

**THE ONLY THING  
THAT LASTS**

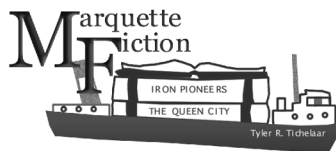


# THE ONLY THING THAT LASTS



*a novel*

Tyler R. Tichelaar



Marquette, Michigan

## THE ONLY THING THAT LASTS

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To my brother, Dan  
who likes an old-fashioned book



“Land is the only thing in the world that amounts to anything....for ’tis the only thing in this world that lasts, and don’t you be forgetting it! ’Tis the only thing worth working for, worth fighting for—worth dying for....And to anyone with a drop of Irish blood in them the land they live on is like their mother....’Twill come to you, this love of land. There’s no getting away from it, if you’re Irish.”

— Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With The Wind*

## **PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN *THE ONLY THING THAT LASTS***

### **The O'Neills**

Robert O'Neill – The narrator and hero of this novel. Named for his grandfather. Born in South Carolina, he goes to live with his grandmother and aunt in Marquette, Michigan during World War I

Kathleen O'Neill – Robert O'Neill's widowed grandmother who lives in Marquette, Michigan

Louisa May O'Neill – Robert O'Neill's spinster aunt who lives with his grandmother

Cynthia O'Neill – Robert O'Neill's mother, deceased when the novel opens

John O'Neill – Robert O'Neill's father, who is away fighting in World War I. He and his late wife were second cousins

Robert O'Neill Sr. – The late husband of Kathleen O'Neill

### **The Blacks**

Nellie Black – Negro servant and friend to John and Cynthia O'Neill in South Carolina

Martin Black – her husband

### **The Carters**

Barney Carter – longtime friend of the O'Neill family in South Carolina

### **The Smiths and Hamptons**

Carolina Smith – sister to the late Robert O'Neill Sr.

Judge Smith – Carolina Smith's deceased husband

Jane Hampton – Carolina's married daughter

George Hampton – Jane Hampton's husband

Mark Hampton – George and Jane Hampton's older son

Tom Hampton – George and Jane's younger son



### **Carolina Smith's Servants**

Jones – A Negro butler  
Jenny – A Negro maid

### **The Lawsons**

Ellen Lawson – Mother of three daughters, whose husband is away fighting in World War I  
Margaret “Mags” Lawson – Ellen’s oldest daughter  
Mollie Lawson – Ellen’s middle daughter  
Mary Lawson – Ellen’s youngest daughter  
Helen Neill – Ellen Lawson’s niece who comes to live with the Lawsons  
Helen Pierson – Ellen Lawson’s unmarried sister from downstate who comes to visit

### **The Williams and Hobsons**

Mrs. Williams – elderly lady who is good friends with Kathleen O’Neill  
John Williams – Mrs. Williams’s middle-aged bachelor son  
Marie Hobson – Mrs. Williams’s widowed daughter who lives on Mackinac Island  
Eric Hobson – Marie Hobson’s son who is away fighting in World War I

### **The Lewises**

James Lewis – elderly bachelor friend of the late Robert O’Neill Sr., brother of Charles  
Charles Lewis – elderly bachelor friend of the late Robert O’Neill Sr., brother of James

### **The Grahams**

Mrs. Graham – mother of Eliza Graham  
Eliza Graham – fiancée of Mark Hampton

### **The Mitchells**

Roger Mitchell – middle-aged bachelor, brother of Mary and Florence  
Mary Mitchell – spinster sister of Roger and Florence  
Florence Mitchell – spinster sister of Roger and Mary



## Preface

The world has nearly forgotten Robert O’Neill as one of the great twentieth century American novelists. Although he did not publish anything during the last couple decades of his life, he did write one last work while in his eighties. A few months before his passing in 1998, he described this last work to me as a “failed attempt” to write his autobiography. At age ninety-four, he realized how difficult a task it would be to encompass his entire life in one volume and to finish that work before his death, so he focused on those years he considered most formative of his character and writing. In addition, he wished to pay tribute to the town of Marquette, where he lived most of his life and which he always regarded as his true home. *The Only Thing That Lasts* captures his and Marquette’s past, the world of his youth, a world at that time that was innocent despite the background events of the First World War and the Great Depression. Mr. O’Neill’s memoir is both an old-fashioned story, and one that charts the growth of an impressionable young mind that would one day create some of our greatest fiction.

