

The Presidential Address, 1968

The presidential address faded sharply with the slamming of the door, and the harsh winter settled easily upon her skin. Oli had had much too much of the family celebrations that were not her own, the biting comments, the whispered insults; the family had gone in to watch the address, and she had stepped out onto the tenderly indifferent New York streets, largely absent but for a few dot-like individuals far down the avenue.

She closed her eyes, and the space-grey of asphalt turned to canary-yellow grass, blowing in the Carolina breeze. The endless horizon of red brick turned to an infinite cerulean, the white dust cloud on the horizon that signalled noon. The too-tight red dress suddenly felt light and airy on her skin, and the wrinkled hat felt exuberant in its youth. 1968 faded to 1955, and suddenly she was seventeen again, home, with all its southern comforts. The bitter righteousness of east-coasters had ceded to wretched libertarianism, and the unthoughtful neighbours had disappeared, and it was only the Garden for as far as the eye could see.

She looked to the vast plains of sun and sky and earth, that eventually all melded together as one beautiful, blinding canvas of simple life, as it should have always been, before everything went to hell and everyone had died and Carolina had at last held nothing but the plains, and though she had held on so vigorously, they too had at last become dull and meaningless.

The Woman, who had spent so many years fighting the memories, the temptations to delve into a brighter and unburdened world for fear that she could never leave, decided at this moment, as she saw the blue and yellow and all the emptiness in between, that she would cease to fight. Quite simply, she no longer saw any use for it.

The day had taken more than its fair share, and now she would take her own.

The day after her brother died had been the day she decided to leave for good, to uproot to the promised land of New York, where it did not matter if everyone you had loved were dead because there were so many more to meet. Grandmother, Grandfather, and all that had come hence, paled in comparison to the invisible masses - the faceless infinite, that held all the possibility in the world. Possibility! Lying sack of-!

She allowed herself to remember that day now, to remember the rope swing rocking morosely to itself, the porch creaking its sorrows beneath her lacklustre feet. The house was empty, then. She had convinced herself that if she walked every inch of the house, every inch that had before been covered by handmade tables, or tape-tied chairs, or even the rug that had been burned three times, and survived each one, that she could reconstruct it in her mind and then she wouldn't really be leaving, because she'd always be able to walk from the porch through to the kitchen, past the rusty tap, through the archway to the sitting room, and then to the stairs. She could go up, if she so pleased. Right on the first, left on the next three, then right for two, then left for one and then centre for the rest if she wanted to not make a sound as she came in late at night. Past the parents' door, always the most treacherous moment - step on the rug to reduce sound by 30% - and then to the final straight, past the grandparents with ease, the toilet, the room with two sisters, then the brother, then at the

end of the hall, the door to comfort; comfort comes in only one model, I'm afraid - white, wooden, with bronze furnishings.

She burned into her eyes, so that it would never be far, the desk that had grown with her, an extra inch or two added to the legs each year. The shelves that fell if you filled them, so they always seemed half empty. She had convinced herself that if she remembered where each spring prodded her back from the old mattress, and the way each pillow moulded around her head, then she would never sleep uncomfortably again.

Nowadays she always slept uncomfortably. She imagined it would be like that for some years to come, when her decrepit eyes could not close but for the thought of home; after the many births, and the many betrayals, she would one day lie back in her New York bedstead and all it would feel like was Carolina, and she would whisper goodbye to the ghosts of the living, and slip into the real world, the wheat-fields that rock her to sleep, and she would never leave, not this time. No, she would one day lie down and dream of home and simply never wake up, embrace the happy dagger, and sing herself to peaceful sleep with dreams of a brighter tomorrow, that also happened to be yesterday. People would mourn, and say she was in a better place, and they would, for once in their lives, be right. She would at last be home.

But that hour would not strike the clock for some time. Life's tunnel had so much more darkness to go, and she would drive along, needle at the top of the speedometer, until eventually the dot of light at the end of it would grow into the blinding light at the end of Carolinas horizon, and she would be home.

But that hour would not strike the clock for some time. She was only thirty, and she would have to sit through at least thirty more Independence Day presidential addresses, even if she were lucky.

She turned to go back inside, leaving the blissful Carolina behind for at least one more night, thinking how much more she would enjoy the wretched family arguments if, by some grace of god, they were her own.