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In the Wake of the End of the World: Stories

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In the Wake of the End of the World: Stories

by

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Abstract

This collection of short stories came about from my growth as a passionate but imperfect feminist, reflecting on the place I call home—how the South and its politics shape us and how I learned to shape myself.

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The Tornado Girls

The sky was getting darker a few counties over as the girls waited for Ms. Pearl to pick them up after school. It was the end of their first week of fourth grade and there was summer clinging to the deep green trees and other students' skin, but not to the girls' conversations. Naomi, Adia, and Caroline had all ended up in the same class again, by no orchestration that they could figure, none of their mothers marching into the school to make the request, because their mothers weren't the kind to march. They were sure they'd ended up together by their powers. Powers they could feel getting stronger.

Ms. Pearl's big grey Cadillac lumbered through the car-rider line and the girls piled in when she pulled up, all three in the backseat. They buckled their seatbelts and hugged their book bags to their blooming chests and stopped whispering their plans. They sat quiet as Ms. Pearl inched along with the queue of cars, gospel on the radio low in the background. They saw her lift her eyes to them in the rearview mirror.

Y'all aren't even gonna ask about the Friday treat? Ms. Pearl questioned from the front seat. What, y'all too old to be excited about that now? You get to fourth grade and suddenly you gotta pretend you not excited for sweets?

The girls contested and said, yes we are, Ms. Pearl! And each offered their guesses, but only to amuse her.

Cinnamon raisin bread?

Oatmeal crème pies?

No, lemon squares?

They had other things on their mind.

Good guesses, Ms. Pearl said, but you're just going to have to find out when we get there, now, and then she laughed big and warm from the front seat as she drove them away from the school, away from those boys, toward the darkening sky.

The girls loved Ms. Pearl and Ms. Pearl loved them like they were her own. But these girls loved each other in a way Ms. Pearl could see; a kind of love she wanted to think would wrap them up safe. She could see it in the way they never argued, the way they took blame for each other instead of trying to place it. Ever since they were little bitties, they'd been like that. Ever since Ms. Pearl met their mothers in the AA meetings she once conducted and ran out of her church's basement. You get yourselves on your feet, she'd said to the women, the only ones there, and I will be here whenever you need.

And they did and she was. All days during the summer except Sundays, all afternoons during the school year for the last six years. All that time together with those girls, so little time with those women, who never stayed around when they'd come to pick up their daughters, ready to get home, she guessed, from long days of work.

From the big road, she turned onto hers, the red-clay one that stretched through the pines and beside the creek. She put her car in park when she pulled up to her house and the girls all but jumped out, running with their bags across the dirt-spotted yard and to the door they knew Ms. Pearl kept unlocked. They slipped inside and Ms. Pearl limped along behind, fast as she could go with the knee that'd been giving her more and more trouble. Rain had started falling and once under the carport, she watched it dot the pond for a second before following the girls inside.

Chocolate pie! Naomi said, going to the drawer for a knife and the cabinet for some Tupperware. Caroline grabbed napkins and three bottles of water. She put them in a Piggly Wiggly bag she found under the sink. Adia had gone to the linen closet in the hallway for blankets and a flashlight.

When Ms. Pearl saw them piling those things on her kitchen table and Naomi cutting into the pie, she said: You little skinny minnies acting like you own the place! Look at you!

We're going to the fort, Ms. Pearl, Caroline said. We need that candle. The big fat one.

And matches, Adia said.

Well hold on, now, Ms. Pearl said. Y'all aren't going to the fort in this rain.

But it has a roof, Naomi said. She flopped a chunk of pie into the container.

Please, Ms. Pearl?

The three of them stood next to one another and looked up with the same expression, the same dark brown eyes. They knew that if they stared hard enough, Ms. Pearl would say alright, would probably even go find a coat, an umbrella. Spells always worked on her.

Ms. Pearl stared back out the window for a minute, her brow crinkled like when she stood over a recipe or scribbled on a crossword puzzle or tried to make the remote work. She turned back to the girls and said, okay, but Adia, your mama's gonna be here a little bit early, remember? So don't make me come out there and get you. You be in here before five, you hear?

Yes ma'am, the three of them echoed. Naomi made two more generous cuts of pie.

Ms. Pearl, Adia said, what about that candle?

*

They ran through the large backyard, past the pond, garbage bags over their heads with a hole torn open for their faces and arms, the only raincoats Ms. Pearl could offer. They turned by the tree with the hollow-bottom and kicked through the wet leaves until they came to the plywood hut they'd built themselves on a hundred degree day in June the previous summer.

Inside, there was just enough room for the three of them to sit cross-legged on the dirt-packed floor. Caroline spread one blanket on the ground before they all got in, and hung the afghan blanket for a door. She slipped the crocheted yarn over the two nails on the top corners of the entrance and they all ducked in. What little bit of light there was outside spilled in through the holes and sprinkled them all with dots of it while the rain drummed on the flat wood roof. Naomi waited for Adia to light the candle before she passed around the Tupperware.

Later, Adia said when Naomi offered her a fork. Spells first.

Caroline pulled out the purple composition notebook and tilted it down to the candlelight. She was the writer; her cursive looked the oldest.

We need something big, Adia said. To teach them a lesson.

Naomi picked at the skin around her nails and said, but not to hurt them, right?

Adia looked at Naomi and Caroline with the low light of the candle playing on their faces and shrugged. Do you want to be called those names for the rest of the year? The rest of next year?

Naomi thought about it. Caroline did too with her pen poised for Adia's instruction. They all thought about the boys on the playground this week, Jeremy and his pointed and missing teeth that made his face look like some animal, Quinton who'd thrown the rocks. Gabe who'd just stood there. All of them different this year than last, like they'd switched bodies with older, angrier boys.

They all agreed: no. They didn't want that.

But it was harder to agree on the right spell. They tossed around ideas, considered what was most practical, what was most funny, what was most likely to do the trick.

It was Naomi who brought up the one that made them all look at each other like, *this could work*. Adia came up with the right words. Caroline wrote it down. They ate their pie and when they were finished, they held hands and spoke the words over and over.

*

Ms. Pearl barely noticed that her whole house had gotten darker within the hour. She was sitting at the kitchen table with the radio on, a cup of decaf and her task journal open, the one in which she wrote the things of the day: *bank, stopped by the church, bologna sandwich for lunch*. She was writing *Friday treat: chocolate pie* when the weather alert sounded so abruptly that the *e* in chocolate turned into a line that ran off the page. She sniffed once, licked her thumb and wiped off the pen mark on the table, and

stood with trouble, that knee throbbing and pinching as she tried to straighten it out and shuffle to the living room to flip on the news, to see what that sound was meant for.

The map on the news channel showed South Carolina covered by the weather radar and she watched the image zoom in to her county and the fire-colored blot that hovered over it and moved and reset, moved and reset, weatherman Tim Collins talking about the tornado that had touched down in Clarendon. Ms. Pearl felt her heart quiver thinking about how she'd let those girls go on out there without even considering how the weather knew how to move past a little rainstorm if it pleased. Sometimes she wasn't so sure that weather and God worked together. She hurried to the door with what speed she had and stepped back down onto the carport and threw her hands up to her mouth.

Girls! She yelled. But she didn't think it'd make it all the way to them. That fort of theirs was far into the trees, farther-seeming now that she knew she couldn't get there quickly, and the rain was falling hard, so loud against the metal awning that Ms. Pearl was sure it'd sucked up her voice before it could get very far. The first clap of thunder broke through the sky and Ms. Pearl grabbed her big umbrella from inside and used it as a cane, moving forward a little crooked but as fast as she good go, rain slipping down her forehead and into her eyes, her mouth. She wasn't but twenty feet from the house when she saw the three of them moving through the trees, all in a line, all running.

Oh, Jesus, oh thank you, she prayed. She listened and waited for shrieking wind, half afraid something would sweep in and carry them away before she could get her arms around them.

When they got closer she could see their eyes were wide.

Get, get, she said, Lord, Lord. Inside. To the bathroom. Grab the couch cushions.
Bring the blankets.

But they're wet—

Don't matter. Look at us.

They got to the door and all slipped in. Ms. Pearl closed it and herded the girls down the hall after they'd grabbed pillows and cushions, all of them dripping.

In the tub, she told them.

They listened, and climbed in, bringing their thin legs to their chests. *We can't tell her this is our fault*, they thought. Ms. Pearl lined the cushions up along the edge of the tub.

If the house start to rattle, you grab these and put them over your heads, you hear?
I'm gonna grab the radio now so we can know when it passes.

When what passes? Adia asked.

This storm. It's coming but we're gonna be alright, now, Ms. Pearl said, disappearing from the doorway.

The girls looked at each other but didn't say anything, the buzzing thickness of fear and excitement and power that was coursing through them all too strong and loud for words anyway.

Elizabeth's Children

Your birth mother's name is Elizabeth Jones.

You were a seed that grew in her tummy before you came to us. You never grew in mommy's tummy.

But we are your parents and you are our daughter.

*

In the voicemail, Angela sounded so frantic: Please call me. I want to talk about Noah. And Liza. Call when you get this. Please.

Keri erases the message. She stands up and walks past Liza's room looking for the phone to have on hand when she's ready to call Angela back. Liza looks up from her markers and notebook and waves.

Can I see what you're writing? Keri asks her daughter, the answer a shake of the head while the blue pencil moves back and forth.

No, I think it's very private.

Well then, I'll leave you to your work, artist. Keri lingers with her arm on the doorframe, looking at her daughter's curly hair, watching the concentration on her face, the way her eyebrows are squeezed together, little mountains of folded skin above her small nose.

I love you, Momma, Liza says, eyes down.

I love you too, baby. And I love to watch you work.

It's a picture for Elizabeth.

Oh, it is?

Yes. But I can't show you.

Maybe when you're finished? We can hang it on the refrigerator?

No, I think maybe we should take it to her house so she can have it.

We can't do that, baby.

Why?

Elizabeth doesn't live near here.

We can drive there.

No, no. Not without Daddy.

Then we can call Elizabeth and tell her to come over to our house.

Elizabeth can't come over here.

Why.

Because, Keri says, leaning thump against the doorway and pulling a quick reason out of the air. Elizabeth is sick.

Liza stops twirling the pencil, the red one, and pushes curls out of her eyes. If she is sick, she needs someone to take care of her.

You're very sweet, Keri says.

Or she could move in with us. You take good care of me, Liza says. She would like if you took care of her.

She is an adult, baby. She can take care of herself. But I'm sure she would feel good to know that you were thinking about her.

Can we call her?

I don't think she has a phone.

We can try.

Keri grips the phone in her hand and makes a quick decision: presses the pound key seven times, waits with the phone to her ear, watches her child's face taking the shapes of concern so naturally.

Sorry, baby. There's nobody there.

Let me hear.

This time Keri dials the number to her old cell that's been disconnected. She feels her throat burn a bit while Liza holds the phone and waits with her mouth open.

Nobody's there, Liza confirms.

*

When Keri finally decides to call back Angela's voice still sounds the same. But really, when has her voice not sounded like this, Keri thinks. A voice like someone trying to make their way to the front of some crowded space. Keri sits on the front porch swing, counting the grey cars like she and Liza do on the way to school or ballet. It is a fine afternoon as far as weather goes. Light traffic along the often-busy road, falling leaves in the yard around her.

Thank you for calling me, Angela says. It comes out blended with a heavy sigh. They skip the pleasantries.

What's wrong? Keri asks.

We've noticed something with Noah.

What?

He's lying a lot.

He's seven.

These are not seven-year-old lies.

What do you mean?

Angela pauses on the line, in her home in rural North Carolina that Keri has only seen pictures of through email and Facebook, where they really connected over a year ago. Angela and her husband have an old farmhouse with a wrap around porch, three goats and three dogs and four-wheelers that Keri has seen Noah posing with, the same smile as Liza's, the real one where the top lip disappeared.

Yesterday he told me his friend Peter fell off the monkey bars at school, Angela says. Told me that he broke his arm. I called Peter's mother to check on him and she said, Peter didn't break his arm, goodness! And when I asked Noah why he told me that, he insisted it was true. Even after I told him I had just talked to Peter's mother. I don't understand. I've got more stories like this. He's been doing it so much lately that I suddenly realized he's been doing it for so long. Like, even as a toddler. And I've got to ask: does Liza do it too?

What, lie?

Yes.

She lies like a kid. Little things when she's afraid of getting in trouble or when she's trying to get out of going to bed, Keri says. She can hear Angela sigh again.

