

PROLOGUE

“Anything to drink, sir? Maybe an iced-”

“No.” The man had a grim, annoyed expression on his face. Raising his head, topped with thinning, gray hair, he glanced quickly at her before returning his gaze to the smooth wooden table. “I’m just waiting on someone.”

The waitress was taken aback at his rudeness. Around her, the clinking of silverware and chattering voices said that none of the other people dining had noticed. Standing in a typical, smooth outfit, she held a small notepad and pen. Similarly dressed waiters and waitresses were all standing about the diner, taking orders. Composing herself, she again tried to extract an order.

“Well, while you wait, could I help you to a pastry? For today only, you can get a-”

“I’m just fine, thank you,” he cut in with a clear, back-off attitude. His tone of voice and the threatening scars from old age weathered onto his face, convinced her to leave without any remarks. After one last huff of frustration, she gave him a piercing gaze and made a rude gesture with her hand.

Turning her back, the waitress stormed away, towards another employee so she could complain. Most mornings like this, when the sun was bright, shining through a cloudless sky, the customers were kind and carefree. Lots of them were elderly folks, coming in for their morning coffee and talking with friends; a few were younger and ate more, occasionally tipping extra too. These were particular favorites of the waitresses, although the older folks held their own unique charm.

This man, dressed in a wrinkled, half-buttoned shirt that drooped from his shoulders and jeans that had been packed in a suitcase too long, was different. His face grave and hands shaky, he refused to talk with anyone. Instead, he sat in solemn silence, staring out of the window.

Strangers passed by, and he saw them, but at the same time did not. What occurred around him was of no interest or importance; he looked only to the future, and with a wary gaze, uncertain and nervous. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he sat rigid and resigned to his fate.

“That man hasn’t moved in nearly half an hour,” one older lady named Beth said to her friend. With a prolonged nod in his direction, she convinced her crossword-solving companion to look up rather reluctantly from the daily puzzle in the newspaper.

“Are you certain?” she asked with a mindless, bored sort of voice. Moving the white hair back from her forehead, she stared for a moment, taking in everything she could see about the man, before deciding he was not worth her time.

“Quite. He’s hardly even blinked since he took a seat.”

“Why didn’t the girl wait on him?” said the friend in a bored tone, hoping to appease her friend’s curiosity. Returning to her crossword puzzle with a yawn, she began to scribble a word into the blank squares.

“She did; the man told her off,” Beth answered, not taking her eyes off the man. Sipping her early morning coffee, she stared at him for a while longer, wondering to herself why on earth someone would choose to sit inside on a beautiful day like this.

At that moment, he turned to face her. With a devilish smile, in one quick instant, he winked. Ten minutes later, the two ladies were gone, after tipping the waiter with shaky hands and leaving a half-empty coffee cup behind, along with the crossword puzzle.

Without peering around at the other people in the restaurant, the man stood up and crossed to that table, grabbing the newspaper and finding a pen in his pocket. Sitting back down at his original table, he set to work on the crossword puzzle. He was quite adept at solving puzzles, now that his whole life had become one.

Why was he inside on such a lovely day? It was a good question. He could have been outside; walking in Pine Tree Park would be comfortable

and pleasant on a midday like this. In fact, Hardy was chock-full of interesting places to be and unique things to see. Being a small town with only a handful of bustling streets at its center, odd sights were bound to pop out at you, whether you went searching for them or not.

There was the handful of flea markets on the corner of Market Street and 1st Street. Lots of trinkets and toys could be found in the shady corners of that place, hidden for years and forgotten. The cashiers and, at times, customers were just as interesting, both drawing you near to them and frightening you away. Hardly ever as sinister as they appear, they are still people you do not want to catch you gawking at them, so let's move along before they catch our eyes. Who knows what terrible things could go on in these shady corners.

First, Second, and so on streets ran vertically, while Main Street and a handful of others were horizontal, forming a neat-looking town, where every block was shaped in a square. This was the typical structure of roads for small river towns, like Hardy, and only a short drive away Marcy was the same way, with streets at intersecting at neat, right angles.

Just past Market Street, the northernmost road in that bundle of criss-crossed streets, there were the many fields. Corn and soybeans were the biggest crops; soybeans to the north and corn to the west. If you followed Highway 62, which ran through the center of Hardy, you would see all of these fields, until you drove down into the center of town and turned. There you would arrive onto Main Street, and, following it, would meet the corner of Fourth.

