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### Chapters 1-8 of Ralph & Lilly's Orchard

Chloe Chartier

*Bridgewater State University*

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Chapters 1-8 of *Ralph & Lilly's Orchard*

Chloe Beth Chartier

Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Prof. Bruce Machart, Thesis Advisor  
Dr. Heidi Bean, Committee Member  
Dr. Joyce Rain Anderson, Committee Member

## Chapter 1: Cowboys

“Ralph! Lilly! Dinner’s ready!” their mother yelled from the white farmhouse atop the hill.

Looking up and at each other upon hearing the call, the twins’ eyes met, allowing them to both ask, *Wanna race?* without opening their mouths. They took off sprinting through the freshly fallen autumn leaves that coated their yard with what seemed to be a million shades of yellow, red, and orange. The sky was the same crystal-clear blue of their eyes, and the sun shone brightly over their farm. Today, in Hayworth, Pennsylvania, even those who wished for eternal summer couldn’t complain.

Ralph ran behind what the pair both knew as “*the tree*,” despite the fact that nearly a dozen similar-looking oaks lived in their yard. *The tree* was much larger than the others, making it seem more important just from the sheer size of it. Plus, the family portrait and the dozens of wasted shots that came with it were taken there each year. All eight photos, one from each year, hung perfectly in line in the downstairs hallway, illustrating their shift from bumbling babies to distracted kids. Family Picture Day was always the same: first week of September, Ralph in a sweater and Lilly in her favorite (or only clean) dress. The pair did everything they could think of to aggravate one another those days. Their repetitive poking and sticking their tongues out would only continue as their mother asked their father, who wanted desperately to get back to work in the field, to stop checking his watch again and again. The tree alone required no direction or correction.

Now Ralph bounded around the large trunk before putting his fingers in the shape of a gun and pointing it directly at his sister. “Put your hands where I can see ‘em cowgirl,” he said.

“Oh my!” said Lilly in an exaggerated country accent.

“What are you up to?” he asked.

“Just riding my noble steed is all.”

“And where is it you’re going?”

“Why, I’m just following my nose! I could smell that…” she hesitated, inhaling deeply before recognizing the smell of homemade spaghetti and meatballs--hints of basil, oregano, and pepper. “…spaghetti!” she exclaimed. “Smelled that spaghetti a mile away!”

They both giggled before regaining their composure.

“Hold on there! Women ain’t supposed to be riding ‘less they sidesaddlin’!”

“Well I’m quite an experienced rider if I do say so myself.”

He squinted one eye into a menacing stare, trying to raise an eyebrow, but ultimately only contorted his face into an expression that Lilly had to look away from to avoid laughing.

“Raised Lucky here from a foal myself,” she said, pointing to the imaginary horse upon which she sat. She imagined it so vividly, as if the leather saddle and reigns would burn her skin from having been out in the sun so long and the white bristles of the horse’s hair were just beneath her fingertips.

“Alright ma’am, things seem to check out. I apologize for stoppin’ ya on your way to get something to eat.”

“Who said I’d be doing any eating once I get there?” asked Lilly, pulling her hand from behind her back and making a finger gun of her own. “Turns out you were right all along partner, I’m just on my way to check their ol’ till.

“I knew--” said Ralph, who couldn’t finish before Lilly shot her imaginary pistol into the air to distract the cowboy and ride into the sunset. The sheriff fell to the ground in a panic. He

could barely hear the leaves crunch beneath him when paired with the fabricated boom that rang through the prairie.

Lilly blew the smoke from her pointer finger, sticking it back into her holster only once she had reached the safe zone: the back patio.

“What’s for dinner tonight, Mama?” asked Lilly.

“Don’t talk to her, Mom!” Ralph said as he approached, taking off his cowboy hat and resting it on the railing. “She’s a daggon bank robber.”

“Don’t be jealous Ralph, I’m just a better cowgirl than you.”

“That’s good. I’d hate to be a cowgirl,” he said, mimicking his sister’s voice and pretending to swirl a long strand of hair around his finger.

“You know what I mean, Ralph,” said Lilly.

“But it’s not what you said.”

“Alright, alright,” said their mother, Marie. “Nobody robbed anybody ‘cause it was just a game. And if we’re not having fun, we’re not going to play it anymore, understand?”

“Yes, Mama,” they said.

Having just sat down at the dinner table and grabbed the wooden serving spoons, Marie scooped a helping of pasta onto three plates.

“Dad’s not coming?” asked Ralph, who had been looking out the window from the moment they sat down at the table.

“I don’t know about tonight.” Marie said.

“But why not?” asked Ralph.

“He’s had a lot of work to do lately. You know that, honey. Keeping a farm is not easy.”

“But couldn’t he come in for dinner?”

“Well, he does, but sometimes he’s got to come in late. There’s only so many hours of light.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Ralph, pushing his plate to the center of the table.

“Now come on,” said Marie. “There’s no need for that.”

He sat still. Marie took a deep breath before facing her son and shaking her head. “Just go upstairs,” she said.

“Fine,” said Ralph, marching up to his room.

Pushing her food around her plate with her fork, Lilly watched as the noodles swirled around the dish, leaving messy streaks behind them.

“Honey, you’re not going to eat either?” asked her mother.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not really hungry anymore.”

Marie leaned back in her chair and held her forehead as if it were too heavy for just her neck to support it.

“What’s wrong, Mama?”

“Oh, nothing honey,” her mom said, looking again as her daughter munched the elbows into a pile.

“I’m not a little kid anymore, Mom. I can handle it.”

“I’m just really sleepy is all, sweetie. But don’t you worry, I’m okay. I’m not going to make you eat that… mush,” she laughed.

“Are you sure, Mama?”

“Yes, honey,” she said, and just then the phone began to ring.

She picked it up, her sweet voice singing, “Hello?”

Marie looked across the table at her daughter. "It's Aunt Katherine," she said. "I think I'll just go in the bedroom so you don't have to listen to our blabbering on."

"That's okay, Mom," said Lilly. "I'm going to go talk to Ralph."

"Thanks, honey, but don't be discouraged if he's all worked up. Can't change his mind once he gets upset."

"Okay, Mama."

The pair both left the table then, Marie making her way toward her and her husband's room, and Lilly walking up toward her own. She stopped at the top of the stairs and took in a deep breath. "How are you guys?" she heard her mother ask, then she knocked on the door to warn Ralph she was there.

"Go away, Lilly," he said, recognizing the quiet three-tap knock she always did when she would go to someone else's room.

"I just want to talk," she said.

"Not right now," Ralph said.

"You always say that. But then you never talk about it later either."

"Yeah, cause I get over it. I don't need to talk about this stuff like you guys always want me to."

Lilly sighed and turned around before sitting on the floor with her back against her brother's door.

The coarse rug itched the back of her knees.

"What's your problem anyway?" she asked.

"Don't have a problem."

"Then why are you being mean again?"

“How could you not be mad that dad doesn’t even see us before we go to bed most of the time?”

She opened the door then, allowing herself into the room. Ralph hadn’t bothered to turn on any lights prior to flopping into his bed, Lilly assumed, as the quickly fading sun stood as the only means by which she could see her brother. He lied stomach-down on his navy-blue comforter, his eyes fixated out the room’s only window. He looked as if he was waiting for the stars to appear and settle into their spots for the night, she thought.

“That’s not true,” she said. “He tries to see us before bed.”

“Not on Fridays and Mondays.”

“Yeah, but what about every other day of the week? He always says goodnight.”

“Five whole days a week,” he said.

She could hear his eyes roll. “Plus, sometimes he whispers that he loves us when he walks by and we’re supposed to be sleeping.”

“Doesn’t count.”

“Oh, stop it. He does it, so it counts.”

“I’m glad you know he loves us,” Ralph said. “I’m not so sure.”

“You’re supposed to be on my side,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes.

The room grew darker each minute.

“That’s the beauty of having twins,” she quoted her mother, “You’ve always got someone to be on your side. That’s what mom always says.”

“I’m not against you, Lil’. I just don’t want you to get your hopes up that soon we’ll be selling so many apples that Dad can hire his own farmers and hang out with us.”

Lilly left her brother's room before pausing for a moment in the hallway to gain her composure. She heard her mother downstairs and walked to the end of the banister, just to the point where she could see her mother's yellow curls shine in the light of the reading lamp.

"Night, Mama," she said.

"Goodnight, honey," her mother said, blowing her a kiss and returning to the book she had been reading. Marie always read before bed. Most nights after dinner, she would let Ralph and Lilly watch TV for an hour before telling them it was time to go to sleep. As the twins brushed their teeth, she would walk over to the stove and turn on the burner, warming up her kettle for a cup of tea. Just as she would sit down with her drink and start to read, Lilly would come down in her pajamas, ready for bed, while Ralph would run to the top of the stairs and ask, "Whatcha' reading tonight?"

Their Mom would then give a detailed recount of the events that happened since last night's questioning, or—if she had finished last night's book—would share the marvelous reviews she had heard about whatever new story she was just cracking open. Lilly came to love this part of her day, as she knew she could always rely on it to unfold exactly the same way. While she didn't especially love reading herself and hated the taste of tea when compared to something much better, like hot chocolate, she pictured small moments like these with pure bliss when she was lonely, nervous, or simply wanted to think of her mother.

## Chapter 2: Meeting Jimmy

Lilly and Ralph woke up the next morning promptly at eight to their mother's daily reminder of "Time for school!"

Ralph slunk down the stairs first, his eyes open just wide enough to see where each of the stairs was, but not enough to let in too much of the fresh sunlight that burst through the kitchen windows.

"Morning there, handsome," said Marie.

"Mmm," Ralph mustered.

"Cereal or a waffle?" asked his mother.

"Waffle, please."

"Alright, I'll put it in the toaster for six minutes with one for Lil. Check 'em after 5, though, okay? I've got to go feed the horses, then I'll walk you outside."

She put on her muck boots and overcoat at the door before closing it and sending her son a smile. For as long as he could remember, she was always willing to forgive him after he had been rude.

That afternoon, Ralph glanced out the window-lined walls of the school hallway. He always preferred the sun to the fluorescent lights that shone within the old school and considered this part of the building to be his favorite. He couldn't imagine a point in time when the place didn't look run-down. As long as he had been there, the bricks outside had been crumbling from the wall and into the grass. It also certainly didn't help appearances that the once-bright-red paint that coated the lockers had faded and chipped, making the building look 20 years older than it was.

He thought of his parents at home. His mother and father were out picking apples by now, he figured. He liked the dependability of the work they did. Knowing that each day would be the same was a comfort to him, though he was not sure why that was.

As he turned the corner toward the lockers that belonged to his classmates, he noticed a strange boy going through the one adjacent to his own. He had seen the boy before, but knew he must have started just this year, as he could not remember him from grades past. As he stood before the locker, searching the backpack that obviously didn't belong to him—as indicated by its pink exterior—Ralph approached him quietly.

“What’re you doing?” he asked the boy.

The dark-haired kid with torn jeans and a dirty flannel jumped at the sound.

“That’s not your locker,” Ralph said.

The boy just stared back at him before dropping the bag to the ground and fixing his eyes on the beige-and-white tile floor.

“What were you doing?” Ralph said.

“Nothing,” the boy whispered.

“What do you mean ‘nothing?’”

“I was just looking.”

“For what?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“You were looking for *something*.”

“I was looking for a dollar,” he said, frustration washing over his face. “Just don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“It was a mistake.”