I know what kids do, she says. But this is different. Noah lies for no reason. Just makes things up. It's not cute or peculiar. It's concerning. Exhausting. I've got too many things to keep up with already.

Angela, I think maybe you're reading into things too much. And you know we've gotta be careful of that.

Am I though? You know what Elizabeth is like. Have you seen her Facebook posts lately? They're all over the place.

Keri chews at the skin around her nails, a habit her husband has called unoriginal but one she takes to it when she wishes to be thinking of something else. Conversations with Angela were weighted; even ones about birthdays and vacations.

You can look for reasons to be worried, Angela, but then you'll keep looking, Keri says. We could both sit and think like this every hour, but what good will it do us? What good will it do the kids?

*

Keri and Liza are well into the bedtime routine when Adam gets home from work. Teeth brushed, hair combed, stories read.

Who is in your prayers tonight? Keri asks, stroking Liza's arm exposed outside the covers. She is kneeling by the bed, resting her head on the other pillow, the low motorized crank of a rotating nightlight close behind her. Stars and ballerinas twirl around the room, distorting when they hit corners and closet doors. Adam sneaks in the door and kisses both Keri and Liza on the cheek.

Hi, Daddy, Liza says, reaching her arms to his neck.

Hi, Liza. He gathers her up for a moment and then guides her head back to the pillow and says to both of them, I didn't mean to interrupt. Who's in your prayers?

Elizabeth, Liza says, her voice full of sleep, her eyelids sinking. Keri swallows and brushes her hands along the frame of Liza's face, stroking her brow with her thumb.

Anyone else?

Just Elizabeth. She's sick.

I promise you, Elizabeth will be fine, baby. She feels Adam's gaze on her but she keeps hers on her daughter.

Okay, she exhales. Her eyes close and her breathing steadies. Keri pulls the comforter up to Liza's chin and kisses her cheeks and forehead, her knees creaking as she stands. Adam starts to leave, but Keri hangs back, pretending to tidy.

I'll be right out, she says to Adam, who's turned at the doorway. He nods and walks straight back to the living room.

Keri finds what she's looking for. Strewn about on the desk by the door are the papers, pencils, and crayons Liza had bent over for the last hour before bed, intently shading figures and sounding out words quietly to herself. Keri picks a drawing up, and lowers herself onto the foot-high chair to examine the picture of a family of five standing in front of a house. She picks up another paper and strains to read every large, practiced letter by the nightlight.

*

Do I have a sister?

No, you don't.

A brother?

You do have a brother.

But we don't know him.

Does he live with my mom Elizabeth?

Your birth mother, but no, baby, he doesn't live with Elizabeth.

He has other parents like I do?

He does, yes.

Is he my big brother?

Your little brother.

My little brother.

*

She knows Adam is going to ask her about Elizabeth so Keri decides to take a bath first, to sit in the tub with some salts because she wanted to do that anyway. But fifteen minutes into her soak, she realizes she has nothing to defend. She told a little lie; little lies were acceptable as truths until Liza was old enough to really understand. Keri sinks into the water up to her neck for a bit before stepping out, drying off, and uncorking the drain. Then she gets in her pajamas and treads down the hall, peeks her head around the corner to tell Adam she's turning in for the night.

A good idea, he says, and follows her.

In bed, he asks: so what was that about? Liza saying Elizabeth was sick? Keri shrugs and grabs for her computer on the nightstand.

I told her a story. I made something up in a quick moment, she says. You know, what parents do sometimes? She logs in to Facebook and Pinterest and pulls the strap up on her nightgown.

So she's fine?

Yes, Elizabeth is fine. Keri says, scrolling through her news feed. Crazy, still. But fine. Keri thinks about telling Adam what she found in Liza's room, the story, the

drawing, but she doesn't. Because she doesn't want to think about it even if it means nothing.

Adam turns the television off and reaches for his book and glasses, fluffs the pillow behind him while he settles in to read for what's bound to only be a few minutes. He never makes it far.

Keri keeps scrolling, liking her colleagues' posts, her brother's status, a picture of Noah with an ice cream cone.

When she sees Elizabeth's post, she has to read and re-read it.

Adam, she says, Elizabeth is pregnant again.

Did she call?

No, look. Keri turns the screen to him and he reads Elizabeth's status above the ultrasound image.

*

The next morning, instead of curling into the couch and watching Tom and Jerry and eating oatmeal like she did every Saturday, Liza requests to stay in her room. Keri pours herself a cup of coffee and sits at the kitchen bar. Usually, these were the days Keri already ached with longing for. The two of them on the couch together before Adam woke, Liza curled beneath her arm, cartoons on the television in the still-dark morning, was something she'd trade hours of sleep for.

But this morning, Liza asks to eat at the table in her room.

Come snuggle with me, Keri had said, but Liza had only looked at her and said, no thank you, I want to draw. So Keri had let her draw.

Light has started to leak into the house. Keri opens her laptop, opens her Facebook, searches Elizabeth's name to see if she's mentioned anything else. She doesn't notice Adam come in and stand in front of the refrigerator.

You're on that too much, he says as he pours a glass of orange juice.

She scrolls through Elizabeth's posts, a lot since last night.

Adam, she says, reading them all carefully, she's keeping this one. She said she's ready to start a family.

Maybe she is, then, he says. Maybe she's gotten through all she needs to get through.

Clearly you haven't seen the things she posts on the Internet.

That's not fair.

No, I'm concerned. For her and for the kid she wants to keep. Look, she says. Keri clicks on Elizabeth's photos, starts flipping through the album she posted a week ago, one full of pictures with obvious bongs and middle fingers and a new tongue piercing and snapshots of Elizabeth bartending in a dark space, so young, so petite, in a black and barely there lace bralette.

It's not judgmental, Keri says again. Look at her eyes in these. I mean it seems like she's smoking something a little stronger than cigarettes, don't you think?

Maybe, he says. So what do you want to do about it? How would you handle this?

Keri narrows her eyes. It's not something to handle, she says. It's not my business, I know. But it's there and I can see it, so I can't help but be concerned.

Little socked feet pad across the hardwood and Liza climbs up between them on the barstool with papers in her hand. They are stapled together, an uneven book with a brightly colored illustrated cover. Keri closes the computer.

I think we can mail this today, Liza says. I want Elizabeth to go ahead and get it so maybe she can feel better. I think this will make her feel better. Adam looks at Keri and shakes his head the slightest bit.

Put it by the door and Daddy and I will take it out before the mail comes.

Can I put it in the mailbox? She asks, stretching her body across the bar, smiling, sincere.

May I see it? Keri reaches for the papers. Liza inches them back protectively.

Well I think maybe I want it to be private.

Adam moves to the barstool next to his daughter and twists a handful of her curls around his fingers. Why should it be private, sweetheart? He asks. Liza turns, her hair straightening as she shies away then bouncing back into its spiraled form free from his hands.

Because, she says, it's for my mom.

Keri feels her stomach hollow out.

Elizabeth is not your mom. She's your birthmother. But I'm your mom, baby, and we told you there's a difference.

No you're my pretend mom, Liza says.

*

Is my name from her?

Yes, you already had a name when we got you.

Did Elizabeth give me my name?

Yes, she did. But we gave you your middle and last.

My name is Elizabeth too.

And we call you Liza because Liza is a pretty name.

I'm Elizabeth Gracie Parker. My mom is Elizabeth Jones.

Your birth mother is Elizabeth Jones. Your mom is me, Keri Griffin Parker.

Who is my dad?

Your dad is me, Adam Henry Parker.

But my other dad?

We don't know him. Like we don't know your brother.

Oh.

Do you have any other questions for us, sweetheart? You can always ask us.

Can I watch TV now?

*

Keri picks Liza up from school on Monday, everything on her mind except the things that needed to be. Elizabeth's news still making its orbit; Keri had been keeping up since Friday when Elizabeth first shared it. She was surprised Elizabeth had not called or messaged her yet to let her know, as Elizabeth would occasionally make a call to check in, but Keri would wait until she did. She made sure to never be the first to reach out for any of their conversations.

Liza would have another sibling. And if Elizabeth was telling the truth, this complicated things. How would she explain in a way that went past logic, why Liza's mother gave her up and kept another? How could she begin to explain Elizabeth's

choices? When Liza got older, Keri hoped they'd have the kind of relationship she'd had with her own mother: tender but candid. But for now, Keri's impulse was to hide the truth. Only to reveal the necessary parts: a name, some numbers, an idea. Little lies like safety nets.

Liza had been talkative on the ride home, recalling vivid accounts of the playground games and art class. Keri's responses scripted like quick text. At home, Liza sits at the kitchen bar eating a banana, afternoon light playing on the counters.

Do you think Elizabeth likes bananas? She asks, down to her last bite. I bet she likes bananas, Liza says. Cause I like bananas.

I know you do, Keri says. They were your favorite when you were a baby. You almost turned yellow you ate them so much.

Would you still love me if I was a banana?

I would love you no matter what fruit you turned into. Liza smiles, her dimple sinking deep into her cheek.

When will Daddy be home?

After you're asleep. He'll come in and kiss you, promise. Let's get that homework done so we can relax, huh?

Liza nods, slides off the stool and puts her peel in the trashcan. She jumps on one foot to the cubby by the door, grabs her book bag, bigger than her small torso, and jumps back on the other foot. She hands it to her mother.

Thanks, Froggy, Keri says. She pulls out the yellow folder full of first grade knowledge and sees it in the left pocket. Not Liza Parker, but Liza Jones, in her daughter's determined script. She may have done a double-take, knowing the state of

mind she was in, if not for the red-penned circle and question mark beside the name. A spelling test, where she'd missed *wear* and *share*. Adam's voice filters through: she's curious, Keri. It's just a name. And what's in a name? He'd try to joke. But Keri would think: plenty. There's plenty in a name.

*

Wednesday morning on the way to school, they count cars. Blue ones this time, Liza's decision.

We never see blue cars, she says. They'll be special. And when we see it we can say, Blueberry! Keri looks in the rearview mirror at the small girl in the backseat, at the almond shaped and colored eyes that are so unlike hers.

How many do you think we'll see, Momma? Liza has her face pressed against the window.

Maybe one? Two? What do you think?

Probably none, she says. They pull up to the stoplight by the laundry mat near the school. An old man sits outside with a newspaper, a dog curled around his feet. They look painted into the scene, staged.

Did you know when I lived with Elizabeth we had dogs?

Keri's mouth goes dry like she's opened it wide in the cold. You never lived with her, she says firmly.

Well I meant when I was a seed and then a baby in her tummy before you and Daddy got me. We had dogs. Liza thumps back against the seat with a giggle.

Can we get a dog? I want to name it Pepper, like the one I used to have, she says. Keri reaches for her phone, fingers heavy on the buttons, and brings it to her ear.

Hey, hey there's my school, Liza says. You're missing it, Momma. She taps on the window.

Keri says in as steady a voice as she can, we're not going to school today baby. Liza looks incredulous, a little excited. Angela picks up on the second ring.

*

The halfway point is about an hour drive that ends in a speed trap of a town with one stoplight, two gas stations, and five churches. Keri pulls up to the paint-peeled Grace United Methodist and stops parallel to the chain link fence around the playground. She texts Angela: *Grace UM past the stoplight*. Liza has fallen asleep in the backseat; her head slouched over her book bag, her mouth agape. Her lips are a pretty pink and unnaturally full for her small mouth. Her breathing is steady, peaceful, the reverse of Keri's.

The place and land around them seems to be sleeping just as soundly. The playground and church lot is vacant. No cars had passed since she parked. Keri wonders about Liza's dreams, wishes she could see them projected. Isn't this a thing all mothers think, she says to the quiet.

Thirty minutes later, a car comes over the hill, up the long stretch of road between the horizon and the church. It slows, and pulls up behind hers. Keri chews the skin at the top of her lip, unbuckles and steps out as the car door behind her opens up. Angela gets out looking different from the photos Keri has seen through their emails and Facebook. She's curvier and her hair is a vibrant shade of red. It was black in September. Her smile is wedged between thick cheeks.

My little man fell asleep, she says even then in her very Angela voice. She steps through the calf-high weeds growing at the edge of the road.

Liza did too, Keri says. The grass is still dewy and it soaks through the bottom of her jeans and she asks, for the first time, is this a bad idea?

Angela looks past her, down the road. We're not going to tell them anything, are we?

No, not yet.

And you don't think they'll figure anything out?

She knows she has a brother. But she doesn't know we know him.

And you know we haven't told Noah anything at all. Soon, she says, as if Keri had asked her why.