I am deeply honored, as president of the Robert O’Neill Historical Trust and Mr. O’Neill’s literary executor, to present to the world my favorite author’s final work. Mr. O’Neill graciously entrusted me to be lifelong curator of his home, which has been preserved as an historical and literary museum. The proceeds from the sale of his autobiography will be used to support that historical trust.

*The Only Thing That Lasts* is Robert O’Neill’s final gift to his beloved Marquette and to his millions of loyal readers, both of whom he always felt gave far more back to him than his pen could ever repay.

John Vandelaare  
Marquette, Michigan  
August 27, 2001



# **PART I**

**1917-1918**



# Chapter 1

## Going North

“So, you’re going up North to live with those damn Yankees. How do you feel about that?”

Mr. Carter turned his head to spit out a wad of tobacco, then turned back to look me straight in the eye. We were sitting on my parents’ front porch. I had known Mr. Carter all thirteen years of my life—he was an old family friend, having known my grandparents on both sides of the family—yet I had never felt overly comfortable around him. Since my father’s parents had long since passed away, he had come over to our house often, to “check up on” my dad, and to give him some fatherly, if unwanted, advice. My father was always cheerful toward Mr. Carter, my mother always polite—yet many times I had caught the irritated glances my parents exchanged when they heard Mr. Carter’s knock on the door. Because my parents had raised me to respect my elders, I usually did not become riled by Mr. Carter’s comments—if today were different, perhaps it was because my mother had died a couple days before—or perhaps because my father was away fighting in the Great War in Europe, and we had not heard from him in weeks—or perhaps because in a couple hours I would be boarding a train with my aunt, to go live with her and my grandmother in the North, until my father returned home.

None of these events had caused me to lose my temper in the last few days—not even when Mr. Carter continually spat tobacco juice on my mother’s whitewashed porch. But his comment that I would be living among “damn Yankees” now stirred me enough to retort:

“My family are Yankees!”

I sneered out the damning word “Yankees” in mockery of how all good South Carolinians spit it out. Even if my family were half-Yankees, I would not have them insulted.

Mr. Carter frowned.

“No, they’re not,” he said slowly, pulling out his tobacco can and putting another plug into his mouth. “Your family comes from good Southern blood—your father was born here, as were both your mama’s parents, even if your mama was born up North. Your folks were probably ashamed to tell you so, but your grandpa’s family were deserters of the Cause; they moved up North before the war, and then your grandmother went and married your grandfather when he was down here as part of the occupying Union Army during Reconstruction. So I guess you could say she deserted too. But your grandmother comes from one of the oldest and finest families in the South—her aunt, Abigail Richmond, could have been the first lady of the Confederacy had she wished. But instead she chose to associate with Northern carpetbaggers and scalawags. That’s how your grandma met your grandpa, at some fancy party her Aunt Abigail held for those damn Yankee soldiers.”

I felt incensed. How dare he spout off my family history to me, as if I did not know it! But truthfully, I knew none of this. I had never thought to ask why my mother’s family lived in Michigan, or how she came to meet my father who was from South Carolina, or why we lived in the South and not the North. And now my mother was dead, and my father was overseas, so I might never be able to ask him about these things. Oddly, my parents had never spoken of the Civil War, and while I had learned plenty about it in school, somehow I had never thought to ask about our family’s role in it. My schoolmates all knew about their family’s roles in that war; they all could list with great pride every battle a grandfather or great-uncle fought at. I always remained silent during these discussions—perhaps because I sensed that in the South where the Confederacy lived on in so many hearts, something must be wrong with my family never to mention the war.

Could my grandmother have really married a Yankee soldier? Was I the grandson of a Yankee? Were my mother’s relatives really traitors to the Cause? I could not believe any of it. I would never be able to hold my head up again at school if it were true—only I would not be going back to the local school. I would go to school in the North with Yankees! I felt my family pride dying inside me. Mr. Carter couldn’t possibly be right, could he?

“Ha!” chortled Mr. Carter. “I bet I know more about your family history than you do!” He let out another stream of tobacco juice as if to affirm the statement.