“You were stealing!” Ralph said.

“Shh. Just don’t tell, please,” the boy said, then he shot Ralph another sheepish look and took off through the door to join his class at recess.

Ralph stooped over and picked up the backpack, putting it in the open locker.

“I’m going to assume that’s not yours?” a deep voice called out to him.

Ralph turned around to see Mr. Hastings standing tall before him. The man, just shy of 40, was the most intense teacher in school. In addition to being 6’3” and coaching the high school basketball team, his ability to make the 6<sup>th</sup>- and 7<sup>th</sup>-graders cry was legendary. Rumor had it he even got to Jake Lysing last year, though the boy managed to deny it every day from October to Winter Break. Mr. Hastings cut no slack for anyone and was a strict rule-follower, something he believed everyone else should be, too.

“This isn’t mine, no,” said Ralph.

“Didn’t think so. Pink’s not really your color.”

“I can explain.”

“I’d like to hear it.” He was the only teacher with tattoos, and he made no effort to hide them. His black polo top showed off the ink on both arms.

“Someone else took it out. I was just putting it back.”

“That’s quite a likely story,” said Hastings.

“Honest,” said Ralph. The boy’s hands were slicked with sweat, which also started to form at the back of his knees. He could already tell his jeans would stick to his legs if he sat down, a feeling he hated.

“Let’s go to the office,” the man said.

As Ralph sat in the principal's office—where he had never been before—he looked around. He scanned the pictures on the wall, many of which contained two kids. Others showed Mr. Lewis in hiking gear raising his arms, winning a huge race. On the opposite wall hung three framed papers. “Master of Education in Administration: Yale University,” the one in the center read. Mr. Lewis had only been the principal for a few months but came into the school with an unmatched to-do at the start of the year. The teachers had joined together to form a committee and seemed to shock everyone when they were able to interest an “Ivy Leaguer,” a phrase Ralph repeatedly read in the town's paper at that time.

“Ralph, is it?” said Mr. Lewis, who now joined the boy in his office.

“Yes, sir,” Ralph said, sticking out his hand for the man to shake.

“Sorry I'm late, there was a faculty meeting. You know how those are,” he said, looking at Ralph with a smile that was obviously meant to be comforting.

Ralph didn't force the chuckle he knew Mr. Lewis probably expected.

“I didn't take anything. I didn't even look,” Ralph said.

“Woah, woah. Hold on,” the principal said, holding up his hands as if he had been caught red-handed.

“Sorry, sir,” Ralph said. He knew he had done nothing wrong, but worried that a misspoken word could result in punishment, in his mom finding out, in tears.

“I'm not the bad guy or anything, Ralph. I'm just trying to prevent theft from occurring in my school.”

“I swear I didn't do anything.”

“How would you explain Mr. Hastings’ finding you putting a pink backpack into a locker that belongs to another student?”

“I put it in the locker, but I wasn’t the one who took it out.”

“Who did?”

Ralph hesitated. Would describing the boy result in him getting a detention? Or maybe even getting expelled? He didn’t want to be the one to decide that fate. Not describing him, Ralph knew, would just result in getting in trouble himself. That’s at least what happened to the men who took the blame to save those who was truly guilty on the police show his mom didn’t know he snuck downstairs to watch some nights when he couldn’t sleep.

He wondered if this conversation was just some kind of scripted game played by the principal. He was probably used to bad kids coming in all the time and knew how to get information out of them in the most efficient way.

“I don’t know,” Ralph said. “I just found it on the ground.”

“Are you sure?” asked Mr. Lewis.

“Yes,” said Ralph.

“Well, you know this all is a bit suspicious, right?” said Mr. Lewis.

“Yeah.”

“You’ve never had a problem here before, and I don’t have any reason to believe that you would need to steal.”

“I would never steal.”

“That may be true, but I still have to tell your parents. Just in case.”

“But I promised you,” said Ralph.

“Well, I'm sorry son, but that's not always enough. Regardless of what you did, your classmate's bag was in your hands, and either you or someone you're protecting did in fact go through it. Its owner deserves some justice, don't you think?”

“If that's justice, so be it,” said Ralph. He leaned back in the chair, losing all sense of hope.

“I've got a home number here,” said Mr. Lewis, holding up a sticky note with a phone number etched across it, its numbers nearly falling over the edge in what must have been a hurried act.

“Good luck reaching anyone,” said Ralph. “Probably out in the orchard, like usual.”

Ralph sat up straight and cleared his throat when he saw his dad enter the main office. He had on his typical work boots and jeans, but paired them with his blue flannel, the one he saved for necessary occasions. He had only worn it twice that Ralph could remember: Grandma June's funeral and the day they bought Mom's sedan.

“What happened?” he asked his son.

“Nothing, Dad. I didn't do it.”

“Didn't do what?”

“This girl's backpack was on the ground in front of her locker, and I put it back in. They think I was going through it and stealing stuff.”

“Were you?”

“I just told you I didn't!” Ralph said, his voice high enough to signal to Mr. Lewis that the boy's father had arrived.

“Hi there,” the man said as he opened the door. “You must be Mr. Reynolds.”

“Yes. Robert, if you'd like,” Ralph's father said.

“Of course, Robert. It's nice to meet you. Please, come in,” he said, motioning for the man and son to follow him into the room. The pair sat across from the principal in two matching blue office chairs, their upholstery lightened awkwardly by the sun, with everything above the armrest three shades lighter than the bottom half. Mr. Lewis certainly was not the first principal to have been given the hand-me-downs, Ralph knew.

“What seems to be the problem?” Robert asked.

“I'm not sure there is one. Your son was found trying to put a backpack in someone else's locker, and there's been suspicion that he perhaps was going through it.”

“Suspicion?” Robert asked.

“No one saw what happened prior to his picking up the bag, so we're a bit unsure as to what else could have happened.”

“So *you* didn't see it, at all?” Robert asked.

“Well, no. I didn't see any of it. One of our staff members witnessed the incident.”

“A teacher?” he asked, facing his son.

“Mr. Hastings.”

“Oh, Hastings,” Robert said.

“You know Mr. Hastings?” Mr. Lewis asked.

“Went to this school with him a few decades ago.”

“That's incredible!” the man said, a giddy smile across his face and a sparkle in his eye. “I'm from New York, you know. Once you go your separate ways from someone there, you're not likely to find yourself running into anyone you know anytime soon.”

“Mmm,” said Robert, though Ralph could tell his father was only pretending to be fascinated with the man on the other side of the desk.

As he let the smile fade from his face, however, Mr. Lewis regained his focus, asking, “Have there been any similar incidents to this one in Ralph’s past? Perhaps at home?”

Ralph wondered if he looked like a bad kid to the man. The office’s window being directly in the path of the sun and causing the boy to break into a guilty-looking sweat certainly wasn’t helpful, either.

“Not at all,” said Robert, sitting tall before putting a hand on Ralph’s shoulder. “Might not be enough for you, but I know my boy’d never steal. My wife and I raised our kids to be respectful. I’m sure whatever happened, he was just trying to help.”

“I hope that is the case, sir. I’m sure you understand, calling was just a precautionary step I feel it is best I take.”

“Sure thing,” said Robert.

“Alright, well I’m confident I won’t be seeing you boys in here again any time soon, but I’d say that’s a good thing!”

“A very good thing, yes,” said Robert, nodding as Mr. Lewis opened the door for his guests.

“I’ll see you around the halls,” Mr. Lewis said to Ralph as they left the office.

Ralph and his father got into the navy ‘69 Ford pickup parked before the school’s baseball field. The windows were down, a typical scene given that there was no A/C in the patched-together truck. The pair sat looking out over the four white bases and the empty green stands.

“You ought to play baseball this spring,” said Robert.

“I guess,” his son said.

“I think you’d enjoy it.”

“Why?”

“I know I did as a boy.”

“We’re not the same,” he said, leaning his elbow against the windowsill and propping his chin upon his hand.

His dad let out a deep breath. “You didn’t go through that girl’s bag, did you?”

“No. I already said I didn’t do it. You don’t believe me either?”

“I never said that, Ralph. I do believe you.”

“Then why are you asking again?”

“Sometimes it’d just be wrong for a parent not to ask the tough questions.”

“Mr. Lewis thinks I did it.”

“I’m not too concerned as to what that man’s thinking about anything,” his dad said with a chuckle.

“He thinks I’m a bad kid now.”

“You’re not a bad kid, Ralph. Anyone who takes the time to get to know you knows that.”

Ralph felt the early-Autumn wind brush against his face. It was just cool enough to warrant not having an A/C in the truck. He thought of the boy who really did go through that bookbag, wondering what he possibly needed a dollar that badly for, or if it even really was a single dollar he was so desperately in search of.

“Why’d Lewis ask for me, anyway? Shouldn’t he have been looking for your mother?”

“I asked him to.”

“Why’s that?”

“I didn’t want to stress Mom out.”

“And it wasn’t stressful for me to get spoken to that way?”

“I don’t mean that. She just gets so emotional about this kind of stuff, and I didn’t want it to happen. I knew you’d just come and get me.”

“You know I care about you and ‘Lil too, right?”

“Maybe Lilly,” said Ralph.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You say goodnight to Lilly sometimes but never me. But it doesn’t even matter ‘cause that’s rare in the first place.”

“Well, if I’m not inside, I can’t tuck you in,” his father told him.

“Then why aren’t you there?” Ralph asked.

“Come on, son. I’m trying to make us enough money. Trying to help us. You know that, I’ve told you.”

“How can you help if you’re not even there?” Ralph asked. This was more of an accusation than he’d expected himself capable of, and he felt tears welling up in his eyes and his face growing warm. He would have cried, but instead he clenched his jaw and tried to be a man.

The disappointed countenance that appeared on his father’s face was one that Ralph had never seen before.

“Do you know how hard I work for you kids? How much your mother and I do to keep us safe?” Ralph heard a sad tone in his father’s voice, one that sounded quite like his own when he would get riled up. Turning the key in the ignition, Robert began the silent ride home.

### Chapter 3: Looking

Ralph and Lilly made their way to the end of the driveway the next morning. The sun was up, but the brisk morning air reminded Lilly that all signs of summer would soon be gone.

“I saw a kid try to take something out of someone else’s backpack at school yesterday,” Ralph said as he looked around the curb for the bus.

“Stealing?” she asked her brother.

She imagined a team of ginormous policemen, all in black and holding handcuffs, swarming in to confront the unknown thief in the school hallway.

“Technically not stealing. He didn’t get away with anything,” Ralph said.

“But trying to steal?”

He shrugged.

“Why didn’t you tell Mr. Lewis?” she asked her brother.

“Cause I don’t want to be a tattletale.”

“But now he’s going to think you were stealing.”

“Forget about that. I need your help.”

“Why?”

“I think he’s in your class.”

“The thief?”

“Come on, Lil’. We shouldn’t call him that.”

“Who is it?”

“He’s always kind of dirty looking, like he has nothing nice to wear. And he was new last year,” he said.

“You mean Jimmy Barrow? What am I supposed to do?”

“Maybe you could just talk to him,” Ralph said. “Try to see if something’s up with him.”

“Don’t you think that’ll look suspicious?” she asked. “It’s already October and we’ve never talked before.”

“Just don’t tell him why you’re talking to him.”

