

Part One:

# W O O D B I N E

# 1 .

The roads were winding and dark, no longer lit by city lights, houses far apart. Luke Citrine sat in the back seat gazing out the window. The night fields on either side of the car stretched on and on like seas of dark water. The stars were slowly moving too, or maybe it was the sparse clouds moving across the starlit sky that made it look like the world was sliding backward.

Luke's father was driving the family to his grandparents' farm, a few hours from the city. They came out to see them often—the farm felt like as much of a home as their house in town, Luke had spent so much time here. When he was a little kid, he'd spend weeks at a time on the farm with his brother while his parents travelled or just decided to take a break from the boys for a while. He didn't mind. He liked being there, but the drive always made him feel a little melancholy. Everything spread out the farther they drove, the world getting quieter and stiller, less and less to distract him from his own thoughts.

Nobody was talking now, groggy from the ride and the long week. His father drove, blinking and trying to keep his eyes open to focus on the country roads. Next to Luke's father, his mother sat with her head held in one hand, as if she were thinking about something or lost in a waking dream. Luke wanted to ask her what she was thinking about but he was pretty sure she was thinking about her parents out on the farm and he didn't want to bring it up. They'd be there soon enough.

Luke's older brother Stephen sat next to him, slumped into himself, still worn out from his graduation parties. Stephen's face was pressed against the window, his mop of dirty blond hair hanging down over his eyes. Luke couldn't tell if Stephen was asleep or just moping—he had friends in town and probably wanted to be hanging out with them, not spending time on the farm, especially since it was his last summer before he went away to college.

Luke could tell they were approaching his grandfather's farm. The car started to slowly swerve on the S-curve between cornfields. It felt like a descent, the car going down into the fields, into the darkness, like a submarine going under the water. Then, the car turned onto loud gravel that grumbled beneath the wheels, moving more slowly now. Coming here felt like going back in time. Life was slower on the farm than in the city anyway—no neighbors near by, no computers, and just one old TV his grandparents had never replaced, no cable. Near the end of the gravel road, they turned and drove through the wall of evergreens that surrounded the farmhouse like the high green walls of a fort. The house and barns that had been hidden suddenly appeared. They entered another world.

The fields were full of full-grown corn almost like woods. The wind moving through the corn made scratchy rustling sounds. It had a dry, slightly sweet smell. When threshed, the fields looked like scorched land, like a battlefield littered with the limbs of the dead, the slashed stubs of stalks sticking out of the dirt. When the wind blew in the right direction, the air filled with the rank, sickly sweet smell of silage. Then winter came with its long white sleep covering the fields as if there were no fields at all but only vast planes of smooth snow

stretching to the curve of the earth. At night, the fields of snow turned silver-blue in the moonlight like a frozen sea.

The car stopped. When the engine turned off, Luke felt how quiet it was out here away from town. The silence seeped into everything at night like a liquid filling the empty spaces. Up the slope from the car, the old white farmhouse loomed, a little run down now—the white paint chipping, shingles dulled from years of wind, rain, and sun. An orange light shone dimly through the front window, waiting for them. The silhouette of his grandmother came into the light and Luke felt like a little kid again, remembering all the times he'd spent here growing up, all the times his grandmother had greeted them as they drove up. He was glad to be here again, though nervous to see his grandfather, who was dying.

His mother turned around and looked at her sons, then reached back over the seat and shook Stephen's shoulders. "Hey," she said, nudging him out of his reverie. "Come on, sleepy-head. We're here."

"Huh?" Stephen said groggily. "Oh right. Here. Great."

"You too," she said, looking at Luke, though he wasn't asleep or even pretending to be.

Luke tumbled out of the car after Stephen and walked up the grassy slope to the front door behind his parents and brother, each dragging along a suitcase behind them. More lights turned on in the house. His grandmother appeared in the front door. It was late, after ten p.m., but she was still dressed in day clothes. Luke remembered her as always being perfectly put together even though she was in her early 80's and a farmer's wife.

She greeted them each with a hug, whispering, "You'll have to be quiet. He's sleeping in the front living room." She seemed happy to see them, though tired.

As they entered the house, the light fell on his grandmother and Luke saw more clearly how out of sorts she looked. Her hair looked frazzled and dry. Even her clothes didn't quite match. He knew this couldn't be a good sign and was nervous about what they'd come here to see.