This particular intersection was not the busiest, but still far from empty. People hustled about at that corner, doing whatever they did and staring at whatever they saw. There would be a diner at this corner, with a handful of these people inside, and the number growing larger every minute. Inside the crowded building, at a table in the center, facing the street, would be two men.

The stranger stood there, looking quite relaxed compared to the man seated. “Good morning, Steven.”

“I’ve been waiting for over an hour, and I don’t even want to be here. I can’t believe you’d bring me back here, or keep me waiting for such a long time.” Despite his defiant voice, the seated man kept contorting his face, trying to appear more relaxed, but only looking uncomfortable

He had his palms clasped in his lap, trying to still his shaking fingers. Sweat trickled down the back of his gray-haired head, rippling down the inside of his shirt, where the fabric swallowed it. Steven had spent the last half an hour working on an impossible crossword puzzle, before ripping it to shreds in his frustration.

Since then, many customers had come and gone, leaving him alone, still watching, still sitting, and wishing he had kept the crossword puzzle. Brash decisions seemed to be his downfall; coming back to this town proved that.

Now, he had a companion. Familiar, loathed, and a former friend, the man wearing a black coat was an aberration he wanted to leave behind in the past.

“Wow, I really feel the friendship rekindling.” His companion chuckled. “You’ll hardly even glance at me.”

This companion sat down, appearing comfortable. He knew things this older, rude man did not, and would not, want to know. That fact gave him power and confidence.

A hat was pulled low over his -the companion’s- face, blocking his eyes from view. Wearing a dark coat, even though the temperature outside recommended a t-shirt, he sipped on a cup of bitter tea and focused on the man across from him, who was sweating nervously and wiping his forehead with a napkin that same waitress had given him with a growl.

“How are you, Steven?” the stranger asked calmly when the first man did not answer.

“Better before you sat down.” Steven placed a hand on the table, where it shook with such violence his partner’s teacup rattled.

“Oh, come now. What way is that to talk to an old friend?” The stranger ignored the sweat-beaded face across from him and smiled in a casual, relaxed way.

“That was a long time ago. Old friend or not, I don’t wanna get into this business.”

“But you don’t even know what happened, Steven.” The stranger said it as if whatever Steven had missed was something crucial. “You’ve been-”

“Out west, yeah. It’s *your* fault I was sent out there. And I know enough of what happened to want out. This isn’t good business, and I’d rather be alive still come Christmas-time.”

The stranger sipped his bitter tea through pursed lips. “Wouldn’t we all.”

“Why did you want to meet me, anyways? They’re done now; won’t happen again for twenty years. You missed your chance this time. She’s gone,” said Steven, his hands still shaking despite the rough bravado in his voice.

With the dark coat crumpling at his movements, the stranger shook his head with a sober expression and placed the tea cup on the table. “They’re not done for me, Steven.”

“What do you mean?”

The man with the dark coat folded his elbows. “Would you like to hear a story? The *entire* story? It’s really quite something ... ”

“No, I don’t. I want answers,” said Stephen. He gave the other man a stern gaze. “So give them to me, or I’m leaving.”

“You can only get the answers you asked for in the story.”

“Just summarize it!”

“You can’t summarize the story.”

“You know what I think of your story?”

The stranger grinned. “I know exactly what you think, but it changes nothing. Story, or no story?”

“Fine,” said Stephen, leaning back in his chair with a glaring expression. “Tell me the story. What’s it about?”

“It’s the story you never finished. The story you left in this town. About what happened, right here, not so long ago as you might think. I suppose in some ways the town held the story, but it is really more right to say that the story was the town, is the town, and always will be.”

1. JUVENILES

“She was watching us, back then.

“I should have known it much sooner, but I guess that is my fault and not of your concern. Not recognizing it for what it was led to pain, and lots of it. Many people lost children to her; I suppose that if I went back in the history books and counted I could give you the exact number, but what use would that be? The only useful fact you can know, before I begin my story, is that she was always watching.

“For all I know, she still is.

“This whole disaster started right here, in Hardy. Such a sweet little town, really, if you look at it on a map, or even if you walking through it. But that just goes to prove that any town, any person, any *thing* for that matter, can be haunted. Or evil. Or the source of evil. After all, if even a little town like Hardy, Indiana could be haunted, way out here away from the bright lights and drama of the big cities, then is anywhere safe?

“I’m still getting ahead of myself, though, and I’m sorry for that. I suppose this story doesn’t even start with me, honestly. No, the story starts a long, long time ago, way back in 1775, but you’ll learn that soon enough if you listen. The part I’m going to tell, and the part *only* I can tell, starts not long, back in 1995. How many years ago was that from now? Twenty, I think? Anyways, that’s when it starts, all this nasty business I’m going to tell you about.

