

A Hand to the Plow

No one came to my grandfather's wake. Deepsicks wasn't a big place—unincorporated, the county roads screamed, like some sailor's warning—but even so, I had never been in St. Mark's when it was empty. Only Grandpa could keep the faithful away, the way he used to set fires in the backyard to keep out mosquitoes. But there was no one at all. No greeter, no minister, no organist. Not even my grandfather's body. Just candles melted to nubs, giving creamy winks of light.

My brother, Noah, told me over the phone there would be no eulogies. It was one of the few things grandpa wrote in his will: no eulogies, knowing full well he'd lived a life of damning post-mortems. But I intended to make one all the same. I'd even slicked up my throat with tea and honey that morning, whispering to the waitress at the highway diner, saving my voice for forgiveness. Making sure I sounded real sweet.

A janitor knocked, then wheeled in a mop bucket. "Ope," he said. "Bible study?"

"I came here for the wake. Ezra Sanders?"

He gave me a funny look, like I'd asked a ten-dollar question.

"I'm Adrienne Sanders," I said. "Adie."

He eyed me, drinking in the incongruity of me in this place, my black tats, my thigh-highs. If he lived here all his life, he'd only seen someone who looked like me on TV. He reminded me of grandpa in the eyes, the way they crowned under his eyelids like eggs trying not to be laid. I expected them to go big, or maybe tighten as he recognized me. I was the Adrienne Sanders, yes, one of the few who got out of Deepsicks. I got my first credit card when I was still technically seventeen, and I learned the mailman's routine so I could run to the box before Grandpa saw any of my envelopes from Mastercard. Grandpa never let me get a job, so on my eighteenth birthday, I ran to the train station and started my life seventy-four dollars in the hole, plus two for a whoopie pie from a convenience store. I ate it on the train and didn't make a wish. There was nothing left to wish for.

But the janitor only looked at me and stretched his back. "Welp. Sorry for your loss, ma'am."

"I ain't."

"Oh?"

"He wasn't a good man," I said.

"It might be he didn't want no wake—"

"I hope they didn't cremate him. I wanted a proper funeral, to forgive him with. Send him off. Isn't that what funerals are for?" I thought of the ancient Egyptians and the trinkets they'd leave their pharaohs for the afterlife, onyx statues and mummified dogs, to keep the dead company. Or the Greeks, with coins on the eyes for the ferryman.

The janitor gave a shrug. "I don't think the dead care too much."

He let the mop slap the floor and got to soaping tile.

Grandpa died in the old house on Fox Den Lane. By the looks of the place, he had taken the easy way out. It was a shotgun house, and I remembered being strong and vibrant, robin's-egg blue. Now that blue had yellowed a shade towards jaundice and half the roof sunk in, cupping a puddle that stewed in the sun. Wasn't much of a lawn either, except overgrown spots of ryegrass, with no flowers to speak of ones that didn't belong, those purple Kudzu blossoms. "Not much in there," came a voice. "My boys already picked the meat off."

I'd stared so long into the living room I never heard Noah pull up in his truck. He stood with his hands in his jeans, his way of warding off hugs. His goatee was half gray-blond now. It added twenty good years on him, instead of the ten it had been.

"I'm not here for any of his things," I said.

"Wasn't much anyway. Pots and pans. Coupla army things the boys liked."

"He leave you enough for a funeral?"

"Funeral? He's already cremated. Didn't say where he wants himself scattered. Don't think he cared."

"Well, we gotta have a funeral, right?"

"Naw. People don't gotta do anything."

"I do." My tongue thickened, turning my Is into Ahs. Every time I talked to Noah, it was the same way, slipping right back into Deepsicks. "I'm here."

"And you drove that ole scrapper all this way?" Noah clicked his tongue at my Ford Pinto.

"Anyhow, you being here makes one who wants it. D'you need money?"

The Pinto needed new struts, but that wasn't worth blushing over. "No."

"Drugs? You're skinny."

"No!"

"Then why're you here, Ade?"

"Real nice. If I were callin', you'd ask when I was gonna visit. Now I'm here, I might as well be a bug."