They filed past the utility room. It smelled like his grandfather's work clothes, a pungent mixture of mud, sweat, and horse manure. In the front living room, in a hospital bed by the bay window that looked out over the front lawn toward the hay barn and the fields, his grandfather lay, drifting in and out of consciousness, his head tilted toward the window as if he'd been gazing out it, looking out at the farm he would never work again.

When they entered the living room, Luke's grandfather seemed to wake and turned his head to look up at them. He smiled vaguely at Luke's mother, who rushed to him and grabbed his hand. His hair looked blond, Luke thought. It had been gray. It had always been very thin, but now it was blond and wispy, as if the color had seeped out of it, as if even his hair had grown lighter. He looked half his weight. He looked up at Luke and Stephen standing there and whispered "hello" in a weak, high-pitched, and feminine voice. Then his eyes closed again and it appeared that he had fallen asleep, that he had only been able to muster enough strength for a greeting before his body failed him.

Luke's mother kissed his grandfather's forehead then stood and walked slowly away. She followed his grandmother toward the kitchen along with his father and Stephen. Luke stayed behind for a moment. He could hear their quiet voices in the distance now. He smelled something that must have been baked

late that afternoon. It was probably carrot cake—his grandmother's usual treat when they visited.

The house was dark except for the light in the entryway and the light coming from the kitchen at the back of the house. His grandparents had moved here in the early 1930's, when they were newly married. Over the years, they made changes, adding indoor plumbing and electricity, adding on the utility room on one side of the original house and a skinny office on the other side. It had been decorated and redecorated. Now the downstairs was covered in wood paneling and rust-colored carpet with matching floral-patterned furniture. His grandmother kept collectibles all over the house—ceramic Hummel figurines, decorative plates, souvenirs from their vacations to Arizona and Florida. Luke's favorite was a "painting" of the Golden Gate Bridge with orange indoor Christmas lights lining the suspension cables. It was tacky, but he knew that his grandmother didn't think it was, that it must have been special to her—a memory of a trip to San Francisco that she'd wanted to keep. The whole house, except for the utility room and the office smelled like his grandmother, like department store rose-scented perfume. The house was her province; the farm was his grandfather's.

Luke looked down at his feet and saw the suitcases that everyone had left in the front hall. "I'll just carry these upstairs," he said as if he were talking to someone. It was a relief to be in the house at last, out of the confines of the car, even if it was to be near his grandfather as he died.

His grandfather was asleep again. Luke looked at him in the quiet for a moment, watching his chest rise and fall as he slept. It didn't look like a restful sleep—his grandfather's breaths were shallow and uneven. Luke felt weird watching him, ner-

vous that he might die at any moment or that he would suddenly wake and call out in pain or that he'd cough uncontrollably or vomit.

It was strange for Luke to see his grandfather so weak—he'd always been so strong and full of life, with a deep voice and hearty laugh. Now, he looked almost childlike, so thin and his features so fine. But worse, he looked weak, too weak to even sit up or stay conscious. Luke turned away not prepared to deal with any of that yet. He lumbered up the stairs, dragging the suitcases behind him.

The staircase was closed off from the bottom floor with a door. Walking up the stairs was like entering a separate house. He dropped off his parents' things in the room they always stayed in, one of four rooms upstairs, one for each direction. Then he took his and Stephen's things to the room they had stayed in since he was a little kid. His grandmother used it to store sewing odds and ends. There was always an ironing board out in that room, though Luke didn't remember ever seeing his grandmother iron. There was also an old pants pressing machine from the 1950's against one wall. It probably hadn't been used since then. He wondered if everyone had had machines like those in their houses back then, but thought they probably didn't, considering what else was in the house.

The relics in the third upstairs room trumped everything else. There were two old hair dryers in it—the kind that looked like a large helmet connected to the top of a chair. As little kids he and his brother pretended they were space travel seats with built-in helmets. They would spend hours there pretending they were flying through outer space like Captain Kirk and Mister Spock, though they looked more like two kids pretending to be old ladies in a beauty salon.

