

They Who Make Us

BY CHRISTOPHER NELSON

Strong. She was strong. Tall and skinny, but muscle-solid like jointed pipes. He remembered being too sick to go to school before she'd left his father and moved out to Lords Creek to find herself and never came back. She was working at the mill then, down in Hickory, and he remembered how exciting it'd been to drive past the school's still-silent red bricks and naked flagpole on their way from their house in West Tucker to the highway, a proud, chosen feeling like having the one toy everyone else'd wanted after Christmas. It was enough to make the fever ease in his mind at least, and as they drove south down 321 he forgot he'd ever had one in the first place. The old oak tree in their front yard had just started to blossom, tiny dark specks that dotted the gray morning sky, but by the time they crested the final hill he saw that across the long gray stripe of asphalt the far bank shone blinding green above the last wisps of fog on the river. And along Hickory's wide streets the azaleas were all in bloom, their leaves full and flowers glowing like they were lit from inside, and it was then that he began to understand that beyond his narrow domain the world was a garden that'd been hidden and kept from him, began to sense that Tucker was something he needed to escape *from*.

At the mill, his Mama'd sat him in the front office with a woman named Reena who talked on the phone and fed him rock candy from a glass on her dish. It was boring enough to be exhausting, and twice when Reena went out to use the bathroom he'd snuck through the green steel door that led to the machines and went to find his mother. It wasn't a big plant –

reception, offices, a single hosiery floor, and the loading dock out back – and his clearest memory was of the noise. Loud enough he'd had to raise his voice for Reena to hear him with the steel door closed, and behind that there was nothing to hear besides the machines roaring and humming, some rattling, all violent. Two rows back in the middle of the noise and standing before a line of pale green machines three times taller than him, Will'd found her. Both times he'd stopped when he first saw her concentrating on the machine with her hair pulled back and covered with a bandanna like the one she wore to clean, her arms occasionally reaching to adjust something inside the machine moving faster than his eye could catch, and her face set as strong as he'd ever seen it, her jaw locked back like the hammer of his dad's pistol. And both times he'd stood there, before she or another worker could notice him and snatch him up in their arms with a *What in the hell do you think you're doing?*, he'd been certain his Mama was the strongest person he'd ever know in the world.

~

Will thought back to that day as he sat on his balcony waiting for his Mama to call, his phone on the table between a half-empty glass of Sun-Drop and gin and the ashtray. She'd called while he was with a student, and the voicemail he'd listened to later was short and hadn't said much of anything. But there was something wrong. It'd been in her voice, a little tremor that he'd learned to recognize through countless nights during the years after her accident as clear as California scientists must hear seismic rumbles. What that wrong was could be anything – from something trivial like something somebody'd said to piss her off to a real problem like one more doctor's bill she couldn't pay to something much worse – and it was the not knowing that ate at him. Will kept replaying her voice in his head, the same voice that'd spoken to him since before birth now

flattened and slowed like an old cassette set on a car's dashboard too long. He'd called back before leaving the clinic where he worked and left a message, then'd called again an hour later and left another. Every couple of minutes he'd get antsy and reach for the phone, but he knew there wouldn't be a point in doing anything besides waiting. She'd called first, and she would call again when she could.

Across the street at the Jewish Community Center they'd hung a banner along the top of the fence saying this was the last week the pool would be open, but the same banner had been up three weeks ago before they'd draped another over it announcing the pool'd stay open on weekends and after school. And despite the fact he'd had to park two blocks away for all the cars Will hoped they'd change their minds again. He enjoyed the crowds, enjoyed watching the little kids splash around in water wings while their older brothers and sisters tried to impress each other in their own way, parents hovering distractedly around the edges. It was a puppet show with shouts and chlorine floating on the summer air like spices.

In the deep end a pudgy boy about fourteen or so was trying to lift himself out of the water without resorting to the ladder, and Will watched until the kid finally managed to swing a leg over the concrete lip and make his way to the diving board, blending into a pack of children too young to know to look down on him. He felt bad for the boy, knowing how hard it was to feign indifference. He finished off his drink and stood, feeling the first rush of a gin buzz as he stepped inside.

It was a good ten degrees warmer in the living room, and he knew he'd appreciate the retained heat later when he woke in the pre-dawn morning. He'd left Tom Waits growling over a piano on the stereo. The open windows drew a breeze that riffled scraps of paper on the coffee table. For a second he gave himself over to standing just inside the door, examining the

accumulations of his life, happy for that moment.

