." I had a strong urge to spite him, but that was the most anger I could let out.

Dave sits down on the floor, knowing that I prefer it here from our many nights watching crappy television together. I sit down next to him just close enough that our arms barely touch. I feel nervous around him and I don't know why. We've spent the entire summer together exploring the swamps, feeding Lucky every day, and I even let him borrow Mom's copy of "Everything That Rises Must Converge." We sat together on the docks reading and talking about music. Sometimes we would steal jars of liquid that tasted like fire in a bottle from his neighbors and go out onto the pier taking sips in turns, seeing who would fall off the pathway and into the water first.

He so quickly became my best friend, and the summer flew by. I'm dreading the start of tenth grade, but I am hopeful that things will be different with a friend by my side for once.

We watch T.V. all afternoon and imagine ourselves as Fonzie's best friends. We really wanted to be tough guys, but it was too obvious that neither of us fit the role. Occasionally he would put his hand on my shoulder, laughing at the jokes.

"I'll be right back" I tell him as I notice the sun setting. I start gathering up all the beer cans and the empty chip bag we had eaten. He immediately gets up and helps me. "It's okay, dude, I can get it," I say to him.

"Nah, it's fine, let me help," he says kindly. I give in quite easily and we carry the trash together to the bins. Noticing both are full, I begin tying them up to take them out. Without a pause he ties the second one. He's always like this, eager to help in any situation.

I give him a look, but he just laughs and tells me to show him where the cans are outside. I nod my head in the direction of the back door and walk that way; he follows directly behind me carrying his bag of trash.

As I open the door, I notice the lid missing off the can. “Oh no...” I say as I set my bag down and run toward the cans.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“They keep coming back. Dad is going to kill me.” I hear the cans rattle with their furry bodies and claws scraping the sides.

He laughs, “What? How is this your fault?”

I sigh and rub the back of my neck, “Well...they probably would have stayed away, but...don’t make fun of me...”

“What!” he exclaims, eager to hear my secret.

“I’ve kinda, sorta been feeding these raccoons every night when my dad falls asleep. He tried to shoot one and he thought he scared them off for good...” As soon as I finish speaking two racoons pop their heads over the top of the can and climb out. They’re a lot chunkier than they were the first time I saw them, probably because of me. Their furry little faces sniff at the ground as they chitter and rub their faces with their paws.

Dave laughs, but it is sincere. “You feed them? Look! It’s like they noticed you were here and realized it’s dinner time!” The two raccoons chitter loudly in excitement of food.

I can’t help but laugh with him. They really have come to recognize me, sometimes they even let me pet them as I give them table scraps. Dad wouldn’t even let me get a dog, so this was the best I got. One time I was even able to pick one up.

“Yeah, they’re kinda my only friends, besides you of course,” I feel my cheeks grow red. I wonder if he thinks I’m a loser.

I can tell I embarrassed him a little. Dave isn’t really a guy that talks about his feelings too often. He’s listened to me complain about my life and my dad and all of my other problems

time after time, but whenever I ask about him, he doesn't really tell me much except his parents are divorced and he lives with his mom now. After a few seconds of silence, Dave lets out a smile that makes me feel relieved.

"Can I feed them?" he asks me excitedly. Dave has really grown to love all the animals around here, even if I am the one that pushed them on him. Lucky really took a liking to him, and we even share our lunch with the egrets sometimes. He always brings Pop Tarts from his house to give to animals we see.

It makes me smile that he wants to feed them, especially when my dad only ever refers to them as a nuisance. I walk to the bag I dropped earlier and open it. Inside I find last night's dinner leftovers: frozen chicken pot pie scraps. I hand them to him.

"Just be slow about it, and they'll eat it right out of your hands," I tell him.

He crouches and walks real slow toward the racoons. They back away at first, but once they notice the food he's holding they start sniffing and moving in closer. Daisy, the smaller, female raccoon crawls to his hands and begins eating. Dave turns his head back toward me and gives me the biggest smile and look of accomplishment I've ever seen. I smile back and chuckle.

Duke, the other raccoon, moves in and takes the last pieces of pie crust from Dave's hands. I can't help but appreciate his amusement. He looks so happy, and in a strange way reminds me of Mom. She was always so kind to any animal she encountered, always feeding them or helping ones that got hurt. Dad never really liked them all that much, but when Mom was around he'd act like they were the best thing he'd ever seen. After she passed, he didn't really try.