"Didn't mean it like that. Thought maybe now Grandpa's not here, you might be thinkin' of movin' back. Diner's hirin'."

I walked up the porch. A tube-style TV sat in the corner of the living room, watching like it always did, a square black pupil in the room. It was the same one Grandpa used to watch every night before he came up to my room, frying himself in the wan glow of the TV. Noah said that's how he died, a widower while watching TV. Was it a violent thing? A struggle, him collapsing to the floor, fingers clutching his chest? Or was it like falling asleep? I wondered how afraid he was. If he had time to beg God not to take him, to ask forgiveness.

"I'll bet you don't feel better, seein' it again. People think lookin' at the past washes it. But that ain't no mop for the soul. You want to know what forgiveness is? It's burnin' things down. That's the only way people forgive." Noah fancied himself a poet-philosopher and spoke in axioms. Maybe one out of ten made sense.

"Maybe we should have a proper funeral," I said.

"The man's already ashes." Noah shrugged. "You want those? It creeps Maeva out, having an urn in the house. Like a pair of eyes."

"I just want a—boundary." The word sounded wrong. "Between that life and this one. Something. Thought there'd be a wake today at St. Mark's. The janitor looked at me like some mental patient."

"Fine. But you do the arrangin'. And it's comin' outta your end. You got a place to stay? We got a room."

"I ain't poor, Noah, so don't ask."

"Whatta they pay you at that pet shop?"

"That's the same as askin' if I'm poor."

"You ever think maybe I was askin'?"

"Either way, I think I'll stay here tonight."

"We got a nice bed. This place is a shithole." He threw his head to the side and spat. "And you might see Caleb here. Is that what this is about?"

"Would that be so wrong, seein' Caleb?"

"Wrong for him. Wrong for you. Wrong for everythin'. He don't like you, to say it plain."

"Why?" Wah.

"Just don't complain if you end up carin' for him. I'm checkin' outta that."

"If you say so I've been going to this church group, and all they talk about is forgiveness. Forgiveness this, forgiveness that, oh, the power of forgiveness. And, I don't know. They seem happy, like they know what they're doing. Like it puts a bow on things."

Noah chuckled. "Your life here was such a gift, you wanna wrap it up in a bow?"

“It’s the ugly things need bows.”

“I don’t get you.”

“That’s fine,” I said. Fahn.

He left me to stew in that same sun. I pulled myself to the mirror in the bathroom. Grandpa didn’t allow any other mirrors in the house except that one, which he kept for shaving, though he only did that when he felt chipper, which meant most days he had a beard. I rinsed my hands. The faucet coughed out yellow muck before clearing to water. That was one reason my boyfriend stayed behind. But his real reason, Rick said, was that it would be like picking a scab. It heals if you let it alone, but if you go on scratching, it goes on bleeding. And besides, Rick said, women already bleed enough.

The phone shook on the nightstand that night. Rick. When was I coming home? A year or two ago, I would have made a joke of it—oh, don’t wait up, Rick, I’m going on to the Golden Isles to take up with a cabana boy—but now the thought stirred up something like vinegar in my belly. Two nights plus the drive, I replied. Tryin to convince Noah to have a proper funeral.

Get your ass home, he said.

I found a box in the living room and started throwing junk in it, but grandpa didn’t keep much. A pile of chipped paint, some old TV dinner trays. It had been different in my head. I was going to rent a dumpster, don some latex gloves, and scour the place. All night, if I had to. But aside from some old phone books and stacks of porno mags from the 90s, there wasn’t much to scour. I’d brought a box all the way from New Orleans. I’d marked it SENTIMENTAL. There had to be something worth taking, a photograph somewhere, a refrigerator magnet from before grandma died and grandpa became what he became. I could find a fossil of it somewhere like one of those dinosaur diggers, brushing away the forgotten earth. But there was nothing. The house was all forgotten earth.

At the very least, I’d hoped for a memento I could bring back to Sadie. That was Rick’s daughter. Sadie and me, we were peas in a pod. On the nights Rick didn’t come home, Sadie and I stayed up on the couch watching documentaries. Sadie liked baby orangutans and their stringy troll-doll hair. I liked the Apollo missions. The idea of controlled burns—when your rocket needs to get right, you aim the tip, align it just so, and fire up the engines. It only takes a moment or two, but that’s all you need. That’s how you get where you’re going, I would think on those nights, Sadie’s head resting under my chin. Deepsicks would be a controlled burn, long as I aimed myself right.