I was angry, but I could not argue—he probably did know more about my family history, yet he had no right to call my family members Yankees and deserters.

Mr. Carter was about my grandmother's age—in his early sixties—too young to have fought in the war. He was of that unfortunate group of Southern boys who had hoped the war would last long enough for them to join up, so they could restore the failing Confederate Army, but by the time Mr. Carter was ten years old, Lee was defeated, the Union restored, the South occupied by Northern soldiers. But Mr. Carter could remember the South's defeat, and he had been a friend of my father's father in his boyhood—if that were the case, then he probably did know all the details of my family's history during the war, and perhaps he did speak the truth now, but he had no right to throw it in my face, to dishonor my family the day after my mother was laid in her grave.

"Excuse me," I said and went into the house.

"Robert, I'll be ready to go in ten minutes," said my aunt as I came in the door.

For a second, I considered that she might know the truth—she was my mother's sister; she lived in the North, unmarried, with my grandmother—who probably knew everything about the family. I thought of asking my aunt whether Mr. Carter's words were true—were our family deserters of the Southern Cause? But if it were true, I was not yet prepared to hear it. I went into the bathroom to be alone with my thoughts.

My mother's family Yankees? How could I think of them that way? But they did live in the North. I had seen them so rarely that I had never thought about why they lived so far away, and now I was going to live with a grandmother who had married a Union soldier, and worse, that Union soldier had been my grandfather! My father must have known this, yet he had married my mother, the daughter of a Yankee soldier. I wished I could contact my dad. I wondered whether he would have consented to my living up North if he were aware of my mother's passing. We had sent him word, but who knew when he would receive it?

Maybe I didn't have to go. Maybe I could stay with Mr. Carter until my father came home—but living with Mr. Carter wouldn't be much better than living with Yankees. Could I live in my parents' house by myself? I was thirteen now, and Nellie, my parents' Negro servant, could still come over to check on me and cook my meals.

But I knew the grownups would think such a plan impractical at my age.

I stared out the bathroom window, at the beautiful willow trees and my swing hanging from an oak. I wondered whether I would ever see our magnolia tree blossom again. I knew the North didn't have magnolias. From what Aunt Louisa May had told me, they didn't have much of anything except snow.

"Robert, we're ready!" my aunt called. "Hurry or we'll miss the train."

Who was she to decide where I lived? But I couldn't be rude to her any more than to Mr. Carter. And she had always been kind to me, and I knew my grandmother was kind as well. It was not my aunt's fault if she were born a Yankee—she could not help where she was born, and she had been born long after the war. I could blame my grandmother, but she was taking me in now. I felt rather relieved to think I wouldn't be going back to school here—I would have been ashamed if my friends found out about my Yankee connections—imagine what they would think when they heard I was going to live among Northerners? Perhaps the North was the only place I would be accepted now. But that was silly—all our neighbors knew my mother was from the North. I was making too much out of it all. The war had ended over fifty years ago—it probably didn't matter to anyone now except an old man like Mr. Carter.

"Robert!"

"Coming!" I shouted. I flushed the toilet so no one would think I had simply gone into the bathroom to avoid Mr. Carter. Why did he have to tell me all this the very day I was leaving? Why couldn't my parents have told me this before? Was our past so besmirched that they had thought it best to keep it from me?

When I stepped out the front door, Aunt Louisa May was standing on the porch.

"There you are," she said. "Hurry and say goodbye to Nellie so we're not late for our train."

Nellie stood by Mr. Carter, handing him luggage to place in his wagon so he could drive us to the train station.

I went down the front steps and walked up to her. "Goodbye, Nellie." I held out my hand, but she did not blink until Mr. Carter took the suitcase from her. Then she buried me in her arms. "Be good for your aunt, Robert," she said.

She had been like a second mother to me. I had known her all my life. Three times a week she had come to help my mother with the cooking and cleaning, and often she had postponed her work to chat or play a game with me. Now I felt as if I were losing my mother all over again.

"I wish you could come with me," I said as she released me.

She laughed and said, "What would I do up North? Besides, you know I'm a married lady now."

She had married just a year ago. I held a fierce hatred toward her husband whom I did not think good enough for her. But secretly, I felt he had partly stolen her from me.

"Then I wish I could stay, and you could look after me," I said.

