

Tuscumbia, Alabama

by Collin Kelley

My dad at the wheel, my mother's ulcer inflamed, she puked her way across northern Alabama that summer, from Huntsville and the rusting rockets to Tuscumbia, the farthest any of us had been west. We drove through raw, blistered towns, like a hundred Sally Mann photos come to life, the hollow-eyed poor, the rust and dust. Helen Keller would have wished herself blind.

My parents on each end of a see-saw, up and down, and me in the middle, a counterbalance. My mother said more than once, *I want to leave*. In the hush after battle, when only a book was a safe bet, I found poor Helen. Wondered how she managed happiness in her turncoat body, how Annie Sullivan's urgent fingers slapped against Helen's young hand could make three senses seem like five.

At Ivy Green, the Keller's low slung house, I thought I came to find Helen, but was looking for Annie, the surrogate mother who rescued Helen from her lock box. Who suffered the sadistic mind-games, thrown forks and eggs, lost a tooth for her trouble, who resolved to stay until water became water. Half blind herself, her thick glasses like mine, learning Braille just in case. Her brother dead in an orphanage she barely managed to escape. She didn't want to leave him either, his apparition showed her the door.

Alabama in 1881 must have been a fresh hell, Annie's Yankee hostility a constant reminder of who had won the War of Northern Aggression. The Kellers giving in to Helen's every whim was a new battleground, yet Annie never yielded. The high, hot southern sun scorching her corneas even after the surgeries, books held so close her eyelashes rustled the pages, hungry to absorb every visible word, to ingrain them in case she woke up in permanent darkness. Going back to Boston was never an option.

My mother's insides finally settled, she stared out the window of Ivy Green, looking into some middle distance, beyond my father into the next life of no children, no responsibilities, a clean slate to begin

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again. I picked up Helen's Braille watch, the one lost in NYC and returned by a stranger, because who else would it belong to but her, as if no one else in the world was blind. I wondered where Annie's watch was now, the one I'm sure she picked up a million times and said, *I want to leave, get off this see-saw*. Could have. Did not.

