

11-20-2013

Crayons and Yarn

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Holloway, Danielle G., "Crayons and Yarn" (2013). *Creative Writing Minor Portfolios*. 2.
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ABSTRACT

This portfolio contains poems, creative nonfiction, and short stories, all original pieces of writing produced while completing the Creative Writing Minor at Cedarville University. The poems come from my own life, and while they are not intended to be a cohesive narrative, arranged in this order they tell a story of growing up, leaving home, and finding love. The nonfiction pieces come from a collection centered around my experiences in high school marching band, though a love story is present there as well. The short stories also draw heavily from my own experiences and passions, exploring themes that are important to me through characters and situations, which are technically fictional, but also very familiar.

CRAYONS AND YARN

by

Danielle G. Holloway

A Collection of Creative Writing Submitted to the Faculty of the
Department of English, Literature, and Modern Languages at Cedarville University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Creative Writing Minor.

Cedarville, Ohio

2013

Approved by

To Mrs. Frincke—the first of many teachers
who believed in me and challenged me to do the same.

INTRODUCTION

The making of this portfolio began when I was six years old. That's when I first called myself a writer and decided that I would be a published author someday. My interest in books and stories started when my parents read to me as a baby and toddler, so often that eventually I had my favorite stories memorized. I could sit down with *Mickey's Christmas Carol* and tell the story to myself, pretending that I could read.

Soon I started making up my own stories to go along with the pictures in my books. When my brother was born, I was often found "reading to the baby," turning the pages of anything resembling a book—even, in one case, a Hallmark calendar—and telling a story. Through my constant exposure to books and stories, through the stubborn persistence of a four-year-old on a mission, and through the help of my parents, I learned to read. But this skill alone wasn't enough, so I learned to write.

Through years of writing stories and poems and showing them to parents, classmates, and teachers, I've heard plenty of positive feedback. I heard over and over again that I was good. And for a long time I believed there was nothing more to it; I just had to wait for my chance to write a story good enough to be published.

But as I moved from kindergarten to elementary school to middle school, then to high school, and from there to college, I've met and worked with people who are also "good writers." I've studied the work of writers whose work has survived for many decades, and of others who are prize-winners and role models to plenty of people whose writing is more practiced than mine. I've seen work and dedication that go into making a story better than "good." It's inspiring to realize that I could make my writing so much greater, and intimidating to see how great other writers have already become.

In my poems I focus on particular events or themes that are most vivid in my mind. They're short, each containing one focal point wrapped in images which are often as literal as the events

they surround. They weren't written as a cohesive narrative, but as they are arranged in this collection they hint at the journey I've taken from childhood to where I am now, and some critical points along the way. Though the poems all reflect on different times and different subjects, a few themes in particular should stand out. Family, love, change, and the ocean. I've chosen these poems because they either demonstrate some of my strongest writing or are insights into the things that are closest to my heart. Most of them are both.

In some places, the poems and the nonfiction pieces work together. The poem *Nashville* and my nonfiction piece *The Bridge* come from the same events. *Marimba* alludes to the same themes that are in *Farm Sunset*. Again, love and change are major themes in these pieces, as well as the constant presence of the world of music, and most specifically high school marching band. The pieces of nonfiction go further into depth and description than the poems, naturally, but as an arc the poems go on to tell a more complete narrative.

The two pieces of fiction, *The Toad Thief* and *To Dance For*, don't fit into the narrative the same way the poems and nonfiction do. But if you look, the same elements are there. *The Toad Thief* is based on my relationship with my little sister. I wanted to show what it means to be the big sister and what it's like to want to be rid of the constant annoying presence of a younger sister who looks up to you, while at the same time wanting to protect her at any cost.

The closing piece, *To Dance For*, features two characters who face the struggle that any writer—or any artist—faces. I've always thought that everyone has something they would do even if they weren't paid to do it, which was the idea behind the character James Parrot. Sarah encounters him when she's at the point in her life when she's just starting to grapple with the question of wanting to pursue something she's passionate about while at the same time feeling pressure to choose a career by which she can earn a stable living. This is something I've been aware of since I was about Sarah's age, when I was preparing to spend thousands of dollars of my parents' money to pursue an education in the field of my choosing. Having the story take place at a wedding

was my way of linking the romantic love of the married couple to the passion Sarah and James feel for the work they do.

The writings collected here are not supposed to be the completion of my goal to become a writer. I certainly hope I haven't peaked so soon. This portfolio is more like a checkpoint, or evidence of my progress thus far. I've come a long way since I was six years old, but the spirited kindergartner still lives somewhere inside me, urging me to keep going with the enthusiasm only a six-year-old can have and with the challenge to keep growing up as a person and as a writer. I might not be a published author yet and I might not have a novel with my name printed on the front cover, but I've made it this far and I've learned enough to know that if I keep working to improve my craft, I'll keep improving.

I think that if I could step back in time and meet my six-year-old self, I'd hand her this collection and say, "You can do it." She'd probably hand me one of her stories, illustrated with crayon drawings and held together with yarn, just to remind me why I write and where it all began, and she'd probably ask me what I was going to write next.

FOREWORD

When time began, the first act ever performed was the act of creation, when God made the world and everything in it. Then He created man to be His greatest creation, designing humanity to bear His image as an artist's signature on a work of art. By giving us His image, God also gave us the ability to continue the act that brought everything into existence. We can create because God first created us.

God made the different parts of creation not just to serve practical purposes. He wanted His world to be beautiful. The creation account tells us that God created the Garden of Eden to look pleasant as well as to provide food. He intended that the first man and woman should not only exist and survive, but that they should take pleasure in the beauty of their surroundings. Reading the Bible as literature also points to a God who appreciates beauty. Many writers of the Bible took time to put their words into verses or poems that not only conveyed a message, but sounded lovely to the ear as well (Ryken 26). They made art. Using the gift of creativity is a means of glorifying God, the first creator, the one who shared His creative ability with us.

The human capacity for creativity is demonstrated in nearly every aspect of our lives, in new technologies that are invented, structures that are uniquely designed and built, the differing cultures and societal structures around the world, and, most obviously, in art. The ability to write, and write well, is just one example of the many creative gifts God has given to man. This gift is not ours to do with as we please. Since it comes from God, and has been entrusted to us, we recognize a responsibility to use it well. A Christian writer should feel the importance of always using his gift of writing in the best way he possibly can (Williams 20).

This means that if we recognize a gift we have been given, we should not only use it, but look for ways to cultivate it and make it even greater. The gift of writing is a gift of potential. God wants to see us put our abilities to good use. If a Christian is going to write, he should take the time and spend the effort necessary to make himself into the best writer he can be. His writing should

reflect this effort, and be excellent. The Christian writer should strive to be a great writer not for his own fame or recognition, but because he wants to make the most of a gift he has been given. Using our talents and gifts brings glory to the God who gave the gifts.