In a moment of pure excitement, Dave rises from his position and runs toward me. He's so excited that his face looks like pure joy. He quickly wraps his arms around me and repeats



many “thank you’s” to me. His body is warm and his hairbrushes against the side of my face. As he pulls away from me, we lock eyes.

Before either of us can say anything, his lips are touching mine. For a moment, I don’t react. I’m in shock. But his cheap dollar store cologne that he always wears smells nice fills my nose and his warm face feels like home. I kiss him back. I feel something I’ve never felt before, and all I can think about is how I don’t ever want this moment to end.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, I hear a loud blast and my ears are ringing. I can’t hear anything. No cicadas chirping, no water rushing by no raccoons chattering - only a high-pitched tone ringing through my entire body. Dave steps away from me.

Behind his shoulder I see Daisy on the grass. All over and around her is a runny red liquid pouring out, seeping into the earth. She twitches a few times, then goes still. Duke is near her, and he looks like he is hissing loudly. Without a second thought I run toward him and scream “Go! Get out of here!” but it’s too late. Another loud blast hits Duke and he falls to the ground. I scream. Dave walks backwards past me with his hands in the air. He looks terrified.

I turn to see my father with his shotgun pointing at Dave. I scream again, but I can’t even hear my own voice. I rush toward my dad and throw my entire weight against his. We both fall to the ground, me on top of him. I begin throwing my fists wildly at him without a second thought, but one misses, and hits the ground hard. I feel my knuckles bust open, but I don’t stop.

It’s hard to tell how long I swung for before my dad grabs my hands and stops me. He lifts me up by my shirt and I can hear his muddled shouts at Dave. “Go! Get the fuck out of here. I never want to see you near here again, and if I do, I swear to God I will fucking kill you!”

I see Dave run away out of the corner of my eye. I look at Dad, and he’s staring at me with a red face full of anger. Tears stream down my cheeks and neck. I see him raise his arm

with his hand in a fist, and before I can say anything, I feel it make contact with my face. Blood rushes in my mouth and I feel a tooth knocked loose from my gums. I spit it at the ground, and it falls into a puddle of blood. As darkness falls around me, I can feel my limbs thrash and I hear my father say, “You aren’t my son anymore.”

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The sound of songbirds outside my bedroom window wakes me up. I hardly tilt my head when a sharp pain bursts through one side of my face to the other. I can taste the dried blood in my mouth, and I feel like I haven’t drunk water in days. The light shining in through the window shows me the dust particles float around in stagnant, humid air. My back is sweaty on the bed.

I pull my body slowly from the mattress and sit on the edge of my bed with my legs hanging off. I can see my face in the mirror in my room, ragged, bruised, bloody, defeated. I try to remember what happened, but I quickly shake it away. It’s too painful and rings throughout my entire body with a chill. I shower off the dried blood and get dressed for the first day of school.

As I walk down the stairs I can hear my father rooting around in the fridge. I panic, and my breath gets choppy. He looks at me, but he doesn’t see me. He sees right through me. I reach for the fridge and he stands in my way, then I reach to the cabinet, of which he also blocks. He slides a neon yellow vest across the kitchen counter in my direction, still not looking at me.

“Get ready, we have to clear this lot by the weekend so they can start building.”

Reluctantly, I slip the vest over my head.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Distilled*

She pours a bag of corn into a barrel without spilling any of it. I remember the first time I ever handed her a barrel, and she could hardly even wrap her arms around it to hold. She spilt the whole mix everywhere, and sometimes we still find little kernels in the corners of the shack or underneath furniture and have a laugh. I laugh to myself and it causes me to choke. My throat is thick, simultaneously feeling full of fluid and dry as hell. I'm so fucking thirsty.

She turns around toward me with a concerned look. I try to squint to see her more clearly, but she's just a blurry figure. I can hardly sit up, my guts hurt so badly.

"You alright? You look like shit," Del asks, approaching my bedside.

I try to motion her away from me, but she just scoffs. Her muddy brown eyes roll to the back of her head – a familiar sight.

"Don't you got any friends? Someone else you can bother?" I can taste blood seeking out through my gums.

She ignores me, and continues pouring kernels in the barrel. She stirs the mixture for several minutes, checking the temperature every now and then, just like I taught her. I point at the big sack of barley.

