

*Leah Browning*  
**FUGITIVE**

**G**avin stumbled on his way down the steps of the bus. He reached out to catch himself, sandwiching his duffel between the side of his body and the pleats of the door, which smacked aggressively against each other. Gavin straightened, pausing a moment before he stepped out onto the ground. The woman behind him shoved a tip of her suitcase into his back. "Move it along," she said. "We ain't got all day."

Outside, the sun gave off a harsh, exposed glare. He'd been asleep on the bus. His head was already pounding, and he could feel a slick glaze of sweat on his forehead.

He hadn't had a shower in two days. He hadn't spoken to his mother since he got on a bus on his way out of town, though, and the last thing he wanted was to go home. Before he left, he'd sworn he would never come back. He felt tired thinking of that, and old: the bravado he'd felt as he stalked away from his mother's trailer was a distant memory now.

Still, instead of turning in her direction he went north, toward Sara's house.

As he walked, the gravel alongside the road was replaced by sidewalks, the cars up on blocks by decorative fences and flower borders. Gavin slowed. It was cooler here, and he relaxed a little, slipping through dappled light under a canopy of shade trees.

Her house was modest but inviting. It was set back from the street, tucked amongst the foliage, and Gavin hesitated a second before opening the gate. At the top of the steps was a wide front porch with a pair of plantation-style rockers.

There was a time when he and Sara had sat outside in these chairs. Now, he rang the doorbell like any stranger.

His heart was beating hard. He could hear footsteps, then a long pause as she looked, as she always did, through the peephole. When she opened the door, Sara gave him a withering look. "Oh, great. It's you again."

He had put his arms out toward her—a wild miscalculation, he saw now—and he blushed.

"Oh, come in already before the neighbors see," Sara said, stepping aside and then closing the door behind him.

Sara's mom and stepdad were both family doctors. They worked at a free clinic they had started downtown. Sara wasn't supposed to have friends over when she was home by herself.

In the kitchen, she gestured toward the table and chairs and, in an act of mercy, poured him a tall glass of iced tea.

She slid into the seat across from his. "What're you doing here?"

"Looking for you," Gavin said.

Sara raised her eyebrows. "Well, aren't you thoughtful."

## Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

HER PARENTS SEEMED EQUALLY AMBIVALENT about Gavin's return. That night at dinner, her mother said, in a polite tone, "Now, why can't you go home again?"

An awkward silence settled over the table. Her parents hadn't seemed to mind that he was in the house, when they arrived home from the clinic in their scrubs. Earlier, Sara had let him use the shower, and they were in the kitchen cutting vegetables for dinner. She was older now—she'd turned eighteen while he was gone ("I appreciated the card," Sara had told Gavin sarcastically)—and her parents had started to give her more freedom.

She looked older than when he had seen her last, too: her hair was a little shorter, just past shoulder-length, and cut in a loose, flattering style. A couple of months earlier, she had graduated from high school and gotten a job as a bank teller. "I usually wear a suit," she had said at the kitchen counter, looking down at her jeans, "but it's my day off."

Sara was a pretty girl, but not showily so, and he could imagine her standing behind the cutout that would separate one station from the next, in a smart suit jacket, counting out money.

"Do you want to?" Sara asked. She looked irritated.

Gavin looked around the dinner table at her parents. They were studying him with interest.

"I thought you said you didn't have anywhere to go," Sara said. "You don't even have a car. Where else are you going to sleep, the street?"

He didn't know how to answer. The plan, if you could call it that, had ended at Sara's doorstep. It never would have occurred to him to ask if he could stay, or that if he did ask, they might say yes.

"Maybe for a few days," Gavin said. "If that's all right."

WHEN THE TWO OF THEM WERE ALONE in the living room, before he went upstairs for the night, her stepfather said, "No funny business."

Sara's parents had hung a string of little bells across the doorway of her bedroom, he said. Their bedroom was just down the hall from her room, and they were both light sleepers. Her stepfather pointed his finger at Gavin and pulled an imaginary trigger.

Then he smiled faintly, just enough to show that he wasn't this guy—this caricature of a bloodthirsty father who would go to any lengths to protect his daughter—and Gavin nodded uncomfortably, trying to return the non-smile.