This doesn't mean that a Christian writer must always write about religious themes or even include God or a gospel-like message in his writing. T. S. Eliot makes a distinction between what he calls "religious literature" and literature which has the writer's religion applied to it (Eliot 198). Unfortunately, literature which is written from a Christian perspective and with the purpose of including Christian themes and messages often becomes clichéd and unrealistic. Richard Terrell criticizes Christian literature for becoming "sterilized" and depicting idealized versions of the world in which Christian morals are rarely, if ever, compromised. These pieces of literature come to sound false and contrived (Terrell 250).

Since the gift of writing comes from God, the Christian should recognize that his work must always, in some way, give glory back to the God who allowed him to use this gift on earth. This can be done by illuminating the world as a place where hope can shine even in dark moments by connecting with readers as fellow members of the fallen human race and by using words to show that beauty does exist on this earth.

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PURPLE CRAYON SMILE

A cardboard Crayola box opens,
spilling its colors rolling across the dining room table.
Her small fingers catch them before they fall.
She sets them in a line—
crayons in rainbow order, red to purple.
The purple one is already shorter than the others.
Careful hands rub color onto a white rectangle—
paper borrowed from her mother's printer.
She puts the yellow circle sun up in the corner of the blue sky,
and a line of grass along the bottom—green, of course.
Red tulips grow in the brown dirt
and attract a pink and orange butterfly.
She saves purple for last,
making sure that the world is ready for the mother and daughter—
purple stick figures smiling together.
When it's finished, it hangs from a magnet,
keeping the refrigerator gallery colorful for a while
until it comes down to be kept in a manila folder with others
in a box under her mother's bed.
She may outgrow her crayons,
but her mother will always have a purple crayon smile.

FROZEN FIRE

As kids my brother and I imagined
that we could light a match
and put it in the freezer
to make an ice cube flame,
then take it out again
and watch it thaw back into fire.
Sometimes we wonder
what Mom would have done
if we had tried.

DINK JUICE

Underneath the backyard apple trees
lie the juicy marbles, felled by wind.
We call them "dinks" because Grandpa does—
my cousins, Grandma, and me.

Before beginning our collecting,
we chase away the loitering bees.
They don't even mind the shooing
they're so drunk with apple juice.

We plop dinks in plastic buckets,
make them heavy with the weight,
then we turn our buckets and pour the dinks
onto Grandma's metal tray.

Grandpa brings a brick for juicing
and sets it on the dinks.
He holds us steady as we stomp
the juice from apple meat.

We wait out on the patio.
Grandma takes the tray inside.
She pours apple juice for everyone
—from a proper plastic bottle.

I think we must have known
even as we let them fool us, but
those days we drank our dink juice
from our turquoise plastic cups.

GAVIN

His little bare feet kick up sand as he runs,
then he sits down to feel it with his hands.
Eyes of truest blue look hopefully up at me.
He wants to build a sandcastle.

My blue plastic bucket comes out of the tent,
and that same old pink shovel, broken from use.
He doesn't mind. He knows to be careful.
He clears a place for our sandcastle.

Moist grey sand clings gritty to my hands
as I show him how to pack it firmly enough,
then upend the bucket on the place he directs.
We start to build our sandcastle.

The sands are his bricks and the water his mortar.
He knows where best to erect each new tower.
I let him direct me as we build together
because he is the King of this sandcastle.

When our work is complete we stand back to look
and I brush sand from his sun-colored hair.
Passionate and proud his blue eyes are beaming.
Today we built more than a sandcastle.

KITES

We brought our kite to the beach one day, she and I,
to watch it soar up high among the clouds,
and when the sea breeze all but disappeared
we stood and waited, side by side, for its return.
But the afternoon faded old and later every moment
and she grew tired of waiting for a wind to lift the kite.
She moved on to expectance of a sunset
while I kept the kite and sadly watched her go.
She never stopped to hear the tide's changeless rhythm
or to feel the meeting of sand and sun and saltwater.
She busily waited for the twilight's bright display.
The wind offered its lifting fingers, but only for a moment,
and for that moment I saw the kite swoop and dive and twirl.
I would have liked to have her watching with me,
but she was only waiting for the sun to end the day.

CAPTURE

My own hands held a lightning bug.
His soft body glowed in rhythm—his own—
blinking yellowish between my fingers.
I smell firecracker pops and the green of fresh grass
and it's that day at dusk again—
five minutes with a lightning bug
now a distant wisp of smoke.
He flew away because lightning bugs do,
to disappear among other little lights,
blinking a rhythm I couldn't remember if I tried.
Nothing's missing, but I wonder.
Maybe less would be gone
if I never held a firefly at all.

VERTIGO

Twenty feet of air beneath my toes
is all that holds this platform above the water.
My fingers feel the smooth wooden railing.
They feel it again.
I've jumped before—
I'm looking treetops in the eye—
but never this far.
I'm not afraid of falling.
What harm is falling?
I'd rather be treading water than standing up here.
I've jumped before,
but never this far.
This platform is everything I've ever known
from years of climbing its wooden stairs.
To jump is to start over,
begin the end,
and fall.
I've jumped before
but all I see beyond the platform
is...

THE BALLOON

I wrote a memory on a blue balloon
and tied its ribbon to my wrist.
I think it watched me as I walked,
bobbing above me on puffs of breeze—
the breeze pulling at my windbreaker,
the balloon pulling at its ribbon,
the ribbon tugging me.
I guess I stopped walking then.
When a wave stung my ankles
I untied the ribbon.
When it retreated to my toes
I let go of the balloon.
Then I watched it float freely,
vanishing blue in the cloudless sky,
sailing above the air and waves.
I kept walking anyway.

PIECES

The sand isn't soft
but she likes it that way—
filled with buried rocks,
bits of sharp driftwood,
dry seaweed that pops underfoot.
She kneels and thinks of heaven.
Sometimes the broken vessels are her favorites—
smooth purple mussels with barnacles,
bland clam shell halves,
brown snail spirals with holes.
In heaven there will be no broken pieces.
Sometimes she hates to smile at them
because she knows they aren't forever.

RAINDROPS

She glares out the window,
that safe shield of glass,
to see—but not touch—
raindrops glittering darkly
against the pane,
water in drops spoiling the air.
She can ignore—
slick white raincoat to repel their icy kisses.
She can pretend—
umbrella canopy to hide the weeping clouds.
And she can stay dry
while they fall
and she can forget that all the silver drops want
is to catch themselves in her hand.