She rolls her eyes again, "I know. *Be sure to add the barley first, after the kernels, when it's at the right temperature.* You tell me every time, just trust me for once." She adds the barley and leaves the mixture to simmer, then picks up a watermelon. "What if I added some of those watermelons we grew this summer?"

"Del, I don't give a rat's ass what you do. You ain't gonna let me have any, so you might as well go on and ruin it." The smell of watermelon makes me nauseous. I know when I say

something harsh, but the dryness in my throat makes me feel evil. I can't help it. She won't let me have any, says it's killing me...but if I'm already dying, then why does it matter?

She seems annoyed but gets over it quickly - which kind of annoys me, too.

She still drinks like a damned elephant. She's too much like her pops, and I hate myself even more than usual for letting her stay with me. It's the same feeling I got whenever I made a new batch for Sam. She lights a cigarette, careful to blow the smoke away from me.

"You need to rest" she tells me through a cloud of tobacco.

"Listen, you need to go."

"Yeah, yeah.."

"I mean it this time. You can't stay round here no more. It's ruining you." She looks at me. Her eyes like wild honey from the sunlight coming through the window.

"You may not want my help, but you need it." Her face stiffens as she presses the barrel top on.

"I got used to you being around all the time, but it ain't me that's suffering because of you...You're wasting too much of your time with an old bastard who's gonna die soon, no matter what you do." Her eyes sparked as they filled with tears, but she fought hard to keep them back.

"Would you just shut up. You need to go to the doctor, and I can't even get you past the pier." She checks the temperature of the barrel.

I start to sit up, listening to my bones crack as I move. She looks concerned, but I motion her away again. I'm killing her. She needs to get out of this hell hole, she don't belong here. I stand up and she holds my arms as I walk. I want her to leave, but I know I need her help. I step out into the sun.

Outside the door are my shoes, but I continue on barefoot. The wet wooden dock has thick roots growing between the planks. The water runs softly along with the breeze, and trees sway with each gust. The sound of the swamp fills my lungs and drips into my brain as I take a deep breath. The smell of dirt and rot fit comfortably around me, and my old, tattered skin becomes wet with sweat. I watch as Lucky swims to the pier to greet me, his one yellow eye watching me from just above the water. Behind him are wavy ripples, mixing up the mossy layer of water, and flowing around the buckled knees of the cypress.

Lucky walks with a heavy stout motion up the edge of the porch dock. About a year ago, Del helped me attach a wooden ramp for Lucky to walk up from the water so he can sunbathe by me on the porch. I'm sure he's just here for his dinner.

He passes by Del at the front door and waddles over to me. He lays behind my back, and I sit with her help, resting on him with my feet dangling off the dock just above the water. His bellow vibrates a low grumble across the duckweed, and Del turns inside the shack. She returns with a black garbage bag of scraps and dumps it in front of Lucky. He seems pleased, even with almost bare chicken bones. He takes what he can get these days.

"Lucky and I were doing just fine before we found you, and we'll be just fine after you," I tell her as she sits next to me, against Lucky's tail.

"That's debatable" she smirks. "Where would I even go? I don't have a home."

It's hard to hear her say that. There was a light in her when I first told her that I was friends with Sam, but I've seen that light go out over time, as she learned more about him and this town. I think she thought she could make his home her own. It's just disappointing I ever let her believe that. None of us really belong here.

"You could go anywhere you wanted" I know that doesn't help.

“This is the closest I’ve ever felt to home. I keep having these dreams of being a kid, and it’s always here. Sometimes I see my parents out here on the pier, tossing food to the animals and reading books in the sun.”

“You’re just using images of right now to fill in those empty spaces. You’ve convinced yourself that you are made of this land. You’ve forgotten that we don’t even have a connection to nature anymore. We only see moments of it, like with Lucky, but those are just remnants of the past. They’re like glitches. This land, this swamp, it doesn’t want humans back. We’ve already pissed it off enough. Why do you think the air turns people crazy here? It’s revenge, and you’re letting it get to you. Get yourself to the tallest city with the most concrete. Don’t let this shit touch you anymore.” She stares at me, then out across the green water to watch the dragonflies as they land on the air plants attached to trees.

“You’re wrong,” she says. “You’re fucking wrong. The point here isn’t to forget about it, let it all go, the point is to figure it out. To fix it!”

“You can’t change the past, Del. You just can’t.”