It was about midnight when a tap-tap on the front window woke me up. I’d fallen asleep on the beat-up old sofa in the living room.

Tap-tap.

A tall, slender figure approached, uncertain under the staticky streetlight. Caleb had one last growth spurt since I saw him last, but there he was, stretched out, a few extra frown lines at his lips.

“Ah, shit,” he said when I opened the door. “What’re you doin’ here?”

“Go home, Caleb.”

“Ain’t never been nowhere else. You were sleepin’? That house is haunted, hope you know.”

There was more meat under his skin, at least more than he had as the scrawny teenager of ten years ago. He was the family looker, more so than me, but he looked puffy and pink and snotty, like maybe he was allergic to the world. Some people are like that. Even moonlight stings them.

“Lemme in,” Caleb said. “I sleep here now.”

“What do you do all day?”

“Never you mind.”

“You been drinkin’?”

“A guy needs money to drink.” Caleb splayed out on the front stoop and rubbed his belly with a fingertip. “Nah. Nah, not a drop. Six months.”

“Where you been, then?”

He pointed at the sky. “I seen a meteorite.”

“Just now?”

“Not in Deepsicks. I don’t think stars fall here. Anyway, I’m just rememberin’. I forgot to make a wish.”

“God,” I said. “It’s like talkin’ to a wind-up doll.”

“I woulda wished you back. I woulda wished you never left. Now I woulda wished you never came back, so I’d have a house to sleep in.”

“How many drinks you had tonight, Caleb?”

“You gonna let me in or not?”

“If you’re sober.”

“I been sober. I told you. Six months. Why you care, anyway?”

“I came back for you,” I said. “You can come to New Orleans, with me. Rick won’t mind, we’ll put you up a while. There’s jobs there, odd jobs too, so you don’t have to work for anybody you don’t want.”

His brow furrowed. "I'm a country boy."

"I was a country girl. The city changes you. Changes everything." I wondered if he saw my eye twitch.

"You'd take me there?"

I closed the door and pulled the chain through. His face was half in shadow as he walked through. He was half a foot taller than me, but bowed, his spine worn and curved like steamed wood.

"The city treatin' you right?"

"Of course." I twitched. "Glad I went there."

"Noah says he wonders about Rick. Says he's a big strong guy, stronger than grandpa ever was."

"I look beaten to you?"

"I can't tell. Been a while since I seen you otherwise."

"Well, I'm healthy now."

Caleb finally smiled. "Tell me about Nawlins."

When I left Deepsicks, Caleb was just sixteen, the next one up to the plate. I hadn't thought of that. I had been so fixated on my Greyhound ticket, squeezing it like it was a pass to heaven, I couldn't see anything else. I didn't think about Caleb having Grandpa's spotlight shining on him instead of me. I used to wonder how some mothers could leave their infant children in front of firehouses, not knowing what would become of the baby. But then I knew. A person can do almost anything if the flames are hot enough. Those first few years in New Orleans, I remembered going to payphones and dialing up the old number, letting my finger rest above the nine at the end, dreaming of all the wonderful apologies I would make. I never pressed it. I was too afraid maybe Caleb would really pick up. So I said nothing and let him hate me.

Now, with him looking at me with a smile in his eyes, I finally told him about New Orleans. Told him everything people had told me, how life in a city changes you, how cities don't have memories like these small country towns where people chip your sins into stone. Told him about Rick, made him sound as gentle as I could. Told him about Sadie, the little red-haired angel, and how Sadie would love Caleb. And I told him everything that wasn't true, how I hadn't been fired from the pet store for stealing cash right out of the register for Rick's poker money, how we were going to buy an apartment in the Garden District. Caleb wouldn't know what that meant.

Funny how Caleb looked at me. Eyes glinty and shiny, pinpoint pupils. Like my words were so bright.

"I like the way you talk about it," he said. "Why didn't you take me with you?"