Angela nods to herself. Let me wake him up, she says. Hopefully he won't be a grouch. She turns back to her car, where half of her disappears inside. Liza's always pleasant in the mornings, Keri thinks, always wakes up with a smile. She walks around to Liza's side of the car, and lightly taps on the window. The nest of curls stirs and she turns her face to the window.

Hi, sleepy.

Hi. Liza rubs her eyes.

Come on out of the car, baby. I found us a playground. Keri helps her down, holds her hand as she walks her over to the fence.

Two spindly legs dangle above the ground behind Angela's car door and hit with a tiny, muted thud. Angela leads them around the door and closes it and Keri feels a tightness and warmth in her chest and she holds on to it.

Hi Noah, she says to the boy hiding behind his mother's legs, a thin finger hooked in his mouth. Brown, almond eyes set on Liza, who stares at him with her brows pinched close, no smile. She walks to the wildflowers along the edge of the fence, pulls them up with roots dangling and raining dirt. Liza, this is my friend Angela and her son Noah, Keri says. Want to say hello?

Hi, she says quickly, turning back to the flowers.

Angela bends to the side and leads Noah in front of her, easing him toward the gate.

Don't you guys want to play on the playground for a while? Angela asks.

Liza and Noah look to each other briefly and then stand side by side in the weeds, looking through the fence. Keri sees the likeness everywhere: their curls, their frame, the way they stand and grip their fingers through the holes of the fence—maybe the way Elizabeth would. Keri is only desperate to see their differences.

FATHER: Is this the life we envisioned for ourselves? No, absolutely not. I don't think anyone could envision this.

MOTHER: But we like to think we are making the best of the situation.

HOST: Would you say this has brought you together? The family? The two of you?

FATHER: *Looks at wife.* We are a family that respects inconsistency.

I.

Maeve looked her father straight in the eye and said in one even, collected breath: I have to hurt him.

She was six years old and this was the first time she directed violence at the baby.

She turned her gaze to her brother across the table. He was smearing applesauce all over his alphabet placemat, all over his thick face. Her parents exchanged a look that for the first time came from concern and not amusement. Her mother's eyes narrowed, her father froze, spoonful of black-eyed peas halfway to his mouth. Maeve nibbled on the carrot she had pierced with her fork and stared at the corner above the kitchen door, where a small crack snaked out from the molding. She waved to the corner.

Why do you want to hurt your brother, Maeve? Her father asked.

400 will scratch me if I don't.

I thought 400 was a good friend, her mother said, sipping on a pretty-colored glass of wine.

400 is a bad friend. She bites. She's right there. Maeve pointed to the doorway and picked up her grape juice, lips to tilted cup until she drained it.

Listen to your good friends, the mother said.

They were accustomed to entertaining Maeve in this way—they discovered early on that it was one thing that could keep her focused—asking her about all her friends, the people she talked to when there were no people around. They knew about 11 O'Clock, Blue, and 40. 40 was her oldest friend, the first mention of her they can remember from Maeve as a three year old. They knew 40 made Maeve laugh and they knew 40 loved to swim. 40 was a good friend. At first, they thought the things she claimed to see were just a testament to active imagination. When the mother brought it up to her sister over the phone one evening when Maeve was two and seeing puppies, the sister said that oh, yes, her son was doing the same thing—it was so precious—he'd started requesting they fix an extra plate for his imaginary friend while they had dinner. But the son's friend disappeared after a few weeks while Maeve's company was multiplying and she was giving them color and number names.

Her father leaned over to wipe applesauce from the baby's chin.

Baby, her father said to Maeve in hush-tone, sweet. We like your friends. But we don't like to hear you talk about hurting your brother, okay? You're a good big sister.

I know.

But they weren't sure, the parents. Her violent episodes had increased over the course of the last month, the bruises on their arms and hips from Maeve's tiny clenched fists appearing more frequently. Her fists, when connecting to the parents' skin at just the right moment, made a quick trebly echo, and had intention behind them. They would

have to take turns constraining her, tapping out and switching every few minutes. And Maeve would fight with force for the full exhausting twenty minutes. Scratching, biting, drawing blood. Then her muscles would soften. She would melt in their arms and look up at them, as if they were in the middle of a bedtime story, as if she could be easily coaxed to sleep despite the fact she rarely slept. I love you Mommy, she'd say, reaching up to touch her mother's flushed face, just under where a bruise was born.

As they sat around the dinner table, now in a peculiar silence, Maeve pushed a matted curl back from her face. She rubbed her hands together quickly like she often did, the tick she'd had for years. Maeve swiveled her head back and forth, her eyes following nothing in particular, the bags underneath them deeper and darker than either of her parents'.

II.

When she found the scratch marks on the brother's stomach and on the backs of his legs, the mother cried. She had not seen it happen. Was it when she was loading the laundry? When she turned her back on the kids to fix lunch? She thought she knew the trajectory of Maeve's episodes and the fact that there was something she couldn't predict felt pressing. So even though she knew better, and even though this was not the kind of mother she was, she put Maeve in her room alone and locked the door. She steadied herself with a hand trailing against the wall as she made her way back down the hall to apply ointment to the raised red streaks on her little boy's body. She stared at them and grazed them, imagining her daughter's nails making them. The mother called a doctor. She made an appointment and slunk into the couch, staring at the streaks on the window from hands and faces, touches. The ointment dried as the baby napped in a sunny spot on

the living room floor and Maeve talked in her room behind a locked door. And even when Maeve screamed—at what, who knows—the mother let her scream. She was thinking about hours in a day and days in a week, weeks in a year

FATHER: To put a name to the thing we were experiencing was a relief, honestly.

MOTHER: It was like the fog rising from the clearing for the afternoon.

HOST: Only to come back the next morning, right?

III.

Schizophrenia. Maeve was diagnosed unquestionably after the testing. The specialist had said to the parents: she's an anomaly. They'd never diagnosed a patient so young. He'd recounted a few narratives of other patients he'd seen—most in their late teens and thirties—as he scribbled something on his pad. Maeve moved from tracing shapes in the wallpaper to caressing the metal scale in the corner of the small, stark room, to calling 400 down from the ceiling.

The parents wanted to be clear.

We don't mind the hallucinations, they had said. We've been dealing with them for so long and they're a part of our family, in a way. But we're scared of the violence.

I understand the concern, the doctor said. It seems she has indicated a connection between the two.

You mean that the hallucinations tell her to do things.

That's what I mean.

But she likes these hallucinations. They make her happy. She wants to keep the good friends and make the bad friends go away, he said.

The doctor nodded and held up a thin, square carbon-copied paper with his prescription. This should make the hallucinations more manageable, he said.

Manageable, the mother said to herself. She smiled at the doctor and they shook his hand. Maeve rubbed her hands together and smiled too.

This will work to suppress the bad ones. You might see some reactions to it. He listed a few of them. But nothing unbearable, he said. We'll see how this does and if it doesn't, well, we have other options.

IV.

Clozapine—atypical antipsychotic

Side effects:

(More Common) blurred vision, confusion, fainting, irregular heartbeat, shakiness in
legs, arms, hands, feet, unusual tiredness

(Less Common) anxiety, convulsions, decrease in urine volume, difficult or labored
breathing, feeling sad or empty, discouragement, dry mouth, lack of
appetite, loss of bladder control, pounding in the ears, slurred speech,
sudden jerky movements of the body, ulcers, swollen glands

(Rare) Absence or decrease in urine, lip smacking or puckering, muscle stiffness (severe),
nausea, rapid or worm-like movements of the tongue, unusual bleeding
or bruising, uncontrolled chewing movements, puffing of the cheeks,
yellow eyes or skin, weakness

(Incidence Not Known) Bloating, clay-colored stools, holding false beliefs that cannot be
changed by fact, inability to move the eyes, unusual facial expressions,
vomiting blood

Clozapine: A last resort.

V.

Maeve was at the edge of the pool, resting her head on the surrounding tile. She was talking to the space beside her.

I like your swimsuit, 24 Hours.

Her mother was setting up the table with the cupcakes and the gifts, her father was on the pool steps, the little brother on his lap, waiting for Maeve to collect the diving sticks he'd thrown. Cousins and two children from her class at school swam and floated. Aunts and the grandmother and parents and uncles and grandfathers lounged in the brittle plastic chairs. It was June in the South and it was Maeve's birthday. She was seven. They had gone months without a real incident. She had episodes nightly when they tried to brush her teeth, but they mastered those quickly. Listening to her shriek about the bristles touching her gums had become reassuring.

You can learn to swim, 24 Hours.

Maeve, her father called, I threw them all. Gotta go find them.

Maeve jerked her head toward her father and smiled. She gave a thumbs-up and started to swim toward him but stopped, turned back to the pool wall and grabbed on tight.

Not the eight feet side! Not the eight feet, 24 Hours! 24 Hours, you can't reach in the eight feet! Maeve splashed away from the edge, flailing through the sun-warmed water toward the middle of the pool. She turned left, right, went beneath the surface. She came back up.

You could learn, 24 Hours, you could learn, she said, fighting to keep her head up, splashing, turning. 24 Hours!

Her father called her name and quickly checked to see what everyone else was doing. Still setting up gifts, still sitting in pool chairs. Maeve resurfaced again and the father called her over.

Back to the shallow end, please!

She complied, came toward him treading water but looking back over her shoulder when she could. When she could touch, she turned back toward the deep end, stared while the children swam around her, stared at the deep end with no one in it.

The father shifted the brother on his lap and watched his daughter, wondering what she had just witnessed.

VI.

What do you want to be when you grow up? Maeve's teacher asked. In Maeve's new class there were eight students. They were writing about and drawing pictures of their dream jobs. The teacher crouched down to Maeve's level.

Uh, a zookeeper, Maeve said.

That would be a great job, Maeve. And you would be very good at it since you love animals so much.

No, a Number Checker. Maeve rolled her tongue like a wave.

What's a Number Checker?

It's where you draw blood from the Numbers to make them feel better.

Well that's very interesting, the teacher said. I've never thought about a number's feelings. What do they feel?

What people feel. They can feel sad. And happy and scared. They can be afraid of each other.

Do you see a lot of numbers right now?

Seven and eleven are friends because they're both green.

It's good they're friends.

But five and eight aren't.

HOST: And then the move happened. Why did it happen?

FATHER: We couldn't run interference between Maeve and her brother anymore. She was just...too strong-willed and under complete influence of the things she saw and the things she heard. If she wanted to hurt Timothy, if 400 told her to hurt him, she would do anything she could to do so.

HOST: But what about the medicine?

FATHER: She was on the highest possible dosage of the strongest antipsychotic available. A dosage that could incapacitate an adult. But 400 never left, in the previous months, she just had less to say, I guess.

MOTHER: So moving was the only thing we could think to do—and I think this was for us as much as it was for the children. There needed to be a safe, separate space. We used to live in a 2 bedroom condo, but we found another one bedroom in the same complex—one where we could stand in the windows and wave to each other across the parking lot. Maeve's apartment and Timothy's apartment. When we were sure we could devote full attention to them, we were together. Most dinners were all of us. But then when dinner was over and it was time to clean, we had to split. We alternated: kitchen

duty, kid duty. Bathtime and bedtime, I went with one to our place, he stayed there with the other.

HOST: *To audience*. Imagine. Being forced to live apart like that. The toll that had to have taken on you. Unbelievable. *To parents*. The strength you all must have.

VII.

They had not slept in the same bed in months. They could not remember the last time they saw each other's bodies.

VIII.

There were no flowers or cards or balloons surrounding the hospital bed where Maeve lay, awake but not present. Her curls were unruly, her face pallid. Her mother tried to read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in the vinyl chair by the window. It was Maeve's sixth hospitalization in three months. For the mother, the drive to the hospital had become familiar. The sight of her child in bed restraints had not.

MOTHER: It was always two steps forward, one step back.

VIV.

They took Maeve to the pet store on a Saturday afternoon, a week after her last hospitalization. The specialist suggested animal therapy, a real pet to counter the hallucinated ones. Maeve was not careless; she needed tasks.

Taking care of something would be like dropping on a pair of headphones playing the most soothing music, the therapist had said. It would occupy her mind.

In the store, Maeve led her little brother around with unequivocal tenderness. She pointed out colors on bags of cat food. She helped him squeak some of the dog toys.

Timothy laughed.

Let's find someone who works here, sweetheart.

They came to the aisle with terrariums full of fish, lizards, rodents and found a pimple-faced girl unloading a few miniscule, pink furless things into a terrarium without an inhabitant they could see. She wiped her hands on her jeans and said, how can I help you?

We want a mouse, Maeve said.

Probably a hamster? The father said. We need advice. It's a first pet.

It's part of my therapy, Maeve offered.