Tears trickle down her face, and in an instant, mosquitos come to get a salty taste. She swats at them. “I know I can’t! Fuck! Don’t you think I know that? But this is my home, this is where the ground can touch my feet. I can’t get this anywhere else. It’s not the swamp’s fault that we can’t get our shitty little lives together! It’s ours!” Tears flow quickly down her sunburnt cheeks.

I rub my forehead in frustration. My vision is blurry. I don’t know what’s right either, but I do know that only bad things happen here. The only lights in this town have gone out.

“What do you think happened?” I ask her, angry with her.

“What are you talking about -”

“What do you think happened to *him*?” My voice raises. “You think he was some kind of smooth fucking criminal? A backwoods cowboy running around in some sort of secret underground world?!”

“No! I just thought he was in some sort of trouble with-”

“NO! He wasn’t in trouble with absolutely anyone except his own damned stubborn self! No one messed with your pops, they all let him be after your mom left him! They felt *bad* for him!” My heart skipped around with anger. “Someone found out about your dad, but not because of me. He went around causing his own trouble and people caught on. They ridiculed him from that point on. They told him that’s why his own family left him!” I feel short of breath.

“Found out what?”

“Who he *really* was. Who your grandfather tried to keep him from being. This town pushed your father into the swamp. I put the bottle in his hand, and they led him to the water. He drank so much shine then swallowed so much water that even the warmouth didn’t touch him. And when the police pulled his body out, they gave each other money for their bets on how he’d do it! This town didn’t give a single fuck about your father, and they don’t give a single fuck about you.”

“And you think they care about you?” Her words are hot. I know she’s known; I see the way she looks at me when I get too drunk and carried away with a story about Sam and me that summer. She never cared about that, I think she just wanted confirmation that someone loved him, too.

“Even when I first came here, when no one knew nothin’ about me, I didn’t matter. All I ever been was the outsider. Why do you think I’ve been out here hiding all these years?”

“I used to just think you had a problem. I see now it’s more than that.” She stares down at the water watching ripples appear from underneath. It’s too muddy to tell what’s there, but it’s most likely a couple of turtles.

“Problem or not, it don’t matter. There ain’t a lot left for me, but Del, there’s so much for you. You could do anything, be anyone, start a family, see the world, just get the fuck out of here. You don’t wanna die here - you won’t decompose; you’ll sink to the bottom and drift along.” My breath feels thin, and she senses it. The sun is so hot, and all this talking is making my head spin. Things have been bad ever since she stopped letting me have any drink. She thought it would help me, but it’s killing me even faster now.

“Listen, I’ll figure it out, but right now I’m going to get you some medicine. I’ve almost got the doc convinced to write me a script for you without seeing you. Even if he doesn’t, you need some real food and clean, cold water.” *I don’t want nothing to eat.*

“Del,” I can hardly get the words out, “You can’t play pretend anymore. It’s been three years. I should have never let you stay out here. Can’t you feel it? The swamp wants you gone.”

“No. You want me gone, not this place. You just can’t stand to see my face anymore. It’s too close to his. You don’t want to be sad when you die, but I don’t want to be sad when you die. So please, just let me help you.”

She gets up without giving me a chance to protest, not that I can catch my breath to do so. I watch her stand up and brush all the dirt off her legs then head inside. She returns quickly with her backpack and sneakers on. She fixes her ballcap on her head and walks back over to me and Lucky. She gives me a once over and says, “Sit tight, I’ll be back. Want help getting back inside?”



I shake my head no, but I can't see straight anymore. I know she doesn't want to continue talking to me. She always shuts down when she can't handle something.

"Will you stay here?" I ask.

"No, I just told you, I'm going into town." She responds without looking at me.

I shake my head no, and the movement makes me nauseous. "No, Del, when I die. Will you stay here? Alone in the swamp with no one around? I don't want you to be alone, and you shouldn't stay out here by yourself." I close my eyes against the sunlight.

"I'll be back," she reassures me. "Just keep it together until I get back, okay?"

Lucky's one eye follows her as she heads down the pier and across the water. Once she is beyond the turn behind the thick sawgrass, he closes his eye and rests his heavy head on the dock.

I rest my head on his thick body, mindful of the jagged scutes along his back. I can feel his slow, heavy breathing against my skull. Alligators don't need to eat a lot; they can wait years between meals. Lucky eats so damn much that he can hardly ever move.

