

Promises

by Mike Croley

THE LAST THING I WANTED, expected, or needed was to be standing in the doorway of Carly Ray's room, watching her clutch a picture of her father, my old friend Beryl, up to her face. She is so tiny, but at the same time there is something very adult about the way she looks. Maybe it's the light spreading over her shoulders from the nightstand lamp, her slick-straight brown hair lying limply behind her. Something about her seems too mature for ten years old.

"Carly Ray," I say, hesitantly, fearful. "It's time to go to bed. You've got school tomorrow." I expect her to turn, to look at me with cold eyes and resentment, but she doesn't. She puts the picture away, under her mattress, and rolls to her back, looking up at the ceiling.

She's used to Beryl being here, maybe telling her a story or just sitting on the edge of the bed until she falls asleep. I can't be sure of what. She's only known me as her father's friend, the one who comes in every so often, bringing her a present from some far-off city she's never visited. She doesn't see me in any sort of fatherly way. I'm not sure if I'm even like an uncle.

"Goodnight, J.D.," she says.

I turn off the lamp, and she closes her eyes, feigning sleep, and my mouth becomes dry. A strip of light from the hallway illuminates her Gillian Welch poster—Beryl's doing, for sure. I close my eyes for just a moment with the hope that when I open them I will be in my own apartment, a thousand miles away, the sounds of the city rising up from the street and through the windows, crashing against my bookshelves and furniture, echoing down the hallways.

I pull the covers up to her chin, something I've seen people do on television, and whisper a goodnight to her.

Mom is waiting for me in the living room, flipping through a *Time* magazine. She puts it down beside her on the sofa when I walk in the room.

"How is she?" she asks.

"Good, I think. I can't tell."

"What do you mean you can't tell?"

"I mean, I don't know. I've never been around her enough to know. I'm not sure about all this."

"Well, you're going to have to be, aren't you?"

"I guess," I say. I think about the phone calls I have to make this week. The one to St. Vincent's to tell them I'm not coming back. The one to my girlfriend, Julie, in New York to tell her what I've avoided saying the last few days. "It doesn't seem real," I say, but not really to Mom.

She rises from her seat, ready to comfort me.

"I never thought I'd be back," I tell her. "When I was still in college I thought I might come back, but after that, once I was in my residency, I knew I never would. I didn't plan on this."

"Plans change sometimes, honey. Beryl was your oldest friend, and he's asked you to do this thing for him. You can't take her from here," she says.

"Why not? Why can't I raise her someplace else?"

"Because this is her home," she says.

"People move all the time, Mom. Think about the life she could have in the city. I could take her to see plays and Broadway shows. She could go to better schools."

"You grew up here and turned out just fine," she says to me.

"For every person like me, how many people are there who stuck around when they could have left?"

"That's not the point, son."

"Well, what is the point? My whole life is going to change."

"And hers hasn't?"

LATER, after mom has left and I'm on the porch, phone in hand, the frenzy of the last two weeks hits me. The phone call about Beryl's death, my frantic flight home, that first night with Carly Ray. When I went to see Chris Molloy about Beryl's papers I found out that Beryl left me everything. Not just custody of Carly Ray, but his house, his pickup truck, half his insurance policy, and a letter telling

me what he wanted for Carly Ray if it ever came to this point and I had to take care of her.

The paperwork was tough to sift through. Molloy had coached us both in Little League, and he got choked up as he went over the documents with me, lifting his glasses off his face so I could see the impressions they'd made on the bridge of his nose as he wiped away a few tears. "Just don't seem right," he kept saying to me every few seconds. "Just don't seem right. You two were good boys. Still are," he'd say and then go back to the will and explain to me what it all meant.

He told me normally the godparent thing is just a title, but in this case Kentucky law says with Tracy running off and not keeping in contact for ten years, and Beryl naming me guardian, unless something crazy happens, I'm in the clear. She's my responsibility as long as the court declares me capable. There's no reason they won't, he told me, and I left his office with a folder full of documents.