"I'll take you now. Tomorrow, I mean. If you'll come."

“But why didn’t you take me then?”

“I don’t know. I was eighteen. All I could think was getting’ out myself. And you were strong. I didn’t think he’d—”

“You was wrong, Adie. You wasn’t just wrong. You was way off.”

“That’s why I’m back. I want to—I don’t know—fix things.”

“Some things ain’t fixable.”

“Don’t say that,” I said, feeling my voice weaken. “You said you been sober six months. That true?”

“Almost seven.”

“I’m so happy.”

“Why do you care?” he asked.

“Because it means I didn’t ruin you.”

“You couldn’t ruin me,” he said. “Some people are just dead souls.”

Now that he was inside I could see the face I recognized, the way the shadows cut across his cheekbones as he frowned, dicing the years away. I watched that face without listening for a while, and when I came to he was asking about tool and dye jobs in New Orleans—surely those big city factories were better than the seasonal work he got an hour up the road from Deepsicks. I didn’t know. I only knew how kindly he looked at me now, how hopefully. So I found myself responding as if I did know, smiling and nodding and making up stories about people I had met, important people or spouses of important people. People who could help him get set up. It didn’t matter who I knew or didn’t. Once he was there, we could find someone, and all would be forgiven. “It’s New Orleans,” I said. “Dead souls are our chief import.”

He laughed with that ravenous energy of people who usually laugh alone.

Later, we sat on the couch together, watching local TV on the antennae. The way it glowed and sputtered with the light of ads for copper pans, it might as well have been a fireplace, a comfort in the room. I thought Caleb slept, so I put one of grandpa’s old blankets on him. He stirred without opening his eyes.

“You don’t sleep too good?” he asked.

“Can’t remember the last time I slept through the night,” I said. “I thought bein’ here would help. But it just makes it worse.”

“Grandpa ever beat you?” he asked. “That’s why you left, right?”

“Sure,” I shrugged. “Same as Noah.”

“He ever rape you?”

I said nothing.

“The fact I gotta ask—”

“It’s nothin’ worth askin’ about,” I said. “It’s done.”

“A rape ain’t never done, Adie. It goes on and on.”

The house was so silent I could hear the air whispering through the vents. “Moving changes a person. You get to have a whole new story. In New Orleans, I’m Adie at the pet shop. I smile a lot. Smilin’, sometimes, if you force it, it’s as good as the real thing. People think I never met an unkind person.”

“Those scars on your wrists. They still there.”

I looked at them in the half-light, cobwebs of puffy skin. “I tell people a cat scratched me up. Had to put him down. It was real sad.”

He still hadn’t opened his eyes. “Why is it when you get to pick your own stories, they’re still sad ones?”

The next morning, I gave myself a long look in the mirror. It had been a few weeks and all the fluid under my eyes had drained away. There was no way for Caleb to know about Rick. And maybe having Caleb around would settle Rick some. Rick was always better when Sadie was around, or when I brought some friend from the church group to eat my famous mac and cheese, which was really just the boxed stuff plus onion powder. Rick would bristle at having Caleb on the pull-out couch, but so what? I’d say it was only for a day or two, and we’d stretch it a few weeks. A few weeks of daylight. That might last me until a new month. A whole month. I never felt so good, not since leaving Deepsicks on that train.

There were a few texts on my phone, all from Rick. When you comin home? Sadie’s a pain in the ass.

I started punching in a long paragraph about Caleb—he’s coming home with me, but he’ll just be on our sofa a few weeks, I promise—but I thought better of it. Rick might let him stay if Caleb were a surprise I brought with me. And with Caleb already there, Rick would be on his best behavior. He’d have to be.