“It started back then, with some kids; four of them, I think. Yes, there were four. The twins, first of all. Crystal and Christian Moore were their names, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen such cooperative siblings in all my fifty years of life. Sure, they had their fights, and they had their moments when, just like any teenage siblings, they bickered over who-knows-what, but altogether, I think they were fine people and even finer siblings. They both had the same dirty blonde hair, too, although

Christian's was cut real short and hers was down a little below her shoulders.

"Crystal Moore was the only girl in this particular group of kids, but she fit in just as well as the boys. She was very passionate at times, as I might point out many times in my narrative, but that's not all. She kept those boys in line, or at least that's my opinion, and you could never find a better friend. Nowadays, she'd probably get made fun of for being a 'tomboy' or something like that, but back then, in that group of friends, she meant the world to each of those boys, in different ways, of course, one of them being her brother and all. The other two were attracted to her, at least a little, and I'm not surprised; to them she was the most beautiful girl ever.

"While she was quite talented when it came to sports, especially volleyball, her brother, Christian, was about the exact opposite. He would be considered a 'nerd' nowadays, though whether or not that's a good thing, I'm still not sure. Even back then, his glasses got made fun of; big, chunky things that they were, always slipping off his nose. But he was quite a smart boy, with lots of good manners and good posture his mom probably taught him. There really isn't much to say about him, though, because he never said much to me. The other I knew fairly well, for one reason or another, but Christian... He was an anomaly, and a puzzle I just couldn't understand. But that's that.

"Anyways, as I said, Crystal was the best friend you could ever find, and Christian was the same way. It seemed as if nothing could possibly split up that group of kids until... well, you'll have to listen a bit more. I can't say yet. You've got to understand but you hear.

"Now, for the other two. I won't tell you as much about them; you'll hear all of that in the story for yourself. First off, there was Brandon Gray. He was the kid who started it all, or to whom it all started. Yeah, that's a better way of putting it, because nobody would ever choose the things that happened to him and his best friend.

“Brandon was black, to put it plain and simple, and in 1995 Hardy, that was sadly unusual. I heard when he moved up here he and his parents had quite the accent from down south, but by the time I met him that was gone. His family has a strong heritage of African-American, and the determination was not lost in him. Brandon was also funny, I gotta give him that. Always quick to cause laughter and even quicker to join it, he was the life and soul of the group, keeping things from getting too dark when they altogether could have gone downhill real fast and real easy. He was never afraid to be the butt of anybody’s jokes, but away from his friends, he was a totally different character. When he was around strangers, Brandon wasn’t nearly as outgoing. He was quiet, resigned, and thoughtful. I still don’t understand him, to be honest, and I’m not certain I ever will. If I only I knew where he was at nowadays. I think his bipolar character all had something to do with his family, though, ‘cause his dad was pretty strict, and I imagine getting away with his friends felt like some type of dream-life. He once told me he wanted to grow his hair out a bit, but his dad would never allow it. He said... well, never mind; on to Michael.

“Michael Walker... now there’s a name I haven’t spoken in a good while. He was the youngest of the group, fourteen in the midst of fifteen year-olds, but that didn’t stop him. Maybe just a tad on the short side, he was about the same height as Brandon, although with that spiked up, messy hair he seemed to be taller. He and Brandon had been best friends for god-knows how long. They were inseparable, and as familiar with the town as anybody could be. Even though they were different races, different ages, and in different stages of life, they both had the biggest hearts I’ve ever seen. They cared about people, and protected people they cared about. It was that simple. Michael is different though; well, *was* different. He always had this air about him, like he was in control and knew it. It wasn’t a bad type of thing, though, because he was humble enough to relinquish control and smart enough to know when he was wrong. The thing was, he

could have been in control, and I mean total, dictatorship control. But he didn't. He didn't beg for attention and fight for it, and he didn't fantasize too much or get downtrodden too low. He didn't fight unless necessary, and he didn't want the whole world to belong to him. Michael was a stand-up guy, even as a teenager, and never let his emotions control him. Well, almost never. Like anyone, there were moments, but he hid them pretty well. I'll never know all the thoughts he had but didn't show.

"Speaking of emotions, he always had this thing for Crystal, and I suspect she had some feelings his way too, but they could never be proven because... well, I'll get to that part later on.

"The important thing, as I said before, is to remember that Michael was the leader; he was the man. Him and Brandon were best friends for their whole lives; I think that's what they told me. But even Michael, as powerful as he was, and Brandon, as determined as he was, and Crystal, as hotheaded as she was, and Christian, as brilliant as he was, never understood the full story. They never quite got the gist.