He lived in one of a row of small apartment buildings built in the late 1920s just north of downtown on the back streets that ran between Charlotte and Merrimon, the apartment itself long and narrow with the bedroom in back and living room and concrete balcony up front, a cramped hallway running between the two. The kitchen and bathroom filled the space between larger rooms. They'd been retiled recently, but the rest of the place had worn hardwood floors and white gypsum walls decorated with the same assortment of posters and Dali prints he'd had in college. The apartment didn't have the amenities of the newer complexes south of town, but it was vintage and felt as if it had grown out of the living core of the city like rings on a tree rather than something spilled across the surface, and the neighborhood was a haven of sorts for students and the recently graduated, many of them artists of some form or another who paid their bills by working in one of the local restaurants or coffee shops. He felt that things were happening in Asheville, beginnings he could be a part of. Here there was growth without decay. He liked to imagine that one day the area would be remembered in the same way that North Beach or the Lower East Side were, a place where for a time artists and admirers both came together to create a new wrinkle in the cultural fabric of the world. And though he wasn't an artist it was enough to just be here, to be a part of the groundswell that propelled others into the spotlight.

And, he'd been seeing somebody who embodied those marked for distinction. Her name was Alana, and she was in her second senior year in the undergraduate poetry program at the college. And while Will had no idea what separated a good from a bad poem beyond the obvious too many rhymes and flowers, he knew she was *good*.

His friend Marcus had asked him to go

watch a student reading at Malaprop's Books and he'd seen the change that came over the audience when it was Alana's turn. They quieted in a way they hadn't for the others, and as he looked across at the crowd of mostly parents and friends he saw there were no daydreams, no distractions in the café, no shuffling papers. They listened, attentive like they expected at any minute to hear their own names. And he knew it wasn't her voice or looks. Others had read like they thought they were Billy Graham or else mumbled so soft he'd had to strain to hear, and even the shy had polished themselves into their best approximation of a poet, a new fedora or wrinkle skirt or interesting tattoo each time he looked. Alana hadn't gone out of her way to attract or avoid attention either one. She stepped to the lectern wearing a formless gray shift, no adornment except a watch, yet she shone unintentionally like a conscripted angel so used to its own radiance it was unaware of the effect. When she read it was in a clear alto that allowed the melody of her words to be heard without cheap ornamentation. Will listened, but afterwards all he could remember from the poems themselves were a few unrelated phrases swallowed by the whole of their song. What he remembered clearly was *her*. How her face was so pale it was almost alabaster against the contrast of the hair falling across her neck like a veil cut from a single dark amber cloth, how she moved unhurriedly but without arrogance, not caring whether anyone took notice. Then her turn was over, the spell lifting while she found her seat. He'd remembered looking for her after the last poet, scanning the clusters of ongoing congratulations as he followed Marcus outside for a cigarette, but he hadn't found her until almost a month later when he'd stumbled up half-drunk to the empty chair beside her at the New Europa downtown and introduced himself.

~

When he saw Alana's familiar gait coming down the hill beside the center Will was back on the porch with a fresh gin, watching a girl no older than himself try to corral three kids into the back of an SUV. It was almost 7:00, the evening shadows creeping towards the pool as the sun set behind his building. He thought about going ahead and trying to reach his Mama again but decided to wait until full dark. If she didn't answer then he'd have to call his Uncle Carter, but he hoped it wouldn't come to that, started to regret not having talked to her – his session with Amanda Robbins, the nervous first-grader he'd been teaching vowels to, be damned – when he'd had the chance. Logically he knew there wasn't reason to worry, but he could help being reminded of hours he'd spent as a teenager waiting for a crush to call. There was that same weird combination of excitement and sick fear.

He debated telling Alana. They'd only been seeing each other for a month, though, just enough time to cross the barrier of discussing their relationship or even using the word "relationship" to describe it, and he wasn't sure he was ready. He'd mentioned his mother running off and becoming something of a New Ager before finally settling into a hybrid creation she liked to call "mystic Christianity." He'd told Alana about the years he'd spent being passed between his father's progressively neglected millhouse in West Tucker with its growing stacks of unread newspapers and faulty wiring and his Mama's little ranch house in the middle of nowhere. But those were things he'd tell anybody, general information no more intimate than his middle name or favorite color.