Later that morning, Lilly watched as Jimmy sank into his chair when he got back from Gym period. It was as if he felt that falling further into it would eventually allow him to go straight through the floor and out of sight. His blue and white flannel shirt was worn at the elbows, as if only another wash or two would cause the material to tear. It was also missing its middle button, though he was able to mask that quite well by wearing it open with a white t-shirt underneath. His jeans, blue and tattered, had stains and tears on the knees. His clothes didn’t look new, Lilly agreed, but did this really mean he was poor? So poor that he needed to steal his lunch money? After all, lots of the boys in her class had grass stains on their jeans from playing football at recess. The only difference was that they never seemed to come in to school with them still there in the morning.

Lilly watched as Jimmy took out his comic book, a Spiderman story that looked as though it had been read one hundred times—given the damaged pages and faded cover—and read through it quietly. Lilly’s view of the boy—each hand on either side of his face, blocking anyone from seeing his eyes, was just about the only way she had ever seen him. He was never one to join in group games, and instead seemed to just fade into the school walls. He must not mind, she figured, since he never tried to change.

“Time for lunch,” their teacher said.

The kids raced to their lockers to grab their lunchboxes and money, toppling over each other as they ran like lions in search of the only gazelle on the plain. Lilly had watched a real gazelle get eaten in a documentary at school one day last week and wished desperately that she could jump through the screen and save the poor animal. The video was so vivid and loud that it was like someone had placed her in the African savannah herself. Afraid of being called a “crybaby,” she held her tears back in class. She was not nervous about revealing her sadness at home, however, where she cried and cried about the whole event while hugging her father.

“Walking!” their teacher yelled out to the children for the billionth time that year.

As the class sat down with their lunch group in the cafeteria, Lilly kept her eye out for Jimmy. She spotted him in the back of the booming room, sitting alone at a wooden table, again reading his comic book. He had a single brown paper bag, folded over itself and severely wrinkled, from which he pulled out half a PB&J. Lilly wondered if he had more food hidden somewhere. She also questioned if he had any friends that would join him later. He didn't seem to have either.

She wondered why the boy had chosen to sit alone and could not help but form tears for him that she struggled to keep back the longer she watched him. He was probably a nice boy, she assumed, as she had no reason to think otherwise. She wondered what her own friends would think if she were to get up and sit with him for a few minutes, asking him about himself. She was never one to be concerned with what others thought of her but hated to be stared at. Each day, Lilly sat at the same table amongst the girls from her class. Many had been friends since kindergarten, a likely consequence of there being only one school system nearby coupled with the lack of movement in or out of Hayworth.

On many days, Lilly and her classmates had so much to talk about at lunch that they would couldn't even finish their meals, as they only prioritized getting through their saved-up

conversations. This was something that worried Lilly's mom at first, as she feared there was a reason that her daughter was not eating—that she herself had been skipping lunch to sit alone, or that she didn't like her mom's food choices. As the truth came out as to the cause of this strange behavior, however, it instead became more of an annoyance than a worry.

"We pay so much for this food, Lilly," her Mom told her.

"I know, Mom. It's just that lunch is our only time to talk!" she explained. "Even if we talk during locker break, we get in trouble."

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't eat," her mom told her.

"I know, and I try, but we just have so much to say. I can barely even make time to breathe."

Now Lily wondered if Jimmy once had friends like hers at his old school. She knew her own shyness would surely get ahold of her if the roles were reversed.

She looked around at the students beside her. A few years ago, no one cared where they had to sit. Now, however, boys sat with boys and girls sat with girls. There were no exceptions. The boys' side of the room boomed with deep laughs while the girl's side rattled with whispers.

"Do you guys know Jimmy Barrow?" Lilly asked the table, unsure of the responses to come.

"No, why?" Nina, one of the girls, asked. "Does he like you or something?"

"No, but he was sitting alone in class and I started to feel kind of bad. Plus, Ralph was asking me if I knew him." Lilly bit into her squished ham & cheese on wheat. All signs of its once-fluffy bread were gone, but she knew bagged lunches never made it to noon unharmed.

Nina ruffled an eyebrow. "Why?"

"I think he just bumped into him or something."

"Maybe something's weird about him," another friend, Jenny, suggested.

“You don't know that,” said Lilly.

“It's not like he hasn't had the chance to make friends. Maybe he's really mean or something.”

Lilly shook her head at the idea, knowing it was nothing short of ridiculous.

After three minutes of alternating glances from the boy to her friends, Lilly saw her chance. Jimmy had gotten up and left the cafeteria. She asked one of the lunch chaperones if she could go to the bathroom, and with her permission, followed suit. Jimmy wasn't difficult to track down, despite his one-minute lead, but Lilly moved slowly and sneakily through the halls as a precaution. Whenever he took a corner, she pressed herself against the wall before peering over, doing all she could not to get spotted by the unsuspecting boy. She thought of the spies in *Tagging Harry*, her favorite movie. They were always staying unseen until the last minute, just until they knew they could swoop in and complete their mission without making a hitch. Lilly, however, was clumsy and often incapable of staying quiet for more than a few minutes. She considered the latter characteristic a blessing, though Ralph would be the first to call it a curse.

She followed Jimmy up the staircase to the second floor of the school. There were two boy's bathrooms downstairs, so that couldn't be his destination. Lilly turned around quietly to survey her surroundings, unable to shake the feeling that someone was following her. Perhaps one of those dark, imagined policemen with the weapons had heard of her misdeed and were on their way to punish her. As she looked around for any lurkers, she didn't see the locker door that had been left open, and walked into it, knee-first. The door clanged louder than she ever would have imagined and sent a pang through her knee that she could not help but pair with a whimper. She bit her bottom lip then to keep herself from letting out any other noises, hoping that perhaps Jimmy never heard the sound. When she turned the corner, however, he was gone.

She limped down the hall quietly but at her fastest speed yet.

“You’re an awful spy,” she mumbled to herself. Just as she made it to the end of the hall and was about to give up, sure the boy must have made his escape, she saw Jimmy turn into the library.

If the darkness of the room was not obvious enough that students were not allowed to enter at this time, it was also indicated by the paper sign that read *CLOSED* in black ink taped to the front door. Lilly hesitated for a moment, questioning whether it was best to turn back and face no chance of being caught, or follow the boy inside. She thought of Ralph: there was no way he had mistaken the fact that Jimmy needs help. He’s too smart to mess that up, she reminded herself. She opted on entering and did so by using each and every spy-skill she knew. Opening the door quietly, she slunk inside the dark room. Before even fully entering, however, she whipped herself around to catch the closing door before its latch made the signature *click*. Controlling the door so cautiously that the warped bottom corner did not even slide across the carpet too loudly, she had done it. Watching that movie five times really had paid off, despite Ralph's insistence that real spies were wildly exaggerated in the work.

His impression of a real spy was much different, though he claimed it was nothing but accurate. “It’s all about being in society with regular people without giving away your identity,” he would say.

Lilly made her way through the lobby of the library. She had never seen it in the dark before and was terrified of its silence. She imagined one of the older kids running out and scaring her, laughing as she cried in a rolled-up ball on the floor. That's what happened last year to Jolie Peters, who came in to drop off a book one day. Rumor had it the boys were planning to scare the librarian

but decided it would be just as fun to surprise a 1st grader. They say she was so scared she even peed her pants. After that, the library was always closed at lunch.

Lilly walked to the farthest row of books, home to the graphic novels and comic books. It was a row she never went to, but one she knew Ralph frequented whenever he could. Jimmy sat with his legs crossed on the floor, his back leaning against the shelf. He held up a mini flashlight in one hand and flipped through the pages of his comic with the next. She watched him for a moment before looking up at the clock to see there were only 5 minutes left in lunch period. She knew she had to make a move and decided to do so by clearing her throat. Jimmy jumped at the sound, completely unaware that anyone had been following him.

“Sorry,” Lily said. “I didn't mean to scare you; I didn't know what to do.” Jimmy looked back at her but said nothing. His deep brown eyes were barely visible to her in the small light coming from his flashlight, but she could tell they were nervous.

“I'm not going to hurt you or anything. What are you reading?” she asked before sitting down.

“Batman,” he said, avoiding eye contact as she got closer.

“That's cool,” she said. “I'm not really into comic books, but my brother loves them. He says Wolverine is the best superhero of all time, but I think it's kind of creepy. I know technically he has the face and body of a man sometimes, but if you're also a dog half the time, can you really be a superhero?”

He smiled and returned to his book.

“I'm in your class, by the way. I'm Lilly,” she said, holding out her hand.

He brought his up and shook it quickly before pulling it back to himself. It was soft, much like her own, and not callused or rough like she'd imagined it to be from looking at his clothing.

“Jimmy,” he said.

“How come you never really talk in class?” She asked.

“No reason.”

Pulling a book from the shelf so as to not to seem too nosy, Lilly drew in a breath when she felt the gritty layer of dust that lay hidden in the dark now coat her fingers. She wondered when the last time it was checked out had been.

“You could always talk to me, if you want,” she said.

“Thanks,” he said. “I kinda just like to be alone.”

“That's okay. I do too, sometimes. But you can always work with me and my friends if you want. We're nice and we do well on our projects too, if that's what you're concerned about. We always get our work done, so you will too,” she said, trying to persuade the boy to believe her.

“Thanks,” he said. “Maybe.”

“You could sit with us at lunch too, if you want.”

“You don't have to feel bad for me.”

“Oh no, it's not that I feel bad. I just want you to know that you don't have to be alone.”

The boy nodded, keeping his eyes on his book. He shook his foot continuously, a sign of nervousness that Lilly hated to cause.

“Why do you like Batman?” she asked. She wasn't really interested in the answer, but just wanted to be nice.

“I like that he helps regular people, even the ones who aren't always nice to him.”

“Yeah?” she asked.

“Sometimes he causes trouble even when he doesn't mean to, but he always fixes it.”

“Do you like helping people?” she asked.

He nodded but looked defeated. "I can't do much, only small stuff," he said.

"Like what?"

"It's stupid, but I just help my Dad. He's sick, so I help him around the house. And every Christmas I work at the vets' kitchen. It's just putting food in a bowl, but I can't think of anything more to do."

"Your Dad is sick?" Lilly asked, unable to look past that point. "Like, really sick?"

"Yeah."

"Is he gonna be okay?"

"I don't know. He has cancer and it's pretty bad."

She thought of her own Dad: broad shoulders, dark brown beard, and work boots. He could never get sick. Lilly wondered how Jimmy could go home and take care of a grown man every night. She wondered if she would ever have the strength, if the roles were reversed.

"What about your mom?"

"She died last year."

"So it's just..." she said, but she was suddenly unsure how to finish her question.

"Just me and him."

Lilly recognized then that her mouth had been open and yanked her jaw up, hoping the boy hadn't noticed. He chuckled.

"That's why I have to help so much. He doesn't have anyone else."

"Why doesn't he go to a hospital or something?"

"I'm not really a kid anymore. I can help."

"Don't you think a doctor could do more? An *adult* doctor?"

“I’ve kept him alive this long on my own,” he said, swallowing deep. He clenched his fist, seemingly wanting desperately to go through a portal and into another dimension. It was like this world was out to get him.

He picked a Superman comic off the shelf and looked through its pages, not paying any real attention to what he saw. Lilly liked the library better this way: dark and hidden. When the lights were on, the bright colors of all the books shone off one another in a blinding display. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, the recessed lighting also threw the molding ceiling tiles and cracked walls straight into the spotlight. At least with the lights off, these things were kept secret.

“What kind of stuff do you help your Dad with?” she asked.