I felt the childishness of this remark—I was practically a man, after all. But I had been unable to stop myself from speaking the words.

"You're getting too old to need looking after. And you'll be back before you know it—your father will be coming home soon."

She was trying to cheer me, but from all accounts, the war in Europe was far from over.

"Here's the key, Nellie. I locked the door," said Aunt Louisa May. "Let us know if you hear from Robert's father. I'll write to him again as soon as we reach Marquette."

"Don't you worry none, Miss Weesa May," she replied. "I'll keep a good eye on the place."

"So'll I," said Mr. Carter, although he had not been asked. I think he resented that my aunt had given Nellie the key over him. But it did not matter—he would stick his nose in our business anyway by driving over every few days to check on the house.

"Let me give you a hand, Miss O'Neill," he offered, helping my aunt into the wagon.

I crawled into the back with the suitcases, wishing instead we could ride to the train depot in my father's automobile. Would I ever get to ride in it again?

We had barely waved goodbye to Nellie and pulled away from the house when my aunt, as if reading my mind, said, "I'm surprised, Mr. Carter, that being such a prosperous landowner, you haven't bought yourself an automobile."

"Don't believe in 'em," Mr. Carter replied. "Dem contraptions is jus' a passin' fad."

"Well, I imagine they'll be around longer than this horse of yours," Aunt Louisa May said. Jeb Stuart was a rather run-down nag.

Mr. Carter began whistling "Dixie" to ignore her. I think it was the only tune he knew. My aunt and I exchanged amused glances. Mr. Carter was a stubborn old man, set in his ways and unlikely to change. He would not have driven that old nag any faster to the train station if Sherman's army were after

him. But his whistling reminded me that I wouldn't be in the land of cotton anymore. Marquette seemed an unimaginable place, from all I had heard about it. It was like a fabled land where the snowbanks reached six feet high, where people had to snowshoe or ski to get around in winter, where even on the hottest summer days, the temperature scarcely exceeded eighty, and Lake Superior, the world's largest freshwater lake, was within walking distance from everywhere in the little town. I could not imagine living amid such cold weather, in a place so contrary to everything I had previously known.

Mr. Carter kept up his whistling all the way to the train station. We had no conversation—I think my aunt and I were both exhausted from the long days of preparing for my mother's funeral, the thought of the long trip North, and the all-consuming grief in our hearts. I had not even cried for my mother, except the day of her death; I felt numb all over, as if the world were moving on, as if I were going through the motions of living, merely going to Marquette because I was told, not really caring what became of me. I fell into a melancholy daze until Mr. Carter coughed, and then I saw we were pulling up to the train depot.

"Well, Robert, hope ya have a good time up North, and that ya come back here soon," he said, after pulling our luggage out of the wagon and handing it to my aunt and me.

"Thank you, Mr. Carter," I said. "You've been a good friend to my parents, and I thank you since they are not here to do so."

I felt very adult saying such words. Mr. Carter had always hung around our house, eating our food, amusing and occasionally annoying my parents with his shiftless ways, but I thought it best to be polite when we were parting. I felt I was being very big and gracious considering his recent degrading remarks about my family.

"Don't ya worry none. I'll keep an eye on the house while you're gone."

"Goodbye, Mr. Carter," said Aunt Louisa May. "Thank you for everything."

He tipped his hat to her, and for a moment, I saw their eyes meet and an odd smile of approval cross Mr. Carter's face. My aunt, seeing him smile, looked bewildered and quickly reached for my hand. Mr. Carter turned to spit out his tobacco.

"Well, see ya," I said to him, as Aunt Louisa May pulled me toward the train.

We quickly got on board, found our seats, and waited silently for the train to pull away. In a few minutes, my childhood world was left behind.

I felt lonely as the train headed North and familiar sites disappeared. My aunt sat quietly for a while, doubtless exhausted from all the urgent arrangements she had been forced to make. She stared out the window until long after we had crossed the border into North Carolina. Once or twice I heard her sigh. After half an hour, I pulled out a book and tried to read—I remember nothing of the book now, except that a mother was in it, which immediately made me think of my own mother. I felt less grief-stricken now than angry that my mother's death meant I must live up North. And again, I felt anger stir in me over Mr. Carter's words—what did he know? He was always exaggerating the truth—my own father had said so on more than one occasion. I could not trust Mr. Carter's words.