His silence had nothing to do with Alana personally. Until college he'd figured he'd had a pretty unremarkable life. He watched TV and played video games. He liked to ride his bike, sometimes for hours. At his Mama's he'd go out and hike through the woods pretending he was in the Special Forces with the bolt .22 his

dad had given him when he turned thirteen, and in high school he'd driven countless back roads talking about sex and music while getting messed up on cheap port wine and blunts of brown shwag. He knew his parents had trouble paying bills, especially his Mama after the accident, but they'd had jobs most of the time and outside of Upper Creek and the country club he couldn't think of many kids who wouldn't have been able to say the same and a hell of a lot who could've said worse. But it hadn't taken him long in Crockett to realize that what he'd always considered normal others considered somehow primitive, that what he thought of as rich in Tucker was considered the middle of the middle class in other places. Once he'd earned himself a half-hour environmental lecture from a girl in his American Literature survey for saying he watched NASCAR. Divorced parents were common enough to admit, he'd decided in the end, but if he shared more than that he either had to confess to being a redneck when he couldn't pass for one back home or else run the risk of being felt sorry for when there was nothing to be sorry about. So eventually he'd just stopped telling, and by the time Alana asked the habit had been so well ingrained he didn't think about it except when he was alone in the apartment at night, thinking too much.

Will timed it so he opened the front door just as Alana was pounding up the steps. "I had to park at the damn video store on Charlotte," was all she said as she brushed past, crossing the living room at a near-jog and slinging her backpack on the far end of the loveseat just before disappearing in the direction of the bathroom.

Will followed as far as the kitchen, where he went in and mixed another gin and Sun-Drop. There were still a good five fingers left in the pint. He figured he had enough to last the evening without being too stingy so he went ahead and sipped the top off his drink, replacing it with straight gin and calling down

the hall to see if Alana wanted one.

"Do you have any Sprite or 7-Up to mix it with?" she answered.

Without speaking Will reached back in the freezer for the gin, moving quickly to the cabinet and grabbing another glass before mixing it with the fresh two liter he'd bought just for that purpose, trying to heave it ready before she came back. He was just finishing with the mixer when she spoke, her voice so close that for a split second it seemed to surround him like the voice of God.

"Be sure to leave enough room for ice."

Startled, Will looked up to find her in the doorway. She was wearing a black skirt with matching knee boots so the few inches of skin exposed drew his eyes, called his thoughts away to the curves hidden under above in the skirt's waist. He handed her the drink and kissed her, said hello.

"Hello yourself," Alana said, near enough for him to see the dusting of freckles across the base of her neck. She smiled and parted her lips, drawing her eyes across his face just a half-second longer than normal, the subtle language of a question unasked.

Will pushed his kiss back into hers, deep like her mouth was a cave that could shelter him, let him forget everything but the sound of his lips meeting her flesh. She tasted faintly of strawberry lipgloss, and the smell of sweat and marijuana underneath sandalwood incense that clung to her clothes and soaked into her skin mixed with her feral scents to form a near visible cloud around her. He felt they could explode or dim lightbulbs if they wanted, knock out the city's entire grid. But only for a minute. Alana shifted so that her back was to the bedroom door and he was suddenly aware of the phone shoved deep in his pocket like an embarrassing growth, and he pressed himself against her so roughly she was knocked off balance and staggered backwards down the hall, pulling him with her by the shirt.

~

When Will stepped back onto the porch the evening had stretched itself across the pool and Beaucatcher Mountain, taking whatever warmth the day had harbored in the advance, and he still hadn't heard from his mother. He stared at the fading division between ridgeline and night. A chill brushed his arms and across his shoulders. Something had to be wrong. He'd been able to keep the fear silent up until the rush of orgasm, but afterwards, holding Alana as she talked about her day of classes, the god-awful poem she'd been forced turn in for workshop and the class's effort to make their disapproval as encouraging as possible, he kept getting distracted by the mental image of the silent phone, and in each heartbeat he felt Nero's arterial guilt for fiddling while somewhere Rome burned. Now fear's banshees shrieked in his ears, spewing every conceivable disaster as a certainty, as inevitable as him being held accountable afterwards.

