

Hill Country

North emerged from a bend in the wooded road, his gait confident and unhurried. Tall and thin, he wore a tattered suit and an expression of polite interest. His hand turned over at his side, unspooling the dark red yarn so that it trailed off into the woods behind him. There was no obvious point where it ended, just a scarlet thread disappearing between white birches.

You could follow it for miles and still not find the end, and there were people who had attempted that before. Not North, for he had no use for looking back, and his youthful curiosity had all but fled him. Turning to the dog trotting dutifully at his side, he struck up a conversation. “I haven’t seen a forest this nice in a long time.”

The small white dog had no reply for his master, and truly, he was not the talkative sort. North was, but he respected an animal who kept his cards close to his chest, and so he wasn’t offended by the silence. The dog was raggedy around the ears, unkempt and shabby but proud of his scraps and scars. In that way, the pair suited one another. They were confident travelers, but like anyone who spends their life on the road with no set destination, they carried a heavy weariness visible in their dusty coats and set shoulders.

As they walked, birdsong filled the woods, night calls of thrush and redwing blackbirds mingling with the croaking of frogs and the rustling of the underbrush. It truly was a beautiful forest, perfect for having a smoke and a cup of tea as you balanced an open book upon your knee. It had been a long time since North had spent a whole afternoon at such a task. If he hadn’t been busy, he would have wandered off and found a cool, shady place by the creek where he could sit and spread out his lunch. Feed the dog slices of apple from his palm, talk about anything that he wanted.

Sighing, North cast another appreciative glance around. When he approached the single-lane, rural highway, he turned and followed the gravel shoulder to wherever it would lead him. Soon enough, he came upon a little boy where he was huddled on the side of the road, one hand raised to protect his head.

Looking up at the sky where it hung low and brambly gray above them, North nodded in understanding. His eyes lit with respect. “You’re a smart kid, aren’t you?” said North. “I’d give it about ten minutes until it starts pouring.” The boy didn’t notice North or the white dog; he just kept his head turned down the road as he shuffled from foot to foot in the chilled air. It was almost fully night now, and the trees were crisped red around the edges, the season of decay beginning. It was perfect timing for North. He’d always enjoyed traveling in the autumn.

“I hope for your sake that you won’t be out here too long. Looks like it might get kind of cold tonight. This should help, one moment,” he said, bending down until they were of a height as he unspooled the yarn. He folded the red thread into a loop that he tied carefully around the boy’s finger. The boy didn’t react, which was to be expected. North was good at this part, one of the best. He knew all the tricks to being discreet, and he could tie a better knot than just about anyone, the kind that wouldn’t unravel after the years and distances wrought their damage.

North exhaled, watching the boy with a frown. The child’s posture was closed off and wary, and the way he was protecting his head made North a little sad, seeing so much awareness in such a young person. And the boy was unimaginably young compared to him. Not that you could tell that by looking at North, as his face was unlined and smooth. It was only his eyes that gave him away, clear brown in color and filled with an intelligence that suggested there was very little that he hadn’t seen.

“It’s nothing more than a connection. Don’t worry.” assured North, face softening with concern. His words fell on deaf ears, but he wasn’t saying them for anyone but himself so it didn’t matter. “I just need to tie off the other end. When I do, someone will come and help you.” He cast a wistful look down at the thread where it disappeared into the woods, the deep ruby color standing out before being swallowed by the forest. Until he found the person who was meant to hold the other end, it could be anybody. It was a bit like walking a tightrope in the dark, except that North knew enough to keep moving forward, knew that there was someone waiting on the other side and when to stop looking for them. He smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners, and he patted the thread at his side. “These things always work out, somehow.”

Turning away from the boy, North whistled to his dog. It was time to move on.

Eliza sat on the front porch her old white farmhouse, sipping a steaming cup of tea. She liked wide porches like this one and considered no home complete without one. She needed a place to just sit and contemplate, to cast judgment on the comings and goings around her. It was a lovely evening, freshly minted and soft, the air filled with the smell of leaf mold and hay. The yard was peaceful now that the noise of the busy afternoon was over, and the calls of the last summer crickets were only just dwindling to a gentle hum.

Talking the latest news from town was a big bellied man named Bob Jones. He was sitting in the other lawn chair, airing his feet out by dangling them from the edge of the porch. Jones liked hanging around Eliza well enough, even though she could complain about anything, including him. Mainly it was his tattoos and rural accent that she took issue with, which was ironic considering she had same accent and had been on the sharp end of a needle at a few points in her life.