I thumb the numbers on the phone, trying to summon the courage to call Julie, but I can't. I keep thinking of Beryl. I want to remember the things he and I did as kids in this town. The nights we drove to the bootlegger out past Woodbine and sipped on lukewarm beers, setting our empty cans on the railroad tracks and waiting for the trains to run them over. I try to think of all the high school football games we attended on my visits home from college and med school, how we spotted the kids wearing our old numbers, but all I can see is the picture I have of him in my mind falling from that roof. One minute he's hammering away at shingles, the frame of the house drawing yellow lines against the forest behind him. He's bare chested, skin turned brown as a biscuit, sweating under the July sun. Then it happens. He stands to stretch, loses his balance on the pitch, and he's tumbling. Nails splay from the canvas 84 Lumber pouch he has tied around his waist. They sprinkle, like jacks, the spot of earth where he will land. I hear the snap of his neck as it bends past ninety degrees and the thud of his heavy, muscled body hitting the ground. He folds on himself like a sheet kicked off the foot of a bed.

Nails prick his skin, and his hammer lies beside him, the shiny silver glinting in the sun.

I see my friend, the only one I had remaining here, lying in the grass, the life escaping his eyes, and I shudder at the sight, at all the distance that came between us when I left Kentucky and went to New York. And now that I'm back in our hometown, here to raise his daughter, I realize I've always thought our lives were moving in opposite directions and that home was our only connection to each other. Yet home doesn't even sound like the word to describe Fordyce anymore. It's been so long since I've lived here, I don't know what I can claim of it.

I look at the big oak and maple trees lining the street. Their branches hang over the pavement, shading the ground from the moonlight in jigsaw patterns. The quiet here compared to the city unsettles me, and this lets me know how far I've gone. My life's only beginning, I think. I finished my internship a year and a half ago, and St. Vincent's is a nice hospital, close to where I live. After my shift today I would have gotten Tone, the X-ray tech on the third floor, and we would have walked ten blocks down to the Carmine Street Rec to play hoops, and then afterward we'd have gone to Two Boots Pizza across from the hospital. Then there's Julie.

We've been dating four months. Long enough that I want her around, but not long enough that I'm sure it is OK to ask her to come to Kentucky and live with me. And even if I did, there really isn't much for her in the way of work. She's in public relations, and the closest thing we have to that around here is the local newspaper, maybe something in a state congressman's office.

These are selfish thoughts, there's no getting around it. But when I think about what is supposed to come, this promise I've made that I never thought in a million years would be called in, I can't help but be resentful. I've had to give up everything for a little girl I don't really know and a friend I became separated from.

I'm ready to dial Julie's number when Carly Ray comes up behind me. She has on baby-blue pajamas with daisy chains around the ankles and chest.

"J.D.," she says.

"Yeah," I say, turning on my hip and setting the phone down.

"Can't you sleep?"

"Not tonight," she says. "It's not an especially good night for sleep."

I smile at her and her child's way of speaking like an adult.

"What would Dad do if he were here?" I ask, too quickly to realize this may be the wrong thing to say.

"Nothing. He'd probably just sit here with me and talk till I got bored."

I ask her if she wants me to read her a story, but she says no. She says she just wants to sit outside for a bit.

"That's what we'll do, then. It'll be hard to get up in the morning for school, though. You'll be tired. Fifth grade can wear a girl out."

IN THE morning we're running late, and I hustle Carly Ray out to the truck, handing her some money for lunch.

"Dad always made my lunch," she says.

"Today you'll have to buy your lunch," I tell her. "I forgot." I want to tell her that after she fell asleep on the porch, and I carried her up to bed, I came back outside and called Julie and she kept me on the phone until nearly three. I want to tell Carly Ray that Julie is probably the first woman I've ever even felt close to loving, to saying "I love you" to, and not having it feel hollow and out of some form of obligation.

Carly Ray doesn't know any of this. She is looking at me, hateful and upset. "I hate the school lunch," she says.

"I'm sorry, Carly Ray, I really am. I won't forget again."

She gets in the truck and holds her backpack in her lap. I flip the collar down on my sport coat and slide in, smelling sawdust in the floorboards. In four years I've not driven a car or a truck, much less a stick. I pop the clutch three times before we even make it out of the driveway.

Carly Ray is sullen. She pouts, refusing to look at me or even straight ahead. She only looks out her own window.

"I really am sorry," I say to her, hoping to make peace.

She says nothing and stares ahead. In two weeks it seems I can't do anything right. When I tried to clean up the house, getting rid of some of Beryl's old magazines, she asked me why I was throwing them out. And when I started to pack his shirts and put them in boxes, she came into the room, looked at me, and then turned around without saying a word.