If only Sara's stepfather knew how angry she was, and how unlikely any liaison would be; then they could forego this entire uncomfortable charade. (Sara hadn't even made up the sofa bed: she'd practically thrown a pillow and sheets at him.) But Gavin just said, "Yes, sir," because he didn't think it would be wise to elaborate.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

EVERY MORNING, after Sara and her parents had left for work, Gavin folded his bedding, pulled himself together, and went job hunting.

It was hot, even in the shade. He wandered around looking for Help Wanted signs, haunting the places he remembered from before.

Gavin and his mother had moved here when he was fifteen—a tall, skinny kid with a leather jacket and the equal parts swagger and insecurity that came from mistakenly believing that he was the son of a rock star. Gavin had been a year ahead of Sara in school. She was good at math, though, and they ended up in the same class.

Sara's father had died in a machine shop accident before she was born. Her mother had married her stepfather when Sara was five and they were both halfway through medical school. Sara had spent much of her childhood with her grandparents, who lived nearby.

The town was small enough to be stifling but too big to be welcoming. The locals had extended networks of family; they'd grown up being taught by their parents' teachers, in the same classrooms with their cousins. They didn't need anyone else.

And though Sara had grown up there, too, her parents were busy trying to keep a business afloat, and her grandmother rarely left the house. Sara never had the backyard pool parties her friends described when they came back from summer break, where aunts and uncles converged with covered bowls of potato salad and watermelon, and the kids swam while the adults sat on lawn chairs and gossiped and drank beer and barbecued.

Gavin's mother was a waitress, a woman who spent all day on her feet, taking care of other people, and by the time she got home, she just wanted to be left alone. Every ounce of restraint she had was used up at the restaurant. She hated cooking and food and him, it seemed, for needing nourishment. At night, she stood at the stove, brandishing a spatula and yelling at him about one thing or another.

He sat next to Sara in class. They both felt like misfits, and they were too young to realize that at that time in their lives, almost everyone else did, too, in one way or another. They clung to each other for two years.

Gavin walked past the restaurant where his mother worked. It was a diner, really, with an awning and wide glass windows all along the front. In the late afternoon, when the sun was low, there were thin sun shades that she could pull down if someone complained about the glare.

Inside, he knew, he could get a sandwich, fries, and an ice-cold Coke for \$6.99. His stomach was growling. Still, he crossed the street and kept on going.

WHEN HE WOKE UP, everyone was already gone. A pair of half-eaten crusts were on a plate next to the kitchen sink.

Gavin loaded the dishwasher and wiped off the table. He was tired

### Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

from the day before. Sometimes, after job hunting all day, he'd follow his mother home, or around town as she did her errands. Stopping at the grocery store, for example, or at the post office.

He wished he knew what she was thinking. It was strange—when he lived with her, he thought she'd never stop telling him what she was thinking. She was angry, or bitter, or (occasionally, when she'd had too much to drink) sentimental.

It was her day off. Gavin sat in the mottled patch of shade under a gnarled, anemic old tree in the abandoned lot across the street, watching for her to come outside.

The trailer looked the same. Small, claustrophobic.

When she finally left, he gave her a couple of minutes to get ahead before he rose and brushed off the seat of his pants.

Every day of his life with her, it seemed, he had wanted to escape. Now, watching her back as she disappeared behind the automatic doors at the CVS, well—he didn't know why, but it gave him a pang.

ON HIS WAY BACK to Sara's, Gavin bought a carton of eggs, some ripe strawberries, and a lottery ticket. He was down to his last couple of twenties.

The night before, Gavin had told Sara that he wanted her back. He interpreted her silence as interest, but when he leaned forward, trying to kiss her, she turned her face coolly aside.

Here he was again, always miscalculating.

At the park near her house, he saw two teenagers lying entwined under the trees. One summer, Sara had packed a picnic lunch and taken him there. All afternoon, they lay on a blanket under the trees. He was afraid someone would see them and report back to her parents, but they'd escaped notice—or, at least, they both thought they had.

This had been during a lull. Later, when the fights with his mother turned more vicious, Gavin paced the floors of the trailer like a caged animal. He hated everything here—the town, the house, her unpredictability and anger. He became fixated on the idea that his father could save him from all of this. Gavin could tour with the band, do odd jobs; they could make up for lost time.

He graduated from high school and abruptly broke up with Sara. The day after he turned eighteen, he left town and took the bus straight to his father's house. The duffel had been in his closet for days, already packed. The thought of escape filled him up like a drug.