NASHVILLE

He played the piano.
She listened.
Football season ended.
He wanted to go play the piano.
She wanted him to stay.
But she wanted him to try.
Christmas passed.
He played his best.
Then he waited.
So did she.
Winter melted.
The letter said no.
He felt disappointment.
She felt relief—and guilt.
She told him she was afraid.
He told her so was he.
She asks him to play.
He chooses her.
And he stays.
He plays the piano.
She sings.

CHRYSALIS

Your caterpillar eyes look up at me on purpose.
You see my hand holding your brother's,
the new haircut I got last week,
how many strawberries I ate at dinner,
and how many cookies afterward.
You see my fingers petting the one-eyed cat
and my toes hesitate when the water's too cold.
You look at me and I see your caterpillar eyes.
You're making a chrysalis out of me.

THE KNIFE

blood on a white tile floor
burned like a scar on our eyes
remains in memory
worse than imagination
he should have died
terror and shock and grief
faded with time
but he didn't realize we were wounded too
that we had been scared for him
or that he cut us off
because he was the hero
maybe rightly so for surviving
we healed ourselves in silence
hiding our scars
because who are we to say we suffered?
he was cut the deepest
red puddle of a memory
blood pooling on white tile

SOMEONE ELSE'S STORY

Hold her close tonight
and let her hear your heart beat
while you teach her to love herself.
Grief is only a word
made up of grey serifs on white pixels
when all these stories sound the same
because they're someone else's.
I'd never seen my shadow in pixels before.
But this time the letters spell a memory
and freeze your grief to its edges
because once it was my story too.
Keep her innocent just a while longer
because I know blood stains memory
worse than it stains tile floors.
I'll say a prayer for your little girl tonight—
a prayer that she only knows grief
as someone else's story.

FARM SUNSET

We sat on the porch to watch the evening,
just outside the blue farmhouse door,
the one with the new metal latch that sticks.
The bench cushion was a little damp,
but once we turned it over and brushed off all the cat hair
it really wasn't bad.
We sat together and he put his arm around me
and he said the buttons on my denim jacket were poking him,
but in the coming night I was too chilly to take it off.
The sun was setting and the sky turned orange
behind the little pasture where the two horses played
within the bounds of their electric fence.
The mastiffs wandered, drooling, along the gravel driveway,
next to the corn that isn't knee high quite in time
and the opposite field of soybeans.
From the creek down the road
we heard the toads begin to chirp
and he reminded me that he doesn't like toads.
I thought maybe he'd like them better
if they'd come out and eat the mosquitoes
who were poking itching spots into our skin.
Sharp pops interrupted the day's settling down
when the man across the country road got out his BB gun.
That's just Richard, he said, shooting at bats.
Together we watch the evening dissolve to night
above the small patches of farmland
and wonder if Richard ever hits any bats.

THE PHONE CALL I NEVER WANT TO RECEIVE

I didn't make it to Indy.
The highway was icier than I thought
and I won't tell you how fast I was going.
I'm in a hospital in Marion.
The doctor said I should call you.
Come if you can
but I won't be here.
I'm sorry.
I love you.
Goodbye.

SMOKE

I cross the street and smell exhaust and fresh grass.
Like the gas station just north of Tennessee
when the crab apple trees were blooming white
while our car broke down just in time.
Like the motel across the street from the beach
when the water was cold and grey
and sand crabs tickled our feet.
Like the street in front of the high school parking lot
where the marching band trailer waited patiently
during every football game we lost.
Fading like the smell of smoke,
until someone invented the pencil.

SALT

The moment was like a handful of seawater
when he asked the first question I'd ever heard.
My answer made the little puddle quiver,
even as it spilled away,
as moments always do—
fusing, seeping into the sand.
I dried my hand with his
and both were sticky with the salt
the moment left behind.
Now he holds my salty hand
and we watch the big water chase the moon.
My answer is still the same.
He says, Don't you know I'd die for you?
I tell him, Don't you dare.

SCALES

"Dani, you can play scales on the marimba with Brad," Alissa suggested.

Brad stood at the marimba—*his* marimba—lifting music from the wooden keys. His careful mallet strokes drew notes out of the bulky instrument, notes that would become part of our marching show. Already he was pulling them off the page and turning them into melody.

I stepped up next to him and waited, feeling like an intruder. He gave me two mallets and moved over, letting me into his space, giving me the lower half of the marimba—the larger keys. They stared up at me.

--

Sydney and I were house-sitting for her aunt. We were in the den talking about how I had decided to join marching band, while Charlie the parrot was downstairs repeating a word Sydney's uncle claimed Charlie had learned from TV.

"You'll be in the pit," Sydney told me. "I think you'll be playing the timpani, those big kettle drums."

I knew what the timpani were. I didn't know the word was plural for *timpano*.

"Alissa Deaton will be in there with you," Sydney continued. "You know who she is. And Brad Eberbach. He's pretty cool. He plays the marimba, and he's really good."

I knew Alissa. And I recognized Brad's name from Honors Algebra. I didn't know what a marimba was.

"It's that big wooden thing in the middle of the band room."

I'd been in the band room almost every day my freshman year of high school, but I couldn't picture the "big wooden thing" Sydney was talking about. I just looked at her and shook my head. I

hated to admit my own ignorance, but decided I'd rather look dumb in front of Sydney than walk into my first band practice without even knowing the names of the instruments in my section.

Sydney turned on her aunt's computer and pulled up Google images. None of the internet pictures of marimbas were quite what she was looking for, and I still wasn't sure I knew what she was talking about, but I pretended the pictures had helped. Sydney shrugged and closed the Google window. "Basically, it's like a big wooden xylophone," she said.

--

The keys in front of me were certainly big enough that I had no excuse for missing them, even with my clumsiest mallet taps. I missed them anyway. I hesitated too long, thinking about which came next in the key of G, and hit too many sharps in a row. At least I knew their names. Eight years of violin lessons had taught me to decipher notes and lines and staves, and I reminded myself that the other pit members had been pleased to learn that I could read music. Move my wrists, not my elbows. Draw the sound out of the keys, don't hit them like a drum.

The mallets felt heavy in my hands. The haphazard notes I hit were like careless dirt tracked across the carpet of a stranger's mansion.

"Let's slow down," Alissa suggested. "For the new people."

--

Brad was in my freshman Honors Algebra class. He sat in front of me with other guys from the band and always had his plastic band binder with him, because band class was the hour after Algebra. He rarely raised his hand to volunteer answers. He stayed within the invisible box surrounding his desk and chair, often going an entire class period without looking at anything except his notebook and the front whiteboard. I don't remember why I noticed him. I only knew his name because he was in band.

In the band room, standing next to me at the marimba, Brad looked only at the keys and to Alissa for the tempo, still speaking only when it was necessary and only enough. But he was

different in the band room. There he kept to himself because he didn't need anything else. Just his mallets, his music, and the marimba.

--

We played the scale again, slower. I tapped out one tentative note after another. G major.

