



PROLOGUE.

DAWN

My mother worked the bakery at the Canard Feed-Mor, best they had at icing cakes. She could pipe out frosted flowers from here to Pineville and every last petal'd be perfect. My daughter, Nicolette, is my mother made over. Lean as a rake, slick as dish soap, long fingers like two handfuls of dragonflies, flitting about, fixing and doing. Nicolette's pointer finger is Momma's pointer finger dancing down a row of spice bottles—onion powder garlic powder mustard powder—snatching up this and that, pinching and sprinkling.

Nicolette fresh and young was my mother when I was little, when Momma still took us to the woods, tender lifting spring leaves, fingering little brown jugs and Jack-in-the-pulpit. She could turn back slick creek rocks without mussing the sand, lull the crawdad into the pouch of her hand, cup salamanders with their Skittle-colored spots. Momma shared treasures with me and my brother, Albert, with creek sparkle in her eye and junco lilt in her voice; a sparkle and lilt marks her granddaughter in the time of me telling you this, as Nicolette skittered from pan to kettle in the kitchen, from herb pot to treetop in the yard.

I was twenty-one when Momma got caught up in a den of pillshooters and they shot her up with OxyContin and killed her in the heat of a July night and dumped her body under a oak tree by the river behind the floodwall. Those did that were her friends, my friends too. Maybe she should've known better, should've done better. I don't know.

I do know this: being mad at her didn't get me too far.

Me and my daughter and our uncle Hubert are here to tell how we got on with our business on Long Ridge in the year 2016, twelve years after my mother died. I'd like to think we are better people now than we were then. I feel like I am. Happier. Better able to give love. Better able to take it. But getting there was a trial.

I am thirty-eight years old in the moment I'm telling you this. I feel like I've been telling my story for a thousand years. In the year 2016, I was tired of telling my story, tired down to my bones. My daughter was seventeen, and I was not much of a mother to her. My heart, had you pulled it out in them days, was a walnut shell, a little dark pitted thing, the kind of bitter husk a squirrel might drop on your head, leave you staring into the treetops, your hand stained, your mind unsettled.

Those were hard days, as are these. The story we are going to tell you is hard. I guess what I'm saying is, there may be triggers ahead. I tried not telling this tale, but Nicolette said, "Telling might be how the heart starts to mend. If the right person is there to listen."

Seems like all we do is talk. Tell big tales. My dad used to say, “When all you got’s a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.” But my parents loved hearing stories better than anybody. Even though he’s been dead since I was a little girl, I can still hear my father laughing when my family sat around making big talk. I can still feel his tears on my finger when the hammer hit your heart. Momma’s face still wet with tears from hearing something sad as she throws her head back, tickled at something funny, so tickled laughing brings its own tears—that’s how she comes to me in dreams.

Well. I reckon it’s time to bust out the hammer.

My name is Dawn Jewell. I use she/her/hers pronouns.