“There’s an Amber Alert out,” said Jones. “Some kid from down in Logan, I heard.”

“That’s awful.” Eliza replied. “I swear, the police around here have got a dreadful incompetence to them. They need a fire to waft smoke up into their Goddamned noses before they get anything done.” Her voice rose at the last part as she worked herself up. She could ramble on unstopped when she got going on the topic of how the facilities in Hocking County didn’t run like they should and how everything was just about going to shit these days.

“They’ll find him. Kid probably ran away from home. God knows I did that a few times as a kid.”

“Well, me too. But it’s different nowadays.” Eliza said, pulling the pale blue quilt up underneath her chin. There was a thinking quality to the slow breeze playing with the stiff curls around her temples. She stared out across the darkening yard, the familiar dips of the land and the red barn where it crouched low over the field. “Used to be so nice this time of year. I don’t know what it is, but I don’t wanna go look ’round like I used to. Don’t much want to get up,” she said. Jones swiveled his head to look at her. In the dim light, he appeared hewn from stone, wet mouth the only supple line on him, his cheeks furred with sparse reddish hair. He took another swig from the bottle resting against his thigh.

“Used to be? It’s still nice out here.” There was no response, just Eliza twisting the quilt in her worn-down hands. It was nice, she knew that. Even now the sight of the home she knew so well was a warm hand against her forehead. And yet she was tired, bone tired, as though she’d been working her entire life. The thought of walking out between the sweet-smelling trees held no appeal. The barn, once her favorite place, was too thick with nostalgia now for her to slip in between the heavy doors.

Eliza did her best, and no one could say she didn't work hard because she'd kept Skipping Stone running all these years out of sheer stubbornness. She'd never move away from Hocking County, for all that catching a glimpse of the same horizon out of her window each morning made her throat tighten. Her son, Trevor, used to talk about moving away to Cincinnati or some other city, bragging about how he'd get himself a good job and maybe try things out on his own for a while. Of course, he hadn't grown up the way that she had so it was easier for him to imagine a future that wasn't tied to Skipping Stone.

It was different for Eliza. She felt the land like it was a giant turning over and bearing her up. On good days, she sat out in the air and felt it breathing all around her, and during the bad times it was a weight bearing her back down into the bedrock. She had tried explaining it to Trevor once, but he'd just blinked his large brown eyes at her and laughed, saying that she was too stuck in her old ways. He passed away before he got to prove her wrong.

Five Years Earlier

She heard about the accident on a Tuesday in August, the morning only just beginning to grow hot and stagnant. She was startled out of her sleep by a knock on her door, and blinked in surprise to find Sheriff Malone standing there, feet planted and face grave. She knew something was wrong immediately because of how diminished he looked in the half-light, his khaki hat clutched to his chest with one trembling hand. His shoulders were bowed inwards and his lips were pursed, blue eyes fixed somewhere over her shoulder. She'd known this man since she was a little girl, used to beg for rides on his shoulders, and now he couldn't even look at her.

"What is it?" she said, her voice still thick with sleep. It was early, too early to deal with whatever was happening.

"Eliza." Malone scrubbed a hand down his face, eyes hollow. "It's Trevor."

His voice broke on the name, and she remembered thinking how absurd it was to have a grown man breaking down on her porch. It had been an accident, he explained. Trevor had taken the tractor out to the west field when something went wrong with the breaking mechanism and it had flipped over, pinning him underneath. The details were fuzzy, and there would need to be an investigation, but it had been too late for anyone to do anything to help by the time they had found him.

Eliza kept shaking her head. Her eyes felt hot to the point of burning, but she didn't cry. It was strange, Malone was shaking like a leaf and all she felt was a numbness in her hands and a buzzing in her skull. She got more information as the day wore on, learning that the tractor had crushed him underneath the wheels. It was quick at the very least, even though it would be several hours before a passing farmer would smell the sharp scent of gasoline and notice the overturned tractor.

She forced Malone to tell her where they were keeping her son, and as soon as she could she shook herself free from her relatives and went to see him in the Hocking County morgue. Strictly speaking, she wasn't supposed to be in there, but she needed to make sure that it was him before they tucked him away into a neat box; she had to feel the texture of his hand in her own before she could be certain it wasn't all some unfortunate mistake.

Inside the tiny white room, there was nothing but the sound of her breath and Malone's words, breaking over her like water and without her registering what he was saying. She approached slowly, unsettled by how peaceful Trevor looked where he was stretched out beneath the ethereal white sheet. His fingers slid out of hers when she held them, and she was startled by how cold they were to the touch, freezing and stiff beneath her hand.