He sat down and lit a cigarette. The living room lamp came on behind him, coating the table and chairs with a yellow film and followed a few seconds later by the screen door creaking open and shut. Alana set the forgotten two glasses on the table and went to lean against the brick rail, looking down on the now still poolwater. The light made her hair glow a deep russet red, and when she turned halfway to look at something down the street it caught the side of her face, turning her jawline into a buttermilk crescent that struck Will as unspeakably beautiful.

He left his burning cigarette in the ashtray and went to her, kissing her quick on the lips before settling into a hug. She was only an inch or so shorter than him, and in his arms she felt solid, strong enough to take care of herself if she had to.

"I forgot to ask earlier," she said, leaning back. "That conference is tomorrow afternoon, right?"

"Yeah," he nodded.

The conference. Will felt something in

his chest twist, another needle in the voodoo doll God kept of him. He'd met with parents before, but there was something about Kylee Folsom's mother he didn't trust, and combined with the hesitation in Dr. Clay's voice when she'd told him about the meeting suggested it wouldn't be an easy one. It'll be fine, he reassured himself, just something to deal with tomorrow.

Alana leaned in, scrutinizing his face until he had to look away, focusing on an empty planter a previous tenant had left and that he'd never bothered to throw out. There was still a layer of what had probably been soil across the bottom, and Will imagined green stalks had risen from it once, maybe herbs, maybe flowers, but something other than caked mud and old cigarette butts. He knew he should say something more, but he just couldn't. It was like the words were bottlenecked in his throat, held by a principle of air pressure he couldn't understand, and if the seal were to break he didn't know how much would come pouring out, what manner or control would be lost.

"You alright?" she asked.

He nodded, and after a minute Alana raised her eyebrows but otherwise let the matter drop, moving to the empty chair across the table. "Think we'll see skinny dippers tonight?" she asked.

"Too early to tell," he muttered, following her, reaching for his drink. The ice had melted, and the first sip was mostly water. He finished the rest off like a shot. "Might be too cold."

Alana shrugged and reached into her dress pocket. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes and put one, unlit, in the ashtray before reaching back in the box for a joint wider than Will's pinkie. "You sure you're alright?" she asked, putting her lighter to the joint's twisted end.

Will kept quiet but took the joint when offered, pulling on it until he burned from throat to lungs, and when he exhaled he felt the

familiar hitch and launched into a coughing fit that made random dots of light appear where before there'd been streetlamps. By the time he'd passed it back and was able to breathe halfway normal he was already starting to feel the effects, the weed and resurgent gin just past the point of introductions but still sizing each other up.

"Not going to answer?" Alana asked. She leaned back in the chair and pointed the joint at him between tokes, playfully goading, then stopped and let the chair land back on its legs before passing what was left of it back.

He drew on it again, gingerly this time, and when he passed it to her he took both their glasses in for refills. By the time he came back and set the drinks on the table, she'd lit the cigarette from the ashtray, replacing it with the roach.

"You never did tell me what was so bad about that poem." Will said, realizing as he sat back down how fast the weed had gotten on top of him yet still reaching for it and putting a flame to the tip, loving the butane's tiny roar. It was a distinct sound, but lesser than the music from inside and the noises from the neighborhood – car doors slamming, shouts and voices, the clicking of a bicycle's gears all the way from the top of the hill down to Murdoch, and everywhere, like he was lost in an echo chamber of them, hundreds of lonely tree frogs chirping. Will focused on the houselights crawling up Beaucatcher half-hidden by trees, hoping that if he could make sense of their pattern he could steady the chair holding him, but the lights were no more than fixed points in the distance, something to watch while he rode the gin's waves. He was reminded suddenly of a vacation at Myrtle Beach when he was no more than four or five, his chest pressed against a cheap inflatable raft as the ocean beneath lifted and dropped taking a little bit of his stomach each time, the image of his mother standing at the water's edge with her hands on her hips, watching to make sure

her baby wouldn't disappear and be lost.

At some point he noticed Alana was repeating his name, saying it louder each time, and the beach disappeared, the chair rested solidly on all four legs. "Thought I'd lost you there for a minute," she said, leaning across the table to press the back of her hand on his cheek, then his forehead. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'll be fine. Just a little worried about Mama." The words came out before he'd had time to form the thought, but it felt good to say them, to say something so essentially true. Memories of her appeared in his mind like cards, rearranging themselves without reason and no connections between them but the thin undercurrent of fear that a card he'd not seen before had been shuffled into the deck, was now waiting for its turn.