“I cook the meals, though they’re not great or anything. Just mac & cheese and easy stuff. And I help him get dressed, take a bath, brush his teeth...”

“How do you have time for all that?”

“I make time.”

“But do you ever do anything for yourself? My mom’s always reminding Ralph to do something he wants whenever he’s been feeling bad for awhile.”

“Why?” Jimmy asked.

“I don’t know, maybe it’s just a boy thing.”

“I’ve got my books,” he said, looking out over the window-lined wall of the library and onto the floor of the 4<sup>th</sup>-Grade hall.

No one would ever know it had just been buffed that morning from the look of it. Lilly wondered how the custodians put up with doing that each and every day, along with a myriad of other jobs, knowing that their work would simply be destroyed within hours of its completion. She

questioned if the custodians, who she always made a point to smile at, felt like Jimmy: exhausted and alone.

Lilly stood quietly as she looked at the boy, tears welling up in her eyes. She thought of the poor man that lived with Jimmy, and pictured him lying in his bed, unable to do much of anything until his son got home.

“What happened to your mom?” she asked Jimmy.

“Car accident,” he said as he returned to his spot on the floor

Lilly sat directly to his right this time before the pair stared silently at the brick wall for a moment.

“I bet you miss her so much. I would.”

“All the time,” he said. “After she died, there was a long time where I would wake up and forget each morning. I’d expect her to be downstairs reading the paper or out planting bulbs in the garden. Then I’d remember what happened, and it’d hurt more than the last day.”

“Does that still happen?”

“Not really”

“How’d it stop?”

“It kind of had to since it didn’t for my Dad.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. Lilly no longer cared about the darkness of the library, or the fact that simply being in there could get her in serious trouble. Instead, she propped herself up against the bookcase and looked toward Jimmy, who ran his index finger around the hole in his pant leg.

“My Dad was really sad after it all happened. But he wouldn’t get out of bed or anything. He couldn’t even go to the funeral. Pretty soon he stopped eating and started getting sick a lot. Then I kind of realized he wasn’t going to get any better.”

“Why won’t he get up?” Lilly asked.

“He says he just wants to be with her.”

Lilly began to cry then, not even bothering to bite her lip to hide her emotions like she usually did when around other kids. She turned away from Jimmy and wiped her eye, grateful the darkness of the library would help conceal her reaction. As Jimmy took a deep breath, the bell rang. The pair jumped up without a word and ran to the back door of the library. Jimmy pushed it open and darted into the hall. Even his short time as a Hayworth student had already made him aware of the librarian’s notoriety for being the first one back to her room from lunch after last year’s incident.

As she felt her way through the dark corner of the library, she wondered if this was something he did every day. It all seemed so routine to the boy. She watched as Jimmy turned around once in the hallway, seeming to have suddenly remembered she was with him, and sighed in relief when he grabbed hold of the door for her.

#### Chapter 4: Family Dinner

Monday recesses were always the loudest of the week. Everyone was anxious to tell their friends about the weekend and rejoice in the fact that class was over—for a few moments, that is.

Jogging across the pavement after noticing Ralph in the grassy area beyond the basketball courts, Lilly couldn't wait to tell him about her encounter with the boy she previously labeled as “the thief.” She looked straight ahead as she ran, not paying attention to the kids around her.

*You were right, something is up with Jimmy*, she imagined herself saying. She had no doubt Ralph would do what he always did when he was right: raise his eyebrows and smirk as though he had never been wrong about anything in his entire life. Suddenly, a blue blur passed just out of the corner of her eye, and she found herself falling fast toward the pavement.

Her knee landed first, skinning against the jagged surface of the court only to be followed by her left hip, shoulder, and the palm of her hand. Her freshly scraped knee met the open air and sent a sharp pulse throughout her leg as she sat up to assess the damage. Her stinging knee's effects were eclipsed only by the heat of the dozens of eyes she realized then had been fixed on her. She threw her right palm—the only one she knew to be okay—over her knee, eliciting an instantaneous sting from the rough skin that turned increasingly red around the small pebbles that had been pressed into her knee. It stung more than any bee sting she had gotten before. She looked around, hoping to find a guilty face amongst the many boys around her, as she knew she had been tripped.

It wasn't the injury that made Lilly's tears fall, but the fact that someone was willing to hurt her. She could never imagine doing such a thing herself. As she sat on the ground, switching

between holding her damaged knee and elbow and wiping away the tears from her eyes, she felt a hand on her shoulder. She jumped, afraid it belonged to the boy who had tripped her.

“Are you okay, Lilly?” Without having even turned around, she knew the voice to be Ralph’s and instantly felt her embarrassment and worry float away. He would keep her safe, she was sure. She leaned into him and cried heavier then, grateful to have his comfort. He squeezed her before whispering, “One second.” He rose then and looked at the boys on the court.

The sun was out and facing him, though it wasn’t quite bright enough that he had to squint to face his opponent. He knew a group of boys were forming a circle around them but pretended as though he hadn’t noticed, as he did not want to make a spectacle of the event.

“Who did it?” Ralph shouted to them.

The boys looked back, some of them blankly staring while others smiled, finding Ralph’s attempt at protection to be more “cute” than brave.

“I said, ‘Who did it?’”

One of the boys stepped forward, puffing out his chest and straightening his back. “Did what?” he asked. It was Thomas Greene, one of the athletes in 5th grade and the bane of Mrs. Olivia’s existence, as Lilly was sure the woman must say, “Thomas, stop it” one million times each day.

“Someone tripped my sister,” Ralph said. “It was one of you, I know it.”

“No one did anything,” Tom said, approaching the faded white line that marked mid-court.

“So why is she on the ground?” Ralph asked.

“Maybe she's clumsy,” the boy said.

“It's fine, Ralph,” said Lily, only wanting to have the attention taken away from them. Everyone was seeing this. From the hopscotch-inked area of the pavement to the sprawling soccer field, kids glued their eyes on the two boys of such contrasting strengths.

“Did you do it?” Ralph asked Tom again.

“I already told you she fell.”

“Yeah, but you've yet to say that you yourself didn't do it.”

The few warm raindrops that fell on his bare arms made Ralph realize that his body had been numb in fear prior to that moment. He always loved “sun showers,” as his mother called them, and pictured her smiling at the sky at that very moment. He himself wanted to stare at the rainbow of colored clouds but knew that would only lead to more teasing from his bully.

“You think you're so smart,” Thomas said, inching closer to Ralph.

“I don't know if it was you, but somebody tripped my sister, and no one's stepping up for it. If you or one of your buddies wants to do something so low, you might as well admit it, right?”

Lilly clenched her jaw as she watched Thomas run toward her brother, tackling him to the pavement. Ralph pushed back, trying to gain the upper hand by getting on top of the boy, but Thomas was much bigger and stronger. They only tussled for a moment before Thomas socked Ralph in the eye.

“Ralph!” Lilly shrieked, worried her brother would not be able to get the boy off him. She attempted to jump up, forgetting about her own injury until feeling the molten pavement against her stinging and now-reopened knee.

“Look, he needs *her* help,” one of the other boys said, pointing at Lilly and laughing. She shot him the dirtiest look she had ever let come upon her face until he looked toward the ground, regretful of what he had said.

Picking the tiny rocks out from the warm blood on her leg in hopes of stopping the pain, Lilly was grateful to find one of the teachers had made it to the fighting pair before she needed to intervene.

“Knock it off,” the man said, ripping Thomas from Ralph and standing ready to pounce if the boys were to try to engage once again. Catching his breath, he asked, “What’s the problem?”

“This loser’s accusing me of tripping his sister,” Thomas said.

“Quit it with the name-calling, it’s immature. Just like fighting.”

Lilly’s legs felt as if there were bugs crawling up them, the stinging of each scratch racing up and down her skin. The boy laughed at the teacher’s comment as if he was so much better than the obviously wiser man.

“You saw him trip your sister?” the teacher asked Ralph.

“Well, no. But I know he tried.”

“You don’t know anything. I didn’t trip nobody,” Thomas said.

“Anybody,” the man said.

The boy looked to his friends and shrugged.

“I guess I’ll have to ask Mr. Lewis to check the cameras then, boys.”

“Fine,” Thomas said, catching a basketball thrown to him by his teammate before rejoining the game. It was as if nothing even happened to the boy.

“Bring your sister to the nurse and get some ice for that eye,” the man said to Ralph, placing a hand on his shoulder for a second before turning away and shaking his head.

Ralph walked toward the building quickly, turning around only to make sure his sister was with him. He kept his eyes to the ground from that point on, not wanting anyone to see the blue bruise that was surely starting to form around his eye. She knew he was embarrassed.

Ralph and Lilly walked into the nurse's office and took the two green seats across from the check-up room. To their right lay the plastic blue bed reserved only for the about-to-puke kids and those who claimed they were too tired to do their work. Making it all the way to the bed was never the desired outcome of a "tired" student, of course, but was instead a consequence given out by a teacher fed-up with kids who would simply put their head down on their desk and choose not to work after a long night of staying up talking.

The nurse, a younger-looking woman who always wore a bright top, smiled at them through the window of her walled-in office.

"Well, I haven't met you two before," she said as if she were excited to have them join her.

"Looks like you need some ice, honey," she said to Ralph as she examined the red blotch taking over his eye.

"One second." The pair watched as the nurse hurried back into her office and opened a freezer. "It should be cold enough, golly," she said, pretending to laugh as though she did not mind the cold, but quickly handing the ice to the bruised boy before her.

"Now you two just sit a minute and I'll come back out and check on that. I've got to fill out the paperwork for you. I need your name and age, dear."

"Ralph and ten."

“And who is this?” she said, looking to Lilly before back at Ralph with patient eyes.

“Friend of yours?”

“My sister.”

“Oh, your sister! How old are you, honey?”

“Ten,” she said, though still occupied with the image of the bully towering over her brother.

“My goodness, twins?” the woman asked with a smile across her face. “You two are so lucky to have each other, you know that?”

“Yup,” said Lilly.

Ralph only nodded, obviously lost somewhere else.

“Okay, well you just rest here, Ralph, and Lilly. I’ll get you a Band-Aid. I’ll be right back,” the nurse said, walking back into her tiny office.

Lilly let out a deep breath as she looked at the posters that hung on the walls around her. “Get 60 minutes of exercise a day!” one poster displayed alongside a picture of a boy happily riding his bike. Another depicted the food pyramid, something Lilly had learned about during Science period one day. Each section of the pyramid was brightly colored with a shade from the rainbow, hiding the science behind the information behind its appearance.

“Were you scared?” Lilly asked her brother.

“No way.”

“I was,” she said.

“*You were?* Why?”

“I thought you were going to get pummeled.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, come on. He’s a 5<sup>th</sup> grader.”

“Dad’s going to kill me,” Ralph said.

“You mean *us*.”

“No, I mean me.”

“But I was there, too,” Lilly said.

Ralph let out a laugh and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter,” he told his sister. “You couldn’t do anything to make him mad at you.”

Lilly rolled her eyes, sick of hearing this sentiment for the millionth time.

The nurse made her way over. “How’s that eye, honey?” she asked.

“I can’t really feel it.”

“Oh, good. That means the ice is working,” the nurse said removing the pack to check the bruise before putting it back where it was with a gentle touch. She clenched her face as she did this, as if Ralph would forget to feel any potential pain because of it.

“Alright, honies, you can both head back to class now.”

The pair went the long way back to their classrooms, walking through both the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade halls to reach the back staircase that led to their desired location.