I have no idea how to handle her. I'm lost about how to get her to open up, about even knowing what she needs from me. The muffler has a hole in it, and the truck rumbles when I downshift and give it gas. It sounds like a sputtering lawn mower on turns.

On Adams, I pass the house I grew up in and see the new homeowners have taken down the basketball hoop where Beryl and I used to have our games. I see him and me, our younger selves dribbling and blocking each other's shots. I see Beryl streak past me as I stand lead-footed, my neck craning, to watch him lay the ball in.

Carly Ray is looking out her window, gripping and then regripping her bag, as if she's kneading dough. I think to tell her this, to give the images I have of her father, but I keep quiet until we get to her school and I ask if she'd like for me to come in with her.

"What for?" she says.

"I don't know. Do parents go in with their kids at the beginning of fifth grade?"

"You're not my parent."

She doesn't say this with malice. She says it the way a person says, "Looks like rain today."

I grip the steering wheel harder. "I know that," I say. I want to remain calm. I want to say the right words. "I just meant do you need me to go with you?"

"It's okay," she says. "I can do it by myself."

"I'll wait here until you get inside, then." She gets down from the truck, and I hand her the backpack.

I wave to her, but she has already shut the door and is walking up the small set of steps. She is greeted by a young woman standing at the door in khaki pants and a bright red blouse. The woman waves

to me and ushers Carly Ray inside and I pull away, almost popping the clutch again.

LAST NIGHT I told Julie, "I can't do this."

"Why don't you bring her back here?" she said.

"Mom doesn't think it's a good idea."

"Your mother isn't in charge, J.D. You are. Your whole life is here. Your job, your friends. What about us?"

"I know, I know." There was a long pause on the phone until I finally said, "I think she has to grow up here. You don't understand that, I know, but it has to be *here*."

"I don't even know what that means. People don't have to grow up in small towns."

"What am I supposed to do, Julie? I gave him my word. You think I want to be here?"

"So, what? It's settled? Is that what you're saying? We can't even talk about it? You just said you couldn't do this. I thought we talked about doing this together. At least trying it. You were going to bring her up here after Labor Day, and then we'd enroll her at a good school, let her get adjusted to the city. What happened to that? Didn't you tell me he was always telling you how proud he was of you? How much he wished he could have gone off and done the things you did? Don't you think he'd want you to still live your life too?"

"It's not that simple, and you know it. Maybe if she were older. It's too soon to move her." I looked up at the sky, the dots of stars, and I could feel my throat closing, fighting the urge to let go of my emotion and tell Julie just how afraid I was and how much I was beginning to love her just as I had to leave. Then the phone went silent again, and I could hear Julie tapping her fingers against the window in her apartment, looking out over the traffic on Houston.

"I thought we talked about this, J.D. I thought we were going to try together."

"Things are hard, Julie. She's just a little girl. I don't know if the timing is right, and—"

“Of course the timing isn't right, J.D. Her father died. But you sound like you're giving up on everything. You don't have to make every decision right now, do you?”

I thought about Julie's face, the soft point of her chin resting on the windowsill, her light reflection in the glass, her dark hair falling forward in her face, covering her temples.

“Why won't you let me help you?” she said. “I love you, J.D. You have to think about yourself too.”

I SPEND most of the day cleaning up the house. I'm reorganizing some things in the living room and in Beryl's—now my—bedroom but now leaving as much as possible the way it was for Carly Ray's benefit. I cut the grass and pull weeds from the flowerbed and then make a list for the grocery store, leaving enough blank spaces for Carly Ray to fill in and put down what she wants.

The sun comes down through the trees in specks, and the heat feels like it has a hum to it. I wheel the lawn mower back in the shed and feel welcomed by the cold air resting inside. Everything is so neat and organized, hanging off screws driven into boards. In the corner is a minifridge where Beryl kept his stash of beer, afraid to let Carly Ray know he liked to drink one from time to time.

I open the door and pull out one of the silver cans and pop the top. I hear my throat rising and falling as I gulp down nearly half of it in one long pull. I sift through the drawers of a small filing cabinet that has all the invoices for customers built up over the years. I see Beryl made a good living framing and roofing houses. I think in all those years I've been away he must have grown closer to other people, that when he died there's no way he could have still considered me his best friend.