"What happened? Is she okay?"

"I don't know yet, that's the thing."

He struggled to catch up, to decipher the meaning in the way Alana was watching him out of the corner of her eye, his mind lagging behind like a gimp dog. How much more could he say without saying too much, or was it too late? Had he already crossed that line to stand in the shelterless open? Alana had grown up not liking her parents – her mother was the black sheep of old Albemarle money who'd neither forgotten the 'stateliness' of her raising nor abandoned the idea that Alana should be the prodigal surrogate, and the years themselves seemed to have eroded her father until he was just a castrated echo of his wife's commands. Will had no idea how she'd react if he tried to explain it. He wouldn't expect her to understand, wasn't sure he *could* explain it or put to words what 'It' was, some ineffable but inseparable set of ties that encompassed not only his mother but all the people and even the ground on which he'd been raised, how he couldn't imagine either of his parents without seeing the rest, an environment as immediate and familiar to him as anything he'd seen since.

How he felt like he was living in two places at once, always divided and never quite where he should be. He wanted to tell Alana this, to cover it again and again until the layered sketches produced something recognizable, but he also wanted her respect. And he was afraid he couldn't have both.

In the dim her eyes were no more than drops of dark caramel on a pale surface, unreadable. Will reached for the gin just as another wave started in his chest. It was worse than the others, an electric spasm that spread almost instantly like safety glass shatters – one small break then a million more at once – and he had to set the cup back down and lean forward with his elbows on his knees until it passed.

“Have you called her?” Alana asked when he was finally able to sit back up, her voice gentle, almost hesitant.

“Tried earlier.” Will rubbed his face, the knowledge that he'd waited more than long enough lumbering up from the back of his mind with a spear of guilt. “I should try again,” he said.

He stood up too fast and the blood left his head like a drain had been opened so that he had to lean against the back of the chair until the dizziness stopped, feeling Alana watching him. When he opened his eyes her face was a series of dark creases in the murk, and he could feel matching tendrils of concern and curiosity reaching for him.

“Want me to come with you?” she asked, but he shook his head and continued inside.

~

“Hey. It's you.” His mother's voice cracked with sleep. “I called you,” she said.

“I know, Mama. That's why I called you back.”

The bedroom was dark, and Will sat against the headboard with his knees pulled up, staring through the open blinds at the apartments next door, the alley out back where cedars planted when the building was first built

now scraped their branches across the walls and roof in the gloom.

“You always call back,” she smiled through the receiver. Will heard her sheets rustle. “I'm sorry I worried you. Carter took care of it. I was just upset. You know how I get ...” she trailed off like that was the end of it, and Will had to fight to tamp down his aggravation.

“Why were you upset?” he asked.

Deep at the other end of the apartment the screen door slapped its frame, and he listened to Alana moving around the living room. It struck him that he was talking to his Mama like she was one of his students, asking simple building blocks of questions so he wouldn't overwhelm her before she was really ready to talk.

“Just the same stupid shit.”

“Mama, what specifically happened?”

She sighed, and he heard the bedsprings creak as she sat up, put her feet to the floor. He could see the carpet from memory, the soft beige covered in random stains from dog piss and a glass of cherry Kool-Aid he'd spilled years before.

“Hold on,” she mumbled, “let me find my cigarettes.” A minute or so later the click of a lighter came through. “The bill collectors have been calling—”

“Mama—”

“Oh, they've been calling. Maryanne hadn't needed me to help out at the store in awhile, and I've been getting behind again.”

“I thought you said she was going to need you on weekends.”

“She'd thought so, too, but people just haven't been coming out to those things like she'd hoped.” She told him all the details, how yet another of the city's attempts to spur revitalization had failed, how difficult it was to sell anything but the cheapest of Maryanne's stock anyway – candles and Bert's Bee's Lip Balm the two most popular – how lucky Maryanne was to have enough money coming

in from her law firm to keep the place open and how lucky she was to have Maryanne as a friend in the first place.