“He’s around, Ralph. He’s just trying to make sure we’ve got all we need.”

“Don’t we?”

“Don’t we what?”

“Have everything we need.”

“I guess.”

“Then why can’t he take a break?”

“Cause pretty soon we won’t be able to afford everything.”

“Fine,” Ralph said, moving quicker in his trek up the stairs.

Lilly was disappointed in her brother’s behavior but knew more had to be said. “I met Jimmy,” she offered.

Ralph spun on his heel, gazing at his sister with surprised eyes. “And?” he asked.

“He only stole because he has nothing.”

“What do you mean ‘has nothing?’”

“He has no money.”

“His parents don’t give him any?”

“Doesn’t have those either,” she said. “Well, he has a dad, but he’s very ill and cannot really function. His mom died in an accident last year.”

“Oh, boy.”

“They’re all alone, Ralph,” she said as her sinuses started to sting. Lilly used to hate that she cried so often but came to accept it after her mom said it just meant she cared so much.

“But what am I supposed to do, Lil’? I don’t have any money.”

“We’ve got to earn some.”

Ralph looked as if his sister had begun speaking in French. “Earn some?” he asked.

“Doing what?”

“Whatever we can.”

He shook his head and looked out from the only window in the staircase. The September sun was shining through, warm but warning of winter. He could see miles away from that spot.

“Remember when you helped Mr. Johnson last year? Didn’t he pay you ten bucks?” she asked.

“Mom didn’t let me keep it. I’m sure she’d do the same this time around.”

Lilly took a deep breath and aimed her eyes at the floor. “What if we don’t tell her?” she mumbled.

“My god, what’s happened to you?” he asked. “Do something without telling Mom first? Are you sick or something?”

“Stop it, Ralph,” she said, brushing her brother’s hand off of her shoulder. “I don’t want to lie, but he needs help.”

“What if Johnson doesn’t need help this year?”

“Have you seen his yard?” she asked her brother. “I’m sure he needs help.”

Ralph laughed. Lilly joined her brother at the window, where they stood silently for a few moments.

“He’s out there now,” she said, pointing to a little red blob amidst all the faraway trees.

“Dad.”

“Where else would he be?” Ralph said.

Lilly and Ralph threw open their bedroom doors as their watches simultaneously hit 6:30. Upon seeing each other, they shared a look that the two knew relayed not only an excitement for dinner, but also the readiness for the playful pursuit that would soon break out. Lilly raced past her brother and down the stairs, Ralph following close behind. She leapt around the banister at the base of the staircase, turning around to say, “I win.” She had not even begun muttering the start of the sentence, however, before Ralph leaped ahead, leaving her in the dust. She raced after him, though she knew her chances were bleak. Looking into the kitchen then to see what her mother was cooking, she didn't notice Ralph stopped short in front of her, and she ran

straight into his back with a thud. It was the kind of impact where your nose smashes right into what's in front of it, breaking the rest of your body from the fall while causing instantaneous numbing.

"Sorry," she said, looking over to see her brother's shocked expression. His eyes had grown wide and his mouth was ajar, as if he had been caught doing something he shouldn't have been. She had seen that face all too often when they were younger. She looked over, following the direction of his gaze, and met her father's eyes, bright and excited.

"Hi, Daddy," she said.

"Hi, Honey. How was school?"

"Good," she said, wondering if he had heard about the fight. "Just did more fractions."

"How about you, Ralph?" he asked his son.

Lilly looked at her brother's fear-stricken expression. He looked like he did back in second grade when Ms. Haver asked him for his homework that he had forgotten at home: eyes wide, back straight, lips shut.

"Huh?" he asked, seeming to jump into his body from somewhere else. Lilly wondered if he was back in second grade in his mind, too. "Good."

Ralph looked at her with eyes she knew were hopeful to find the same fearful expression as their own.

"We just read stuff."

"All day?" his father asked.

"Yeah, I guess," said Ralph.

Lilly wished for a lot of things. She wished she had never run over to her brother at recess. She wished Ralph wouldn't have been in a fight with another boy. She even wished it

wasn't so hard for her brother and father to connect. She typically blamed Ralph for the tension that was always there between him and their father, as she knew he never truly believed that their the man worked hard. When he wasn't out planting, he was delivering apples, or helping someone else, but Ralph did not seem to get it.

Their mom entered the room then, placing a salad bowl filled with vibrant vegetables and crisp apples on the table.

“Burgers coming right out,” she said.

“Did you grill them, Daddy?” Lilly asked her father.

“Sure did,” he said, smiling widely.

“My goodness, this is good,” Lilly said before noticing that not only had she dripped some grease onto her white shirt, but that there was also a dollop of mustard resting on the left corner of her lips. Her mother shook her head twice: once at the whole scene and again upon her husband’s giggle in response to their messy daughter. Lilly’s fear of getting in trouble released from her shoulders as a bead of the smoky, homemade burger’s juices met the mustard and dewy sweat on her lips.

“Why are you here?” Ralph asked. Marie cleared her throat to get his attention then and leered at him with a look of obvious frustration.

“Well, I wanted to eat with you guys, but we ended up wanting to talk to you about something,” Robert said.

“It wasn’t even our fault,” said Lilly, unable to handle the pressure.

“What wasn’t?”

“Oh, nothing. Never mind,” said Ralph, shooting his sister a look of panic. “What did you want to tell us?”

“Just that I’ll be out an extra hour most nights now that it’s time to meet all these Fall orders.”

“But you’re already always out,” said Ralph.

“It’s what we have to do, son,” he said.

“No, it’s what you want to do, like usual.”

“Watch yourself,” Robert said. His face was tense, holding back years of anger.

The twins had never seen their father cry, Lilly realized, and now she froze, feeling as though any sudden movement could result in an explosion.

Ralph and Robert stared at each other, both holding firm in their silent frustration.

“He didn’t mean it,” Lilly told her Dad.

“It’s okay, Lil’.”

Ralph’s eyes began to water, which was a rare sight for Lilly. Unlike her own tendency to cry, her brother usually remained dry-eyed and stone cold.

As the family ate in silence, the twins looked from each other to their parents. Robert kept his eyes on his plate. A rooster let out his call just beyond the door, causing them all to jump in their seats at the sudden surprise.

“Oh, I’ve got some extras for you in the kitchen, hold on,” Marie said back to the bird before leaving the room in search for the leftover pile they gave to the chickens each night.

“I want you to start helping out on Saturday mornings, Ralph,” Robert said.

“Why?”

“It’s time you start to learn the trade.”

“I’m not gonna use it for anything.”

“I used to think that, too. Then my father died, and suddenly it was mine.”

“I don’t want to learn.”

“Sometimes you have to anyways.”

Lilly’s knees were clenched below the table, her hands clinging to the seat of her chair.

“Lilly and I are done,” Ralph said, “so can we just go?”

“You may. I’ve got to talk to your mother anyways,” he said.

Lilly followed her brother up the stairs, matching each of his stomps with a tiptoe-like step. Maybe they would equal each other out, she hoped.

Ralph went in his room and shut his door loudly behind him, causing even his sister to jump.

“I don’t know what to do about that boy,” she overheard her father saying downstairs.

“Just give it time,” her mom said. “He’ll get over it.”

“It’s been a year, Marie,” he said in a voice so frustrated Lilly could feel the tension all the way upstairs.

She wasn’t one for eavesdropping, and never would, she knew, had it been any less important than this. Nothing she said seemed to matter to Ralph. He was so inflexible, and she was at a loss.

“He thinks I’m not helping, but to prove I *am* helping, I have to be at work. It’s a Catch-22. What am I supposed to do?”

“I’m not sure, but what good is bringing him out in the fields going to bring?”

“Maybe he’ll finally open up his eyes and see how hard we’ve been working all these years. How apples can’t grow and sell themselves.”

“He knows that, Rob.”

“I’m running out of options here. My own son hates me. Can you imagine that? We always wanted kids, but he doesn’t want me. Please just support me on this,” he begged his wife

“Of course I support you, Honey. I just don’t want you to get your heart broken.”

Upstairs, holding fast to the bannister, Lilly felt as though her own heart had formed a gaping hole. She had never heard her father—her strong, tough, wonderful father—sound as broken as he did that night, and she hated that she had no idea how to help him.

## Chapter 5: Mr. Johnson

Mr. Johnson was technically the twins' next-door neighbor, but seeing as the man's four dozen acres created quite a distance between the pair's backyards, the twins couldn't help but think of him more as a "sorta-nearby acquaintance". His old white ranch was the first they hit when trick-or-treating each Halloween before driving three miles toward the center of town. The old house would have been beautiful, Ralph figured, had it been maintained. Whenever he would drive by on the bus or ride his bike in front of the property, he would picture the house freshly painted, the yard mowed, and the overgrown flowerbeds filled with colorful plants. He would imagine himself, ten years in the future, living there and maintaining the land. Everyone that drove by would look upon it admiringly, he was sure.

Mr. Johnson, having just turned 80 last August during what was "likely his last Summer"—the label the old man himself ominously dubbed the season twice in conversation with Ralph's mother—asked for the boy's help with cleaning his yard. Though Ralph didn't want to, he thought the hours of raking were well worth the ten bucks he was offered on his last day of the job. That is, until his mother turned it down for him and called it "a nice thing to *just do* for a neighbor." Without his mother with him this year, however, he was sure he could raise at least a few bucks for Jimmy.

Ralph carried his father's metal rake—"the good rake"—just high enough so that it would not scrape a rock or snag a gnarled root. He knew that if he broke even just one of the rake's spikes and his father walked within one hundred feet of the thing, he would know it. He wouldn't even have to look directly at it, either. It was as though he would smell it, the unforgettable stench of

another no-longer-perfect tool. This one, however, was called the “good rake” and he was going to protect it with his life.

Putting it down on the ground with his gloves on top of it, Ralph walked up Mr. Johnson’s old wooden staircase, skipping the middle step in one big leap. He knocked rather loudly on the door.

“Mr. Johnson? It’s me, Ralph Ferris from next door.”

There was no answer.

“I was just wondering if you wanted some help raking up this year. Not that your house looks bad or anything. I just thought maybe since I did it last year and you said I did a good job and all, that you may want my assistance again this year. And I’m happy to help, I’ve got all afternoon, even.”

The deep red door, an old slab of wood with paint chipping at each of the four corners and around the knob, opened.

“I’m here,” said Mr. Johnson.

“I remembered you always said you couldn’t hear me. That’s why I knocked so loud.”

“Well, uh. I’ve only got half the leaves as last year. You’re kind of early, you know. Still got awhile to fall.”

Ralph grew excited, seeing this as the perfect reason to come back a second day, and perhaps even earn an extra day’s pay. It was like the trees were working as his partner, he thought.

“I don’t mind, Mr. Johnson,” Ralph said. “I can do one round today, if you’d like, and then come back in a few weeks or so.”

“Alright son, as long as you’re wanting to. I’m just surprised to see you back here.”

Ralph felt his brow start to sweat and readjusted his work gloves. He hated the way they chafed his wrists, but was willing to mess with them again and again in order to have a distraction. He wished he could just get to work.

“Marie’s not with you today?” the older man asked.

“Oh, no. She’s out at the grocery store, but said I could come over as long as I’m home for dinner.”

“Alright, grab your things.”