The mother and father laughed. Maeve was learning more about her illness every day. She knew she was schizophrenic. She could tell you about her medicine. She could tell you whether she thought it was working or not. She knew other people could not see what she saw. Her parents encouraged her when she showed awareness.

Oh, cool, the employee said. Animals are good therapy. And we have lots of mice.

A mouse might be too, I don't know, too feral, the mother said. Timothy tugged on her pants leg and she lifted him to her hip.

You can just look at them if you want, the employee said, motioning for them to follow down the aisle.

Maeve stood in front of the terrarium where the employee dropped the newborn mice.

Can we get a lizard?

Absolutely not, honey. Mommy doesn't do scales.

It fit two in there at one time, Maeve said, putting her hands on the glass.

The father walked over to see the lizard's jaw unhinged, the brittle legs of crickets slowly disappearing.

That's because it's so hungry, the father said, taking Maeve by the shoulders and leading her to look at the rodents.

They left with a little grey mouse that fit perfectly in Maeve's cupped palm. She named him Dusty and she talked to him through the little plastic cage all the way home. She warned him about 400.

FATHER: And sometimes it was no steps forward, five steps back.

X.

For Timothy's fifth birthday, they traveled to the coast in search of scenery and a change of pace. They checked into their ocean front hotel after hours in the car, at least 100 of those miles passing with music on the radio and quiet kids in the backseat. With Maeve on the balcony and Timothy in the bathroom, the parents set their stuff on the couch and the husband leaned in to whisper to the wife, I love you.

You are wonderful, she said. She rested her hand on his shoulder and tilted her head up to kiss him when she noticed the top half of her daughter's body folded over the railing.

Maeve! She shouted. She broke free of her husband's arms, rushing toward the glass door. Honey, please don't lean over the edge like that.

Maeve hopped off the iron bar she was standing on and rubbed her hands together.

24 Hours was doing it, she said as she bounced back into the room.

She needs to be careful too, the mother said. She could feel blood pumping hard behind her ears. Timothy cried out from the bathroom around the corner, Toilet paper! I need toilet paper!

I'm coming buddy, the father said.

Let's you and me take care of business too, the mother said to Maeve. She found the medicine bag, nearly stuffed, and took out and lined up the bottles of pills on the seafoam countertops.

I don't want to take my medicine today, Maeve said.

You have to take your medicine every day.

But we're on vacation.

MOTHER: To hear the despondence in her voice in that moment. To know you are a mother that cannot give her child what she wants.

I know, baby, but your medicine helps keep your brain happy. You know that just as much as I do.

My brain always feels like: she waved her hands spastically in front of her face, in circles and jerky flicks of the wrist.

FATHER: All I want, the only thing we want, is for her to find some happiness each day.

You have the most interesting brain in all the land, the mother said.

HOST: And do you feel as if you can give that to her? Do you feel like that's possible?

400 disagrees. 400 told me to jump.

FATHER: I don't know. I want to believe we can. But we marvel at the things we still don't know.

The mother stared at her daughter. Did she tell you that just now?

MOTHER: The things we won't know.

Maeve nodded. She rubbed her hands together and moved her head in a figure eight. Her eyes withdrew in the way the mother recognized.

Maeve, she cooed. Maeve, baby, come on. Let's take the meds. Let's take the meds and we can go swimming, okay? Does that sound nice? Do you want to swim with 90?

I'll be there soon, Maeve said to the opened door. She waved at the balcony as the sea breeze sailed in.

Other Birdsongs

Either Dave's insides or mine were broken and I was rooting for that as fact, despite everyone else's encouragement to think otherwise. Broken insides, not my choice. Broken insides, we're an unfortunate case.

Dave was sitting just outside the bathroom door, listening, waiting for me to uphold my end of the pattern we'd strung together over the last few years, where my part was to provide the feeble sniffles and his was to gather me into his arms when I came out red-eyed, wet-faced. Dave didn't know this was a pattern, but there was something that told me this time he may have anticipated the results. He was unabashedly optimistic in all things: when the Panthers were having a losing season, when all grocery stores stopped stocking his favorite kind of Pop-Tarts, when his father passed away last year. Dave was the protagonist, the guy you always wanted to root for because of his spirit, the one that would make him an excellent father, but this morning, I didn't sense his optimism as much. He squeezed my hands before I took the test, but it felt like a normal squeeze, not the kind of squeeze that signaled hope of any sort, which I can't say I was looking for.

Because unlike Protagonist Dave, I was the kind of character that people would discuss to determine likeability, like that was the best thing I could offer the narrative. I was a secondary character; the best friend or the colleague who really needed those claims filed or the moody grocery store clerk waiting for her shift to end. And I knew that

accepting that role gave you permission to get on with the things you needed to get on with, but most often, those characters carried with them a confidence I didn't have. How could I get that? Someone write me that way.

I heard Dave lean his head back against the door, a thud that echoed whatever it was he was feeling. Concern. Sorrow, maybe. I set the test on the counter and washed my hands, then put them to my face, where I did the most clichéd thing I could and mouthed to myself in the mirror: *this is your life, too*. Whatever that meant.

When I turned the knob and slipped out the door, he stood.

"Same old same old," I said, no tears, no wavering. I kept my voice flat enough for him to fill with his own thoughts. He advanced toward me in his bear-cub like way, extending his arms. I tried exuding stoicism gliding toward him, but I also wanted to seem small and fragile in his grip; squeezed too hard and my bones would crack and crumple and collect as dust inside my skin.

"Kat," he said, all downward inflection. He kissed the top of my head, kissed through the few silver wisps I hadn't tried to cover woven into the brown and said, "We'll be fine." And while I nodded into his chest, I felt guilty that he thought this was something I needed to be reminded of. We were fine, I wanted to tell him.

"We have so many other options," he said. "And maybe now's not the time, but I think now we can at least start thinking about them."

"I'll start on the eggs if you take care of the hashbrowns," I said, patting his chest. Then I walked out of our bedroom and in to the kitchen, the little white stick in my hand suddenly inconsequential. I dropped it in the trash, mixed a little champagne and orange juice, and searched through the cabinets for paprika. My husband followed me and we

got to our real Saturday ritual of breakfast-making, one that I'd always enjoyed because I liked when the two of us shared a space and did our own thing, where we could put a record on and revel in the free hours of the morning before moving on to other commitments. I liked this so much.

While I waited for the stove to heat up, and while Dave shredded potatoes, I went out to check the mail. A week ago I was padding down the driveway for the mail, barefoot in the transitional May heat, and found a nest of little birds tucked deep inside the newspaper slot. We'd stopped our subscription to the paper early Spring because they would always end up accumulating in haphazard stacks in the laundry room, and we had a habit of tossing them in the garbage instead of recycling. Since we lived in a budding little green community right on the outskirts of Charlotte and we felt like our neighbors were keeping tallies of our crime, watching us from behind their compost bins and DIY greenhouses, we just cut it off all together.

I wouldn't have noticed them had it not been for their demanding chirps. They were naked, wrinkled little things with their heads thrown back, beaks wide open and spanning the majority of the upper half of their body. I was struck by the design they made, perfectly aligned like a little choir, three in the back, two in the front. I wondered how long their nest had been there and felt a little thrill thinking about the possibility that they had just hatched that day. Above me, another bigger bird perched on the wire, a wiggling thing clamped in its mouth. It looked down at me, didn't break the gaze for a second.

"Yours, I assume," I said to it, retrieving the mail and walking back up the driveway. I turned back in time to see that bird dive off the wire and swoop straight into

the mailbox once I was a decidedly safe distance away, and I walked back inside feeling so happy with the celebratory noises of five little birds fading behind me. Happy like I'd discovered something real and it was a moment all my own. Happy because I knew I where I could find it again.

It was a simple thing to do, watching them, an obvious one even, but that didn't bother me. I found comfort in their routine over the week because it was, to me, a surprising place to find routine at all and this made it exciting. In nature, where I knew patterns happened always, it was still unexpected to find an unexpected one happening in your mailbox. And since I'd found them, I'd taken to having my coffee on the front porch, and even if I didn't watch them the whole time, while I read or watered Dave's geraniums, I'd catch that one bird diving from the wire out of the corner of my eye and I'd feel something like gratitude just knowing they were there.

I was particularly drawn to the bigger bird's song. It didn't have the trill of other birdsongs I'd heard. It was something with only two notes—something halting and hesitant. There were moments when I swore it was somber. I spent Wednesday afternoon on a birding website, learning how to distinguish calls and songs, how to discern species by region, shape, and color. She never let me get close enough to her to identify her markings and the babies had only developed a sparse down coat. My best guess was sparrow or wren, something probably far off.

This morning, I should have brought Dave out to watch them with me, but I hadn't told him about them yet, for some reason. When I opened the mailbox, two birds perched on the wire and watched me.

“I know,” I said, “you have no reason to trust me. But I’m only here for the mail and I’m a nice lady.” I slipped all the bills and coupons under my arm and showed that my hands were free, that I hadn’t snagged one of their kids. Each time, I had to tell them, show them this.

*

Dave’s magnum opus in the kitchen was his Hangover Hashbrowns. I usually had a knack for all foods breakfast related, but this morning I’d over salted and cooked the eggs too long, maybe let the pan get too hot while I went outside. They were dry and discolored but Dave ate them like he couldn’t get enough and that was one of those nice-guy quirks of his that got under my skin as much as it endeared me to him. Don’t be nice about it. Be real. But also thanks for not being an asshole.

“You don’t have to eat those,” I told him. “I know they’re terrible.”

“No, they’re not. I like the saltiness.”

“Dave,” I said. “It’s fine. You don’t have to be all tender. This is just another day. Another day only with awful eggs.” At this, he reached out to me, his face turning very serious as he slid a hand down the back of my neck.

“That’s a pun,” I said, and I watched him double-check my eyes before he laughed with me, still a little cautiously. Then he sighed, sipped on his orange juice, and set down his fork.

“It’s just not how I saw our life going. I was thinking we’d have at least two by now, you know? That’d I could be out in the yard teaching the biggest one how to kick a soccer ball right now or something.”

“Plan-making,” I said. “It doesn’t work. As soon as you hope for something, it learns how to avoid you. We know that.”

“That’s not plan-making, that’s just the natural progression. You get married, you start a family. Think about the people we know from college that have kids that should not have had kids when they did. Terrence and Charlene. And Jasper and Hannah—they shouldn’t have had kids at all. It just happened to them. We’re smart people. We already live in a comfortable suburb. I mean, we moved here with that in mind. Look, I have wrinkles.”

“Those are laugh lines,” I said. “So we’re out a little in left-field. But I’d say we’re doing alright otherwise, honey. Wouldn’t you say, Captain?” I called to our ten year old retriever mix on the couch. He lifted his head and stood and stretched on his designated spot in the corner, jumped down and moseyed into the kitchen where clicked across the floor and placed his chin on my knee. His eyebrows moved with alternating twitches.

“You want food?” I asked, high-pitched. “You want disgusting food?” I scratched his ears. “You can have it,” I told him. I set the plate down on the floor and let him have at the eggs leftover, even though that is something we never did, let our dog eat off plates and near the table.

“He thinks they’re good,” Dave said. “You’re not making fun of him.”

“He eats shit sometimes, too,” I said, waiting for Dave to laugh. But he didn’t.

“Should I call my mother? Tell her we can’t make it today?”

“Why wouldn’t we?”

“Because, you know,” Dave said. “It’s an emotional day.”

“I told you I’m fine.”

“This isn’t just about you.”

My default setting took this as insult, but I re-evaluated. I picked the plate up off the floor. Captain licked it until it was out of his reach.

“Call her,” I said. “Let’s do something then, just the two of us.”

Every other Saturday we had lunch with Dave’s mother at her house. It started with us cooking meals for her the first few weeks after his dad died, taking over in her kitchen as often as we could where dishes had a tendency to pile up and where if flour spilled, it remained. It’d been nearly a year but she still hadn’t adjusted to the empty rooms and hallways. At the start I was stopping by a few days a week since I worked part time as a substitute teacher and Dave worked full at Intel, to make sure she wasn’t spending too much time curled up in his recliner, or that she hadn’t stopped feeding the dog. It was a thing I surprised myself by saying I’d do, knowing Marcy had never been my biggest fan and knowing I didn’t have the slightest idea how to console or watch after someone dealing with such a death. My parents, though separated and far away from each other, Mom in Vermont and Dad in Northern California, were both in good health, superb health, you could say, and the only family members of mine to pass away that I’d somewhat known was my grandmother when I was seven, and my aunt, who mailed me five dollars every Christmas, when I was thirteen. I didn’t know what it felt like to lose a Richard. I mean, I lost Richard, but not like Dave lost Richard or Marcy lost Richard.