It reminded her of when he was a teenager and he would go out into the winter afternoon wearing nothing but an insensible coat and tattered fingerless gloves, the ones that he wore because he thought they would make him look like a punk. He would come back inside a few hours later, face splitting into a smile and snow clinging to his pale lashes. Eliza would scold him, worrying over his red fingers and the scent of clove cigarettes lingering in his jacket, but her anger would always be given away by the way she would clasp his freezing hands tightly between her own, lending him her warmth.

There was nothing to hold on to now, only cold fingers that didn't feel quite right and a face that looked all too familiar. She stumbled back, bile rising in her throat. Before she knew what was happening the nausea turned into anger, the sensation burning through her quick and blissful. She started yelling something, about how it shouldn't be hard for them to put her boy's body back to rights, make it so this really was all just a mistake, just another case of Hocking County messing it up. The person lying on the table couldn't be her Trevor.

Sheriff Malone reached for her, eyes blown wide with alarm, but it was Eliza's older sister who got there first, bursting into the tiny white room. Her voice was shaking and choked up with tears as she informed Eliza that it just didn't work like that. She placed a consoling arm on her shoulder and steered her away from the white sheet, her head leaning close enough that she could mutter gentle and meaningless words into Eliza's ear.

It was her sister, too, who stood by her side in the weeks leading up to the funeral, a constant steadying hand on Eliza's arm. No one else wanted to get that close. They were too uncomfortable at the thought of acknowledging what had happened and paralyzed by their fear of having to say something to her about it. Eliza didn't remember much from those first few

weeks, just that her sister looked worn out all the time, her pretty face drawn and tired and her mouth full of stories.

Eliza wondered if she looked like that too. But when she spotted her face in the mirror it was like that of a stranger, her hair limp and unwashed and her cheeks hollow and gray. She looked resentful, she realized, her eyes like two holes burned into wood, and it made her stomach coil in disgust. She turned away from the image, her arms pulled tight around her middle. After enough time passed, she began to feel smothered by her sister's attention rather than comforted, like each touch was meant to pin her into place.

It got so bad that Eliza ran out of the funeral just to get some fresh air and space from her relatives and neighbors, who seemed to want to talk about nothing but Trevor, how cute he was as a child and how much they would all miss him. That was just how Hocking County did funerals. The tiny church was filled to the eaves with what seemed like the entire county, the whole space smelling of sweat, bad cologne, and the wilting funeral roses.

Eliza escaped outside, taking a heaving lungful of the crisp autumn air. She stayed out there for a long time, so out of it that she didn't even notice when Jones came out and joined her, passing her a bottle of whiskey but saying nothing, a steady and solid presence at her side.

After the funeral, she avoided her sister's calls and visits and didn't go into town for a long time. Instead, she threw herself headlong into the upkeep of the farm, distracting herself through the mundane tasks of making lists and hiring out help when the harvest rolled around. It was just easier that way, and she got so used to it after a while that it almost became a habit.

Present

"You okay, Eliza?" It was Jones. He was looking at her, probably wondering where her mind had taken her just then. Perhaps he realized that it was somewhere he couldn't go and

didn't want to follow, because he didn't prod her any further. Eliza's gaze was still unfocused but she caught the concern in Jones's expression and was comforted by it. He'd known her long enough to know when to shut up, and she had always appreciated that about him.

"I'm fine," she said, and realized it was at least half true. It wasn't the thinking about Trevor that hurt her so much. It was just that it was difficult for her thoughts not to go that way these days, and the constant work to stop her mind from wandering made her tired. She watched Jones heave himself up and head back to his car to grab a machine part that he wanted to show her, chuckling under her breath when he almost tripped over the loose bottom step. It was nice, the way the evening light caught in his hair, turning it bright red in compliment to the deepening sky. Eliza relaxed back into her chair, pulling the quilt up around her chin and letting the evening rest without putting any more words to it.

North stared up at the old white farm house, the dog panting at his side. He shook his head slowly. They had turned off Route 13 about a half hour ago and had kept walking until the road turned into pasture. It was around then that he had gotten a twitch in his gut letting him know he'd been here before. "What a coincidence, huh?" he said, gazing around with something like fondness. "Never thought I'd see this place again."