I finish the beer and grab another. And then another. I sit in the shed all day and drink Beryl's beer. I forget about our childhood and our races up and down Roosevelt Street on our bikes. I forget about the night we stayed up until dawn at my father's cabin after graduation, matching each other shot for shot from the Maker's Mark bottle, standing on the railing of the balcony, seeing which one

of us would fall first while our friends cheered us on. I try to forget about his phone call to me when we were in our junior year of college, me at UK and Beryl at Eastern.

"Tracy's pregnant," he said.

I sat up still groggy with sleep. "I thought you were smarter than that," I said. "Didn't you wear a rubber?"

"It was just the one time, J.D. I swear."

"Well, that's all it takes, right?"

"What am I going to do?" he said. "I ain't ready for no kid."

Outside my window, I heard the sounds of some pledge class singing *Dixie* to the sorority houses in a monotonous, embarrassed sort of tone.

On the other end of the line I could hear Beryl pacing the floor and walking out of his parents' house, the door slamming behind him.

"Quit pacing and sit down for a second," I said. "You don't have to do anything about it tonight. You've got a little bit of time, man."

"What's that mean?"

"You know exactly what it means."

"Shit. That ain't no kind of advice. I can't ask her to do that."

"Why not? You think she's found some religion all of a sudden?"

"No. It just don't seem right to me, that's all."

"Well, what then? Marriage?"

"Shit," Beryl said. "That ain't no kind of advice either. She's crazier than a shithouse rat. You know that yourself."

"She's always been crazy for you," I said.

Beryl huffed into the phone and let out a sigh. "I'm in a fix this time. I'm going to have to quit school. Get a job."

"Don't do that," I said to him.

"That kid's going to need a father. There ain't nobody but me and her to take care of it."

But it turned out he was the only one. Tracy took off after the birth. Never told anybody where she was headed. She was just gone. Her parents moved to Florida a year after Carly Ray was born,

Jacksonville, I think, and like Tracy, they never kept in contact. Beryl was it. He was all Carly Ray had.

Cans are scattered at my feet. I stand up and start stepping on them in hard strokes, flattening them out. My skin is hot from the alcohol; a patch of sweat on my back feels cold. I keep stomping the cans until they are all discs. I kick at them, pushing them like hockey pucks into the yard.

I go to kick another and miss, losing my balance. I fall backward and try to catch myself on the workbench, but my fingers slip and I fall. I feel my coccyx crack, shooting pain up my spine, and my left hand slams beside me, and the last three fingers jam against the ground, bending the top knuckles backward. I hold my hand out in front of me and clench my teeth as I push them back into place.

I walk out of the shed and into the house, straight to Carly Ray's room. I shove my hand, my bad hand, under the mattress and ignore the thousand spikes of pain tingling under my skin as I pull the picture of Beryl out.

Beryl's in between two other men with his arms draped over their shoulders and grinning that easy, warm smile of his. His sandy-blond hair is lighter than normal because of the sun, and his tool belt hangs around his waist, sloped down over one hip. I can see his farmer's tan at the sleeves of his T-shirt and at the lines around his eyes. I never saw him this way. I never saw him as a man, really. My visits were too short, too sporadic for me ever to know what became of his life in the way a friend should know these things.

I expected this picture to be of Carly Ray and him, but I see the appeal is how fully he fills the space, how engaging and bright he looks. I cuss him. I yell at him for dying and for making me come back to this place when I was just getting started with my own life.

My voice screeches in my throat, and I feel my pulse in my temples when I shout. I pound the wall with my good hand, feel the Sheetrock crack. I grab at the poster on the wall as I fall to the floor. My hand throbs with pain, and I crumple his picture, believing I can press all the pain concentrated there into his image. I open my hand and look at the creased lines on his face. Tears run down my cheeks

and I look up, to the doorway, and I see Carly Ray standing there. Mom is holding onto her shoulders.

"J.D.," Mom says. "What in the hell are you doing?" She looks around the room, sees the poster ripped and lying on the floor, the imprint of my fist in the wall.

Carly Ray jerks away from her and runs down the hallway and out of the house. I go to the window and watch her run away, her little legs pounding into the sidewalk, her arms swaying side to side, trying to cut the air. I hear my mother's voice on the porch calling for her, asking her to stop.

Mom walks back in the room.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" She looks at me, grabs my cheek, and pulls down on my skin. I jerk away from her, and the picture flies out of my hand, falling on the carpet.