"That was good," Alissa said. "Let's try it again."

Brad nodded silently to no one in particular.

--

I was on a bus. Patrick was sitting across the aisle from me. He was a senior—the kind of senior I was afraid to speak to. Not because he looked down on me from three grades ahead, but because he was the marching band's drum major and I barely even knew that about him. It was late, and when Heather fell asleep next to him and Ariel fell asleep next to me, Patrick turned to me and said, "Have you ever thought about joining marching band?" The pit needed a new timpani player.

I thought I'd heard the sales pitch before—that marching band was "amazing" and it was "the best thing ever"—but Patrick told me that band camp was a week long before school started in August, that band practices were long and so was the season, that there was no such thing as free time. "It's a lot sometimes," he said. "It can be really tiring, and sometimes you hate it."

That's how I knew he was telling the truth when he said it would be worth it.

--

So I played scales on the marimba with Brad, conscious of every wrong note I hit, afraid he was annoyed with me for being slow and for making him share his marimba, and waiting for Patrick to be right. I watched Brad's effortless mallet strokes and listened to the graceful scales he made into miniature melodies. I knew the word *Musician* was written across his heart. I didn't know his first marching band practice had been a lot like mine. I knew my mallet technique was clumsy next to his. I didn't know he didn't mind.

UNIFORM

It was raining when our bus pulled into Bluffton High School's parking lot. After we had parked, taking our place in the line of buses, a girl wearing a Bluffton sweatshirt got on our bus with a stamp and ink pad. People in front of me rolled up their sleeves and offered their wrists, palm up, to be stamped. I rolled up my sleeve too, wondering why no one wanted the back of their hand stamped the way I'd always seen hand stamps done. But I gave the girl my wrist too and she marked me as one of the band.

It was going to be an indoor competition, because rain ruined uniforms and instruments and football fields. An indoor competition meant no marching, only music and color guard routines in the gymnasium. It also meant that no one knew where to go or when to be there or how to get there from here. It meant the band went around one corner to warm-ups while the pit waited in a dark hallway filled with other schools' percussion carts. Bluffton was my first band competition, and I knew nothing about what band competitions were usually like, when it wasn't raining. I still wasn't completely sure how marching bands could even compete against each other.

We sat in the hallway on our own carts and talked about birthdays and blood types and the capital of Tennessee, and we tried to keep Reagan from making too much noise with the windchimes or touching other instruments. I fidgeted with the gauntlets velcroed around the cuffs of my uniform sleeves, trying to find some way to make them stop sliding around on my wrists. The shoes under my feet felt alien, too, like they weren't really mine. The soles were too thin and the laces were too loose and the heels were too round. I felt the uniform collar poking my neck. The metal clasp in the back had come undone, and I reached behind my neck to clip it back together.

Then suddenly we knew we were supposed to be moving. I pulled my timpani cart into the school's gymnasium, in line with the rest of the pit, as the band came in through the opposite door and stood in an arc behind us. When we played our music, it didn't quite fit in the space the gym allowed. Dainty woodwind melodies were pressed into the wide brass chords and the sharp drum hits were swallowed by saxophone breaths. My timpani notes didn't vanish like they did when we practiced on the parking lot. Instead they became part of the big sound that was expanding behind me. I heard them even after Laura put her hands down, saluted the judges, and climbed off the drum major stand.

I watched the band retreat out of the gym. With their backs to me, in maroon pants and white jackets, with hats and plumes covering their heads, marching in unison, I only saw the uniforms. Everyone looked the same.

Adam—a sophomore trumpet player and future drum major, whose jeans pockets were always deep enough to hold a calculator, a wallet, six magic markers, and a pair of eyeglasses. Becca—a freshman flute and piccolo player who burned easily in the sun and who acted out every story she told, no matter how trivial. Brian—a year older than me, a trombone player who calculated the takeoff acceleration of the airplane we rode on band tour. Me—a violin player who had dropped out of fourth-grade beginner band but was now trusted with four kettle drums.

On the field, one of us couldn't be distinguished from the others. Anyone watching from the stands just saw one band.

THE BRIDGE

Brad's talk of Nashville scared me, and when we were driving home in his truck one night, I told him so.

"I don't know," I said. "Sometimes I think you'll run off to Nashville and get so caught up in your music that you'll forget about me."

He squeezed my hand. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

--

Brad's cousin was a musician too, and a painter. He had painted a memory of one night he and a woman sat next to a campfire, silhouetted against the latest moments of sunset. The man in the painting held a guitar, playing his best for the woman. The painting didn't tell the rest of the story, that the woman was jealous for the man's attention, that as soon as the man stopped playing he saw disappointment in her eyes.

It's nice of you to come down from Musicland long enough to spend some time with me, the woman said.

I promised myself I would never be the girl who came between the musician and his music.

--

Brad and I had sat in front of that same campfire many times, making s'mores with dark chocolate and watching the cats wander along the trees at the edge of the yard. Sometimes, after the s'mores were gone, we'd sit in the back of his truck and look at the stars while the horses ran back and forth in the field. If the breeze got too cold we'd go inside to sit on the couch and pet the cat. We'd talk.

We were seniors now, and all year I could see our bridge off in the distance. With every standardized test, every college visit, and the end of every month, that bridge came closer. In February, it was close enough that either of us could have touched it. Just an outstretched hand and our fingers would have felt the rough twine that tethered it to everything we'd ever known. One tiny step and we could have put our feet on the thin wooden boards that begged for our trust. But the bridge creaked and swayed in the wind, and we couldn't see what was underneath it. And worst of all, we couldn't see where it would take us in the off-chance it held our weight.

So we didn't talk about Nashville. Not really. He talked about Belmont University, and the music program, and the audition process, and the songs he was learning.

I listened.

--

My brother came home from jazz band one night and found me on the couch with a book. "Have you heard Brad's new song?" he asked.

I didn't even know Brad had written a song, other than the one about angels he'd played for me months ago. If he had a new one, he must have just finished it after school, after I'd gone home while he waited around for jazz practice. He must have been excited to share it. That must be why he'd played it for the guys at jazz band before I'd had a chance to hear it. He'd play it for me soon, I thought. I'd hear it tomorrow morning.

But I didn't hear the new song the next day, or the day after that. All I heard was Franz Liszt's *2nd Hungarian Rhapsody*, Brad's audition piece. He was leaving for Nashville on Friday morning to play his audition on Saturday. He told me he didn't want to spend six hours in a car with only his mom to talk to. He hated long car rides anyway, and this time he had to do all the driving. His mom wanted him to practice, for next year, when he'd have to drive back and forth when he was living in Nashville. I thought he'd probably just forgotten to mention a new song he'd written. Maybe there wasn't a good time to play it for me.