"I'm sorry, Robert. I've been day-dreaming," said my aunt, turning toward me. "It's just so hard for me to imagine your mother being gone. I'm sorry your life has to be so disrupted like this, but I don't know what else can be done since your father is away. We'll just have to make the best of it. I wish your grandmother hadn't twisted her ankle—I imagine she'd make a better traveling companion for you than me."

"It's all right, Aunt Louisa May," I said, wishing to soothe her. Her eyes looked red, as if she were holding back tears. "During times like these, we have to do our duty, and mine is to cause as little trouble for everyone as possible."

I was proud of how brave I sounded. I told myself that even if I were going to live with my grandmother and aunt, I would be man of the house.

She smiled. "You're a good boy, Robert. Your grandmother and I will be happy to have you with us. I still can't get over how much you look like your mother."

She meant the words kindly, although I would have preferred to resemble my father. And the mention of my mother again reminded me of Mr. Carter's words—that my mother's family had deserted the South and sided with Yankees. I decided it was time I knew the truth.

"Aunt Louisa May, how come my mother was from Marquette, yet she married my dad who was from South Carolina?" I asked the question although I was afraid of the answers. "Isn't your side of the family also originally from the South? I've never really understood that, although I know at one point my mother told me she and my father are cousins of some sort."

"Your parents are second cousins," my aunt replied. "They met when we came down South once to visit my Great-Aunt Abigail. When your parents got married, your mother decided to live down here with your father."

“But then,” I said, “if they’re cousins, why does half the family live in Marquette and half down South?”

“To explain all that would make a long story,” Aunt Louisa May said.

“It’s a long train ride to Marquette,” I replied.

I would rather hear a long story, and know the full truth of it at once, before we reached Marquette; hearing of my family’s dishonor seemed preferable to sitting in silence and ignorance, alone with my grief and fears.

“I just want to know,” I added, “if we’re really Southerners or Yankees?”

My aunt laughed. “I never thought of it that way. I don’t think anyone in Marquette would label himself a Yankee, but you Southerners have a different perspective I suppose.”

Her saying “you Southerners” gave me hope; even if she were a Yankee, I was a Southerner. Yet I waited patiently for further explanation.

“I guess by rights you could say your mother’s half of the O’Neill family are expatriate Southerners.”

I did not like that term “expatriate” but it was less harsh than “deserter” or “traitor.”

“How long have we lived in the South?” I asked. “Aren’t we originally Irish?”

“Oh yes,” said my aunt, “although I don’t know anything about the family when they lived in Ireland. I only know that my father’s grandfather was Seamus O’Neill, and he came to America around 1820 or so and settled in South Carolina. I don’t know anything else about him except that he had two sons, Edmund and James. Edmund O’Neill was your great-grandfather on your mother’s side, and James O’Neill was your great-grandfather on your father’s side, but I don’t really know anything about James’s family, so you’ll have to ask your father about that.”

“But how did your side of the family end up in the North?” I asked. “When did that happen?”

“Edmund and James tried to make a living off the land their father left them, but while James was headstrong and strict about business, Edmund had no interest in farming. They owned a few slaves—not more than a dozen I would say. James insisted they would need more slaves to make the farm profitable, but Edmund refused to buy more. On his honeymoon, he and his wife Dolly had traveled to Washington D.C., where they had heard an abolitionist speaking. From that time on, he began to feel more and more that slavery was wrong.”

“I don’t know how anyone could ever doubt it,” I replied. Yet I was surprised by my reaction—why was I so upset that my family should desert the Southern cause when I believed slavery was wrong? I would have been incensed if anyone had treated Nellie like a slave.

“Well, we live in a more enlightened age now,” said my aunt. “In those days, people quoted the Bible to support slavery. James apparently didn’t care whether slavery was immoral—he just knew he needed more hands to make the farm profitable. To ease his conscience and still not disagree with his brother, Edmund sold his land to James.”

“What difference did that make?”