"You're drunk," she says.

"I am not."

"You were supposed to pick her up from school an hour ago," she says. "Her teacher had to call me because she couldn't get an answer here at the house."

"I forgot," I say and try to walk past her, into the living room and then outside, but she grabs my arm. "What?" I shout.

She slaps me in the face as hard as she can, and one of her nails nicks me. She can't control the contortions in her face. She looks at me more disappointed than at any other time I can remember.

"We've got to go get her," she says.

The beer is bouncing in my head. My steps are wobbly, even though my mind is starting to clear. I realize what I've done and why I've done it and how it must look to Carly Ray, who doesn't know anything about life and decisions, sacrifices people make for others.

"How could you?" my mom keeps saying to me in the car. "She's just a little girl, and she has to come home to see you there, destroying her room, ruining the one thing she has left."

I stay quiet because there is no explanation, not one that would matter to her or me, really. I press my forehead against the window

and look at the rows of houses that haven't changed since I was a boy, everything so unflinchingly the same.

"You're a grown man, for God's sake," she says. "Getting drunk in the middle of the day. And then. The gall you have to do something like that."

She goes on. Keeps repeating herself, keeps saying the same things to me over and over. She's yelling at me for something I couldn't control. And I want to say something to this effect back to her, to stand up for myself, but what I did is indefensible, inexcusable.

"I get the point," I say.

"Do you? Well, congratulations. That's great. You get the point. There's a little girl you're supposed to take care of running around town because she's just seen you destroy her room and her father's picture, but you get the point. Thank God for clarity."

"I didn't ask to take care of her." I say it so softly that even I'm surprised I've said it.

Mom slams the brakes and, because I've forgotten to put my seat belt on, my head flies into the windshield before I can catch myself.

"You didn't ask to take care of her? You didn't ask to take care of her? She didn't ask for her father to die, J.D. That little girl hasn't asked for shit, and that's exactly what she's gotten her whole life."

I keep touching my forehead.

"Get out," she says. "She can't be far. Start calling her name."

JUST AFTER dusk, when the mosquitoes start to get thick and I can hear the frying of bugs in blue lights on back porches, I find Carly Ray sitting out behind the shed at the house. It's been almost two hours, and I've been crossing through the same yards Beryl and I crossed twenty years ago when we were nearly her age. My head aches from the beer and the knot on it. Some lightning bugs pop and katydids are whining, but there is still enough light that I can make out her face and see she hasn't been crying.

"Hey," I say as softly as possible. I'm not sure if it's to comfort her or to make sure I don't scare her.

She looks up at me, but she's quiet. Just like her father.

She goes back to staring in front of her, ignoring me. I feel the pull of a thousand mistakes in my life compounded into this one chance I have at redemption.

"Why me?" I'd asked Beryl. We were twenty-five, and he'd just come back from putting his father in the nursing home.

"You're all the family I got, man. Tracy's never coming back. Her parents don't care about Carly Ray. I know if anything happens you'll take care of her." We were on the back deck and instead of this shed being here there was a dead maple tree, its trunk almost rotted out.

I didn't know what to say to him then except that I was honored and that, of course, I'd be Carly Ray's godfather. Beryl and I never talked about it again, but as I look at Carly Ray and consider all the years in the past and the ones she has coming, it's on my mind how often I've not thought about it. The nobility and conviction of my word to Beryl don't have the strength they did seven years ago. I've let myself forget what it meant to Beryl to ask me, for me to be the one, and because I've done this I feel like I'm unworthy of taking care of his daughter.

"Are you hungry?" I say, knowing I'm stalling. "My mom will be back any minute now, and she'll cook you some supper."

I squat down in front of her, like a catcher, and look into her eyes. They are Beryl's, round with small irises that give her looks focus.

"I messed up today," I say. "I really messed up." I think how awful this sounds, how unapologetic it is.

Carly Ray blinks, staring at the back of the shed, the chipped white paint on the boards and the dandelions that have grown up at the base.

"Did your Daddy ever tell you about me, Carly Ray? Do you remember when I used to come visit you and him?"

This breaks her stare, but she still won't look at me. She is thinking.

"When your daddy asked me to be your godfather I was proud to tell him I would do it and take care of you. And now all I can think

about is what I did today, and how he would feel about it, what he would do to me if he was here.”

