**Shenandoah**

Fannie H. Gray

A southwest corner of Virginia, surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains, is the home to a military college and an elite university. Around the erudite little town, farmland undulates, and dense woods are a hunter’s delight.

We grew up there. We were every girl in the 1980s. We watched Oprah and listened to The Talking Heads on our Walkmans. We complained how our youth yawned in those baby-oil days, as we sunbathed, bikini-clad on a tin roof, drinking diet cokes and spritzing Sun-In. We lamented our sheltered lives as we lathered each other's backs, impervious to the country boys honking the horns of their dirty pickup trucks or the frat boys calling “Townie girls” from their BMWs. We barely glanced over the pages of our V.C. Andrews and Danielle Steeles as the cadets, awkward, profusely sweating in their summer pants and winter jackets, shyly saluted us as they marched past.

We left those days, not as quickly as I should have, and that town, mired in its strange duality, a little bastion of liberalism isolated in a conservative county.

You went your way, the way we all knew you would, up north, to a fine Ivy League institution. I meandered. Sometimes, I marvel how we started from the same point. Of course, it was never really the same. Our collective experience, the crushes, the dances, the Saturday night Trivial Pursuit marathons – somehow, I never perceived there was more. You knew differently. You left on a raft of accolades and expectations. I barely escaped.

The roads we took were never on the same map again. You were undeterred, cruising through undergrad, first tier medical school. I struggled to find footing, a few hours only from home. I bounced from one ridiculous vocation to another. Curiously, as you moved through your structured paces, I too eventually found the right path. Mine just doesn’t bring me “home” much. Just as well, I suppose; I can’t abide the confederate flags and the ghosts of my indiscretions. How funny that I am in the north now and you are further south than where we began.

And yet, on humid nights, when my potted gardenia is blooming and the fireflies wink in the soupy air, I stand in my backyard, staring at stars in a sky that will look the same to you, and I run my hands over my arms, remembering the slick, oil tickle of your fingers upon my skin.