Ralph followed Mr. Johnson through his living room and into the kitchen. It hadn’t changed much since last year’s visit, which was the first time he had ever actually been inside the place. The house was full of furniture yet gave off a feeling only best described as “empty.” Ralph noticed it last year, but still could not quite put his finger on what caused it. Everything in the living room was practical: no frills. The couch, large enough to fit three people but only holding one full-sized pillow and a blanket at that moment, was upholstered with a soft beige and blue plaid. It looked so different from his own, with a gray flannel lining that was ripped in several places from years’ worth of rounds of Cowboys between him and Lilly.

He thought more of his mom then, who still seemed mad about the couch all these years after the ripping occurred. She never brought it up directly, but instead just seemed to keep it on the top of her list of grievances, allowing it to resurface in times of frustration. Luckily for him, however, this frustration was often only between her and his father. Ralph remembered one day when he, Lilly, and their father each played sheriffs of feuding towns. They all giggled, smiled, and leapt and tumbled across the couch until their mother walked in and got teary-eyed at the sight of them. She sent the kids to their room, though Ralph stopped to listen from behind the top of the staircase.

“Why would you let them jump on that?” she asked that afternoon.

“They were just playing around, Mar,” their father said.

“But it’s my mom’s old couch. You can’t get that fabric anymore. I told you that! You know it’s important to me!”

“I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t think of it. We were just having so much fun. The kids were smiling so much and laughing. They loved it. I didn’t think to stop and tell them to get off the couch.”

“Fine,” she said, walking toward the kitchen for her cup of tea.

The memory turned blurry after that moment, though Ralph remembered there being a jar on the dining room table the next morning labeled “New Couch,” and a five-dollar bill being inside. It still sat in the very same spot, holding close to what he would estimate to be about \$200 inside. Sometimes, when their dad would slip and say a bad word—something he did quite infrequently—his mom would smile a bit and say, “Oh! Dollar in the Couch Jar!” before going on about why he made such a poor vocabulary choice.

Photographs lined one of Mr. Johnson’s hallway walls connecting the living room and kitchen. A woman, soldiers, and pictures of the home itself were there primary contents. Mr. Johnson noticed Ralph looking at one of the photos, a framed black-and-white polaroid of a woman at her garden.

“Used to get plenty of tomatoes before those stinking rabbits had all those hungry babies,” he said to the boy. “You wouldn’t believe those tomatoes if you saw them, son. Bright red. Ones you’d only see in colored pictures, I swear it. Bet we would’ve won a prize for ‘em if there was one.” Mr. Johnson stepped back and looked at all of the pictures collectively.

Worried that he may stand there all day before he agreed to let him rake, Ralph pretended to clear his voice before walking toward the back door and saying, “I better get to work. You’ve got at least a day’s worth of leaves out there.”

Mr. Johnson followed the boy into the kitchen. “Bet you’re right,” he said. “Now, you get tired you just come on in for a drink, okay? Don’t go working yourself too hard.”

“I’m happy to get them all, Mr. Johnson.”

A frozen Salisbury steak dinner sat out on the kitchen counter defrosting, its condensation silently dripping onto a plate that read “Married 25 May 1934” around the rim. Ralph raked more ferociously than he ever had before, working up a sweat that stuck to his forehead beneath his brunette bangs and flannel jacket. After an hour and a half, Ralph looked up to see Mr. Johnson, who gave a wave, before searching for a leaf pile that would require him to turn his back toward the home. He thought of just how hard it was to make small talk with someone who barely even knew him and was certain he did not want to go through it again. Silence was better.

“Oh no,” Ralph whispered to himself upon seeing his mother’s car pull into their driveway down the hill. He checked his watch then; it was only 5:00. Why did she have to be early *today*? He reached for the brass doorknob on Mr. Johnson’s back door quietly and slowly, being cautious not to seem rushed or frazzled. He knew that would be a dead giveaway that he was out when he shouldn’t be.

*What will I tell her if she catches me?* Ralph wondered. *“I was just riding around?”*  
*“Biking is good exercise?”*

Ralph entered calmly and glanced over at the TV the old man sat watching, seeing a black-and-white show he did not recognize. In front of the set was a little wooden table, the kind made

to move from room to room easily. He noticed the meal, a Salisbury steak, corn, and brownie all divided into separate compartments, and still in the plastic tray in which it came. Ralph thought then of all the fresh tomatoes he used to see growing in Mr. Johnson's backyard. He used to notice them each afternoon on the school bus, taking note of just how close they were to their perfectly-ready-to-pick time. Some were beautiful: spherical, red, and shining under the sun, while the heirlooms—just as delicious in taste—looked discolored, misshapen, and sometimes downright odd. He would even try to smell them as the bus drove by, taking in a whiff and hoping for even the slightest scent of fresh vines and ripe fruits. There weren't any in the yard anymore, though. Only weeds encompassed the once-lively space, their green, spreading bodies making it impossible for anything else to grow.

Ralph realized that he had been staring then and tried quickly to avert his eyes.

"It's not perfect," Mr. Johnson said, "But what's an old man like me need perfect for?"

Ralph smiled, hoping to hide both his frustration in himself as well as his discomfort.

"Jean used to do all the cooking 'round here, I'm afraid."

Ralph, who glanced out the window at the further-setting sun, began to worry. Wondering if he would get any money for Jimmy, if Lilly could stall their mother, or if they would both be grounded for a month for this attempt, he tapped his foot, accidentally displaying his own anxieties.

"Oh, I'm sorry son. I shouldn't do all this talking when you've gotta get goin.' Let me give you a little money, okay?" he asked. "And don't go saying 'you're too proud to take it' or nothing. Hard workers deserve compensation, and you've worked harder than anyone I coulda hired."

Ralph put the ten-dollar bill in his pocket.

"Thank you," he said with a nod.

“Now you get home safe, okay? You decide it’s too dark, just come right back and I’ll walk with you.”

“No need,” he told Mr. Johnson, “but thanks.”

## Chapter 6: Sick

“Ralph's home, Mom,” Lilly shouted from the front door to the kitchen in which her mom was baking fresh bread in the oven. Nothing could compare to such a heavenly smell: other food, flowers, or even the artificial scents of the candles they always used to cover up the wet hay smell of February. Lilly hated to leave at a time when the house smelled so good, but knew Ralph had the answers to many of her pressing questions.

“We're just going for a ride down the street. Be back by dinner!”

“You better be!” their mom said.

Lilly leapt out the door before her brother had a chance to put his bike down.

“Let's go,” she said.

“Where?”

“Where have you been all day?” Lilly asked, so caught up in her own worries that she had not even heard her brother's question.

“Mr. Johnson's.”

“Asking him for money?”

“*Working* for money.”

“Do you think he's going to tell Mom or Dad?”

“Johnson's not going to tell anybody. He's not a big gossip like the moms in town. He's an old man. He doesn't care.”

“How much did you make?”

“Ten bucks,” he said, pulling the bill from his jeans and handing it to his sister.

She pulled an envelope from her own pocket and stuck the bill inside. The envelope was white with a single crease right down the middle, perfectly dividing the “m” in Jimmy’s name that lay in purple colored pencil on one side. “I’m sure it’ll help.”

A mile from their home, the twins rode past the old town post office. Its paint had chipped so much that the exposed wood took up nearly as much surface area as the remnants of the sunflower-yellow shade it had once been. It was the oldest building in town, according to a sign out front. Lilly had always heard of it being haunted since she was little. It was even considered a tradition for the oldest kids in school to tell the new first-graders about the “real” ghost who hung out there and would mail a scary note to one little kid each year. Just like all the others, Lilly too fell for the rumor when she was that age. She wouldn’t even look at the post office for two years when they would drive by at night, afraid she may see a set of glowing eyes from within. She already knew she’d never try to trick other kids with the story when she was old enough, though.

Lilly felt her brother’s hand tap her wrist suddenly, causing her to shift her gaze from the once-feared window to the porch that lay at the building’s side. There stood two men talking—one quiet, the other laughing and joking—and a boy about her own age to their side. Lilly squinted her eyes and used one hand to deflect the beaming sunlight that blocked her vision. Attempting to focus her blurry vision on the young boy, she noticed then that his hand was wrapped around the wrist of the older man to his left. She knew then it was Jimmy.

While Jimmy stood tall and strong, the older man to his side had an unmistakable slouch, as if his head and shoulders were too heavy for the rest of his body to carry. His skin also looked wrong, the color and liveliness seeming to have faded away.

“His dad?” Ralph asked his sister.

“Must be.”

“He looks so sick.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I’m not making fun of him.”

“But how would you like it if someone was saying that about you?”

“Fine,” he said.

The pair watched as the man who Jimmy and his father were speaking to walked off, leaving the two alone on the porch. They sat down on a bench then, his father relaxing his body into the firm seat as Jimmy grabbed the man’s cane and leaned it against a nearby post before taking a deep breath.

Jimmy wore the same flannel shirt he had been the day Lilly met him, but he looked much sweatier today. She wondered if he had been supporting his father’s weight the whole way from their house. Why did he bother to bring him? It must’ve been exhausting for them both, she figured.

“Should we go up there?” Ralph asked.

“Why wouldn’t we?”

“Well, what if his father doesn’t want us to know about him?”

“You think it’s supposed to be a secret?”

“I don’t know. He’s not looking so healthy anyways though, maybe it would just make it worse if we came over,” Ralph said before stopping abruptly and raising his hand.

“What?” his sister asked, looking up then to realize her brother was waving directly at the two people in question.

“Guess they answered that for us,” he said, slowly starting to walk toward the pair.

“Just don’t say anything rude,” Lilly said from the side of her mouth, on which she tried to place a confident smile.

“*That* was rude to me, though,” he said, a smile still plastered on his face to appear friendly to the pair they were approaching.

“I’m nervous, sorry,” she said.

The look of fear in Jimmy’s eyes was unmistakable. He stood taller now than ever, as if he happened to be leaning against the wheel of a bike just as it had been struck by lightning: unphased yet shocked.

“Hi Jimmy,” Lilly said.

“Sir,” Ralph said, nodding to the older man, seemingly in a trance that prevented him from looking anywhere other than his eyes.

“Dad, these are my friends, Ralph and Lilly from school. They’re twins. Live up the street not too far from us.”

“Our dad is Robert Ferris, sir,” Ralph offered.

“Ralph, Lilly, this is my Dad,” Jimmy said, looking to the man for a reaction. Lifting his head to nod back, Lilly too had noticed his bright eyes. They seemed almost like they were there by mistake. How could such a sickly man have such alive eyes? They were just as blue as the river at their Aunt Kit’s house, a color neither of them had ever seen elsewhere.

“My Dad can’t talk all that much, but I’m sure he’s glad to meet you,” Jimmy said.

“Robert Ferris?” the man said at a level just above a mumble. His voice was husky, just like Ralph’s often was after a long night’s sleep with the window open when the pollen was blowing.

“Yes, sir.”

“Went to school with him when I was your age,” he said. All of the kids looked shocked to see a smile emerge on his face, and could not help but do the same thing themselves.

“Did you? Small world,” said Ralph.

“How’s he doing?” the man asked.

“Working hard,” Lilly said. “He works all day, really. Our Mom does too.”

“Farming?” he asked. “Always said he was going turn that land of his into the best farm in town.”

“He did it,” Lilly said.

“Well, you tell your Dad that George Barrow from grade school said hello, will you?”

“Of course, sir,” Ralph said with a nod.

“You look a lot like him, son,” he said to Ralph. “You’ve got the same eyes. You hear that a lot?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“And you’re beautiful just like your mama, Lilly.”

She blushed.