“He'd kick your ass,” she says, and this time there is venom in her voice, the anger of her father's death I haven't seen until now.

It's what keeps me from laughing and forces the sting deeper.

“You're right. He'd beat me black and blue. He was a way better fighter than me,” I tell her. “I—” but I stop short.

Carly Ray looks right into me, so hard I blink and almost fall back. “Why did you rip my poster and punch my wall?”

“I was angry at him for leaving. I was angry that I'm the one who is supposed to take care of you.”

“You don't want to take care of me.” She says it as a statement, not a question, and this hurts the most. This little girl who has nothing anymore, who is the daughter of the best friend I ever really had.

Mom's car pulls into the driveway and illuminates the yard in a sweeping motion. I get up and walk out from behind the shed and wave to her. “She's right here.” I point.

Mom comes running up and bends down to hug Carly Ray. “Lord, you scared us to death. We looked all over town for you. I was fixing to call the police. Don't ever do that again,” she whispers into her ear and looks at me when she says this. “Don't ever run off again.”

They walk past me into the house, and I'm left standing in the dark, my hands in my pockets and dew collecting on the tops of my shoes. I pick up the cans from earlier and throw them in the trash. I lock up the shed and go sit on the steps of the porch and smell hamburgers frying inside.

Mom puts Carly Ray to bed and says she's going to stay the night. I'm still outside, slapping at gnats and mosquitoes, and I tell her I'll sleep on the couch. She's too angry with me to say much more, and I don't blame her. I see the red light of a radio tower flashing off by the railroad.

After the house is quiet I go inside and grab a burger from the fridge and walk outside again. I can't even stand to be in the house.

I'm on the steps, and I lay my head back and feel the wood, cool and grainy, against my neck.

Carly Ray comes outside, and I open up my eyes. She stands over me and then sits down beside me. I raise up and offer her a bite of my half-eaten burger, but she shakes her head.

"Can't sleep?" I ask.

"No," she says.

"You'll be tired tomorrow."

"Yeah," she says. "I was tired today too."

"You need to get your rest. School's going to be tougher this year than last year, right?"

"I guess."

"Sure it will be. That's how it works," I say, but then I stop myself. There's no use trying to talk to her like this. She's too smart not to see what I'm trying to do.

We are quiet on the porch, listening to the trains being connected in the distance and the rumble of their movements echoing above us. I'm ready to pitch my burger into the bushes when Carly Ray speaks up.

"I miss him, J.D."

"You always will," I tell her. "You can talk to me about those things when you want. When you're ready to."

She nods her head and folds her arms over her knees and lays her chin down on them. "Do you miss him?"

I think about this for longer than I should. I hadn't seen him since last Christmas and only then for a few beers. Our conversation felt strained, and our emails became reduced to nothing but forwarded jokes. I do miss him, but not in the way I think I should.

"Yes," I tell her. "I miss him."

She stays quiet, and I look out at the road with her, neither of us moving or talking until I say, "You know, when we were kids and I'd make a mistake, your father would never say anything to me. Just go quiet for a few days and give me these awful looks. He wouldn't sit by me at lunch and wouldn't call me at home. Back then I had a car and he didn't, so I'd usually pick him up, and when he was mad, I'd

wait for him on the curb every morning. When he wasn't mad anymore he'd come out and get in the car and we'd go to school and act like nothing had ever happened.

"He made me think by doing that. And if I tried to mention what had happened or tell him I was sorry, he wouldn't let me. Just say, 'I already forgot it.' Even then as a kid that's what he did. That's funny, ain't it? A person acting that way."

Carly Ray is sleeping, though, and she leans into me. I put my arm around her and expect her to knock it away, but she nudges closer next to me. Her breathing is soft and blows lightly against my skin. I pick her up and she rouses a little but falls back asleep, and I carry her into her room. The poster is taped up and hanging in its place on the wall. I think about the way my own father used to carry me to bed and how warm it felt next to him and how strong his arms were wrapped around me.

I pull back her covers and lay her down and then pull them back up. She rolls to her side and then onto her back. The streetlamp outside goes off, and the room is suddenly dark. I lean down and whisper, "I'm sorry, Beryl."

She opens her eyes to me but doesn't say anything, and we stay like that. Two strangers staring at each other, one charged with taking care of the other.