"But I did, many years later, and I take no pride in admitting it. Quite the contrary, I believe if they had the chance, they would have understood much sooner than me, because I was narrow-minded and cold towards anything uncomfortable and unnatural. At the beginning, I never intended to help much, but then I got entangled in their lives, and I feel responsible for what happened now, with as much knowledge that I have gained.

"I understood later, and I understand now. She watches all. She always has. As I said, my part of the story begins back in 1995, when phones still had those funky-looking antennas on them and you could still get gas for under two dollars, not that you needed to drive many places in Hardy.

"This is all started with those four kids, and I guess in some ways it ended with them too. This is the story of... the story of She. Yes, that's the name we gave her. Improper, sure, but I'll stick with it, for old time's

SHE

sake. Everything happened back when I was just a thirty year-old police officer and they were just four young kids surviving the last week of school...”

2. ELEPHANTS

“Bubby, Bubby, look!” Lilly shrieked.

Michael turned around, facing the store shelf full of stuffed animals. He groaned, imagining the herds of stuffed animals she already had in the room. As she opened her mouth wide to yell again, he put a finger over his lips, and she shrank her voice to a tiny whisper.

“Can we get it? *Please?*”

There was no denying; she was very cute, even for a little six-year-old. Everyone in the town said so, sometimes to her face. Depending on who it was, she would cower behind Michael, or relish the compliment, smiling wide and showing her best side. She was adorable, with red curls falling like a waterfall just past her neck and a face which seemed to be dotted with two tiny dimples permanently. The truth was Lilly constantly smiled, always finding a reason to, no matter the weather or time of day. She was not just a morning-person; she was an all-day, every-day person, and it wore Michael out, but he put up with it willingly and loved her all the same.

Ever since their mother had gotten pregnant with Lilly (and nowadays Michael wondered about that a lot, having had no father in his home), Michael took on a special responsibility, keeping the house in order when his mother could not, even though he was not quite double-digits in his age. When Lilly was born, the two of them immediately bonded while his mother worked odd shifts and scrapped together any cash she could.

As busy as she was, by the time Michael was ten he had changed more diapers than some dads in the neighborhood. Many sleepless nights were spent on his part, rocking Lilly to sleep as she lay there, those red curls swept back and mouth slightly agape. His mother would crash on the couch, and wake up early to go work someplace new. All the while, Michael took care of his loveable sister.

She grew up even while he did, and learned that her “Bubby” would always be there for her. While Michael grew to a be a hard-working,

humble young man, she grew into a little princess, occasionally showing the snappy attitude that often accompanies the post-toddler years.

Despite all of their faults and oddities, the Walker family, only three-people large, enjoyed a happy life, unaffected by the problems and worries of big-city folks. They lived together, in one unbreakable bond, and that was just the way Michael liked it. He would not trade his family for all the power in the world.

“Um, maybe. How much is it?”

Lilly looked at him in surprise. She never thought to wonder how much it would cost. Such a pretty, pink elephant should be given away for free, never costing anyone anything. “Well, not much,” she said, hoping he would not notice the mischievous smirk she failed to hide.

“That smile says different, little lady.” He grinned, digging through his wallet until he found a twenty dollar bill and some random change. “Here, lemme see it.”

He checked the price tag and looked down at her with an exhausted gaze. She saw the look of disbelief, and hurriedly said, “Grace has one and it’s really, really soft *and* pink!”

Grace was her best friend, and Brandon’s younger sister. Brandon, his best friend for many years, lived up in Hardy, only a few streets away. Their families had been great friends since they both moved here years ago.

“Well, we can’t get ice cream if we buy this,” he warned, hoping it would change her mind. Ice cream sounded good on a hot day like it was.

She thought intently, scrunching her eyebrows together, before answering, “I choose... Pinky.”

“His name’s Pinky?”

“*Her* name’s Pinky. ‘Cause she’s pink, see?” Lilly stuck the elephant up as high as she could.

Michael lifted her by the arms and carried her on his hip over to the counter. *She’s getting too big*, he thought with a chuckle. They went over

to stand in line, waiting for the handful of customers to buy their toys from the kid's shop.

Everything seemed to be bright, rainbow colors in this strange world. Every inch had a toy, and every toy had a price tag stuck to it. A small train-track on a table stood farther back, where Michael had spent many days when he was younger and his mother came here to shop for children's toys and clothes.