“Seems like he got everything he wanted,” the man said, smiling and letting out a sigh. “I’m happy for him.” Lilly could tell he hadn’t uttered the words with a resentment that certainly would have been justified. Here George was, having lost his wife and amidst a battle with cancer, only to find out that his old friend had somehow accomplished all of his own goals. How could life be so cruel? How could he still smile?

“It’s been real nice meeting you, George, but we better head out. It’s gonna be getting dark not too long from now and the first sight of sunset puts our Mom on red-alert,” said Ralph.

“As she should be,” George said. “You two seem like a couple of real troublemakers.”

Ralph held out his hand to the man. “Goodnight, sir.”

“Goodnight, kids. You’ll forgive me, but it’s a bit of trouble for me to get up from sitting, and it’s quite embarrassing to have others watch. I’ll just have to say goodbye from down here.”

“That’s not a problem at all, Mr. Barrow. It’s been so nice meeting you,” said Lilly.

As Ralph and Lilly walked off the porch and back toward the street, Lilly stopped behind a bush.

“Look!” she said to her brother.

Of all the things he had thought she may be staring at in this strange hiding spot, he never expected to see a baseball going back and forth between the pair. It wasn’t exactly soaring through the air, but even George was able to work up enough energy to toss a few underhand passes to his son, who had walked only a few feet from the edge of the porch and caught every toss.

As Ralph watched the pair, Lilly watched him. They and their own dad used to toss a ball, frisbee, and even an occasional pinecone or anything else remotely round they could find in their yard on warm days. She wished they would do it again.

She could hear Jimmy laughing, even from that distance, and was glad to know there were still moments like these left to be shared with his father, despite his sickness. George was too young to lose it all.

## Chapter 7: 4:00

Sharp panic rolled through Ralph as the sound of his alarm roared out. While he was almost positive that he had never even owned an alarm clock, he knew for a fact that he had certainly not set it to go off at 4 AM.

“Get ready to go, Son,” his father whispered up the stairs just as he had finished frantically pressing each of the buttons lining the sides of the clock.

“Huh?” Ralph whispered to himself, rubbing his eyes and rising from bed. Throwing on a pair of jeans and a hoodie, Ralph questioned whether all his father had said a few nights ago at dinner was in fact happening. *Wasn't it just a threat? Dad wouldn't possibly make me go out and work at 4 in the morning, right?*

As he turned the corner at the top of the staircase, Ralph jumped at the sight of his dad, who stood staring up the flight waiting for his son.

“Ready to go?”

Ralph wiped the crust from the corner of his eyelids that he always got after a good night's sleep. “I really have to work with you? I thought you were just angry.”

His father shook his head and dropped his shoulders in defeat. “I want you to help so you learn what we do.”

“Fine,” Ralph said.

His father paused, sighed, and handed his son a bottle of water.

“It’s going to be hotter than usual out there today,” he said as he nodded toward the window. Ralph couldn’t remember the last time he had been up so early. Not only had the sun not yet made its way into the sky, but the stars were still out, and the roosters were still asleep.

After two hours of picking apples from dozens of trees, Robert called his son over to the bed of his truck.

“Hungry?” he asked the boy.

“Very,” his son replied.

“Mom made us some sandwiches last night. Eggs, bacon, and cheese.”

“I love those.”

“Me too.”

The pair sat side by side, quietly eating their breakfast sandwiches as the early-Autumn air brushed through their hair. Without having to do such hard work, Ralph realized, it could even be considered a perfect September day: sunny and warm with an ever-so-slight breeze.

“Which ones you working on out there?” Robert asked his son, nodding to the apple trees.

“McIntosh.”

“Your favorite.”

“How’d you know that?”

“You said it a few years back. That’s why your Mom and I made you that apple cake for your birthday last year.”

“I figured you were just trying to get rid of some bruised ones,” Ralph laughed.

His father pretended to be offended by the idea, letting out a gasp and shaking his head as though he was in disbelief.

That cake was one of the best he had ever had. Not only did the apples, having been baked all the way through, fall apart with each bite, but they filled the house with their fresh, warm, Autumnal smell.

“How many baskets have you collected through this morning?” he asked his dad.

“Picked or checked in?”

“What’s ‘checking in’? I thought we were just picking ‘em?”

“Well after we pick ‘em, we gotta get rid of those bruised ones and check their size before we box each type up. If they’re too small, the customers will get mad. Gotta be at least two inches across and high.”

“Well, how many baskets have you ‘picked’, then?”

“Twelve.”

“And checked?”

“I got those 12 checked, too.”

“Wow,” his son said. He looked away quickly. *How did I work up such a sweat and work so hard without even picking half of that? And I have to “check” them still?* He could feel as his cheeks grew red.

“You’ll get quicker as you go,” his dad said.

“Maybe I’m just not that great at it,” Ralph said.

“Don’t say that, son. I wasn’t fast either when I first started.”

“When was that?”

“I was older than you, even. About 14.”

Ralph’s eyes grew wide, “You didn’t have to start until you were 14?”

“*Couldn’t* start until I was 14. My Dad wouldn’t let me.”

“Why?”

“Thought a kid might ruin his business.” He chuckled. “My brother was only two years older, but our father let him start when he was 12. Said he was always ‘more mature.’”

Ralph and his father would take a bite each time the story paused, allowing them to fill the silence.

“I told myself I’d never be like him from that moment on,” Robert said.

Ralph sat quietly for a moment, looking out across the red and blue swirls that made up the sky while wondering what it was like for his Dad to grow up knowing that his own father liked his brother more than him. Sure, his Dad connected better with Lilly, Robert thought, but

even when he and his Dad would argue, he knew he didn't love his sister more than him. It had always been equal.

"What happened when you started working with your Dad?" Ralph asked.

"Fell out of a tree and broke my leg on the first day.

Ralph felt his eyes widen in an awe he could not help but hold back. Though he usually tried to seem unimpressed with his father, this time was worth showing his surprise.

"There was this apple on the very top of a tree—a McIntosh actually. You wouldn't have believed it. It was the best-looking apple I'd ever seen."

"And you went for it?"

"Thought I had to," he said. "I thought for sure it would make him proud, as if he hadn't seen a million apples just like before."

"Was he mad you fell?"

"Picked me up, marched me right in to the house and told my mother 'This is why boys aren't meant to be out working on a farm.'"

"Did you ever work with him again?"

"I did for a couple years when my brother moved out. He needed an extra pair of hands. He retired pretty soon after that though once he realized I could get more done in a day than he could in a week."

Ralph crumpled up the tin foil wrapper from his breakfast sandwich, wishing he had another. Some days, Ralph felt like he could eat three sandwiches and still be hungry. It was as if

his stomach didn't even notice he had just eaten. Aiming at the open back window of his dad's truck, he tossed the aluminum ball through it as though it were a goal, something his father used to do years ago when they and Lilly would have "picnics" on the back of the same truck.

"You remember that game?" he asked his Dad.

"Of course I do," he said, holding the rest of his own sandwich in his mouth in order to make a foil ball for himself. He aimed and closed his eyes, pretending the three-foot shot was a last-second buzzer-beater.

"You do it again," his Dad said then, tossing the ball to his son before he let it go. "It was nice to watch that memory come back."

Ralph smiled and aimed again, missing this time and hitting the brim of the window.

"Now it's ruined," his Dad said, winking at Ralph.

Ralph laughed, remembering how his Dad used to make him laugh so hard when he was first starting school that his belly would hurt. He never wanted to get on the bus those days, and always needed some convincing. Words alone couldn't do it though, so his Dad had to make faces and joke about how bored he would be until the kids got back.

"Did you talk to him after that?" Ralph asked.

"What?"

"Your dad."

"Oh," Robert said, swallowing deep and unrolling the cuffed sleeves he always pushed up when eating. "No, I didn't."

"Did I ever meet him?"

“He died before you were born.”

“And your Mom?”

“Moved into a home for a year and then died herself.”

Ralph tilted his head up toward the sky, wanting both to feel the warmth of the sun and to avoid saying the wrong thing. He watched as all of the leaves blew in the same direction from a gust of wind. His dad let out a hollow sigh.

He let the cool breeze push through his hair, enjoying the moment of relaxation. He could smell his mom’s baking all the way out there. What was that smell? He knew it but couldn’t place it. It wasn’t banana bread. Or chocolate cake. It was cranberry muffins! The smell carried perfectly down the path alongside the rolling red and brown leaves.

## Chapter 8: Giving

Hearing Ralph's feet run up the stairs after his day of work, Lilly left her spot in the living room to meet him. Though she wanted to run, as she had much to talk about, she noticed her mom out of the corner of her eye, and knew it would look suspicious. Instead, she flashed her mother a quick smile and walked up the staircase with a gait that was confident and calm, though not *too* confident or calm, as she knew her mom would be watching.

“Why don't you go back and rake some more?” Lilly asked her brother.

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“It's only been a week. Leaves don't fall that fast.”

“So, what are we supposed to do?”

“Nothing, Lil'. We'll just give him the ten we have. We didn't promise more than that.”

“He's going to be disappointed we couldn't make more.”

“We can keep trying, but I think we should at least give him what we've made so far.

Maybe he can use it to buy something for his dad.”

“Maybe we can wait until next week.”

“We can't,” he said, avoiding his sister's gaze.

“Why not?”

“Cause he's on his way here.”

“*What?*”

“I invited him. I never thought you wouldn’t be on board with giving him his money.”

Lilly did exactly what her brother didn’t want her to do: rolled her eyes, crossed her arms, and took a deep breath in—she was ready to explode, he knew. Thankfully, the doorbell rang.

“I’ve got it!” she heard her mom shout from downstairs.

The look turned from one of annoyance to that of defeat. *You’ve blown this*, her eyes said.

She knew she couldn’t make it there in time but ran toward the stairs as fast as she could anyway.

“Hello,” she heard her mother say as she opened the door and saw the stranger on her front step.

The young boy on the porch stood with his hands in his back pockets, rocking back and forth on his heels.

“Hi, ma’am. My name’s Jimmy Barrow,” he said, sticking his hand out.

“Hi honey, I’m Marie. Are you a friend of Ralph’s?”

“Yes, ma’am. And Lilly’s. Are they home? Or I can come back if it’s not a good time.”

“They’re just upstairs talking—said it was about some secret when I asked why they were acting so suspicious. You can go on up, though,” she said as she motioned toward the wooden staircase. “Maybe they’ll tell you.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Of course, honey. Would you like to stay for dinner?”

“I don’t want to impose, ma’am. That wasn’t my intention.”

“I know that. I’d love for you to stay, and we’ve got plenty of food.”

“Okay,” the boy said looking down at his shoes.

“And don’t you feel bad, okay? We’ll be happy to have you with us. Now, go make sure they’re not up to anything too bad,” she said, stepping aside to let the boy into her home.

Lilly kept her back to the wall, peering down the stairs to spot Jimmy. She watched as he walked slowly up the stairs, taking in each of the photographs that lined the wall. They were embarrassing baby pictures, for the most part, with a few scattered in of their Mom from long before they were born. Lilly watched as Jimmy stopped and looked at one of her, her brother, and her parents in front of the tree. It had always been her favorite. Ralph had said something silly that day that made them all laugh when the flash went off. She loved that it was a genuine smile from each of them, not the phony ones you usually see in pictures. She wondered why Jimmy was looking so long.

“Hey,” she whispered to the boy, surprising him. “Ralph didn’t tell me you were coming.”