But watching them grieve from afar was hard and I wanted to help in a way that wasn’t a just a prayer. I wanted to do something kind. To act it out. So when Dave told me he was concerned about how his mother would adjust to being in that house alone, I

told him I'd drop in on her every so often. He hugged me and cried into my shoulder for long minutes while I rubbed his back and let him.

One Friday afternoon a few weeks after the funeral, I drove over to Marcy's. I knocked on the door and didn't get an answer, so after another minute I let myself in. I found the refrigerator door wide open and Artie, their ancient bloodhound, tearing into a head of lettuce, an empty take-out box half-chewed beside him, and his own food bowl overflowing with kibble in the corner. I called for Marcy and didn't get a response and ran to her bedroom where I found her windows open, the muslin curtains blowing and receding, the top of her head outside and just cresting the sill. She was on her patio with one of Richard's plants on her lap. She was pulling red petals off and letting them fall out of her hand. This image is still the one that comes to me when I make myself think of sad things, which I sometimes do.

Now I wasn't visiting but once a week on my own and the every other Saturday with Dave. She was doing better, taking the dog out for walks, meeting up with her neighbor, Jeanette, who'd lost a husband three years ago, and they were going shopping, getting their hair done, taking painting classes together whenever they were offered at Hobby Lobby. I liked to think I had a little something to do with that, encouraging the two of them to connect, but I let Marcy think it was her own idea because that was probably healthier.

When Dave told her we weren't going to make it this morning, I could tell from how many words he was saying that she was disappointed and trying to change his mind. He loved his mother like he loved other things, relentlessly, and he hated disappointing people in any way, even if it meant some part of him took a hit for it. So when he hung

up the phone and said nothing about going over there, I knew all those feelings he was having that morning were real and I thought about what I'd just told those birds: *I'm a nice lady*. Don't just say it, show it, dummy.

"If the day is ours, what shall we do?" I asked him when he hung up the phone. I curled up next to him on the couch. "Go see a morning movie? *Mad Max*? We can sneak mimosas in the travel mugs."

"No movie," he said, tilting his head back against the cushions. Captain stuck a scraggly paw on his leg. "I want to do something."

"We could take someone on a w-a-l-k." Captain's ears perked up. I knew it was only the intonation he understood but it amused me to think he knew how to spell like it amused me to think dogs were capable of complex emotions.

"We can do that," Dave said, "but I kind of have another thing."

"Shoot," I said.

"I want a garden."

"Like flowers?"

"No, vegetables. I've always wanted a garden."

I took Good-Guy-Dave's hands into my hands and said with sincerity, "So have I."

*

I thought it would feel different as an adult than as a child, to have dirt caked up under my nails, but it was much the same. There was a certain freedom in the carelessness, something damn near spiritual released with hands working so close to the earth and it coming back up with me.

Dave and I stood on the deck holding cold beers and appreciating our labor like we would a painting, pleasure spreading through simply from its aesthetic. I was a sucker for symmetry. We worked until the light faded on us yesterday and woke with it as it peeked through the windows this morning. Yesterday we measured the rows, the distances between each plant. We broke through red clay, leveled the soil. Today we planted and mulched. I staked the bell peppers, caged the tomatoes. We sweat. We laughed. There were two types of cucumber, tomatoes, jalapeños bordering the regular peppers, squash, zucchini, and at the front of the box, a designated area for herbs. Basil, cilantro, oregano, lavender, rosemary. A lone watermelon plant I was going to give extra care to because I remember them being temperamental. We planted and placed Marigolds intermittently among the other vegetation to ward off the bean beetles and thrips and nematodes.

In the garden my parents tended in our backyard when I was younger, we had everything. Could have stocked a whole market for the season. My parents weren't great to each other, but when they were and when they fit together best, it was in their garden, where they both cared, poured what love they had into the soil and seeds. Mom did the designing, the arranging, Dad the maintenance and logistics. They worked long Saturdays together on their hands and knees. They used trowels and hoes and rakes and they never argued in the dirt. They prayed for rain in dry spells and feared it when it was relentless. Their garden was alive, a vibrant palette. I had the most vivid memories of picking tomatoes straight off the vine in the summer, biting into them as if they were apples, only juicier, more red to drip down my chin.

Every vision I ever had of my future included a garden, but that got buried somewhere along the way, as things do.

“This makes me think of my dad,” Dave said.

“Me too,” I said. “Well, my dad. But Richard, too.”

“To dads,” he said.

“To summer, to us,” I added.

Looking at it all did make me feel giddy, a power rising, coursing from toes to fingers. I slipped my arm around Dave’s waist and we clinked our bottles.

“It’s wonderful,” I said.

“Take that, neighbors.”

Captain chased spittlebugs that sprang from blades of grass.

A family could be a husband, a wife, a dog, and some vegetables. I wanted to say this out loud.

*

They were White-throated Sparrows and they were getting bigger and looking more like tiny angry old men every day. The corners of their beaks seemed to turn downward, their eyes bulged, and there were still downy tufts that haloed the crowns of their heads, grey flesh poking through at the middle. During my visits now, which were twice a day since the school year was officially over and I was in between jobs, I carried a low-beam flashlight with me so I could get a better look, and an old composition book to write down new things I noticed. Mama eyed me from a tree branch. I watched her flee when she sensed I was coming too close, and take a defensive position a few feet away.

“Yeah, you’re really protecting them up there,” I said and then reminded myself: I’m a nice lady. “Sorry. You know what you’re doing.”

The birding website said they would be trying to leave the nest soon, at two weeks old, spreading their sticky looking wings and practicing so they could high-tail it off to better places. Since I didn’t know exactly how old they were when I found them, it could even be as soon as tomorrow, but I was going to watch it happen. Make some popcorn, cheer them on. If I had to explain why I felt such attachment to creatures that preferred I didn’t exist, I don’t think I could.

They were still there the next morning. I spent half of it on the porch with a book on mindfulness, half in the garden painting plant names on rocks to use as markers, sweating through my shirt wherever I went because the heat was no longer politely transitional, but aggressively there to stay. Every hour I checked on the birds, still nest-bound and blankly registering my big face when it blocked their view of the street. Looking at me all deadpan and letting out a chirp or two.

“Feed them, Mama,” I said. “Hot worm mush.”

Mama kept quiet on the wire.

I took my notebook inside to the cool and sat in the front of the window in a chair, trying to sketch them. Marcy might like to paint them some day. She was getting better with the watercolors. My sketching looked elementary and I was embarrassed by it even though I was no artist and had no standards. I ripped it out, balled it up, tossed it at Captain on the couch. It bounced off his middle and he watched it roll under the television stand and looked back at me like, *ha*.

I set the notebook down and texted Dave: *Dinner tonight? Out or in?*

He replied quickly: *Thai! Can we invite my Mom?*

I said of course.

He replied: *Awesome. Check out link I just emailed you. Can talk about it later.*

I got up, grabbed my computer, and sat back down, refreshed my inbox until Dave's email came through, thinking it would be something funny and political or an article on the latest herb-pruning trend. The link I clicked took me to the in vitro page of an in-town fertility clinic's website and I put my head against the window and then sat up to stare at the page and all its pastel colors. But instead of closing out immediately, I clicked through a few links and hyperlinks just to do it.

I always came back to that moment, that fourth date when we took Richard's boat out onto the lake, barely twenty-one, a little light headed from beers we thought were fancy, and anchored somewhere off in the middle of the water, Dave asking me if I had names picked out for my children. Me laughing at him like the question was absurd. Him shaking it off and not asking me again until we were married, three years later. Me making something up. Some name I'd just heard on a reality television show hours earlier.

*

When Dave pulled up in the driveway after work, Marcy was already with him. I watched him get out and go around to open her car door, hold her arm walking up the stairs, even though she didn't need the help. I opened the door and met them in the driveway. I hugged Marcy and kissed her on the cheek.

"Sorry we couldn't be there Saturday," I said.

"Oh, you're fine. Dave said y'all made it a productive one."

“We did.”

“Do you want to see it?” Dave asked. He said hi to me and leaned in to give me a kiss. Then he took his mother’s arm to lead her to the backyard. I followed close behind but looked to the mailbox, where Mama was darting at the opening and throwing together notes and sounds I’d never heard her make.

“Give me a second,” I said. I jogged through the grass to the mailbox to check first, to see if it was about to happen. Mama flew to the power line, gripping it, her feathers ruffled larger than I’d ever seen them before.

When I peered into the newspaper slot, it was black and I didn’t understand, so I ran back toward the house. Dave tried to catch me by the arm but I dodged it.

“Kat,” I heard him call before I slipped in the door. I grabbed my notebook, my flashlight and ran back out. Dave and Marcy were already moving to the mailbox.

“Watch out,” I said, brushing around them and clicking on the beam. I shined it inside and when I did the light reflected back off of slick black scales.

“Oh my god,” I said, feeling something drop deep, deep down into me.

“What is it?” Marcy asked, trying to peer in. Dave stuck his head closer and then pulled both of us back with his hands around the outside of our waists. He let go and jogged to the back yard, yelling over his shoulder to not get close. Riotous squawking came from above us.

“They were supposed to fly today,” I said.

“Oh, there was a nest in there?” Marcy asked. “Isn’t that sad.”

I stared at the dark opening feeling a little sick and somehow a little responsible. I shined the light back in, saw the thick body move on top of the disheveled nest.

I thought of the baby keeping watch the last time I checked on them, a few hours ago, the one who stared at me same as he stared at the flicking tongue and beady eyes that appeared later over what he knew as his horizon. Dave came around the house with a hoe over his shoulder.

“Back up,” he told us again, but I stepped up to the mailbox.

“No,” I said. “Don’t pull the whole nest out, some of them might still be alive.”

“I doubt that. Mama, back up.”

My Mama called loud and chaotic from her tree branch as Dave stuck the hoe in the newspaper slot.

“Really,” he said, “we don’t know what kind of snake this is and he’s going to be mad. I don’t want you near it in case.” When he retracted the hoe, the snake, the nest, the feathers tumbled out. The snake twisted and flipped before rolling itself onto its belly and curling into a wavelength. I fixated on the miniature wing hanging out of its mouth and all the parts of me that wanted to cry for those birds were parts that felt for that snake too.

“Non venomous,” I said, wanting to sink right down to the asphalt and gather up the feathers and pieces while I whispered to the snake, *now get out of here and don’t come back.*

“Doesn’t matter. Kill that disgusting thing,” Marcy said from our neighbor’s yard across the road.

Before I could say otherwise, Dave raised the hoe and brought it down. The sound of metal striking the asphalt rang through the surrounding lots until the snake was a scattered thing and the road was another color beneath it. I looked at all the mess on the ground.

“Did you have to do that?” I asked him, clutching my stomach, swallowing down the threat of nausea.

“We don’t want that thing in our yard. What if you would have found it in the garden when I wasn’t home?”

“It’s harmless,” I said, turning away from the scene and looking down the road, where a car was coming. Marcy crossed the street, her flip-flops slapping her feet as she all but ran past the blood and animal pieces.

“I don’t want to look at this anymore,” she said. “We should go get washed up and leave.”

“Let me take care of this and I’ll be right there,” Dave said. The car drove past and swerved broadly around Dave and the hoe he was leaning on, still in the street.

Me, I had no appetite for the food or for the evening, but I told Marcy to come with me anyway and we’d get ready to go. Dave went to the garage for gloves and a trash bag and I turned around one last time to see the scene we’d left.

Mama sparrow made a beautiful dive off the wire. She flapped in front of the newspaper slot for a second and hovered over the remains on the ground. She lighted briefly near the scattered nest, and ascended again. On a branch, she perched, singing that same two-note song over and over.

Lila

My grandmother was sitting across from me at the diner before I got up to use the restroom. She had been sitting across from me, sipping on her coffee, a mosaic of colors dancing on her face from the stained glass panes hanging in the window, a small smile etched between her cheeks. She looked a little weary around the eyes, but the smile never left.

I'll be back, I said. Baby's pressing on my bladder. Grab me a refill if the waitress comes back, will you, please?

It is time to give up the coffee, Emmaline, she said, her coral lips hiding behind the rim, her voice amplified in the near-empty mug.

For one thing, Lila, I said—I have always called her by her first name—that is too much like what my mother would tell me. Another, these are small cups. And have you even seen me drinking coffee around the house? You have not because I don't, I assured her. Plus, coffee and special occasions go together.