It had been late summer the last time he had been here, a season for sweltering afternoons and lightning bug evenings. He noticed a grove of apple trees that he hadn't seen before, ready to harvest judging by how the fruit was hanging from the branches in dense clusters. North found himself grinning at the familiarity of it all, at the nostalgia that comes from returning somewhere you used to know and finding it ineffably changed. It wasn't often that he got to experience it.

Still grinning, North allowed the dog to wriggle out of his arms. “Be careful out there, you scamp.” he called, watching until the dog disappeared into the shadowy grove before moving on.

He had met the dog years ago, although it was more accurate to say that the dog had found him and not the other way around. Animals were like that. Sometimes they just noticed someone like North where they usually passed unseen. There was no good reason for it, just like there was no good reason why the rare human got a gleam in his eye and noticed the thread. North had always thought it just signaled that the dog was a kindred spirit. It certainly felt like that sometimes, and when he was feeling nostalgic he let himself consider what it might be like to stay in one place for once, just him and the dog. Maybe settle down on a farm like this one, where it was quiet and the air smelled differently depending on the season.

An inspection of the boarded-up wooden barn, left to mildew and fill with the chittering of mice, found North running his finger down a length of thread that was tied around the handle of an old tractor. The workmanship of the knot was unmistakable. After looping the handle, the thread snaked outside. Eventually, traversing forests and hills and untold distances, it would find its way back to the reel at North’s side. It wasn’t unusual for him to step over a bit of old thread on his travels and it was best not to worry about this when it happened. Too much worry and you started questioning what you had left behind.

His face clammed up with sweat at the sight all the same, plastering his dark hair against his forehead. He slipped out the heavy door, the night air bracing in comparison to the overheated barn. Outside, the farmyard was cut up by dense shadows, deep purple in color and rounded as plums. The dog was nowhere to be found. “Lazy fellow probably found his way into the dairy.” North muttered, but he let his voice trail off until the words were said under his breath, blending in with the rain that had started falling a few minutes ago.

It was different without the dog at the other end of his words. He hoped his friend would appear soon, but rather than dwell on dark thoughts, he readied himself, measuring out enough yarn and wrapping the excess tightly around his palm. The owner of the other end was still standing by the side of Route 13, hopping from foot to foot and waiting for a car to pass. Nodding, North stepped into the quiet farm house as easily as if the front door had been left open for him.

Eliza woke up between one deep, snoring breath and another. She lay staring at the ceiling, the remnants of the dream nestled into the folds of her sheets. When the dreams came, it was best to get up and pace around the house until the bad feelings got bored and left her alone. She leaned against her little vanity, tracing the veins lurking beneath her papery skin, and played at putting on a touch of lipstick to brighten up her just-woken features. She still looked well, her skin free of spots and her eyes clear and framed by prominent laugh lines that softened her square features.

But it was no good, she thought, patting her cheek. There was a tightness to her chest that only music would fix. She dug through her closet until she found the record she wanted, a 1961 Patsy Cline, and headed downstairs. The stairs creaked under her slippered feet, but otherwise the house was silent. Even the dust motes were heavy and thick. This was unnerving in its own way, because the countryside never went fully quiet even at night, always quivering with sound whether from an animal or the wind.

When she reached the landing, there was a man standing in the front hall, his body backlit by the moonlight. He was tall and was wearing the worst suit she'd ever seen. It was too short for his limbs, musty and set into creases like he'd never changed it before. His eyes, crouched

beneath thick brows, were finely shaped and deep brown in color, the irises standing out stark against the whites. Eliza screamed, breaking the eerie silence, and he screamed right back at her.

“Who are you?!” She chuckled Patsy Cline’s smiling face and the tube of nude lipstick in his direction and would have kept throwing things if she had had enough ammunition. When he didn’t say anything, Eliza shouted again, more out of self-defense than fear this time. “You better tell me what the hell you’re doing here or I’m going to call the police!”

North brought up his unoccupied hand to hover flat in front of him, his posture soft and placating. His narrow face sharpened until he was looking at her with something akin to wonder brightening up his features. “You can see me?”

“Of *course* I can. I’m not blind, you know!” snapped Eliza, clenching her fists. North’s face split into a crooked smile at the words. It transformed his appearance into that of someone much younger, going from a weary middle-aged man to a fresh twenty-something as the dark flatness of his eyes caught the light. It was a uniquely mobile face, the expression shifting before you even noticed as though compelled by some quality lying just beneath the surface.