--

Thursday morning I sat next to Brad in the band room before school, and while he talked about Nashville I thought about the man with the guitar and the woman next to him. Brad sometimes played music for me, just like the man in the painting had played for the woman. Brad played the piano in the band room or at his house or at mine, stopping between songs to tell me when and why he'd learned each one. Some were from piano lessons, some were from his church's praise band, and others were songs he'd just taught himself for fun. Then once he lifted his hands just enough to silence the keys and looked over at me, leaning on the back of the piano and listening, and asked, "Are there any songs you want me to learn?"

"I like Casting Crowns' *While You Were Sleeping*," I told him.

When he played it for me, I smiled. I liked the song. I liked that he'd learned it. I liked that he'd learned it for me.

--

Brad paused, setting Nashville aside for a moment, and asked me why I was so quiet.

I just said, "Ian told me you have a new song."

"Yep. Why?"

"I just didn't know you were working on another one."

"Oh." He shrugged. "Yeah."

And that was all, because Belmont offered a Commercial Music program—not just the standard Music Education or Music Performance programs that most other schools had. I tried to listen while he talked again. I spent the rest of the day telling him that Belmont sounded like a good school, and that it would be great for him to be going to a music school in Nashville, until the last bell dismissed us from seventh hour.

At 3:05 we sat together in the band room, back in the percussion section next to the cabinet full of mismatched mallets and triangle beaters, and he asked what had been bothering me all day.

I was glad he'd noticed. I answered him, "Why didn't you tell me about your song?"

Brad sighed and shrugged and looked at the back of the chair in front of him. "I don't know. It's an electric guitar song, and I know you don't really like electric guitar music, so I didn't really think it was that important."

I thought of the girl in the painting and suddenly she was me. But I didn't want him to know that. Not the day before he went to Belmont for his audition. "I'm interested in your songs because you wrote them," I told him. "And everyone else heard this one but me."

"Not everyone," he said. "Just some of the guys, and Andrew."

"That's just it!" I said. "There's this part of your life that is music and your cousin Andrew and electric guitars, and I know I can never be a part of it. And that's okay. I know how important your music is. But then you write a song and I don't even get to hear it, and now you're going off to Nashville and taking that part of your life with you."

After that neither of us knew what to say. I rested my head against his shoulder and he put his arm around mine. Just like he had in front of a Chinese restaurant with dead ducks hanging in the window. Just like he had on the band bus when I was tired coming back from a competition. Just like he had, for the first time in front of anyone, last year at the cast party for *The Music Man*. I turned away from the openness of the band room and hid the few tears that couldn't be helped.

We were in the middle of the bridge, listening to the twine creak around us, feeling the wooden planks sway dangerously under our feet, hoping only that they didn't break underneath us. Neither of us dared to take a step in either direction, either back to the safety of what we knew, or forward to the place we were both afraid to know.

--

A month and a half later we sat in those same chairs and he told me he got a letter from Belmont. He wasn't going to Nashville.

What was I supposed to feel?

I couldn't tell him I was relieved. Relieved that he wouldn't be surrounded by Nashville and bands and music school, eight hours from home, loving music and forgetting me. Relieved for my own selfish sake that he hadn't gotten what he wanted most. I couldn't tell him I felt guilty, like it was my fault he'd been rejected. I should have wanted him to go to Nashville, to be a musician, to join a band and earn a living like he'd always imagined he would. I couldn't say either of those things, because I could see his blank face realizing that the bridge wasn't the one he had hoped for. I wanted to see him smile again, like he had when he still saw Nashville on the other side.

I just said, "I'm sorry."

Soon we'd have to finish crossing the bridge. But not today.

MARIMBA

I watched Brad tapping out a melody on the marimba keys with his fingers, probably a guitar solo from some Metallica song. The marimba was new. The crisp black keys rang with so much sound that I almost didn't miss the old marimba and its rosewood keys. The old marimba wheels rumbled and rattled, jostling the keys so they clanked against each other as it struggled across the parking lot like an old dog with bad hips. Only its back wheels turned, and only Brad really knew how to steer it. Only Brad really *knew* it. He had introduced us, me and the marimba, convinced it to accept my first failing efforts at playing scales, and shown me how to coax music out of its weary keys. The new marimba glided like a shadow across even the roughest asphalt and willingly offered up young, resonant notes. Brad slowly discovered it, learning to trust it, welcoming its friendship as he had mine.

THE TOAD THIEF

"I caught a toad!" Maggie squealed. My little sister came running up to me, like she always did when we had recess together, but this time her hands were clasped together in front of her instead of spread out ready to hug me. I think Maggie was the only second-grader who liked having recess with the seventh-graders. The other kids in her class were afraid of being around all the "big kids," but Maggie was always excited to see me, and she liked to pester me with stories about whatever she had done that morning in Miss Watkins' class.

I frowned at Maggie from where I sat at the edge of the parking lot. My best friend Jade and I always sat there to watch the boys play football. Neither of us cared about football, but it gave me something to talk about with Travis, and Jade sat and watched with me because we did everything together. We talked and picked dandelions and tried to act bored, and tried not to flinch when the ball came flying towards us.

Maggie came to a stop and I looked up at her. Her brown hair stuck in strands to her sweaty red cheeks, and she kept trying to brush it out of her eyes with her shoulder. I sighed and reached up and tucked her hair behind her ears. "You caught a toad?" I said.

Maggie nodded vigorously. "I found it, by the river, and I caught it!"

A drainage ditch ran along one side of our school's property line. Maggie insisted on calling it "the river," even though I had told her over and over that it was too small to be a river and was really just a little stream.

"Wanna see?"

"Okay," I said, though I knew she'd show it to me anyway.

Maggie opened her hands just slightly. Sure enough, she held a wet, brownish, bumpy toad. It blinked at me.

"Cool," I said.

"Better be careful," Jade told her. "You don't want to get warts."

"Toads can't give you warts," Maggie informed us. "That's just a fib."

"Ah," Jade said, as if understanding had just dawned. She gave me a look and raised her eyebrows. I ignored the look.

Mom was always telling me to "make an effort" with my sister, so I asked Maggie, "What did you name him?"

"Actually it's a girl toad."

I frowned. Of course I knew toads could be girls, but they all looked like boys to me. "How do you know?"

"See this circle behind its eye?"

"Yeah." I didn't.

"That's its ear. That's how you know it's a girl, because it's smaller."

I frowned again. "And how do you know that?"

"Miss Watkins. We learned about amphibians in school." She put too many syllables in "amphibians."

Jade elbowed me. "Your sister's even smarter than you are, Sammie."

I glared at Jade. At home Maggie couldn't even figure out how to put her own shoes away or use the TV remote without screwing up all the channels, and here she was lecturing me about how to tell the difference between male and female toads. She could be such a nerd sometimes.

"I'm going to name her Cinderella," Maggie said.