"Excuse me," a voice said from his immediate right.

He looked over and saw a slightly hunch-backed, gray-haired woman, whose lips were squirming back in a smile, drawing wrinkled skin along with them. Her eyes were empty and entirely black, it seemed, like small, shaded pebbles. Maybe that was just the light's reflection. He hoped so.

"Can I help you?" asked Michael with a shaking voice.

"Kind sir, I'd like to know the name of your sister there. She is such a cutie." For extra emphasis, the old lady pinched his sister's cheeks. Lilly just smiled and buried her face in Michael's shoulder, escaping the sharp fingernails of the lady but enjoying the attention nonetheless.

"Um, I'm sorry, but I'm not allowed to tell you. I don't really... know you." He took a slight step back.

"Oh, but I know *you*. Yes, I do. So please just tell me; I mean no harm."

"I can't," he said with a forceful tone. He felt Lilly giggle and looked down, asking, "What's funny?"

She kept laughing quietly, and the lady smiled even wider. "What a wonderful little girl."

Michael said, "I need to go now." His heart-beat was speeding up, and the line seemed to be moving at an agonizing pace. He began to turn around, facing the line.

The lady stretched out one clammy hand and grabbed his shoulder, with fingernails slicing into his skin. He winced and turned back, as she said menacingly, "Tell me." All hints of pleasantries were gone now; she

glared at him as if her eyes alone could torture their way into his mind and extract the truth.

“I’m sorry,” he said, shaking his head. Shrugging her claw-like hand off, he put his back to her. The line was gone now. Stepping up to the counter, he placed the elephant down and turned around to tell the lady to go away, but she was gone just like that.

Mouth slightly agape, he asked the balding man at the counter, “Where’d she go?” His wide eyes were still searching; she had to be hiding just out of sight.

“Who, son?”

“That lady back there; where’d she go?”

The cashier looked at him with lowered eyebrows. “I can’t say who you mean.”

“There was an old lady and she talked to me.”

“It’s ringing up an item and didn’t see ‘er. What’d she say?” he asked while shoving the elephant into a white plastic bag.

“Asked for my sister’s name,” Michael answered. He was still peering around the store, certain she was lurking behind some shelf, waiting to catch him off guard.

“Don’t know, son. Be careful, ‘ey? There’s some weird folks out ‘ere.”

Michael nodded, thanking the cashier, and took the bag. While he walked out of the store, he looked over his shoulder one more time, and saw nothing unusual. The worried-looking man, who scratched at his frizzled, unkempt beard, was now helping another customer. Others perused the shelves, often bargaining with their children on what they wanted. There was no lady lurking, and no uncomfortable strangers staring.

“Who was she?” Lilly asked when he put her down outside, a bit reluctant to let her go still. That woman had shaken his nerves to the core.

“Nobody,” he said. “Probably won’t even see her again.”

“Okay, Bubby. Can we go to the river?”

“No, let’s just go swing.”

“Oh! Okay!”

They walked along the busiest street in Marcy, with shops on all sides and a small playground just ahead. After browsing through the windows for about ten minutes as they made their way closer, Lilly took off running to the swingset and Michael followed at a walk. She loved these swings, and any swing she could get her hands on. The entire afternoon would be spent pushing her back and forth, unless their mother came to pick them up after shopping or Lilly collapsed from laughing so much.

Back and forth, back and forth; the swing flew to the front, before cascading towards the back. Her hair flew in the opposite direction, sometimes running over her face like a red, dazzling tapestry, other times whipping out behind her like a cape and hitting Michael in the eyes. Lilly laughed the entire time, every once in a while almost falling off, before regaining her balance.

Michael sputtered and said, “Ugh, you got your hair in my mouth.”

“It wasn’t me!” she hollered between bursts of giggles. She had almost as much giggles as smiles throughout the day. “Look at me!” she cried out in joy.

Across the street, standing in a musky alleyway, leaning against the wall, stood a lady with a very wrinkled face and light, gray hair. A hood was draped over her head, concealing her in shadows. She heard the little girl cry out, saw the older brother pushing her, and said in a whisper, “Look at you; look at you, my darling.”

She saw their mother pull up in a small car with crumpled bumpers, and a long scrape along the side. Their mother called out something, and after one last, big push and swing, they piled into the car in a hurry, the little girl climbing in the back where grocery bags were visible. In the rearview mirror, she could just make out the older boy laughing, until his eyes saw the mirror and, in the reflection, saw her.

With one quick movement, she pointed towards them with a single, gnarled finger. Then she turned and disappeared into the dark.