Eliza was charmed despite herself, so caught off guard that her fear bled away and left her with only curiosity. There was something incorporeal about him, she thought. In his generic suit that was notable only because it was so ill-fitting, he could have come from anywhere and any era. He would be more at home in a dream than here, standing in her hallway at midnight with the cold, clean scent of nighttime caught in his coattails. Looking down, she noticed that his brown leather shoes were worn down to the quick and realized that he must have walked here. How long he had been walking for, she didn’t know, but she wanted to find out.

“How did you get in here?” she asked, examining his expression.

North couldn't put it all into words but he must have woven together enough of an explanation because Eliza relaxed, her hands unfurling from the tight claws they'd been pushed into as they came to rest against the sides of her lavender nightgown.

He cleared his throat before finishing his explanation. "I'm really sorry about all this. I honestly didn't mean to scare you. It's just that your door was unlocked and my car broke down not far from here, and this seemed like the best way to get help."

"Hmm," said Eliza. Her gaze kept drifting back to the yarn in his hands, looking at it with enough significance that he could feel the judgments she must be making sticking to his front and catching at the ends of his sleeves. He shifted uncomfortably.

He didn't have any talent for making judgments himself, and so he couldn't say if she believed him or not. It wasn't like he had ever been spotted before. He knew that it happened, logically speaking. He had been on the other side of it once when he was younger. But it was different when he was the one being looked at and was being seen for the first time in what could have been a millennium, for all he had been keeping track. He wasn't sure what to do about the fluttering excitement that being recognized stirred in his stomach.

"What's that string for, anyway?" she asked, breaking the awkward silence.

At the question, North found himself back in school, his memory warped and faded as though viewed through glass. He recalled being an awkward child, overlooked and fragile enough that his peers had treated him like something that would break if dropped. It was odd to remember such a thing, and yet here he was sputtering at this woman's simple question.

He looked Eliza up and down again. She was skinny to the point of concern, with big eyes that might once have held some charm to them but were now clouded with an emotion that he didn't understand, but that made something in his chest tighten in sympathy. Why she would

be the one to see him he didn't know, but he couldn't deny that it was nice. Nice to hold a conversation with someone who could talk back.

Instead of answering, North gestured outside with a vagueness that would have embarrassed him in under any other circumstance. "My dog..." he cleared his throat. "He went missing. In the crash. Would you help me look for him?"

To his surprise, Eliza followed him out the front door and into the night without question, the nightgown drifting around her ankles. The rain had relented, leaving the yard to leak the scent of leaf mold and manure, a combination that should have been unpleasant and yet wasn't. They came to the apple grove first, North clipping his strides in consideration for his companion.

North whistled under his breath, scanning the underbrush for signs of his friend. He felt better now that he was outside, less flustered. It was true that Eliza was not bad to share a silence with, and the novelty of it all kept making his mouth curl up at the corners, a ripple in his otherwise still face. He glanced back, certain that she would leave when she realized how strange this was, but she was still there, peering around the grove and clutching the baby blue quilt around her shoulders.

"I've had this guy with me for a long time," said North, feeling someone should start talking. "My dog. It's good to have a partner in my line of work, I guess. Gets too lonely otherwise." When she didn't respond, North just pushed on. "He wanders off a lot, so I'm not that concerned. But he's such a little fellow that I can't help worrying about him. Who knows what kind of trouble he might get up to by himself?"

"We used to have a dog," said Eliza, finding her voice at last. She was twisting the blanket in her hands and her eyes were distant. When she stumbled, North caught her narrow arm to keep her from falling. She hardly noticed the interruption and kept speaking in that low and

thoughtful voice. “We named her Bib. Got her when she was just a pup. Trevor loved her right away. I swear those two were just about inseparable.”

“Trevor?” North repeated. Hearing the name, he recalled the day clearly. It had been a warm August evening, and the house had been quiet and still just like it was tonight. He remembered tying the thread around the littlest finger of the young man snoring on the downstairs sofa. Afterwards, he had found the tractor in the old barn and had sealed the two together forever with a twist of one expert knot. And then he had walked away.

But the young man’s face always stuck with him. It had looked so peaceful in sleep, exhaustion smoothing out the blemishes and the premature sun lines. Even the cigarette cooling in the ashtray nearby had held an aura that was cleaner than it ought to have been in the context of that slow and muggy August. North paused and considered Eliza from the corner of his eye. The caste of her face was quite similar now that he thought about it. She had the same nose and coloring, the same severe features that were given to softening when you least expected them to.