"Okay, well, why don't you take Cinderella and go—"

Next to me, Jade squealed, and I flinched involuntarily as the football bounced over my head. Travis jogged towards us, calling out an apology. I frowned up at Maggie for distracting me, then hopped up and hurried to retrieve the football.

Travis apologized again when he stopped in front of us. I smiled and shrugged and told him it was all right.

"She likes you," Maggie added.

I glared at her, trying not to let Travis see the horrified expression on my face. Maggie's eyes widened as she realized that she had just told someone the secret she was supposed to keep to herself. I gave Travis the ball back and tried not to look at him, and I was glad when he thanked me quickly and returned to the game.

I faced Maggie again. "Why can't you just stay away from me and my friends?"

"Is he your boyfriend?" Maggie asked. She giggled at the word "boyfriend."

"It's not funny!" I snapped. "Go play with your own friends."

Maggie giggled again and ran away. I dropped down onto the pavement, humiliated, and tried to think of some way to salvage things between me and Travis and convince Mom to punish Maggie for interfering in my personal life. Jade graciously refrained from making any snide comments.

The football game went on, and I had no idea who was winning. To be honest, I didn't even know what the teams were. And judging from the amount of time-outs the boys kept taking, and the shouting that went on, it didn't seem like they knew who was winning either. After the third or fourth time-out, I saw Travis shake his head in frustration and walk away from the game. Part of me was excited, and I thought maybe I'd get a chance to talk to him while he wasn't busy playing football. But the part of me that wanted to avoid him for the rest of the school year kept me from going after him.

I heard footsteps behind me and looked to see who was there. Maggie was back. I turned away again, determined to ignore her so she'd go away.

She didn't. She stood behind me and sort of shuffled her feet around and obviously wanted me to notice her. She shifted around me so she stood at my side, invading my peripheral vision. She wasn't going away.

Finally I sighed and looked over at her. "What?" I demanded.

Maggie mumbled something.

"I can't understand you." I looked back out at the football game, trying to make it obvious that she was annoying me.

"Someone took my toad," Maggie said.

"How did that happen?"

"I let him hold it and he won't give it back."

"Well, if you didn't want him to have it, you shouldn't have given it to him." I really didn't care about Maggie's toad. "It's not like you could keep it anyway."

Maggie stomped her feet, like she always did right before she threw a tantrum. "Sammie," she whined, tugging at my sleeve.

"All right, all right!" I stood up, throwing Jade an exasperated look. I let Maggie lead me away from the parking lot, but I didn't hold her hand and I didn't let her hang on my arm. I surveyed the swarm of second-graders, hoping to quickly discover which of them was the alleged toad thief so I could put an end to Maggie's nonsense. "Who took your toad?" I asked.

She pointed in the opposite direction, away from her own classmates, to a group of seventh-grade boys kneeling in a circle in the grass. One of them stood up, holding a brown lump in his hands.

"Him," Maggie said.

I sighed. That was Korey, and Travis was standing next to him. I really didn't want to start an argument with Korey and his obnoxious personality, and I especially didn't want to face Travis. But I really didn't want Maggie to make a scene in front of everyone either. She was pushing on my back, urging me over towards the boys who had kidnapped her toad. I swatted her hands away. "Quit touching me," I said, but I made my way over to the boys.

"Hey, Sammie," Korey called. "Look what I got!" He stuck the toad out towards me, probably hoping I'd think it was gross and run away. "I've got a toad!"

"Cool," I said. "Can I hold it?"

Korey hesitated, frowning suspiciously at me. "Why?"

"I just want to hold it." I glanced over at Travis, sort of hoping he would help me out, but he just kept watching Korey like he didn't even know I was there. Maybe he was avoiding me. I certainly couldn't blame him if he was.

Korey studied me for a moment, then shrugged and handed me the toad.

"Thanks," I said, then turned and carefully set Cinderella the toad in Maggie's waiting hands.

"Hey! What'd you do that for?" Korey demanded. He made a wild grab for the toad, but Maggie shrank from him and hid behind me.

"She found it," I told him. "It's hers."

"It's not hers." Korey glared at me, then he knelt and smiled sweetly at Maggie. "Hey, little girl, can I hold that toad again?"

Maggie shook her head and took a few steps backwards, never taking her eyes off of Korey. Travis was still just standing there, nudging at an anthill in the dirt with his toe. Couldn't he see that Korey was being a jerk?

I turned around and started to lead Maggie away.

"Come on, Sammie," Korey called after me. "That's not cool."

"Just leave my sister alone, Korey." I just wanted to get away from him. I thought it would be nice if Travis would come after me and apologize for Korey, but when I listened for footsteps behind me I just heard Korey snort.

"That little nerd is your sister?" he said.

Maggie kept walking, but I stopped so suddenly I almost tripped and spun around to face him. My chest trembled and I just stared at him. Travis glanced over at me, but then he turned away and went back to poking at the anthill. I couldn't believe it. He wouldn't even acknowledge me. Since when was he friends with Korey anyway?

Korey laughed again. "Sammie, everyone knows that kid is the nerdiest little weirdo in this school." He shook his head as if he couldn't believe my ignorance and turned around to rejoin his buddies.

Suddenly I was right behind him, wildly kicking a lump of dirt at the back of his legs to get his attention. "Hey!" I said.

He turned around, annoyed. "What is your problem?"

"Don't talk about my sister that way."

"Leave me alone."

"No, you leave her alone." I was trying not to shout. I didn't want Maggie to hear me. "If you've got a problem with my sister, you can take it up with me. All right?" I ground my fingernails into my palms. Korey was just rolling his eyes at me so I looked past him. Travis had his hands in his pockets and he was staring down at the ground like he was oblivious to what was going on, but I knew he was listening. And he wouldn't even look up at me. He just stood there next to Korey and said nothing and wouldn't even look at me.

"Whatever, Sammie," Korey said, turning away again.

"Why do you always have to be so—"

"Sammie, just let it go," Travis interrupted, finally looking up. His eyes were gently pleading with me.

"You stay out of it!" I shouted and watched Travis's eyes widen in surprise. "My sister is not a nerd and I don't care what you think!" He started to say something in response, but I cut him off.

"And, for your information, I don't like you!"

And then I was walking away from them and taking Maggie's arm.

"What's a nerd?" Maggie asked me.

"Nothing," I muttered, looking straight ahead. "Just ignore him. He's stupid."

"You said a bad word."

I sighed and rolled my eyes and looked down at Maggie, still holding that toad and gazing up at me with her innocent brown eyes. "Stupid isn't a bad word," I said. I glanced over at the parking lot where Jade was still watching the boys argue over the score of the football game, and then over toward the drainage ditch. "Why don't you go put Cinderella back where you found her," I told Maggie. "Recess will be over soon."