Inside the car, Michael gasped quietly, goosebumps pimpling his arms. Lilly was saying something to his mother, and in a moment he felt his mom tap him nervously on the shoulder while they waited for traffic to pass on the main street.

“Who’s this woman Lilly said you met?”

Michael stared into the rearview mirror still, wondering where she had gone. With a shaky voice, he answered, “Nobody, mom. Probably just a lonely old woman.”

“She asked for my name,” said Lilly a little proudly. Her small, feeble fingers twisted the elephant’s pink ears as she toyed with the cuddly object, not realizing she was doing so.

Michael’s mom addressed him now. “Did you tell her?”

“No; she gave me the creeps,” answered Michael.

His mother nodded and said, “Good. There’s some weird people out there.”

Michael did not say it out loud, but thought to himself, *Sometimes they’re not so far “out there” after all.*

3. RELATIONS

“I don’t know why, but the last few weeks of school always take forever to go by,” said Michael, looking out of the smudged window beside their booth as numerous cars passed. Rumbling down Main Street, they were an earthquake of noise on the road outside the small restaurant.

“You have no idea.” Brandon smirked behind a hand. “To those of us who don’t sleep through math class, it seems a whole lot longer.”

He did not turn his head to see Michael beside him, but stared straight ahead. Across the four-seating table, in a more dilapidated booth bench, were his other best friends, Christian and Crystal.

Few people were in the restaurant now, since it was at that time of day between lunch and dinner where nobody eats at restaurant. These four made all of the noise, talking none-too-quietly amongst themselves.

Sipping on his milkshake, Christian glanced towards Michael, wondering what he would say to Brandon’s accusation.

“I don’t sleep in math class.” Michael shook his head to emphasise the point. “And my grades are higher than yours!”

“The drool stains on your paper are bigger, too. If you’re gonna sleep, you gotta get rid of the evidence,” Brandon said, wagging his finger like he had seen his mother do.

“You look like my mom,” said Christian with a wide smile, the glasses falling off of his nose. Crystal laughed, throwing her head back, sending smooth, dirty blonde hair flying.

“Maybe I am your mom, lil’ boy,” Brandon said.

“That’s not actually possible-”

Ignoring Christian, Brandon went on in a mock-motherly tone. “Christian, Christian; oh, please do come get your clothes from the clothesline! I wouldn’t want all of Hardy to see your underwear from last night; wetting the bed leaves such awful stains.”

Christian shot a spit ball at him through the straw of his milkshake, smacking him soundlessly on the lips. Brandon choked, filling the entire restaurant with the noise. This increased the laughter he eventually joined, while the few people eating in the restaurant stared at the noisy teenagers gathered together.

They all looked around for Mrs. Moore, hoping to avoid her stern gaze. Christian and Crystal's mother worked there as a waitress, so most days she would take Michael and Brandon to their homes after her shift ended. Both of them had little sisters, Grace Gray and Lilly Walker, but they were in the half-day kindergarten class, so Mrs. Gray took them earlier in the day. The four freshman spent every early afternoon waiting for Mrs. Moore's shift to be over, unless she made them leave the restaurant because they were too loud.

Mr. Moore was a traveling man, often driving back and forth between Hardy, where they lived, Marcy, the town a few minutes away where their mother worked and the children all went to school, and Indianapolis, the state capital where his office was. Normally, he would come home for the weekend, tired and stressed, but always made time for his kids. Dinner on those weekends was fantastic, when their mother made the best possible meals they could afford and everyone sat down to hear what new stories The Traveling Mr. Moore, as he called himself when telling stories, had to tell them.

Stories he told were different from any they heard at school or from friends; these were stories of the city. Lots of traffic everywhere, a combination of nasty smells and good ones, very influential and very corrupt politics; these were what he told them about, but not directly. No, in his stories, everyone had good inside of them, whether they used it or not. There was hate and crime and manipulation, sure, but there was also love and friendship and pride in hard work. "That's what important, kids," he had said one night. "No matter what happens, keep working hard and keep with your friends. That'll get you through life just fine."

The Moore twins certainly did work hard; there was no doubt about that. Christian was top of his grade at school, and by a good amount. And Crystal, despite the carefree, teenage attitude she shared with Brandon and Michael, had serious plans for the future, wanting to become a nurse and maybe work in a large, important hospital. When they first met, Brandon teased her about it, but since then her dreams to become a nurse, even without knowing the first thing about medicine, looked very probable compared to his dreams of becoming a Nascar driver. All considered, the Moore twins had a splendid life.