He lingered awhile upstairs, walking from room to room. He peaked into the fourth room—his grandparents' bedroom. It was clean and tidy. How long had it been since his grandfather had been able to make it up the stairs to sleep there? Now, no one slept there. His grandmother stayed downstairs, sleeping on the couch to be near her husband in case he needed anything in the middle of the night. Maybe now she could get a few nights actual sleep since his mother or father would probably volunteer to stay downstairs for her.

Luke turned back from his grandparents' bedroom and went into his room and opened the curtains to the small window that overlooked the woods behind the farmhouse, past the tool shed and the raspberry bushes. The clean, cool air wafted in through the window. When the wind shifted, he smelled the horses (or at least their droppings) from the pasture at the other end of the farm.

Outside his open bedroom window, the wind moved through the leaves of the woods behind the house. It sounded like ghosts trying to find their way. The smell of corn filled the room, sweet and dry, and mixed with the slightly sweet smell of the woodbine flowers that grew wild on the edge of the woods behind the house. When he and his brother were little kids they would snap off the red and yellow bell-shaped flowers and eat them and the sweet nectar they contained. There were so many of the flowers growing wild on his grandfather's farm that the locals had taken to calling it Woodbine Farm, though it didn't have an official name.

He leaned out the window a little and saw his grandmother's cats slink across the moonlit grass as if looking for some secret that must be right around the corner, hidden under the next rock or down in the fruit cellar. In the distance, the hors-

es whinnied and neighed as they settled down to sleep in the night that was as dark as the blackberries that grew wild behind the tool shed.

He didn't go back downstairs. He guessed he was supposed to—to be polite, but his grandfather was already asleep and no one had asked for him. Besides his parents were probably engaged in boring adult conversation with his grandmother. Stephen probably didn't know how to get out of it. Through the floor, he could vaguely hear their voices though he couldn't make out any of the words. He took off his shoes, shirt, and jeans and got into bed.

On the nightstand next to the bed, there was an old wind-up clock, square and white with glow-in-the-dark hour and minute hands, that had stopped ticking. Propped up against it was a postcard picture of Jesus knocking at a door with leafy vines tumbling over the lintel. It was sort of funny looking—Jesus was white and had honey-brown hair and there was haze of gold light around his body as if he were shimmering. Beneath the image, the words, “Knock and the door shall be opened,” were printed in a small, ornate script. Luke turned his head away from Jesus and looked out the window at the dark night sky.

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When Luke woke up, Stephen was already out of the bedroom and sunlight was pouring in through the windows, lighting the room with a soft, golden hue. He rubbed his eyes and got out of bed, changing into shorts and a t-shirt. He went to the small bathroom at the end of the hall, brushed his teeth, and washed his face. Then he headed downstairs. As he reached

the bottom step, muffled voices came from around the corner. He turned quickly toward where the voices were coming from, avoiding looking at his grandfather lying by the front window.

His mother and grandmother were in the kitchen, his mother sitting at the small, diner-style, metal-edged kitchen table, flipping through the morning paper. His grandmother shuffled around the kitchen from refrigerator to stove to sink. The kitchen looked the same as it always had. It must not have been updated much since the days when his mother was his age. The table looked like it was right out of a fifties diner and the red-and-white checked linoleum floor looked about the same vintage. The refrigerator must have been a little newer, but all the cabinets hadn't been changed with much more than a coat of paint in decades. Luke was sure there was even food somewhere in the back of the refrigerator from the year he was born. It was a little creepy how stuck in time the farmhouse seemed, but it was also reassuring to feel like there was some place he could keep coming back to that didn't change. He hoped it never would change though he knew it must. He tried not to think about it.

His grandmother opened the oven door and the smell of bran muffins floated out into the kitchen.

“Mmm,” Luke said as he crossed the threshold into the room.

“Oh there you are,” his mother said without looking up. “Gonna sleep away the whole summer, lazy bones?”

“Teenagers,” his grandmother murmured then laughed quietly to herself. She put a ceramic bowl and wooden spatula in the sink and turned on the faucet then wiped her hands on her apron.

Luke sat down across from his mother and picked up the scattered newspaper circulars, thumbing through them without really looking at any of the ads for kitchen appliances and kid's clothes. "Where are dad and Stephen?" he asked.

"Outside," his mother said. "Looks like they got a good head start on you."

"I guess so," he said.

"You'd never make it as a farmer, keeping these hours," she said. "We always had to be up at the crack of dawn to tend the hogs or get the corn to market. None of this lazing about."