*What would you be like if you were starving?* I think to Lucky with my eyes closed. I can feel the heat of the sun absorbing into my skin, warming my leathery flesh, and making me sweat. My feet are just barely in the water. The foamy top brushes my toes. The sound of rattling and buzzing surrounds me.

"I bet you'd eat me right up, wouldn't you?" I muster the strength to stutter. His body reverberates a low bellow in response.

I always felt bad for Lucky's kind. They only ever been feared and used. People kill them, wrestle them, taunt them, but they ain't ever really kind to them. Gators are prehistoric, they been here way before any of us, and they'll be here way after us. People found how to take

advantage of their strength. What a mighty animal with such an Achilles heel. They got one of the strongest bites in the swamp and beyond. Shoot, he'd would break your leg in a single chomp. Unfortunate thing is, they don't have the same strength to open their jaw as they do to shut it. People ain't like that - they're way better at talking than they are at shutting the hell up.

The sun is baking me. I can hardly open my eyes against the bright rays. My body is so tired, and I can't get up. I stretch my legs into the water, and the cool touch of the green makes me flinch. I lean on Lucky and reach my feet in the water.

I can hear it all around me, I can feel it, too. It's inside of me. The cicadas shake my lungs, the humidity fills my heart. This swamp ain't always been a swamp, ya know. Most of them start off as lakes or ponds, then start changing over time. Eventually, trees start sprouting up all over the place. Only after plants die, animals die, and they all decay does any of this ever become a swamp. Then, it's just an oxygen-deprived wasteland full of dead stuff. Nothing ever decays all the way; it just keeps rotting.

*How long will she be gone? How much time has passed?* She left in a rush, probably tired of looking at my sorry self. I can't blame her. Mosquitos buzz by my face and hang around Lucky's long, armored body. I watch the dragonflies dance across the top of the mossy foam. The water moves slowly with the breeze, it's hard to notice it move at all unless you pay close attention. Bullfrogs croak and leap across the roots of trees. I feel hazy and breathing becomes difficult. It's like all the murky water filled me up and is slowly releasing out of every pore. The sun bakes me, and my lips feel dry and cracked. I can't stop thinking about the jar of shine just inside. Just one more sip. *Please.*

I can't lift my arms off Lucky, and I can barely move my fingers. Through my squinting eyes I see a heron soar around the thick trees. A woodpecker is pounding loudly against the

willow tree over to the right, digging deeply into the trunk. It makes my ears ring loudly and I scrunch my face. The rank smell of the swamp is a part of me, but I suddenly can smell it again, just like when I first moved here. I complained so much about the smell. I remember Sam telling me I'd get used to it eventually, and I did.

My body is sweaty with the humidity, and the mosquitos are swarming. The water is the only relief I feel, so I sink a little more toward the edge to reach the water more. My head feels fuzzy and I'm so tired. Only my feet are touching the water, but I can feel it in my lungs. Drowning me, pulling me in.

"David?" I hear a voice call from across the water. Startled, I shift further down, my head leaving Lucky's body and hitting the wood hard. With my eyes wide open, I stare directly into the sun. Lucky shifts after my movements disrupt him. Tears stream down my cheeks.

"C'mon, Davie, don't be afraid of the water. I won't let anything hurt you. I promise." I shut my eyes tightly again, confused and disoriented. *Sam?*

It's difficult to lift my head, but I feel liquid drip down my neck. I try to sit up, but it startles Lucky again. He nudges my head and I feel my body shift down, off the dock.

For a small second, only my legs are in the water. My head above water, I look out across the water. I flail my arms frantically to keep me afloat, and it sends waves of pain throughout my body.

Through the duckweeds, under a cypress covered in Spanish moss, he's there. Just like I remember: the same Sam I see in my dreams. Green clumps cover his dark hair, smile on his face. He waves me in. For a moment I don't feel anything, I just see him. Clear as day through my swollen and sunken eyes, his smile shining across the water.

My trance is broken by the sound of loud scurries scraping against the wooden dock and a heavy splash hitting the water. My head descends under the water, I can't see under the swamp's grasp, but I hear the muffled shouting of a woman. *Del?*

The water enters my throat, burning in a familiar way.

Delilah. He always said he would have a daughter and name her after his mother. He loved her more than anything. Don't be weak, like we were.