Things were not quite as cheery at Michael's or even Brandon's house. At the latter's home, his parents were together, yes, but were very strict. Most people assume having only one sibling means lots of free time, free money, and freedom, but that is not always true, and it certainly was not for Brandon.

If you had asked Brandon what religion his parents were, he would have said, "They're Baptists, alright, but the really strict kind that won't let you have any fun, and if you laugh during church you get a dirty look from the man preaching, right there and then, if not a smack on the head from some random father."

The truth is, religion was not the reason so much that they were strict, as you might be presuming. Mr. Gray, Brandon's father, had lived a rough childhood, working on the farm and being taught lessons the hard way all his life. Between his father's tough regimen and the prejudiced, racist families he grew up near, Mr. Gray's life had never been easy. Some men grow and flourish in that environment, making them stronger, but it had made him bitter and resentful. In regards to Brandon, Mr. Gray was a no-nonsense, punishment-ain't-enough type of guy. He wanted Brandon to grow up as straight as a log, and about as tough as one too, so when he did not quite live up to those spiritual, physical, or mental expectations, his dad got frustrated. Couple that with his mom's religious values which she had burnt into her at an early age, and you had a child who just wants some

freedom, so he often found it with his friends, goofing around when they were allowed and even more when they were not.

Now, Michael was a different situation altogether. When he was a young boy, not even a few months old, his father had left him. While the other families all around him had two adults, two parents, he had one. Up and down Country Road, where he lived, there were the typical farm families: one mom, one dad, a few kids. His house was different; they had no farming -besides his mom's tomato garden that died every year- and certainly no animals, not even a dog. In his house, there was no Mr. Walker, so most people did not consider his mother a Mrs. Walker either.

Michael was still the same old Michael, though. He had lots of freedom, but never abused it, and spent most of his time trying to be with Brandon or the twins. Especially the twins lately, and not because of Christian. His time was spent with Crystal whenever they hung out without Brandon. When they would go out to eat or go to the movies, he made certain to sit next to her if possible. Someday, maybe, he would get to hold her hand, although he was not sure if his heart could take that kind of exhilaration. Everything moved so fast in the teenage years, and yet unbearably slow as the same time.

"What time is your mom picking you up for the dentist?" Crystal asked, unfocused; she was staring at Michael, not realizing it until she hastily turned away.

Christian looked up. "And are we all still sleeping at your house tonight?"

"Oh yeah, for sure," Brandon answered. "My parents probably won't like it, but they agreed a while back so now they have to let you all sleep over." He smiled mischievously, and they all could see he was excited for them to come over. Rarely, if ever, did they go to Brandon's house. Michael's all of the time, and even the Moore's frequently, but *never* Brandon's.

"How long ago did they agree?" asked Christian.

“Um, about... Well, to be honest, it was the first month of school. They said I could have some friends towards the end of school, and next week’s the last one. On Wednesday-”

“The first month of school?” Crystal said, looking incredulous. “That was like in August!”

“What if they won’t let us?” Christian chewed nervously on his fingernails, reminding Brandon of a mouse with the way his small eyes darted around. “What if we get there and then we have to walk back home and our parents- ?”

“Your house gonna be fun?” Michael asked, interrupting Christian’s neverending spout of worries. “Or like one of those places where you can’t talk much without getting told to hush?”

“You mean church?” Brandon said, and they all got a chuckle out of that. “Nah, it’s not like that; we can just stay up in my room.”

“I can’t believe your parents are letting a girl come over,” Crystal said, shaking her head in disbelief. “I thought *for sure* they would say no.”

“I told ‘em if we didn’t let you come over, you’d get real upset and pester your mom about it. Made it sound like it was a real loving thing to do, letting you come over. They like to feel like saints.”

“And that got ‘em?” Michael asked him.

Christian answered, “Obviously it did; we’d all be sleeping at my house if-”

“Okay, okay; turn everything into Algebra,” Brandon mocked, throwing up his hands.

Christian grinned smugly while the others chuckled. “Whatever.”

“Hey, I think that’s your mom’s car.” Michael nudged Brandon, pointing out the window with his finger.

Poking his head up to see over Christian, Brandon said, “Yeah, sure is. Guess I better go.”

“Bye, man.”

“See you later, Brandon.”

“See you at your house.”

“Goodnight to all, and to all a good night!” yelled Brandon with a bow before he exited through the diner door, to unhappy looks from many customers.

When he was gone, Christian commented, “He just botched that line.”

They laughed at that. Christian stood up from his seat, asking for Crystal to let him out.

“What for?”