But then his father had turned out to be more of the same: an intermittent construction job, a drinking problem, and a dead-eyed girlfriend with a mean streak. Which was the fire, and which was the frying pan?

Gavin had left his father's house with \$200 in cash in an old Band-Aid tin hidden in the bottom of his duffel bag. He went to Chicago to stay with a guy he knew from high school who was renting a room and wait-

## Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

ing tables while he tried to break into advertising. For over a year, Gavin washed dishes in the back of a Thai restaurant and slept on a mattress on his friend's floor.

Then one night when he went to put away his tips, he discovered that all of the money he'd saved was gone. His friend been taking pills for a while, but it had mostly been a low-key addiction. Gavin didn't wait for him to come home. The next morning, Gavin went by the restaurant to get his last paycheck, paid the landlady what he still owed on his half of the rent, and headed toward the bus station.

TWO HOURS BEFORE she should have gotten off work, Sara showed up at home. She sat down next to Gavin on the couch. Earlier in the afternoon, she and one of the other tellers had been held up at gunpoint. She was still shaking. The guy had been wearing a ski mask and gloves. He'd gotten away with almost five thousand dollars.

She grabbed Gavin's arm. "Please don't tell my parents," she said.

"Why?"

"They'd make me quit."

"Shouldn't you?" Gavin wanted to say, but didn't.

For the briefest instant, he was grateful to the gunman for this warm hand on his arm, and then sick with shame and fear and dread at the thought that something could have happened to her, or that something could still.

DINNER WAS QUIET. Sara's stepfather was out with friends, and Sara's mother had a bad headache. She took a sleeping pill and went to bed early.

Gavin was lying on the couch, not quite asleep, when Sara snuck downstairs. "Do you mind if I lie here with you?" she whispered.

He moved toward the back of the couch to make room for her, and when she lay down, he put his arms around her.

Sara relaxed against him. He was suddenly aware of her skin, and the thin layer of silk or satin under his arm. His heart was beating so hard he thought she must be able to feel it. She turned over and kissed him, sliding his hand under the hem of her negligée.

Then, in the middle of things, they heard the door. Sara froze.

Gavin was still inside her—she was on top, with his hands on the small of her back. She leaned forward, holding him close with her face against his neck.

It was late, and dark in the room. Her stepfather dropped his keys on the floor, then bumped lightly against the wall.

"Shhhh. . . Don't wake him up," he mumbled.

Gavin heard his footsteps as he shuffled up the stairs and down the hall to his room. The house turned quiet again.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

"That was close," Sara breathed. She sat upright and looked down at Gavin. She ran her fingers through his hair, and started moving slowly against him again.

GAVIN FELT THE COUCH shift as someone sat down next to him. He opened his eyes, still half in a dream.

In the early morning light, he could see that Sara had showered and dressed for work. At some point in the night, she must have slipped back upstairs.

She leaned down, in her freshly ironed blouse and suit. She leaned down, and he kissed her goodbye and sent her off to a possible death, as he did every day.

WHEN THE HOUSE WAS EMPTY, Gavin folded the bedding in a neat pile, packed his duffel, and left. There was no way he could sit across the table from her mother and stepfather night after night eating their groceries and answering their questions.

With the bag slung across his back, striding across town, he almost felt like himself again.

The night before, sitting on the couch with Sara, he hadn't told her that he'd finally gotten an offer, though the job wouldn't start until the following Monday. He couldn't wait to have money in his pocket again.

He walked past the strip mall where the bank was located, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

A patrol car was parked in the shade by the far corner of the parking lot, mostly hidden by a pair of minivans. Sara's coworker hadn't been able to throw a dye pack in with the cash, but the getaway car had been visible on the bank's security footage. The police were optimistic about catching the thief.

Outside the restaurant, someone had looped a dog's leash around the railing. The dog was sitting on the sidewalk, and as Gavin approached, the dog got up and walked toward him. It was a friendly-faced beagle.

Gavin crouched down and stroked the dog's head. He wished he could untie it, or unclip the leash and let the dog run free in the world, but he didn't. He scratched gently behind its ears and left it tied up there under the overhang.

Tilting its head to one side, the dog considered Gavin as he stood up, lifting the duffel back onto his shoulder.

"Wish me luck," Gavin said. He pushed through the swinging glass door of the restaurant and went inside.

The beagle stood outside at the window—watching attentively as Gavin walked toward his mother—but the door had already swung closed behind him, and it wasn't possible to hear whatever he said next.