"Okay." Maggie cheerfully carried the toad over towards the ditch.

I watched her for a minute, her bouncy childish gait totally unbothered by Korey's words. All she cared about was that toad. I sat back down next to Jade and she looked over at me, clearly wanting some sort of explanation. I didn't tell her. I just muttered, "Crisis averted." I watched Maggie kneel down next to the drainage ditch, and hoped that for once she wouldn't tell Mom about everything that had happened at school that day. But I didn't count on it.

TO DANCE FOR

Sarah followed the sidewalk down from the parking lot to the lawn where the reception was to be held. Her Uncle Dan was now happily married, and it seemed like half the world had come out to celebrate. The country club staff had set up tables, chairs, and even a huge white tent in preparation for the afternoon's festivities, and a live band on a makeshift stage was already playing music for the gathering crowd. The lead guitarist was playing a shiny black electric guitar, so shiny that the sunlight reflected off it into Sarah's eyes so she had to squint to see her mother waving to her from a table across the lawn.

The little round picnic tables were all decorated in white tablecloths with bouquets of pink tulips in glass vases. Sarah counted the tulips as she made her way over to where her mother and father sat. Each vase held exactly eleven. She paused next to one of the tables and bent to sniff its bouquet. She smiled. The flowers were real.

Sarah straightened up again and stepped back from the table.

"Watch it."

Sarah turned around and ran straight into a man's orange button-up shirt. The man belonging to the shirt cursed under his breath, and Sarah stepped back in surprise, offering a startled apology. He was holding two martini glasses, which had been half-emptied onto his wrists, and frowning at Sarah as if trying to stifle his irritation.

"Watch out," he said.

"I'm sorry," Sarah repeated.

The man glanced ahead of him to where a woman in a slim black dress stood talking with the bride. He let out a frustrated sigh and turned back the way he had come. Sarah glanced after

him, feeling embarrassed and clumsy, and then looked over at the woman in the black dress and wondered who would wear black to a wedding, especially an outdoor one, especially in the summer.

Sarah sat down with her parents at one of the little picnic tables to eat chicken salad and fresh strawberries. They were joined by three of Sarah's cousins who had nowhere else to sit and talked mostly to each other. Sarah ate quietly, listening to the boys talk about college and girls and jobs, and watched her parents trying to act like they were interested in the conversation.

Finally Sarah's father gave up on listening to his nephews and turned to Sarah. "If you get a chance, you should talk to Dan's friend Isabel about what she does for a living," he said. "That's her over there." He pointed to the tall, slender woman in the black dress.

Sarah looked at the woman again, and noticed her shoes—bright pink stiletto heels. Sarah smiled to herself, suddenly not minding the black dress so much and thinking that Isabel was actually very pretty.

"Isabel's the wedding planner," Sarah's father explained. "She put this whole thing together. Pretty impressive, isn't it?"

Sarah nodded, still watching Isabel, and wondering how she managed to walk so elegantly on the moist lawn in those shoes.

"Seems like something you might be interested in," her father continued.

"Planning weddings?"

"Sure. You get to put all the decorations together, come up with the arrangements of the tables and chairs and where the band will play, make everything look nice."

Her father also thought she should be an interior decorator or a real estate agent. Sarah just shrugged and smiled politely at her father.

"I see a bunch of guys from Dan's office here," Sarah's mother commented.

"So do I," her father agreed. "Guys you wouldn't even expect. Johnson, from accounting. And Lou. Can you imagine? Lou, in a jacket."

Sarah's mother smiled, but her eyes frowned slightly as if she were trying to decide whether she knew who Lou was and then picture him in a jacket.

"I even saw Parrot. Remember him?"

"Vaguely," Sarah's mother replied.

"He hasn't worked there since before I left. I didn't realize he and Dan kept in touch."

"Parrot?" Sarah asked, intrigued. "Is that really his name?"

"Yep," her father replied. "James Parrot. Used to be one of my paralegals. That's him over there. In the orange." He gestured with his fork.

Sarah twisted in her chair to look. The man in the orange shirt stood near the stage with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his khaki pants, watching the band. Sarah recognized him from their brief encounter even though his back was to her, and she turned around again. "Why doesn't he work for Uncle Dan anymore?"

Her father shrugged and went back to eating. "Creative differences, I suppose. James was an odd sort of guy. Did decent work, but always seemed a bit scatter-brained or something." He frowned slightly at Sarah. "Why?"

Sarah shrugged. "I just like his name. It's different."

Sarah's father finished eating quickly, then stood, saying that he thought he ought to take advantage of the chance to catch up with a few of his old business acquaintances.

"You should talk to your cousins about what they've been up to," Sarah's mother said. "Pretty soon you'll have to look at picking out a college and getting a job." Then she stood and left to join her sisters-in-law, who were sitting around a table and gawking over the newest member of the family.

Sarah would have liked to see the baby too, but instead she talked politely with her cousins. She didn't really feel like talking about college and jobs, but she knew her mother was right, and she would rather talk to her cousins than do nothing. Still, she wasn't surprised when the conversation fizzled out after a few minutes. Sarah couldn't muster enough enthusiasm to keep it going, and her cousins were clearly more interested in the group of single girls standing near the dance floor. The boys excused themselves, and Sarah found herself back under the caterer's tent, eating strawberries and watching the dancing. A round of applause caught her attention. Someone had caught the bouquet. Sarah poured herself a cup of lemonade and meandered around acting like she was having a good time and wishing she had some cousins who were closer to her own age.

Something orange caught her eye. James Parrot was sitting by himself at one of the fancy picnic tables, gazing absently at the dancers over a glass of Scotch. Sarah hesitated for a moment, glancing briefly around the lawn for her parents, then dropped the empty plastic cup into a trash can and walked over to where James sat.

She placed herself just next to him, and waited for him to notice her, but he didn't look over. He just drank the Scotch and continued to stare out at the dance floor. He was ignoring her. Normally Sarah would have taken the hint and left the man alone, but she was tired of wandering aimlessly around the lawn while her mother was busy with the aunts and the baby, and her father was having drinks with a bunch of guys he hadn't seen in five years. The strawberries were probably all gone by now, too. So Sarah took a step forward and tentatively said, "Hi."

Finally James looked over at her.

"Mind if I join you?" Sarah asked. "I don't really have anywhere else to sit."

He shrugged and took a sip from his glass.

Sarah sat down at the table, making sure to leave an empty chair between James Parrot and herself. She thought he noticed and smiled a little, but she couldn't be sure. "I'm Sarah Bell," she said. "Dan's niece. His brother Malachi is my dad."

"And why aren't you out there having fun with everyone else?" He nodded towards the stage and the group of people dancing.

Sarah shrugged.

"You're supposed to dance at weddings, you know."

She just shrugged again.