“Gotta pee.”

Michael grinned slightly, thinking now he would have some time with Crystal away from the others. When Christian went into the bathroom - and Michael hoped he would be in there for a good while- he asked Crystal, “So you doing anything this summer?”

She shook her head. “Going to visit my grandparents towards the end of June.”

“Sweet.” When she did not say anything, he broke the silence. “Aren’t you supposed to ask me?”

“What? Oh, sure.” She giggled, letting loose butterflies in Michael’s stomach. “What are you doing this summer?”

His face took on a macho expression and he flexed his biceps. “Just working on these bad boys.”

She grinned, raising her hands up as if holding a game console and twiddling her thumbs. “You mean these?”

He gasped, pretending to be offended, although it did not fool anybody. “*I do not*-”

Christian interrupted him, slamming the bathroom door and announcing, “Don’t anybody go in there. The dude before me let off a big one.”

“Christian!” his mother chided from behind the cash register, her face a puzzle piece of utter disbelief towards her normally well-behaved son.

The other two laughed, hiding their faces from Mrs. Moore, who reminded Christian of his proper manners by breaking the very rules she set down, filling the restaurant with a high pitch and words she would never have said in front of her boss. Not too long afterwards they were riding in her car up the hill away from Marcy, the brick buildings shrinking behind them in the distance, and towards Hardy, where they all lived and had for many years.

Following one of the roads, they could travel up from the Ohio River valley on a winding, twisting road, under the shade of trees and with the accompaniment of beautiful scenery. It was a dangerous road if you went too fast, but everybody knew better than to do that. The slow climb up the hill would have been a great opportunity for Michael to flirt with Crystal and lean wildly to the side, his shoulder pressed against her. The only problem was, Mrs. Moore let -more like commanded- him to sit in the front, as he was the guest. According to her, it “gave him all the comfort they could offer in this shabby, old thing.” To him, sitting next to Crystal would have been more comfort than she would ever know, as they inched up the road slowly, passing clearings in the trees.

Looking down on Marcy from a few of those spots would have made perfect images to snap with a camera and transfer to a postcard, except that postcards only came from big cities, big places, or big money. Marcy had none of those things; for the most part, it was made up of a town hall, a library, about a dozen shops, another dozen restaurants, and what seemed like twice as many church buildings. That was alright, though; people loved it one way or another.

The river was a crucial part of life in Marcy back when it had been founded, and with the right nurturing and business investments, it could have grown much larger, getting near the likes of other river-cities nearby, such as Louisville and Cincinnati, not that folks from Marcy wanted it that way. No, they were just fine with the small town and small life they lived, away from drama in the big cities. This was home to them, where everyone

knew each other and nobody could afford to hold grudges for long. Hardy was theirs, and it would stay that way.

Peace and comfort, though, could not last forever. Younger, more ambitious, never contented generations either wanted to move away to large populaces, opportunities, and buildings, or wanted to expand Marcy to become those. Constant turmoil between those who were content and those who were obsessively ambitious erupted almost on a monthly - sometimes weekly- basis; you see, doing anything on a daily basis would be too much work for both sides, and nobody much liked to work hard in Marcy.

Up the road, which eventually merged with Highway 62 and ran along a little farther into the distance, was Hardy. It was different than Marcy, in many ways. With such a small crowd of folks, and an even smaller crowd of buildings, it was truly peaceful. Crime was rare, and the only turmoil that happened was rumors and gossip. It was a different world, a sense of community and bonding that you would be hard-pressed to find anywhere else.

There were many farms in Hardy, but all of them were centered around the main streets and buildings, which essentially formed a square. Pine Tree Park was there, with walking paths for adults, playgrounds for kids, and basketball or tennis courts for those sort of people. It had everything for everyone, and most of all it had family.

Most weekends, a dozen miles away in Marcy, they were arguing over what to name such and such street, or what font should be used on the billboard. Meanwhile, there was a community-wide barbecue at Pine Tree Park, where only laughter reigned and drove away the petty worries of everyday life. It was full of a homy attitude, a familiar sense of togetherness, and the wonderful smell of every type of meat. Dry-roasted, barbecued, seasoned, sauced; there was something for everyone and someone for everything. That was the real Hardy.

What those kids did not know, as they rode up Highway 62, was that every mile they got closer to Hardy, they were getting closer to a different town than they had left that morning. Strange, menacing things were lurking, ready to shoot out, blossoming into something terrible.

That night was going to be different from all the rest. Those four teenagers would never be the same; those streets and those houses would never be the same; Hardy would never be the same.