“Edmund freed the slaves he had. He said he couldn’t bear to see them remain in bondage. But I doubt it made any difference because my father said the slaves couldn’t find work anywhere in the county, and when Edmund offered them money so they could go North, they said they weren’t going to leave their home, so they stayed at the farm, working for the minimal pay James gave them. I’m sure Edmund meant well, but his actions didn’t really make any difference. Only the war made the difference.”

“So then what happened?”

“James was infuriated with his brother—he purposely paid the ex-slaves low wages, and he called his brother a traitor. He said he could not operate the farm and pay wages and that he would go bankrupt, although I guess he managed to get by until the war. But I don’t think the two brothers ever spoke again.”

I could see James’s point—why should he pay for what he had really inherited? His brother, rather than helping with the farm, had only cost the family more. Yet, I felt rather proud that my great-grandfather had stood by his principles.

“And then Edmund moved to the North?”

“Yes. He had heard about the iron ore discoveries in Upper Michigan, and somehow he got it into his head that he could make a great deal of money up there without having to own slaves, so he came to Marquette back when it was just a little village of a few hundred people. That was about the mid-1850s I guess. My father, whom you’re named after, and his sister, my Aunt Carolina, were just children then. Of course, my father has been dead for years, but you’ll meet Aunt Carolina when we get to Marquette.”

“It must have been hard,” I said, “for our family to leave everything they knew in South Carolina to move to a new town.” I was thinking of my own situation.

"I'm sure it was," said Aunt Louisa May. "Edmund must have loved the South or he wouldn't have given his daughter the name of Carolina. I wish before he died, I had thought to ask him more about it, but you never think to ask those questions when you're young."

I felt proud of myself to be so young and asking questions—but I might not have asked if Mr. Carter had not riled me up.

"What happened to James during the war?" I asked.

"He must have gotten by somehow, even after his slaves were freed. I guess the farm had to be sold eventually by your father's father after James died, but I don't know much about that. That was before I ever knew that side of the family."

I thought about this for a while, wondering what it was like to own a farm full of slaves, only to lose it all.

"Your grandmother might know something about it too," Aunt Louisa May added. "She could tell you stories about life during the war since she lived through it down here."

"She wasn't born in the North?"

"Oh no, she grew up not far from where your parents live now. During the war, her parents both died, and Yankees burnt down the family plantation. She was an only child, and just a little girl during the war, so she went to live in Charleston with her Aunt Abigail. That's where she met my father."

"And your Father fought for the Union?"

"No, not quite. My father was Edmund's son. He was just a boy during the war, but afterwards, he joined the army and ended up being stationed in Charleston during the Reconstruction. My mother's Aunt Abigail was from one of the oldest families in South Carolina, and somehow, her fortune came through just fine during the war—rumor said she and her husband were trading with the Yankees. I doubt that's true. I think that after the war, they just accepted what most Southerners wouldn't—that they would have to befriend the Yankees if they wanted to survive. They had a great big house in Charleston, so they had gigantic parties for the Yankee officers; my father was invited to one of her parties where he met your grandmother. She'll tell you that the neighbors thought it bad enough she would marry a Yankee, but to marry a man whose parents had been Southerners and deserted the cause—well, that would have made her a social outcast in Charleston. But Aunt Abigail told your grandmother that she would have a better life in the North, so she married my father anyway, and once his military duty was over, they moved to Marquette."



“And then my mom and dad met when Grandma came back to the South to visit her aunt?”

“Yes, and that was a bit difficult for them as well, just as it was for my parents. My mother thought your father was a good young man, but his father, Jefferson Davis O’Neill—you can imagine why James O’Neill picked that name for his son—very much opposed the thought of his son marrying the granddaughter of his traitor uncle. Jefferson Davis O’Neill had only been a baby during the war, but he ranted and raved that no son of his would marry a Yankee. Your parents insisted they would marry anyway. My mother tried to talk sense into your father’s father, but he flew into such a conniption fit that he had a stroke and died two days later. That was a depressing start for a marriage, but once the mourning period for him ended, your parents got married anyway.”

“I’m sorry my grandpa died that way,” I said, “but it sounds like it was his own fault.”

“He was a proud man,” Aunt Louisa May replied, “and his father had poisoned him against our side of the family.”

“I’m glad my father isn’t ornery like his father and grandfather were.”

“Well, maybe they weren’t always that way,” said Aunt Louisa May. “Your father knew them better and can fill in any holes in my version of the story.”