"Mmmm," he said, deciding not to encourage this line of conversation.

His grandmother took a small plate out of the cupboard and placed a warm muffin on it. She set the plate in front of him and tousled his hair as if she were still taking care of a little child. "Here you are, sweetie," she said, looking down at him and smiling.

Luke unwrapped the sticky muffin from its paper, grabbed the knife that was lying on top of an opened tub of margarine on the table, and cut the muffin in two and slathered it with the melting yellow margarine.

"Thanks," he said, through a mouth full of muffin crumbs.

"Looks like a nice stretch of weather," his mother said, looking at the back of the paper where the ten-day forecast was printed.

"Oh that mayor, he's always mouthing off about something," his grandmother said.

"What?" Luke asked, looking up from his plate. His mother was still looking at the paper and not reacting to his grandmother, who was still washing dishes.

"If we're lucky, we may not get much rain at all the whole time we're here."

"I'd tell your father about that man's shenanigans but I don't want to upset him."

They continued in this way while he finished eating, not so much having a conversation as making comments out loud in turn like alternating monologues. He thought about adding a third line of random conversation just to see how long it would take for one of them to notice but then decided that would be a little cruel, even if it would be funny.

He finished eating his muffin, swallowed the rest of his small glass of orange juice, and got up from the table. "I'm going to go check on the horses," he said.

"After lunch," his mother replied.

"What?" he said, but then decided not to try to figure it out.

"Would you like another muffin, dear?" his grandmother asked.

"Okay then...later," he said as he headed for the door.

Luke stepped outside. A warm breeze parted his hair in the back and rustled the leaves in the trees by the corner of the house. It was the last weekend in June. The corn was full-grown. His mother had always told them that the rule when she was a kid was that she could go barefoot once the corn was knee-high. That meant summer was really here and it was time to play. It was a little dangerous to go barefoot on the farm though, since you were liable to step into something unpleasantly squishy and foul smelling.

Luke walked around the farm, half looking for his dad and brother, though enjoying the solitude too. It was so quiet, miles from any town—or any neighbor. He wondered how his ances-

tors had borne it. They must have been so tired from working the land, maybe they didn't have the energy for anything else, or maybe you didn't miss what you didn't know. Besides, there must have been school and church to anchor the week, to give it all a sense of rhythm and purpose. Luke was pretty sure he couldn't have lived that life, at least not easily. He would have missed all the things he could do in the city and the closeness of friends, would have missed the ease and the entertainment. But he wouldn't have known, so maybe it wouldn't be so bad—except for all the work. Besides, there were the horses for companionship and the land itself that spoke in the slow language of seasons.

He walked across the front lawn and then over past the barn and down a dirt path that led to the grass field where his grandfather kept six horses. His grandfather had always had horses. Years ago, he'd had one very tall horse that had a buttery colored, almost blonde, pelt and a bright white star-shaped mark on her forehead. She would walk up to the fence and bow her powerful head to be stroked or fed apples and carrots. Luke had always been amazed at how gentle the horse was, considering her size and powerful build. There was something noble about that. But she had died years earlier.

These horses were more aloof. Most of them would stay in the distance, very still, contemplating something and paying no attention to him. They were well cared for and his grandfather loved them; not the kind of pets that would do little tricks or follow you around. They were so beautiful and powerful, but so graceful that he felt honored when any of them would come over to him. They lived in their own horse world that abutted Luke's but wasn't the same. He had the funny feeling that if

they could speak English, they'd say very wise things from the generations of horse knowledge.

All but one, Azriel, had shiny chestnut flanks and well-groomed manes. Azriel had an ash-colored coat with oil-black spots in it and he had one milky-blue eye and one brown one. Luke wondered if the horse saw differently through the milky-blue eye or if that eye was blind. The horses ambled through the field with slow, deliberate movements. A few stood in the distance looking into space while others tugged grass from the ground with their big teeth. Luke rested against a weather-worn fence post and clicked his tongue, calling to them. Azriel looked up and moved slowly toward him. The heavy sound of his hooves clumping on the ground was a little scary—if he wanted to he could trample Luke to death. But he didn't; all that power was contained and graceful.