North and Eliza walked for several minutes, talking about anything and nothing at all. The sky gradually lightened as they searched, a soft and golden light outlining the apple trees. The landscape woke up too, the static chirping of the nocturnal wildlife giving over to the sporadic calls of the early risers, and North found himself humming along before he could stop himself.

Eliza found the dog first. He barreled right into her legs, wagging his short tail in a good-natured greeting. He’d always been friendly, and North’s mouth tipped up on one side to see him acting that way. He wasn’t surprised that his friend was making such an effort to impress Eliza, waving his tail and panting just like a puppy. He was just pleased to be recognized by someone, and North couldn’t say he disagreed. Eliza scratched at the dog’s ears, her mouth pursed in

reflection. “I know you aren’t all there,” she said at last. “Or more likely, this is all some kind of dream. You weren’t in any kind of car accident, though. I’m not stupid. I can tell when someone is lying to me.”

North’s mouth went dry. “Oh.”

“Don’t feel bad about it, I’m just perceptive like that. I might not understand what that yarn of yours is for, but I’ve noticed how you keep looking over like you’re waiting for something to happen.” Eliza sat down, folding her legs up underneath her nightgown. Her head drooped backward like the end of a sunflower on a skinny stem, until it came to rest pressed against the trunk of an apple tree. Her eyes fluttered shut. After a moment, the dog crawled over and settled beside her, tucking his wet nose up against her leg. “I’m just tired. Tired of this shit county, tired of living day-to-day. It’s been a year since I took a walk around the farm like this. But I’ll tell you, it feels right now that I’m sitting here. Like I could go to sleep any minute.”

“I haven’t wasted this much time on a job before either. This is a new experience for both of us,” admitted North. He folded his long legs and slid down next to Eliza. The tree was a pleasant if scratchy backrest, solid and bracing against his spine. “But to be honest, I’ve never had things turn out this way before.” He paused for a rueful smile. “Give me your hand, Eliza,” he said, and she did. North’s fingers folded around her pale and spindly wrist, holding it without any pressure.

He wrapped the scarlet yarn around the smallest finger of her left hand. His work was sure and fast. “I don’t know if you seeing me will make a difference at all. But this...” he ran a finger down the length of yarn until his nail caught and stuck. “It’s a connection. Between people and meaningful places, between a person and something that’s going to change them.

Sometimes, like now, it means that there are two people who are destined to meet. To help each other in some way. Do you know what that means?”

“Like fate?” Eliza swallowed. She was shaking, from cold or shock it wasn’t clear. “If I know, doesn’t that mean it isn’t going to happen?”

“Not if you do something about it.” North looked out across the field, his face angled to catch the first tentative rays of sun. He felt a familiar pull beneath his rib and realized it was almost time for him to go. “It was good meeting you, Eliza.” He sighed, and the action made him look older again. His features kept going back and forth, sometimes appearing as young as Trevor when he had passed, and at other times holding the weariness of centuries.

He looked down at the thread tied around Eliza’s finger and thought about the boy who still held the other end. Standing, North brushed the dirt from his ragged suit pants and shook the stiffness out of his shoulders. At his cue, the dog clambered to his paws and, giving Eliza one last lick on her chilled skin, came to stand by his master’s side.

Eliza didn’t push herself up just yet. “You’ve been here before.” she said, her voice scratchy from overuse. North nodded, eyes scanning her pale face. Her gaze had cleared, the memories falling away, but he saw no anger lurking there. There was no accusation leveled in his direction. The time for anger was gone, forgotten sometime between that last sweltering August, and now.

It wasn’t guilt that made North lower his head in respect, because he knew that it would have turned out the same way no matter what he had done. That was the terrible thing about fate. But the realization was somehow comforting too, and perhaps Eliza felt the same relief that he did. They could sense how much history lay mired in these fields, sitting deep in the furrows of the earth. So many strangers waiting to meet and tragedies yet to come, resting in a bed as

innocent as the folds of a child's sleeping face. If not North, then another before him, another traveler with a spool of yarn passing unseen between the birches.

Eliza kept her gaze on the line of North's back until he was nothing but a dark smudge with a small white dog trotting beside him. Soon he and the dog were gone, disappearing between one shuttering of her tired eyelids and the next. She rested against the tree for a little while longer, listening to the wind and sounds of the awakening farm until she got her strength back. The red thread was still tied to her left hand, shining scarlet in the dawn, and she felt it twitch like a living thing beneath her touch. Eliza traced her finger along the yarn, her eyes following where it disappeared into the woods. She got to her feet and started walking.