“He called and said I needed to come over.”

“We have something to give you,” Ralph said.

Embarrassed but out of options, Lilly went to her room and opened the bottom drawer of the antique bureau. The envelope that kept Jimmy’s ten dollars was hidden beneath a pile of sweaters.

“We know its not much,” she said upon reentering and handing him the labeled envelope.

“Not much?” He looked at the envelope, barely opened it, and returned their gaze.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

“Uh,” Lilly let out.

“Is this because of that day with the backpack?” he said, looking to Ralph. “You told Lilly about that?”

She watched as his eyes grew quickly with surprise, only to then fall just as fast with disappointment. It was as if his eyelids and shoulders had suddenly been pulled down from tremendous weight.

“I didn’t think you knew,” he said to her. “I was just looking for lunch money. Did he tell you that?”

“Of course I did,” Ralph said. “Why would I have lied?”

“I don’t know,” Jimmy said before sitting. There was only one seat in Ralph’s room, a blue papasan chair that—other than dirty socks, old crumpled up homework, or an occasional apple core—was always empty. Both Ralph and Lilly got one for their 7<sup>th</sup> birthday, one of those “same” presents they always seemed to get each year. Lilly loved hers, however, and sat on it nearly every day to read a book. Jimmy looked so small and frail in the seat, as if only tapping into it could knock them both over.

“I can’t accept your money,” Jimmy said.

“Sure, you can,” said Ralph.

“I was just really hungry that day and we didn’t have any dinner the night before or breakfast that morning. I was desperate, and it was a stupid mistake.”

“We already believe you, Jimmy,” said Ralph.

“Please just take it,” said Lilly. “Ralph went and raked Mr. Johnson’s yard, and he wants to give you a cut. Don’t worry, he earned a lot more, so you aren’t taking it all or anything.”

She couldn’t believe her brother’s confusion when she looked up. Couldn’t he tell what she was trying to do? She shot him one of those dreadful looks, however, and he suddenly seemed to get it.

“Okay?” she asked Jimmy again.

“Are you sure?” Jimmy asked.

She nodded. “It won’t buy much, and we wanted to earn you more, but we’re having trouble thinking of ideas and not getting caught.”

“No, no,” he said, slipping the envelope in his back pocket. “This will buy us a week of food. Maybe I can even get something special for Dad’s dinner one night.”

Chicken, mashed potatoes, split peas, and a tub of caramel-colored gravy sat steaming before the group at the kitchen table that night.

“Wow,” Jimmy said upon walking in on the sight.

Marie laughed. “You must be hungry,” she said. “I never get that kind of reaction to my cooking.”

“Mom!” Lilly said. “I always compliment you.”

“I know, honey, but look at the boy,” she said as she smiled toward Jimmy. “He looks stunned.”

“I’m sorry ma’am, he said. I’m just thankful you were willing to have me as a guest tonight.”

“You are very welcome, Jimmy. Now take a seat and dive in. My husband is just getting cleaned up and said to start without him.”

Lilly sunk into her chair as her mother handed Jimmy the serving fork for the chicken, knowing the words she would utter next.

“You’re the guest Jimmy. Please go first.”

Lilly hated the pressure she knew he must be feeling and thought back to the first time she saw him in the lunchroom. Maybe he preferred eating alone.

He took a small serving before passing the fork to Ralph.

“Honey, you can take three times as much as that,” Marie said.

“*Mom*,” Lilly said as she rolled her eyes. “Only take as much as you want, Jimmy.”

“Thank you both,” he said, sending them each a shy smile. “What does your husband do?” he asked Marie. Lilly wondered if he actually wanted to know or if he was just hoping to steer the conversation—and everyone’s eyes—away from him.

“He’s in charge of this whole crazy apple operation,” she said, motioning her hands through the air around her as if the house itself was insulated with apple cores. “I’m sure the kids have told you loads about the farm though, so I don’t want to bore you or ruffle any feathers.” Lilly was fairly sure this comment was directed to her after cutting into the conversation to help Jimmy.

“Well, I’m actually pretty new to town, so I don’t know much about all that goes on.”

“Where are you from?” their mother asked then.

Lilly felt herself sinking further now. If her mom kept asking questions, she would find Jimmy out in no time. Ever since she and Ralph were little, she seemed to use some sort of magic power to find out anything she needed to know from them, even secrets they didn't know they had. Maybe now, Lilly figured, she would use it to find out that Jimmy was in a much worse situation than just his appearance would let on.

“Mom,” she said. “Can you please just let him eat?”

“Don't mind me,” her mother said in response, letting out a long and exaggerated sigh simply to be dramatic.

“Mind what exactly? “their Dad said as he entered the room.

They each turned to see Robert as he walked in the kitchen, kissed his wife on the top of the head, and sat in his seat at the far end of the table.

“Oh, nothing sir. I'm Jimmy Barrow, by the way.”

“Barrow? Are you related to George?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. I'm his son,” said Jimmy.

“Well, what do you know? That's incredible. How's your old man doing?”

Lilly could tell from his roaming eyes that Jimmy was trying to collect what he should say next.

“Dad,” said Lilly, shaking her head.

“No, it's okay,” Jimmy told Lilly. “He's pretty sick. Been like that for a while now.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that. He was always a good friend back to me.”

“He’d love to see you, if you’re ever around. I understand if you’d rather not though. A lot of people haven’t wanted to see him since he got sick. They say it’s ‘too hard.’”

“Just to see him?”

“Guess so,” said Jimmy.

“That’s a shame.”

They all sat quietly for a moment, moving their food across their plates but not actually eating it.

“I’d love to come see him, son,” he said. “Long as the offer still stands after you check it with him.”

Jimmy’s eyes lit up. “I’ll check right away.”

He took a big bite of his mashed potatoes, smiling as he chewed. Lilly watched as his shoulders dropped and he prepared another forkful. She took a bite of potatoes herself then. They were delicious, she agreed, but it was almost as though he could experience them on another level that she could never reach. How long had it been since he had a good meal?

Earlier that day, after Ralph told her they were going to give Jimmy only ten dollars, she tried to calculate a meal plan for Jimmy and his father. She had gone to the grocery store so many times with her own mother that she knew everything’s price. By the time she was eight, she could even predict the total amount of all her mom had picked out within five dollars before they had even reached the cash register. Though her mom gave her a lollipop each time she got it right, she was much happier just to see the impressed look on her face.

This skill certainly came in handy earlier that morning. While the rest of the class was reviewing how to add four-digit numbers, Lilly sat and multiplied the prices of boxed meals by three, four, or five days of the week over and over. No matter how hard she tried, though, she could not seem to come up with a way for Jimmy and his dad to possibly afford three meals a day for a whole week with only ten dollars to spend.

She would cut one thing, though it was by no means a luxury, before cutting another, another, and another. Ultimately, though, she couldn't get both a low cost and high amount of healthy food.

Lilly watched as Jimmy's eyes grew wide again before he brought his hand to his seat and felt in his back pocket. Looking at her with nothing short of total fear, she knew what it meant.

"Looking for this?"

She couldn't believe the words as they came from her father's mouth. Nor could she believe it when he placed an envelope—Jimmy's name written clearly across it in purple colored pencil—on the table before the group.

"Found it on the ground in the hall with money sticking out. Plus, it looks like Lilly's writing.."

"Oh," Lilly whispered.

"Anyone want to tell me what it's for?" he asked.

Lilly looked to her brother, who looked back to her before looking at Jimmy. Jimmy, in return, looked to Ralph. She knew he wouldn't say anything, though. He would sit in silence for five minutes if he needed to.

"We," she muttered, "Ralph and I..."

Ralph rolled his eyes at the inclusion of his name.

"You...?" their father prompted.

"We were just letting Jimmy borrow a few dollars. To buy something for his Dad."

"Ten dollars is an awful lot for a gift, isn't it?" he asked his daughter.

"Well, yeah," she said. "But it's important, and we wanted to help."

"It's honest stuff," Ralph said.

"Well, I wouldn't have assumed otherwise, if you hadn't said that," their father said.

"Where'd you get it?"

"I saved it from my last birthday," said Ralph.

Lilly was amazed by how quickly and smoothly he was able to come up with the lie, not having even batted an eyelash in the ordeal. She wondered if he had been practicing just in case this happened and wished he would have recommended she do the same. They could've worked out a big speech like they always did whenever they had anything important to tell their parents.

"You mind if I ask what you're buying your Dad?" Robert asked Jimmy.

The boy stood silent, obviously having not rehearsed for this scenario either.

*What if he blows it? Would he get taken away?* She ran through all the things she could say to protect him: *His Dad needs him. We can give him food. He's just a kid.*

“Just a nice dinner,” said Ralph.

“I’m sure he isn’t looking for you to spend your own money on something for him, son. I know it’s the twins’ money, but if you were borrowing it, you would’ve had to pay them back, and that wouldn’t have been what he’d want.”

“You’re right, sir. I’m sorry,” Jimmy said.

Lilly felt her face grow warm and time grow slow as her father looked at her. His eyes could always see right through her and straight into any inconsistency.

“What aren’t you telling me, Lil’?” he asked.

She looked down at her peas, swirling them around her plate as she often did with her meals as a distraction. She wished they too could leave a golden trail to show where they had been.

“Lil’” he said again, snapping her back to the moment.

“Sir,” Jimmy spoke up. “They’re only trying to help me. Ralph saw me looking in someone’s bookbag to try to find a dollar for lunch money. It was so stupid and I regret it, but I did it and I shouldn’t have.”

“So you were the one with the bookbag,” he said.

“What bookbag?” their mother chimed in, unaware that her husband was privy to information unknown to her.

Robert paused, recognizing he had let out a bit too much information. “So what’s the ten dollars for, then?” he asked Jimmy in an effort to get things back on track.

“They wanted to help me. They gave me the money so I could try to afford to feed my Dad and I for a little while. I didn’t ask or anything, but they were doing it to help me.”

“I see.”

“It’s my fault and I apologize.”

“It’s not your fault, son,” Robert said before standing up and walking to the window. He looked out over the dozens of apple trees, their red and yellow fruits shining in the setting sun, but Lilly knew his thoughts were in a place far beyond what he could see.

“Your father,” he started. “He isn’t making any money?”

“No, sir. He can’t work.”

“Can’t work?” he asked. “Just how sick is he?”

“Cancer, sir. He might not have a chance to get better.”

“Is he getting treatment?”

“Not always. Sometimes he’s in too much pain to make it all the way to the bus stop.”

“And you’re not eating?”

“Usually we get by. Just once every so often I’ve got to skip a meal. It’s okay though.”

“Does your dad realize that?”

“I don’t think so. He still eats the same, and I tell him I do, too, that I just found more food I had saved up and forgotten about.”

“Honey, you can’t do that to yourself,” Marie said.

Only then did Lilly notice that her mother had already removed herself from the table and started packing up the leftovers for the boy.

“It’s okay, Ms. Marie.”

“No, no. We want to help,” said Robert.

All three kids looked to each other, then to Robert.

She watched as her father walked back toward the window and leaned against the bright white trim, peering outside as if searching the orchard for a sign. From her seat at the table, she too could see the orchard. It was the same one she had known since she was a baby. There was *the* tree, the barn, and the pickup, but it all seemed so different this time. The still-green leaves were blowing ever so gently, holding onto the branches that were too afraid to let them go. Soon they would be vibrant and ready to fall. Until then, however, for a time, the trees would hold them fast, and they would all be safe.