And special occasions do trump rules, don't they? Oh, isn't today just wonderful? I feel wonderful. I feel very alive.

Yes, I said. And that's quite a thing to celebrate. A nice, slow morning and a long stretch of day ahead of us.

We should order a cobbler, too. You know I tried to make a cobbler the other day while you were at work because—would you believe it—I have never made a cobbler before?

I called her a liar, delivered it as a joke. But I'd seen her make a cobbler before. I'd eaten it with her.

No, I am not. She laughed and signed an x in front of her chest.

Well then thanks for sharing with me, I teased.

But then she told me she never actually got around to making it.

I left her at the table because she had seemed fine. She seemed contented, at least in that moment, as if she were grateful for the little bit of space she found around her. I didn't think a thing more about leaving her alone.

I knocked on the bathroom door, a single, unisex room at the back of the diner. I heard some shuffling inside and waited against the wall, drumming my fingers on the belly that kept me away from all of my favorite shirts, pants, skirts. After a few minutes, an old man jarred the door open, a newspaper tucked under his arm.

All yours, Miss, he said. He shuffled back to his table where he was sitting alone, eating something fried and cloaked in gravy.

When I got back, our omelets were there, along with the fresh cup of coffee I so desperately desired, filled nearly to the brim, beautifully black. Lila, though, was not. I turned to look around the restaurant, a bustling venue in the middle of a dust-collecting town, my grandmother's hometown, that hosted an amalgamation of loyal patrons, like the newspaper man, and out of towners who had seen the small blurb it got in Southern Living once. No Lila. Lots of shriveled people eating their hashbrowns and eggs in a way

that made me think of turtles. But Lila didn't match up to these people. She always ate with gusto. Everything she did, she did with gusto, and that was part of the problem. Our waitress passed behind me and I reached for her elbow too abruptly before she slipped by. The coffee sloshed in the pot she was holding and a little spilled out onto her Keds that maybe used to be white.

I'm so sorry, I said, nodding at the floor. She blew a stray hair up and away from her face, let a bemused look settle in, didn't seem the least concerned with her shoes. The lady that was with me, I said, any idea where she went? The waitress, her fading nametag said Penny, squinted her eyes then, like she was trying to read something far away. She clicked her tongue.

Penny said, the tiny woman with the long gray braid?

I nodded, still scoping.

I think I saw her go out the front door there, sugar.

We'll be back for the omelets, I said, and walked out onto the deserted Main Street.

*

I moved in with Lila a little over a year ago, mostly as a way to escape my mother, whom neither Lila or I was fond of, but for our own, different reasons. I had moved home halfway through college, following two years on campus. Two years of pure, open space whose quick obliteration had much to do with a significant increase in tuition (the reason I stated when asked), more to do with the way I indulged in that space. I lost all the scholarships I had been granted because I had two ill-timed epiphanies at

once: I was no good at school and I desired, too much, *la vie boheme*, whatever I thought that meant. At the time it meant: anything far from institutions and

So I tried a semester of school commuting from home. But that flame was smothered long before it had the chance to burn out.

I took a job at a print shop on campus for a while and got news during a slow afternoon of my grandfather's heart attack. There had been a Patsy Cline album sleeve at his feet; the record still spinning when Lila found him. She'd been in the garden, dedicated to weeding it entirely. Only she didn't weed it entirely, she left a tiny corner untouched because, she realized, she had not made sweet tea in two weeks. If she'd realized sooner, maybe after the first row of weeding, that there was no sweet tea, she would not have found my grandfather already on the shag carpet, one arm stretched above him, the other tucked underneath him, the record spinning.

When I moved in with Lila I think I found *la vie boheme* in some way in her, in the manner with which she seemed to flit through life. I sensed it strongly enough that I was glad to stay, felt that I was learning more from her than I could have learned in any academic sphere. I loved our evenings together, evenings that started at dinner or in front of the television and evenings that ended in the attic, flipping through photo albums or on the sunroom sewing curtains together out of old bedsheets because she hated how naked the windows felt. I loved watching the determination with which she set to doing tasks and I loved more so, I think, the way she could let them pass, as if everything and nothing was so substantial.

I hated that I traded her in for a few cheap weeks at the end of May with some asshole I met at the print shop, some asshole who helped put a baby inside me that I didn't want.

And maybe it was this baby, the hormones, or whatever happens when you turn into a vessel for another being, but it was as if, suddenly, I noticed that Lila could not keep up with herself. And I felt completely at fault for it, for letting those little moments I usually loved to watch of hers start to pile up like cars at an interstate collision.

A few nights ago I had gotten up for a glass of water. I found Lila in my grandfather's armchair, pouring over one of his illustrated books on hawks. It was 4 AM. Two nights later, she was still awake when I went to bed after a late shift at work, just sitting at the kitchen table under the buzzing fluorescent light, post-it notes with unconnected thoughts and sentences spread sticking and curling across the tablecloth.

It was last night that did it for me. Last night she had gone to the grocery store for eggs and shampoo—she saw a Pantene commercial during Family Feud and she knew she'd need eggs for something. I was folding some laundry in the living room with her before she left and when I was done I took her towels and her clothes to her room so that I could place them on the edge of her bed for her to put away like she liked them, and I felt like I was pegged with a stone, right between the eyes. Lila was never, by any means, a tidy person. But in her room (she normally kept the door closed) I saw stacks and stacks of paper—all sorts of paper in just about every place, piled thigh-high in some corners, but mostly carpeting the entire room. Receipts, pages ripped out of phone books, newspapers—all in these huge piles around the room. I saw the curtains we had made,

torn down from their rods. I opened her closet. I found close to twenty shopping bags, all full of stuff. Tags, stickers still on.

When she walked in the door later on, with two more bags of I don't know what, I said nothing about it. I just said, because it was all I could think to do: Lila, I want you to take me to Ridge Springs again. I've been wanting to go.

And her eyes lit up and I'm pretty sure she never went to sleep last night.

Lila always talked about her hometown, always told me stories. We'd been there together a few times before I lived with her. Once for the annual peach festival nearly ten years ago—she'd brought back a dozen jars of peach preserves for herself, ten of which were still in her cabinets—another during Christmas when the main street had snowflake decals hanging from lampposts and carolers in front of the old deserted drugstore.

Because Lila clung to that rose-colored version of her childhood, and I could tell this based on her stories, like it was a dainty, wispy thing on the verge of blowing away with the slightest current. She had no more family here, no real reason to come other than these memories, but I think she liked to visit every so often if only to place herself back in the company of them. I thought making the trip would ease her mind.

While I was mostly concerned with making sure Lila had a moment to recharge, I was glad to be there for selfish reasons. I was glad to be away from the vicinity of my mother and all of the pre-natal advice columns she was sending me via email and the magazine clippings she was collecting for postpartum, most of them articles on single parenting, most of which emphasized the struggles of it. I'd started marking them as junk mail.

On the main street, I walked down the sidewalk, checking in each store-front windows for Lila. Most places weren't opened yet. I knew better than to be worried since I knew she had each of these streets mapped in her mind, but the past week was certainly enough to concern me. If I hadn't seen this in her lately, I would have stayed put in the diner, knowing she'd followed some thought that danced into her brain, but that she'd be back when she remembered there was food and a granddaughter and a great-grandson something waiting for her.

At the end of the street, where the joint storefronts stopped and a ramshackle block of houses began, I came upon another antique mall. I'd seen a few already just on the drive in to town. It didn't open for another hour, but through a grimy window I saw a very heavysset man in the far corner behind his counter, wiping what looked like the face of a rusty clock with a rag. He gestured to me and I waved back. He placed the clock on the counter and cupped his hands around his broom-bristle beard and yelled something I couldn't make out. When I didn't respond he tried again. I could tell from the way he was arching his back, how his muscles were probably tensing as he hollered, that whatever it was, he intended for me to hear it, so I tried the door and it opened. A bell rang overhead as I stepped in.

Hi, sorry, I said. I couldn't make out what you were yelling.

He cleared his throat, the skin on his neck cresting his face. I just wanted to tell you you could come in if you wanted, he said, cause it was unlocked.

Oh. Well, thanks, I said, my purse grazing an ornate porcelain teacup that clattered delicately against its saucer.

The man cleared his throat again and I felt my face flush but he just said, I know it says we're not opened but sometimes I come in real early cause it's real quiet here. Know what I mean? And when I get here earlier, I can take care of the stuff I need to take care of sooner and I can open up earlier and people can come in quicker. He spoke slowly, with that careful indifference people in towns like this had to the shape of words.

This is a nice place, I said, searching for any sort of negative space the room had to offer, my eyes already felt exhausted. There wasn't any; stuff covered nearly all the visible surface area in haphazard stacks on the floor, on the shelves.

It's all organized chaos here, so you know. I can tell you where anything is.

I'm looking for my grandmother, I said.

He lifted his thick glasses onto his head and wriggled his nose and mustache like a rabbit.

Lila Carstetter your grandma?

I felt a brief lightness in my chest. Yes sir, I answered. She is.

I'll be damn, he said. She dated one of my buddies back in the day.

That so?

Yeah. He was crazy about her. Always called her Hummingbird. Bought her a ring, you know.

I didn't know, I said. What was it about people in places like this that made them think everything and anything was meant for conversation? That everyone and anyone was eager to participate?

Aw, he laughed. He never gave it to her. Couldn't figure out how to tame her. Maybe you should get her to tell you about it.

Well, she'd probably be the right one to ask.

He didn't seem to notice my shift in tone; he had gone back to fidgeting with the clock again.

Sir, I said, I'm just—looking for her is all.

Oh, she's in here 61ohawk61re. Lots of rooms back there. She came in a few minutes ago talked to me less than one of 'em and took off like she was tracking game. Swore it was almost like she didn't even recognize me. Y'all on the hunt for something?

No, I said, we just like antiques. Nice talking with you, I said, starting for the narrow hallway ahead.

I passed through the doorframe, feeling quickly claustrophobic. Even the hallway wasn't clear of items. Lots hanging on and leaning against the walls. How did that man walk through here? Could he? There were smaller rooms on either side of the hallway so full of stuff that only one person could comfortably fit in at a time. I wasn't sure how you would even begin to find anything in here. It seemed like the kind of place you went to explore, to find some quirky, antiquated thing you weren't expecting, not because you needed a new nightstand or a matching set of whiskey glasses.

But if Lila was here, it was because she was after a specific thing, something she was reminded of in the diner, which could have been triggered by anything. Maybe the smell of syrup? Our waitress's name? A salt shaker? It was hard to say. All I know is I had noticed my palms had started to sweat.

Down the hall, in an unidentifiable direction I heard something clang, and when I turned the corner, I found Lila hunched over a rack of old baking dishes, some of which were strewn about the floor. She snapped up at the waist and her arms were full of an

assortment of items. A small candelabra, a stein, an age-spotted needle-point pillow, a shoebox full of weathered postcards, a Patsy Cline record. Some of these things were balanced on one another in her arms.

Emmaline, she said, as if I had been with her the whole time, look at what I've found. Look at these postcards. People have written on them, she said. She tried to set some of her items down and the candelabra slipped out and onto the floor. Lila didn't notice. She just said, I'd like to read what they wrote to each other, but don't you think that's a little invasive? Maybe they'd just be nice to have. To sense other people's company, to know there were other voices around.

Her sentences seemed to bleed into one another. I was unsure where one stopped and the other began.

Lila, I said. I felt that I needed to get her to take a breath.

She had turned around, her back to me and it was clear a deep breath wasn't going to do the trick.

Oh, but here's what I came in for in the first place, she said, her voice muffled. She was digging through another pile on the floor. It couldn't have been a pile she made. She couldn't have been in here for more than ten minutes. Yet she moved items off, one by one until she came to what was at the bottom, indicating she had, no doubt, put it there.

She turned to me with her hands closed around something, a smile so set into her face it seemed a permanent fixture. The bags under her eyes were more pronounced and her eyes, bloodshot, darted back and forth fast as a flutter of wings. She unfolded her

hands and produced a tiny, embroidered baby's bonnet so delicate-looking I thought it'd fall to shreds right there.

It's for that, she said, poking my belly.

I stared at its beautiful stitching, some of the patterns similar to things I'd seen Lila produce. I looked up, wanting nothing more than to just hug my tiny grandmother with the long, silver, bohemian braid if only to keep her still for one minute, one among however many minutes she had been ceaselessly dashing about. But when I reached in to pull her close, she seemed entirely unaware of my gesture. She just said, I feel wonderful. I feel very alive.

Robin's Egg, Midnight Blue

They were outliers in body and brain and they made fun of each other for these things they couldn't help because it had once made the days easier.