We drove along the skinny road to Noah’s house. It was the dry season. Power lines shouldered over the big sky like giant sentinels and the land was scattered with horseweed. It reminded me of our childhood trips out west when we would sit in the back with bare feet hanging out of grandma’s ’94 Roadmaster wagon, clean air washing through our toes. Grandpa would go on about how we had to be quiet, or else we’d waste his favorite thing in the world, a perfectly good afternoon. Every lost opportunity was a perfectly good afternoon to him. Nothing ever lived up

to the potential of a perfectly good afternoon—either you were wasting it by running around outside or spending too much time indoors. Eventually we would kick the seats, and then each other, so grandpa would play the only tape they had in the car, Beach Boys. Summer Days and Summer Nights. I still remembered some of the words. “I wish I could see outside / but he tacked up boards on my window.” Even grandma would sing along, so out of tune she was closer to singing harmony than getting the pitch right, but the effect seemed to please her. I liked the Beach Boys. I liked how they could sing about tough things and still fill up the car up happy.

Noah was already waiting for us at his porch. Or maybe he just stayed out like that most mornings, half-hanging on his front stoop with a steaming mug in his hand, proud to scan his whole acre. Truth be told, if I had an acre, I’d probably stand out like that, too.

“Golly,” he said when we got out. “Look at this. Sanders family reunion.”

“I was wondering if we could take the urn up to the park,” I said. “Bury it someplace decent.”

“Well, it ain’t like we want it.”

“I was thinking maybe you’d come with, to say your goodbyes.”

“Caleb,” Noah said, “funny seeing you ridin’ with her.”

“Adie’s says she’s gonna get me situated in New Orleans,” Caleb said.

“Situated. Ha. She ever tell you how well-situated she is?”

“I’m well-situated,” I lied.

“You ran away from Deepsicks just go to the same place, only you can’t see it.” Noah spat.

“Now grandpa’s dead, only reason you’re back here is because you got an itch to scratch. Itchin’ gets at you no matter where you’re livin’. I don’t call that well-situated. If you was well-situated, you’d be gone forever and you’d forget about us because you’d have so much goin’ in your own life. You know how I know when someone’s really moved away someplace? When I ain’t see them again. My buddy Jack Beauregard got a job in Silicon Valley, and look at him. He’s got six figures now, and we never hear a peep outta him. But look, here y’all are.”

“Well, we’re goin’ now,” Caleb said. “This place is a trap. I’m like a mouse, pinned in a trap.”

“Yeah, real trap. You and Adie, y’all’s the same. Thinkin’ everything’s about the place you are. You know she only takin’ you home because she feels guilty about you, right? There ain’t nothin’ for you there you can’t find here. Meanwhile I got a house and two kids, right here in Deepsicks. Y’all even have a bank account?”

“Fuck you, Noah.”

“Fuck you.”

Same as last time I’d seen them. Fuck you might as well have been good-bye, see you tomorrow.

I waited by the porch.

“You’re still here,” Noah said.

“Grandpa’s ashes. I’ll take ‘em, even if you ain’t comin’.”

He called inside for Maeva, then turned back to me with his mouth open, loosening a cramp out of his jaw. “You want him, you can have him. Just don’t dump him in the sewer or anything like that. It’s bad luck. Even on grandpa.”

“No. A park or somethin’, or if I can’t do that, someplace nice.”

“Why?”

“Never you mind.”

“That Bible group’s got you all twisted, Adie. There’s too much voodoo in that town. Too much humanity. How many problems people ever solved by people thinkin’ about ‘em? Usually makes it worse, far as I figure.”

“Let me process it in my own way.”

“That’s that city talk.” He turned and spat again. “You avoided home so much, but now you’re here, that fix anythin’? That itch been scratched yet, or what?”

“Fuck you, Noah.”

“That’s more like it.” He smiled and went inside.

Maeva set the urn in my hands without a hello. The urn felt heavy in my fingers, like it wasn’t full of ashes but blood. I looked at Maeva. After ten years, her hard frown-lines were like chipped marble, sculpted into the reality of her face now. “He’s all yours,” she said.

I tried to tell her it was nice seeing her, but she’d turned back into the house.

I drove up to a row of dead grass and gnarled old oak trees next to the diner lot. It wasn’t a park exactly, at least not with any name, but it was the closest thing in Deepsicks. I got out and Caleb rolled his window down, saying he didn’t want to come. I told him I understood, and if he wanted to go to the gas station and get something to eat, he could have my credit card. Fifty-fifty it’d get declined, but that I didn’t say.

Want anything? he asked. We ain’t eat breakfast.