James set his glass down and looked past Sarah to observe the crowd some more.

"My dad said he used to work with you."

He glanced at her and raised an eyebrow. "Used to?"

"Yeah. My dad said you left. Because of creative differences or something."

James raised his eyebrows. "Creative differences?" he repeated.

"Does that mean you were fired?"

James shook his head and looked mildly amused, but was apparently not interested in the topic. He picked up his glass but didn't drink from it. He just held it and stared over it at the mob of people dancing and celebrating and getting tipsy. The bride and groom couldn't keep their eyes off each other. James set the glass back down on the white tablecloth. "He's never been happier," James said.

"Who?"

"Your uncle. Both of them, actually. They've never been happier in their lives."

"Well, it is their wedding day."

"This is what life should be like."

"What is?"

"This." He gestured to everything around them—the little patio tables with their white tablecloths and pink flowers, the tent that gave the caterers some shade, the men with their drinks and the ladies gossiping about which of their daughters would be married next, the old couples

dancing slowly and remembering, the young couples dancing fast and hoping, and the happiest couple in the world kissing each other again for a round of applause.

Sarah glanced around and raised an eyebrow. "A wedding?"

"Happiness." James looked at her for a moment, running his finger around the rim of his glass. "What grade are you in?" he asked.

Sarah frowned, caught off-guard by the question. "I'm a junior," she said, and prepared herself to answer the obligatory follow-up questions.

"Started looking at colleges yet?"

"A little. I've got time."

"You don't sound particularly excited."

Sarah shrugged, taking great care to make sure her expression remained indifferent.

"What do you plan to study?"

She shrugged again. "I don't know yet."

"Well, if you could do anything for an entire day—anything you wanted—what would you do?"

Sarah sighed and looked away. She deliberately noticed how green the grass was, and that it was cut short, but not so short that the dirt showed through underneath the lawn. The sky was impossibly blue. There were no clouds to impede the sun's shining, but it still didn't glow as brightly as the bride's smile or the groom's eyes. James was right. They did look happy.

"I'd paint," Sarah finally answered. "I guess that's what I like to do most, besides read."

"So study painting."

Sarah rolled her eyes. "And then what? What would I do?"

"Paint. And you could read while the paint was drying."

Sarah smiled down at the class ring on her finger, enjoying the lovely thought for a moment. But then she shook her head. "I couldn't make any money."

James sat back in his chair and shrugged.

"Maybe I could be a teacher," Sarah suggested. "An art teacher. I'd still have time to paint, when I wasn't teaching or working."

"You don't have to convince me."

Sarah frowned at him, but he had looked away. She followed his gaze and saw Isabel the wedding planner talking with one of the the groomsmen. The groomsman said something that made her laugh, and Sarah thought she heard James let out a small sigh. He took a drink of the Scotch, then turned in his chair to face Sarah again. "Tell me about your paintings," he said.

Sarah hesitated for a moment, surprised by his interest, or at least a seemingly genuine attempt to fake it. "I don't have many good ones," she said. "Mostly I have to do art projects for class and I'm never very good at those."

"What do you like to paint?"

"Cats. And flowers. And I did one of my flute, and one of my grandma's teapot. I think that one's my favorite. My mom was impressed that I got all the little flower designs right and even included the little chip out of the spout." Sarah stopped. James was looking at her strangely. "What are you smiling at?"

"You look just as happy as they do." He nodded towards the bride and groom.

Sarah looked down at her knees and sighed.

"Don't be embarrassed," James said. "It's something to be proud of. This world needs more happy people." He looked over at Isabel again. Now she was out on the dance floor, smiling and dancing with the groomsman.

"What are you looking at?" Sarah asked.

James lifted the glass to his lips. "The band," he said and took a drink.

"They're not very good," Sarah commented. "My uncle isn't as rich as he pretends to be."

"If you say so."

Sarah watched Isabel dance. She was a good dancer, Sarah noticed, and so was the groomsman. Isabel's brown hair was curled and pinned up, exposing her slender neck. The loose curls bobbed as she danced. Sarah looked over at James. He was turning his glass around and around as he gazed out at the dancing, wrinkling the white tablecloth. Then he seemed to notice he was staring and looked down at the creases he had made in the table cloth. He lifted the glass and concentrated on smoothing out the wrinkled cloth. Sarah looked away so he wouldn't catch her watching him.

The song ended and Isabel thanked the groomsman and made her way back to her table to take off her shoes. Sarah thought they must be uncomfortable, especially to dance in, especially on the soft ground. James finished his drink and stood up.

"Where are you going?" Sarah asked.

James walked past Sarah, but paused when another man sat down next to Isabel. James stuffed his hands in his pockets and just watched them make polite conversation. The band was playing again. Isabel declined a dance with the man at the table and he moved on. James watched him walk away.

Sarah twisted her class ring around, watching the different ways it caught the sunlight. She should have brought her sketchbook. There were so many people and sights here at the reception that would make lovely paintings. She looked up when a shadow fell across her knees and saw James' outstretched hand. He was inviting her to dance. Sarah frowned.

"You can't go to a wedding and not dance," he said.

She hesitated.

"Come on. Apparently neither of us have anything better to do."

She reluctantly accepted his hand and allowed him to lead her in a moderate waltz. She kept her eyes on her feet to make sure they stepped at all the right times, and never on his feet. James stared off over the heads of the couples dancing near them.

"You're not very good at waltzing," Sarah told him.

"No, I'm not."

"And you never answered my question."

"What question?"

"Did my uncle fire you?"

"Wouldn't you rather talk about something else?"

Sarah gave up and looked away again. Two of her cousins were dancing with girls and the third was standing awkwardly nearby, apparently waiting for his turn to dance. Sarah saw her father dancing with the bride, while her mother was laughing while trying to waltz with one of her sisters-in-law. The bride and groom weren't the only happy people.

When the song was over, James stopped moving and finally looked at Sarah. "I wasn't fired," he said. "I quit. Now I sell used books and I'm working on my first novel. I love it."

"That's it? You just quit?"

"You sound disappointed."

Sarah frowned and held his gaze, but didn't respond.

"I didn't quit because of your father," James said. "Everyone has something they'd do even if they weren't paid to do it, and for me, it wasn't law. One day I realized what this place could be like if no one had to work for money."

"Without money? It would fall apart."

"I don't see how a world full of happy people could fall apart."

The band started playing a slow jazz number, a swing. Sarah glanced over at the stage and thought she'd like to paint them, or at least draw them. She wondered how much her uncle was paying them to perform, and she wondered what jobs they worked during the week. She wondered how long they had been playing together, and she wondered if they were secretly hoping that one day they'd get a break and tour the country.

"You want to keep dancing?" James asked.

Sarah looked past the indifference in his eyes. "If you tell me about your novel."