Will found himself unable to catch more than half of her words, entirely lost in the image of their collection. Tucker had been in a sort of death throes for years, and as far back as he could remember downtown had been a collection of one-way streets lined with half-empty planters and crooked powerlines, the mostly empty storefronts broken only by the occasional vacant lot or burnt-out shell that, given luck, would become a vacant lot. And despite the city's best efforts to start something new, a handful of restaurants, and the town's first two bars that sold liquor by the drink the idea of revitalization never quite took root. It felt forced. There was too much of the recent past, too many signs of decay to overcome, like an aged matriarch in a dilapidated mansion, dying her hair and caking on makeup to recreate golden years that were unknown as to whether real or imagined.

And in the middle of it all, he imagined his mother staring at the square out the store's narrow front window, seeing her from outside on the square, a shape as thin as the building she stood in. What did she see? Did she think about him? Had he disappointed her like she'd disappointed him? He became so lost in the question he stopped listening altogether, and when Alana's head appeared in the bedroom doorway it took him a minute to place himself. The bedroom, the windows rectangles of black on pale white fields, the bed less steady now than when he'd come in and Mama's voice still talking. He smiled and shook his head at Alana's question, and she left, pulling the door closed behind her.

"What?" he asked, wondering how much time had passed.

"I was just telling you about what Maryanne had said about the holidays, how she'll probably need me again after Halloween."

"What happened today?"

"I told you a minute ago. I got a little behind on the power bill and they came by to shut it off." She spoke as if more embarrassed by having to repeat herself than the content, but Will remembered following her back to the door more than once, her hobbling, half-bent with the tail end of the blanket dragging behind like a train to ask the uniformed man with the work truck for one more day, so ashamed she couldn't look the man in the eye or hold her voice steady. He remembered, the same memory repeated with only the weather and the color of the truck changing.

"What else do you owe on?" he asked.

She laughed, but the lightness was gone from her voice. "Everything. You know what my disability is."

"I could send you some to help out. I mean, not enough, I know, but a couple hundred would help, wouldn't it?"

She paused and he could hear the silence on her end of the line, not even her breathing. "No," she said, the breath she'd been holding surrounding the word. "No. I've told you before I don't want your help."

Then why did you call me, Will thought, then pushed it out of mind. He wanted her to call. The worry was automatic, tied to the years they'd spent together living off her disability and the child support from High Point. To not worry felt like a separation, a defaulting on his childhood debt for worries she'd spent on him years before.

"I don't mind, Mama. I can spare a hundred or two; I've got a job, and Carter always has to run his mouth—"

"Carter's been about as good as he can to me," she snapped, suddenly more alert than she'd been acting up to that point. "You don't know the half—"

She stopped herself, and it was then Will realized she'd been crying. Realized, too, that there'd been more than just the power, that she'd offered that as a token worry, and it was

as if clouds that had been gathering all day had darkened suddenly, extinguishing even the lights in the near distance. Will had never been able to handle the sound of his Mama crying, even as a very young child when they were all together and her tears were as rare as a blood moon. Each choked sob an invisible fist that bypassed skin and bone to strike the invisible parts of him cradled inside and send him reeling.

“Mama.”

At the sound of his voice she stopped trying to hold back and started bawling, and Will repeated her name, tried to sooth her as he'd done before, like his sadness was a vine climbing the latticework of hers along the spine of its progenitors. This is the promised storm, he told himself, and it will pass like the others if you see it through to the end.

As his mother started to calm down she tried talking again, muffled apologies and unintelligible phrases that he comforted her through, then “If it hadn't happened so soon after.”

She didn't continue, but Will knew that whatever was at the end of that phrase was the heart of what was wrong, and he steeled himself for it as best he could. He swallowed though his mouth was dry.

She sniffled, and Will felt her resignation through the phone, could almost see her shoulders slumping towards her chest. “Happened so soon after what, Mama?” he asked, his voice half-smothered.

“The bank's taking the house ...”

There was more but he only heard parts and didn't have the energy to try and put them into any context. He felt cold, not a shivering cold but a cold that was almost numbing like being wrapped in an old quilt soaked in icewater. His fingers and toes tingled, but he was gone, aware of his body but nowhere near close to its surface, the core of himself retreating inward and collapsing on itself until it was all huddled in his chest, directing his

mouth and motions by remote control. The next morning he would know from this conversation that the notice had been delivered almost a week before, that Mama was so behind on the mortgage there was no hope of a deal and that Carter was already fixing up his basement, but he wouldn't remember the saying of the words any more than he'd remember getting off the phone and following the sound of the television down the hall to where Alana watched, laughing at something Jon Stewart had said. But he knew he couldn't forget, either.