They were in Wal-Mart when Sheri fainted and peed herself. May had been looking at cereal when she heard her friend hit the floor like the way a real punch sounded if given right. A black woman in a linen pantsuit dropped her basket and ran on high heels and crouched down to them and May told her thank you, but she knew how to deal with this. The woman squeezed May's shoulder and left them, but stayed on the aisle. May saw Sheri's urine on the floor between her legs, seeping out from under her, pale yellow. Sheri, hey. Come back. Come here. Her eyes opened and she rolled them back. I fainted again, she said and May said, yep. I pissed myself, didn't I. May nodded and pinched her lips together and they laughed behind closed mouths, Sheri's head in her lap, her face almost glowing in its paleness like the big fluorescents above them.

They got up and watched from around the end of the aisle as the employee with the mohawk had to mop it up. They laughed so hard Sheri almost pissed herself again.

They agreed May was easier to make fun of because her issue was not that her body was time stamped, but that her mind was prone to glitching in a way that was, sometimes, comical in itself. She checked doorknobs, she flipped light switches, counted her teeth, chewed her food a certain number of times, said that car commercial slogan over and over and over. When they stayed over with one another, right before sleep when

they'd be in the bed together, blue from the television lighting their faces, Sheri might have said, did I leave the stove on? Did I lock my car? Because she knew just how much May could take.

They were not always making fun of each other. Because, for the very same reason they did, days were hard.

They used to sit beside one another in History and Sheri could tell when May was stuck on a dark thought, sometimes before May would start touching the corner of her desk sixteen times. She never interrupted May, but would sometimes scribble a note on her notebook and tilt it towards May: *It's Alright*, it said.

And when Sheri told May she probably wasn't going to make it through the year, May told her first, to shut her stupid mouth, but second, that they'd worry about that later.

*

May jumps at the sound of her mother's keys on the vinyl counter, a trebled clink. It is dark outside. Her mother's shifts end at seven, most nights, but it is later than that, almost nine. Through sleep-eyes, through television light, May watches her writhe out of her coat and lay it across a chair, watches her dig a pack of cigarettes out of her purse and light one. She shuffles across the kitchen, cheeks sinking with each inhale. Her cheekbones look sharper in the blue colored strobes of the television. May stirs on the couch.

"How was work?" She asks, her head just cresting the blanket. Her mother turns, startled. She coughs a few times and fans in front of her face with her hand.

"Long," she says, "sad," she says, walking into the living room, grabbing the ashtray and transporting it to the coffee table. "I thought about my baby girl all day." She

sits at the opposite end of the couch and sticks a hand under the blanket, drapes it over the top of May's foot. She must not have worn gloves. Her hands are as cold as if she plunged them into a pile of snow before she walked in. May recoils. Her mother leans over and sets the smoke-spouting cigarette in the ashtray and props May's feet up on her lap.

"Baby, I gotta ask you something." May inches up into the corner of the couch, but May already knows what it is, remembers the day earlier this year when she and Sheri talked about it in an IHOP booth over triple stacks with chocolate chips.

"Richelle called me at work after I left you earlier."

She looks at her mother to continue. Voices spout from the television. "And?"

"I told her I'd ask you but I told her I just didn't know if it was something you could handle."

"What does she want?"

"She wants you to do Sheri's makeup for the visitation."

A surge of strange warmth prickles her skin.

"Don't you have to be licensed for that?" When she and Sheri talked about it years ago, orchestration was far from their thoughts.

May's mother suppresses a cough, rubs a hand on her chest to soothe herself.

"Not if the family has a special request," she says. "I told her it was a sweet thing to ask, but baby don't you feel like you have to. Okay?" Her mother works her hand up to May's calf and squeezes it softly. "You can say no," she says. "Sheri won't be upset if you do."

May huffs. She feels anxious. She kicks the blanket all the way off. It lands in a scrunched pile on her mother's lap, almost knocks the ashtray and spouting cigarette off the table. She heads to her room.

"I knew this would just upset you more," her mother calls. May is digging through her closet for her boots, a coat, her father's hunting hat. She dresses quickly, furiously. She undresses; she didn't like the way her arms dove into the coat sleeves. She dresses again. Her mother has turned the television off, smoking the last of her cigarette in the quiet, in the dark. The room feels so small and she feels so unsteady. She undresses. She tries putting her boots on first, then the coat, then the hat. She undresses. Tries hat, coat, boots. She undresses and dresses again and then in every possible combination so that her mind finally stops racing for a moment. She walks out to find her mother in the kitchen at the stove boiling water for some rice.

"I'm going for a walk," May says, and is out of the house before her mother responds.

She sets out on the dirt road that cuts through the pine-filled woods surrounding their trailer. It opens to the field and May crosses it, carefully treading through a row of beets. Most of the leaves are bowing to the dirt, heavy-cloaked with ice. The snow has illuminated everything, brightened the lightless grounds as the fullest moon would. In the middle of the field, she pauses, looks around, feels frozen in an antiquated moment, something in black and white, but more sinister than quaint. And as if led by them, her legs fold and she sits, flattening part of a plant underneath her.

The field is vast. May concentrates on being at the very center of it, revels briefly in the symmetry, feels transcendent, begins to worry she's not at the actual center,

realizes she has no way of finding out, thinks about how it would calculate in feet, in inches, wonders how far off she is, how accurate she could ever be, feels her breaths getting shallow, finally cries, finally feels how cold the ground is.

*

When they were younger, they liked to sit up in the deer stand at the edge of the woods by Sheri's house. The deer stand was Sheri's brother, Derek's. They often spent the night up there, tucked under blankets and high above the field. There was one time when they were eleven, May can pinpoint as one of the first times she could feel something wrong. It was after school on day in the spring; they had packed Swiss Cake Rolls and Cherry Cokes in Food Lion bags. All Sheri's mom said before they left for the stand was, May, don't forget your momma's coming to get you around seven in the morning. They waited for the screen door to slam shut, waited to hear her turn up the volume on a game show, and slinging their bags of snacks and notebooks and flashlights and Dollar Store lipglosses across their shoulders, they took off at a sprint toward the woods. Sheri's brother hadn't been home yet. May was scared of him finding them up there—he was quick to yell, not afraid to hit anything, anyone, she'd seen the bruises he'd left. But she also felt strange when he was around. Like her insides were warm but her skin was cool. She used to let him tie her to trees during a game of cops and robbers even though she was the cop. She felt all sorts of things when she let him tie her wrists and pull the rope tight.

The rungs on the ladder were small. Sheri went first. And she carried the bags. She held the camouflage mesh open for May when she reached the top rung, locked hands with her like she always did when May was afraid to hoist her body onto the

splintery base. When May was safe and steady, they looked out over the fields, felt like they were one hundred stories high. Sheri's breathing beside her was a series of short, difficult breaths. She always got like that. Sometimes just from sitting to standing. Do I sound like a fish would sound out of the water? Sheri asked when her breathing had returned to a normal pattern. May said, yeah, sort of. Sheri sifted through her bag, searching for a Swiss Cake Roll and after finishing half, she said she felt sorry for fish. Because they couldn't breath out of water and because her brother caught them and then they ate them. Then she said she felt more sorry for deer because he killed them and didn't eat them. Picking up a notebook and pencil, she wrote, Dear Deer: My Brother Is An Ass Wipe Sorry, which made them both giggle. She folded it into a paper airplane and sent it over the side. It spent a few seconds in the air, a few suspended seconds, then caught a gusty tailwind and dropped. May pulled out her notebook and started drawing. Sheri sat cross-legged near her, their shoulders touching, her white blonde hair lifting every so often and tickling May's cheek.

The more she concentrated, the more May couldn't get any lines right. If she couldn't get the lines right, the deer stand would fall. She would draw, she would erase, start to round out a shape and stop. The lines looked ugly and messy on her paper. Erase, erase. She did it so many times she wore the paper thin and put several holes in the middle. Sheri said, why do you do that? Start over and start over? And May responded, exasperated, I don't know.

*

Derek's truck is parked beside Sheri's when May shows up in the morning. She is unsettled by how ordinary it feels, to see Derek's after not having seen it in a year, to see

Sheri's knowing Sheri would never see it again. She gets out of her own car and slams the door shut, but she opens it and shuts it again, seven times, counting each, before she feels like she can step away. The American flag in its holder by the porch ripples in the cold slaps of wind, kissing up against the dirty striped awning.

May was used to letting herself in, but mostly used to pulling up and Sheri fleeing the house before May could even get the car in park, her mother's Michelob's sometimes stuffed inside her pink camouflage Carhartt, sometimes crammed into a purse. Drive, she'd say. Take me far from that bitch before I do something I shouldn't. May never asked questions until they were parked somewhere else and sometimes didn't ask questions at all, but they wouldn't make it out of the dirt-tamped driveway before Sheri would crack a can open and chug it full down. On the drive they'd pop in a mix tape and speed down back roads, sometimes into the next county, sometimes just to the boat landing off Ernest Road on the Edisto River, where they'd sit on the trunk of May's Corolla and finish the beers.

To the outliers, they'd say, and clink their cans together.

They would drink and watch water rush past, carrying tree limbs, trash. They would tease the boys and men that came down for a secluded smoke of something. Maybe they'd steal a cigarette. Sheri sometimes made out with some of them, May never, but when Sheri disappeared into a car, May would pop the trunk open and closed three sets of ten times.

If there were no boys or men they would talk about things they wished they could change about their families but mostly what they'd change about their bodies, those defected machines. I'll give you my brain if you give me your body, Sheri said once.

We'd be normal, then. No, May said, we'd be the opposite of normal because I'd have no body and you'd have no brain if we're only giving them to each other. Why don't we just steal from someone else? Sheri had nodded as if that were a good plan, as if she hadn't thought of it before.

On the front porch, May reaches for the doorbell and hears it ring inside. The sound of movement does not follow. Water drips off the icicles behind her and May waits a minute before rapping five hard times on the door just below the small, diamond shaped window with the puckered glass. She wraps her coat tighter around herself, tucks one side under the other. A few muted footsteps inside and then the door cracks, opens. Sheri's mother appears in a ratty t-shirt and oversized gym shorts, her hair twisted and clipped back. Her bangs are parted from a cowlick; the red dye, the dark roots, no match for the grey strands she'd had as long as May could remember. Her skin sags in all the places destined to sag, but she isn't far past forty.

"May, sugar," she says. A deep voice, scratched up by cigarettes for years.

"Richelle." May leans into the starched hug. Richelle holds the glass door open and ushers May inside, a hand hesitantly resting on the small of her back, something that feels like the way the pastor guided her into the baptismal pool when she was seven.

When May called over last night after her walk, after she came home to find her own mother passed out on the couch, she only called Richelle to say she would do it. I can do it. I'll do it, she said, never explicitly saying what she would do. Never saying, I'll put makeup on my friend's corpse. The call ended with Richelle sobbing, May listening, and somehow the formation of a plan to come over the next morning so they could ride

together to the funeral home. May hung up, took a long shower, let the water run until it was cold, never checked back on her mother just a room over.

“Can I get you some coffee? I got a pot on. Out of milk though.”

“Black is fine,” May says. Richelle wanders to the kitchen. May guesses it’s an excuse to get away more than a gesture of hospitality but is grateful for the moments alone even so. Her eyes follow Richelle’s measured steps and May can see the kitchen is in disarray. Pots all over, dishes, cans of beer, food still on plates, cat litter spilled out by the door. May wonders if she should offer to help pick the place up but she is overwhelmed thinking about where she would even start. Just the thought threatens to make her mind buzz. Down the hall she senses movement and feels an old familiar chill pass through her, catching a shadow out of the corner of her eye. While Richelle loiters in the kitchen, May starts for the bedrooms and gets a few paces past the hall entrance when she hears a door close followed by the faint click of a lock. She notices a sliver of light coming from Sheri’s cracked door, which seems unfoundedly normal.

“I had to wash a mug,” Richelle calls behind her. May whips around and comes back to the living room. Richelle glances past her, eyes curiously meeting May’s, and hands her coffee, the mug barely warm. “Housekeeping isn’t my priority right now.” May tries to remember if it ever was. Richelle hovers and squats onto the recliner, leaving the couch open. May sits in the corner of it and listens for more movement down the hall, and says in an embarrassingly hushed way, a very juvenile way, “It must be nice to have Derek here with you. I’m sure that helps.”