Azriel came up to Luke at the fence and shyly bent his powerful neck, all the muscles in his face and neck visible beneath his pelt. Luke stroked the horse, cooing in his ear. He ran his hand up and down his neck and combed his fingers through the horse's mane. When he whispered in his ear that was as thin and delicate as a child's, he sensed that the creature understood more than he had said.

"That's a good boy," Luke said. "Aren't you a beautiful boy? Such a sweet horse."

Azriel whinnied and stomped one foot as if to say, "Yes, I am."

Luke couldn't help chuckling a little to himself. The horse bowed his head and lowered his eyelids half way. His hide was shiny as satin. He looked around to see if there were any apples or carrots that he could give to Azriel as a treat but didn't see anything. He would have to remember to bring something



next time. He stroked Azriel's nose and told him again how handsome he was. It made him feel at ease to talk to the horse and to pet him.

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Once, when Luke was younger, he and his brother had taken one of his grandfather's horses out for a ride, the one with the star shape on its brow. They rode out behind the machine shed that stood at the edge of the farm buildings and the fields, down the tree-covered dirt path that led from the horse field to the back acres. Once they got out from under the trees and onto the path, the horse started galloping. It was exhilarating. The horse's muscles surged beneath them, rippling and tensing. The wind whipped around their bodies. Out in front of them was nothing but open fields, a free path leading on and on.

They didn't say a word to each other, both of them thrilled by the ride. They were going so fast that Luke thought he might fly off at any moment. But he kept a tight hold of his brother's waist. He felt like they could break through their grandfather's fields and ride on forever out into the open country like cowboys or bandits in the movies. But instead, they looped around the fields and then Stephen brought them back to the center of the farm.

They kept the horse galloping as they headed back to the farm buildings. Around a sharp corner, the horse lost its footing for a moment and Luke's fingers slipped and he lost grip of Stephen's waist. He fell sideways off the horse onto the gravel path, landing on his knees and palms. He managed to break his fall but skinned one knee. He wasn't hurt badly, more embarrassed than anything else. But he did scrape his skin from hit-

ting the jagged gravel. The rocks left long red lines on his knee and down onto his shin. The skin around the wound turned pale white and then bled freely.

Stephen pulled the horse to a stop, sending dust up in the air around the horse's hooves and into Luke's face and onto the torn skin of his knee.

"Are you okay?" Stephen asked.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine," Luke said, looking down at the open wound, "but I'm kind of bleeding a lot."

"Oh man. Nothing's broken, right?"

"No, no. It's just a scrape." Luke rubbed the skin around his knee then stood up. He felt a little wobbly but definitely not hurt worse than the cuts.

"That's gonna bruise," Stephen said. "Sorry about that, Luke. I should have slowed down."

"Don't worry, I just lost grip."

"Okay. I'm gonna take Star back to the stables. Go inside and get a bandage. Make sure you wash off the skin first. Get all the dirt and crap out of the cuts."

"Yes, mother," Luke said, making fun of his brother's sudden concern and responsibility.

"Oh, shut up. Just go," Stephen said as he turned the horse around and headed toward the stables.

Luke hobbled back to the house as quickly as he could, limping all the way, the blood streaking down his leg. There was dust in the wound and the air stung. The bathroom on the first floor was locked. He knocked loudly. There was no reply at first so he knocked again. His grandfather's deep, booming voice came back asking who it was and what he wanted. He sounded angry and annoyed. Luke couldn't say anything—he'd lost his voice, nervous that his grandfather sounded angry and

embarrassed that he'd interrupted him while he was on the toilet. Panicking, Luke turned around and ran upstairs to the bathroom there to clean himself up and see if he could find a bandage.

As he was washing off the blood and dirt, he heard his grandfather below leave the bathroom and loudly ask who had been knocking. No one answered. Hopefully, no one had seen him. Luke didn't say anything about it and his grandfather never questioned him, though he must have known—he did bandage up his knee after all. Luke felt like a fool. He washed his knee and put on the largest bandage he could find in the mirrored medicine cabinet hanging above the sink. The cut wasn't very deep and Luke was physically fine but he stayed inside the house the rest of the day anyway. He didn't want to push his luck and still felt a little weird about the bathroom run-in with his grandfather. It all made him feel uncomfortable and self-conscious, though all he'd done is fall and no one mentioned it or gave it a second thought.