It all sounded so foolish to me—that James O’Neill would refuse to speak to his brother for the rest of his life, that Jefferson Davis O’Neill would oppose his son marrying because of a feud between his father and uncle. Why couldn’t people let the past rest? And why had I been so worried about it—these events had all happened years ago, so why should I care what Mr. Carter or anyone else thought?

“So,” my aunt finished, “I don’t know whether that answers your question about us being Yankees or Southerners. I think you could just say we’re an American family.”

“Mr. Carter doesn’t think so,” I said. “He’s the one who told me your side of the family were Yankees and deserters of the Southern Cause.”

My aunt pursed her lips. “Mr. Carter is a foolish old man. He—” But then she held her words, thinking better of it, and instead said, “The Civil War has been over more than fifty years. People who hold onto the past like that only hurt themselves. I think once Mr. Carter’s generation is gone, no one will care whether someone’s family fought for the North or the South. We’re all one nation now.”

I agreed with Aunt Louisa May, yet I knew plenty of Southerners who thought differently—I knew the stubborn pride of my neighbors—and I had heard the stories of hunger and homes burnt down by Yankees during the war. If the South had treated the North that way, the same anger would have existed on the other side. Would another fifty years heal the pain better than the last fifty?

“I often thought,” my aunt mused, “that your mother was a brave woman to move down here, especially when she was a Yankee and descended from an apparently despised Southerner family. I give her and your father both a lot of credit for staying steadfast in their love, despite the prejudice surrounding them.”

I felt pride well up in me at these words. My father had been brave to stand up against his own father and not let guilt over his father’s death stop him from following his heart. And my mother had left the only world she had known in Marquette, so she could live with my father in South Carolina, in what must have been a strange place to her when she was used to Lake Superior and snow. South Carolina had no real lakes, only rivers; on the rare occasion when it did snow, it would only last for an hour and then melt, and in summer, the temperature could soar over a hundred degrees. I felt proud of my mother, and of all my family who had been willing to move from the South to the North and back again. Now, by going to Marquette, I was doing the same.

I wondered what it would be like to live in Marquette; I wished I had paid more attention to my mother’s stories about her hometown, but Marquette had always seemed such an unbelievable place to me. I was about to ask my aunt to describe Marquette when she suggested we go to supper in the dining car, and once we had ordered, she began asking me about school, and telling me I would be enrolled at Bishop Baraga, the Catholic school in Marquette. We had no Catholic school back home—almost all the neighbors were Baptists—but both sides of my family had been Irish Catholic—at least there had been no religious conflict in the family. I wondered what the children in Marquette would be like—would they teach me how to ski or snowshoe? Would they make fun of me because I was from the South? Would they be smarter than me? No, they couldn’t possibly because the South had such fine schools, but then, if Southerners were so smart, wouldn’t they have won the war? The thought of going to school with all those Yankees made me nervous until I reminded myself they were not Yankees, just Americans.

After supper, my aunt and I retired to bed in our sleeper car. The next day, we talked little, both tired from the long journey. I wanted to ask her about Marquette, but finally decided I would just wait to see it for myself. I was too tired and anxious to read, so I mostly just stared out the window. The land of the lower Midwest was so bare and level. I had grown up in the foothills, surrounded by trees—I hoped Marquette would not be flat and lifeless like Ohio.

I kept repeating over in my mind the family story my aunt had told me; I struggled to remember all my ancestors' names—Seamus O'Neill, his two sons, who were my great-grandfathers, Edmund and James, and then Edmund's son was Robert, the grandfather I was named for, and James's son, my other Grandpa O'Neill, had been Jefferson Davis, the one who had opposed my parents' marriage. I tried to imagine what all their lives had been like, the anger some of them had felt, and the courage others had displayed. Where did I fit in amidst this family? My roots were in the North as well as the South; somehow I felt I would be more whole, more myself, once I had lived in both lands. Yesterday, I had feared being a Yankee; now I anticipated that living in Marquette would be a brave new adventure. I had promised my father I would be brave. I wanted him to be proud of me. I wanted to be good so God would make sure my father came home. And whatever obstacles faced me, I hoped my mother was watching over me from Heaven, and that the courage she had shown in moving South would now be mine as I moved North.