No, I said. I looked at the urn. My belly was still burning.

I took the urn in two hands—it wasn’t heavy as all that, but I couldn’t shake the feeling of dragging a body—and found a dried-up creek bed somewhere out of sight. The puckering dirt made me think of grandma’s funeral all those years ago. It had been dry then too, and we all

walked home in the wordless, rainless air, all of us tranquil and silent like on a Sunday. Noah asked grandpa if we could go for ice cream and grandpa threw a dime at him. I asked Noah if I could have it, and of course Noah couldn't do anything with just a dime, so I took it and stuffed it in a sock. I started collecting the change he threw at us. I bought all sorts of ice creams.

I dug a little bit into the earth, but the dirt was hard and unyielding. I felt Caleb's absence behind me, so I brought the urn back to the car. The sun was straight above now, hot on my hair and shadowless. But Caleb wasn't in the diner. The waitress crooked a painted eyebrow at me and said he'd never come in.

So I drove around looking. Funny how a place like Deepsicks suddenly feels big when you're looking for someone. The bar at the big corner—which wouldn't be more than a dive in New Orleans—seemed to stand over me now. It was the obvious place, but Caleb wasn't there, either.

Maybe an hour later, I pulled into the gas station. Grandpa was in the urn. I'd packed him in with a seatbelt and told him don't you fidget back there like he used to with us. I filled up half a tank, then thought better of it when I patted the back of my jeans. Caleb had my wallet.

Then there he was, just around the corner of that gas station, a wet paper bag in his hand. He threw it back and leaned against the wall, brazen as you like, like he thought he was invisible. Last night's same allergic look was already puffing up in his cheeks. It was nine o'clock.

When he finally saw me, he cringed into a palm. "Ahh, shit. Busted. I wanted a lil' goodbye-somethin'-somethin'."

"Six months dry, Caleb?"

"Almost seven."

"Real funny. You lied to me. Did you even want to come to New Orleans? Or were you just anglin' for cash?"

"I'll come to New Orleans if you want. If it makes you feel better."

"This ain't about me."

"It's all about you, Adie, you and your Goddamn conscience. That's why you came back, right? What's all this shit about burying grandpa? The man didn't even wanna burial. And now, what, you gon' fix me? I'm a beater, Adie." He laughed at his own thoughts. "One of those un-fixies they crumple into cubes."

"You don't wanna be fixed."

"Same thing, ain't it?"

I went to the front seat, pulled out the seat belt, then took the urn over to Caleb. He had saddled down next to the wall of the gas station, halfway to nodding off. A fresh plume of grandpa's ashes woke him up well enough, though. He kicked awake, patted at the dust like he was used to it, maybe thinking it was another dusty morning for Caleb Sanders. But when he saw me standing over him with the urn, his skin went white.

“Adie? What the hell you doin’?”

“You already dead, right? Be with your own.”

The Pinto coughed a start, but that was all it needed. A half tank of gas could last me as far as Louisiana. That had been the idea, but as I drove out of Deepsicks, turning the mirror away so I wouldn't see Caleb, I knew I was driving to Georgia instead.

Soon it was afternoon, the air going crisp and salt-scrubbed. I liked the humid tang of it, the way you could taste Deepsicks so thick under the tongue that you could tell when you were free of it because the air got clean again. I felt good, like I could drive all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. My name wasn't on Rick's lease. It wasn't anywhere in Deepsicks. And the pet shop wasn't the only minimum wage job in Christendom.

By the time I needed a stretch that evening, I'd made it all the way to Dothan. My card didn't work at the pump so I used up the last of my cash for the gas money, but that meant counting my change at the counter just to get myself a bottle of Coke. The clerk emptied out the take-a-penny tray, and even then I didn't get to one-twenty-five.

“Here.” He slapped a quarter down for me. “Call it even.”

“All right,” I said. “Even.”

By the time it got dark I had crossed into Georgia and I knew there would be no motel for me, so I pulled into a park 'n' ride where there were always other cars, then grabbed the space blanket and curled up in the back seat. It wasn't so bad, not like people say. It killed my neck and I had to use a sweatshirt as a pillow, sure, but even so, I slept straight through till dawn.