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A hand touched Luke's shoulder, startling him.

"Jumpy aren't we?" his father said. "What are you, asleep on your feet?"

"Kind of. I guess I was day dreaming," Luke said then rubbed his eyes, pretending he was still tired.

"With as much as you sleep, I'd think you'd be wide awake and full of energy."

His brother walked up the dirt path toward them, about a hundred feet away. "Where've you been?" he asked Luke as he reached them.

"Sleeping. Grandma made muffins."

"Breakfast was awhile ago for some of us." His father smiled and messed Luke's hair.

He's in a good mood, Luke thought. That's weird. Maybe he's just trying to seem like everything's okay to keep them from worrying too much about Grandpa.

"I was just looking at Grandpa's tractor. Real men's toys," his father said. "Still, don't get me wrong, I'd love to be always ankle-deep in mud and horse shit, but I think I'll keep my office job."

Stephen laughed and looked at his father, who gave him a knowing wink as if they had shared a secret, though what it could be was lost on Luke.

"What about you Luke?" his father asked.

"Me? I don't know," Luke said. "I like the farm and everything, but I don't think I'd be too good at it."

"That's my boy—full of confidence and ambition," his father joked.

"Well if you decide," his brother said, "you be sure to let us know—whether you're going to be a real man, that is, or if you'd rather needle-point with the girls." Stephen's voice went up a register into a fake girly voice at the end of his taunt. He smiled and laughed under his breath.

Luke didn't reply but sneered back at his brother. What he really wanted to do was to punch him in the gut. Why were they ganging up on him? So he had slept in. Big deal. Besides, when did they become best buddies? That was annoying, and weird. It made more sense to be absent-minded and gloomy than pretending to be happy, considering why they were here.

His father and brother walked away, mercifully without getting in any more insults. They had just stopped by to pick

on him, he guessed. He could hear his brother asking his father something but the conversation trailed off, probably something about the tractor, since that was their big bonding moment, talking about farm implements. He didn't get it. What was so fascinating about a tractor? It's impressive in a way, sure, but what is there to say, other than, "that's big"? But then, somehow, his brother managed to be endlessly fascinated with all things mechanical, which eluded Luke completely. Stephen could spend all day messing with his car, the hood popped open, a wrench or screwdriver in his hand. He'd always been that way. When they were kids, Stephen loved any toys that he had to put together himself, especially if they were model cars or airplanes. Luke liked games more and books best of all. The only things they both liked were Lego's. Stephen liked to build complicated houses, forts, or model rockets. Luke liked the little Lego people and would imagine stories about them, pretending they were knights and ladies in a fantasy kingdom far away.

Now, Stephen had his car, and his girlfriend. Luke really didn't have much for hobbies, just school and, still, books. But on the farm, there were all kinds of things to keep him busy. And he wanted to stay busy, so that he didn't get stuck in the house listening to his grandfather cough and moan, or worse. Best of all on the farm were the horses. Azriel, in fact, was still standing there by the fence next to him as if he'd been listening in on the human conversation.

Luke turned to the horse and stroked his brow again.

"You're a good boy, aren't you?" he said as Azriel whinnied and stomped.

## 2 .

Luke, his brother, his parents, and his grandmother all sat together at the long table in the dining room eating dinner. The dining room was long and skinny, just large enough to fit the table and chairs and space to walk around them. At one end was a door leading to the front room where his grandfather lay in the hospital bed by the front window in a room kept always dimly lit. At the other end was a door leading to the kitchen and a short side hall beneath the stairs that led to the TV room. On one wall of the dining room there were twenty or so old framed pictures of ancestors and the other wall was almost entirely a picture window looking out onto the side yard and toward the woods behind the house.

They ate quietly while his grandfather lay in the next room. Usually, Luke wouldn't hear his grandfather at all, but sometimes he could hear him moaning and twisting on his plastic mattress. His grandfather's moaning reminded him of the distant sound of a neighbor's cow in labor he had heard once through his bedroom window at the farm. The cow bellowed through the night, until the calf was birthed. There had been no other sound—her pain and calling had filled the air. A pain like that must be eating away at his grandfather, except the only relief was death, not a new birth.

The cancer had spread too far before it was detected. It had started in his colon and metastasized, spreading throughout his