Richelle rocks in the chair. “He’s trying. But he’s just as much of a mess as I am. Taking it real hard.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen him. I wasn’t expecting him to be here.” May traces a stitch in the couch with her fingernail, ignoring conjured images of Derek sitting alone in his sister’s room. She suddenly senses the filth of the kitchen, feels like it is going to come flowing out and through the doorframe like lava and they’ll be trapped, leaving Sheri stuck in the basement of some funeral home until they can dig their way out and that could take days, maybe weeks.

“May,” Richelle croaks. She is staring out the window and her eyes look as iced over as the yard. “Sheri would be so happy that you’re doing this for her.”

May says, “I know.”

“Does it make you nervous at all?” It seems like a strange question to ask, one that May hasn’t given thought to in the event of it being very true.

“No.”

If a vision of a Sheri laid flat on a chrome table came to her, she countered it with some concentration on a set of lines, anything symmetrical she could find, the thought of the beet field, being in the exact center of the beet field.

“Somebody will be in there with you. Someone who works there, I mean. I don’t think I will.” Richelle breaks, releases a hybrid cry, whimper. May hears something thud against something down the hall. Her skin prickles.

“They’ve already embalmed her,” Richelle says, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. “And the funeral director said someone would show you what to do. Maybe do most of it for you since you’re so young. I just want you to make her look like she did when she was the happiest.” She wipes her nose again. “And you’d know that better than anyone.”

May stares into her coffee that she hasn't touched. It ripples in response to the thuds that continue down the hall, slight ripples, but noticeable. Circles in her cup. Circles inside the circles: the mug rim, the coffee within the mug rim, the waves, the reflection of her eye, her nostrils, the dark freckle above her eyebrow.

"I reckon I should find something better to wear." Richelle groans when she stands up. "Shouldn't take me long to get ready. Only got a few things to choose from." She disappears to her bedroom.

When May is sure Richelle has closed herself in, she pushes a stack of water-damaged papers to the far end of the end table and places the mug close to the edge, still full. Sitting there alone makes her feel small and anxious, so she takes her jacket off and walks to the bathroom in search of the basket Sheri kept her cosmetics in. The two of them had only just started taking makeup seriously. They were in something of an experimental phase, blending colors, over doing it, venturing into the effects of a good blush, a long eyelash, a pink pearled lip. Recently it was a blue palette they were exploring. A shimmer, a matte, a Robin's Egg, a Midnight. They watched tutorials on the perfect winged liner, almost got it down.

She passes by Derek's door. Her fingers graze the knob, something magnetic, before she clenches her fists together and shuts herself in the bathroom. She stands briefly in front of the mirror and takes in her own lack of color, wondering if the face in front of her is the face she's had all winter. She rifles through drawers, locates the weighty bag of products and sets it on the counter. When she opens it, Sheri's retainer is resting at the top. She takes it out and sets it in the spot where the soap normally was. She finds a tube of lipstick, Pinkerbelle, pulls off the cap and applies it, but hates how much it

accentuates her pale skin. She applies another layer, tries to darken it, and while she traces the soft curve of her top lip, the door rattles and flings open. May stands, heart sputtering, with a line of pink ascending her cheek, the lipstick tube landing open on the linoleum.

Derek is in the doorframe and appears unshowered, strands of caramel colored hair slicked down in places. He is shirtless, bigger than he was the last time she saw him, fleshier. Bearded. He has a towel in his hand, and when their eyes meet, May almost shudders, but there's an anchor in her chest holding her in place. He doesn't look away except to look her up and down. May notices his eyes are red-ringed, but they often looked like that, she remembered, from the things he used to smoke, drink. He has a small mouth set in a smaller smile, pursed, angled up on one side.

"May," he says, her name rolling around. "Didn't know you'd be in here." May tries to return the smile, the grin, whatever shape it is his mouth is taking, but she can't because she can't stop thinking about how awful it is that her body feels some electric pulse at the sight of Sheri's brother while Sheri lies dead in a refrigerated drawer. She picks up the lipstick and sets it in the cosmetics bag, zips it up and tucks it under her arm.

"Maybe your Momma told you," May says, "But she asked me to do Sheri's makeup for the visitation." Derek shakes his head.

"You think she's considerate like that? That woman never tried worth a damn to be thoughtful." Derek crosses through the doorframe, brings their bodies a few steps closer together, in tighter quarters. May's head feels light, but he turns to the cabinet, grabs a washcloth. "Barely kept up with hospital bills and visits and shit," he mutters, "And now she's crawling around and wailing like she's somebody who did."

He turns to May like he's going to ask her a question, but his face contorts and he spins around and rams a fist into the cabinet door, a seamless action, a guttural sound coming through gritted teeth. The cabinet ricochets and creaks back open. May jumps, feels like her teeth are throbbing. Pills and old toothbrushes and deodorants spill out of the cabinet and scatter over the bathroom floor.

Derek immediately rubs the knuckles on his other hand, turned red-blue in an instant. "I asked her to ask you," he says with conviction. "It would make Sheri happy." He comes within inches of her. "Makes me happy to see you." His breath is whisky-sharp and heavy enough to settle on May's face like a mask. Every sense she has starts working rapid fire from his proximity, from the compactness of the room, the things scattered on the floor, Sheri's retainer by the sink. May feels, overwhelmingly so, that if she doesn't get out, her chest is going to cave in, that her bones are going to crack and puncture something, but that weight, that anchor, that pulse she can't figure out keeps her right where she is. In a quick, sloppy move, Derek grabs for May's face, his fingers catching and tangling in strands of her hair. He pulls her in, tries to settle his mouth onto hers and misses but May moves her lips, sadly, desperately, until they align with his. He forces her against the cabinets and the knob of one digs into her lower back while Derek snakes his hands to the button of her jeans, gets them unzipped. He pulls his lips off hers and when she sees his face and remembers the room she's in, the day it is, she wrenches away in a delayed reflex. His stubble scratches her chin and she shoves him enough that he staggers into the shower door.

"Don't be a bitch," he says. "You want that to happen. You've always wanted that to happen." May's whole body pulses and doesn't stop at the sight of Richelle coming out

of her bedroom, who's seen nothing, who would do nothing if she'd have seen. May makes for the door but Derek catches her by the wrist, wheels her around, and she braces for something, but he just says so quietly, "Don't make her look like shit."

May can't respond, can't steady her shakes. She just pulls free, watches his arm sink to his side, cradles the bag of makeup in her arms, snatches her coat, and waits outside in the snow for Richelle so they can ride to the funeral home.

*

When the mortician sees the bag, she's curious.

"You brought your own cosmetics?" She asks. May nods. "You won't need them," she says. Then she introduces herself as Carol.

"We have to use a certain kind of product on the deceased to account for the difference in body temperatures. Those products will just crumble right off," she says. They are standing in the lobby of Thompson's Funeral Home. Richelle has escaped to the canteen.

"Now, we have a few policies regarding visitor's interactions with the deceased. Also some helpful tips to make the process easier," Rehearsed script. May's throat is dry. Carol continues, talks with her hands. May follows her swooping arms, flicking wrists, her long, tapered fingers but she hasn't heard a word. Soon they're walking down a hallway, going through heavy oak doors, treading over neutral carpet, rounding corners.

They come to a room with windows, similar to a hospital unit but with two chrome carts, one with a sheet covered form on it where feet stick out just barely, a tag tied around the toe, and May knows it's hers.

“Sweetheart, you can’t think of this as your friend. This is just a body. Think of her face as a canvas, okay?” The room is clean and smells so. It isn’t in a basement, but it’s cold. “I’m going to lift this sheet now, okay? If you feel lightheaded, step away. There are plenty of things you could knock your head on should you pass out.”

“I’ll be fine,” May says. She had agreed to do this. Three years ago at an IHOP over triple stacks with chocolate chips. Carol draws the white sheet back like she’s folding down the covers to a guest bed and then Sheri’s face is there, framed by her pretty blonde hair. May stares and feels disconnected.

“If you noticed, I’ve applied the moisturizer and the tinting cream already. I think it looks natural, don’t you? What do you think about the color?”

“It looks like her.”

Carol smiles and says, “That’s what we go for. Now, you’ll take care of the eyes and lips,” she says. She lays out several products on the other cart, spreads out the shadows, the lip colors, the blush. A line that doesn’t run in any store. “You should take your time with it,” Carol instructs, “Just like you would do it any other day.”

May walks over to the products, examines them, notices none of the colors have names. No Robin’s Egg, no Midnight. But there are so many shades. An overwhelming amount of shades to color colorless bodies.

May’s teeth throb. She counts them because it makes her feel grounded. She finishes counting. Twenty eight, none loose. But she checks again. That molar seems to wiggle. She flicks it with her tongue. Fine. The colors on the table run together. May picks out the blues. Puts them in their own pile, considers throwing the rest clean off the

cart, just swiping her arm across the table and sending them like shrapnel in every direction. Her chest is heavy; she swears she hears the first splintering of bone.

“Now I don’t mean this to trouble you but I have to caution: the skin of the deceased tears very easily.”

May can only see, like it’s there in front of her, eyes open or closed, that paper in the Spring, the holes she bore straight through because she couldn’t get the lines right.

Old Haven Road

I brought a man home to fool around the Sunday afternoon the church ladies showed up on my porch. His name was Max and I knew two things about him: how he took his coffee and that his accent was fast and full of sharp, hard vowels and consonants. When the doorbell rang, I had just gotten his belt off, his pants unbuttoned, and he'd already swiped my shirt clean over my head, had thrown it somewhere out of sight where it landed and deflated free of shape. He wasn't the first person I'd brought here just to have a body. He wasn't the first man I had pulled close to get him to stay with me in that house. He would not be the last. I wanted warmth, something to counter her cold touch I felt still tracing some part of me.

Give me a minute, I said, sliding my thumb barely under and across the waist of his jeans. He groaned and flopped back on the bed. I grabbed my bathrobe off the back of my bedroom door, slipped it on and slipped out, pulling the door shut behind me. When I turned the corner I saw, through one of the front windows, grey hair. Lots of people came down Old Haven Road, but rarely came to this door. Some drove past and slowed down in front of the house and once, I found two guys on my lawn with a video camera, pimpled teens. I stormed outside, yelled at them to fuck off. They took off running down the road, laughing wild, loud.

Most people turned around at the bridge, right before the asphalt turned red-dirt and dust. They'd turn around after they'd gotten out and sat on the ledge for a while with

their beers, swearing to each other they could hear the lady weeping or the baby crying or could see the devil's face in the water beneath. All the lore their parents or this town had passed on, all the things that made their warm blood race. I'd passed people on that bridge so many times. Laughing, smoking, pretending to throw each other off the side, caring about nothing but the beer in their stomachs and the ways they could touch each other.

I would have liked to turn around at that bridge too, instead of driving the mile down the woods-lined road to the house that was my mother's house and before that, her mother's house, and now mine even though I didn't want it. Mine because she left it to me. When she died, I thought she'd be gone, but she seeped into the hardwoods, curled around my bedposts. I think she wanted me to dissolve into those places with her.

The doorbell rang again, followed by a knock, spaced out and tentative. I pulled my bathrobe tighter around my chest and unlatched the door and cracked it open. There were three women on my porch, on the upper side of seventy, clothed in matching dress suits, all vibrant colors, all ill-fitting. One of the women was wearing a wide-brimmed hat adorned with small scraps of netting and ribbon. One had a handful of pamphlets, the other a Wal-Mart grocery bag with the handles knotted together and sticking up in the air. They looked familiar and similar in the way that old faces often did, unified by their wilting skin and clouded eyes.

The woman with the hat and free hands extended one to me. I opened the door a little wider.

She said hello like she might to a child and her coral lips kept a rounded shape after the word. I took her hand in mine, small and warm.

We don't intend to keep you, she said. We're with New Bethel Church, just reaching out to brothers and sisters in Christ. We have a home cooked meal for you if you'll take it. Chicken and mashed potatoes and butter beans.

The woman with the grocery bag raised it in the air and offered it to me. Her white hair was slicked back against her scalp.

Thank you, I said. She passed it to me. The bottom was still warm. I asked what the occasion was.

No occasion, she said. Just leftovers from a luncheon.

But we would like to leave you with one of these, also.

The tallest woman placed a tri-fold pamphlet on top of the bag of food. *Heaven or Hell?*

I waited a split second before I took a step back against my door. The three women looked at me. I didn't have to look back at them to know that all sets of eyes were looking through me. One of the women shifted her weight.

You are welcome at our church any time, the coral lips said. I gave the women a nod.

He gives rest to the weary, remember.

Finally, one said, be blessed, Sadie, and they turned and descended the stairs. I watched them walk across my yard, level with one another, syncopated steps. The tallest turned around once. I slipped back in the house, closed the door, locked it. Through the window I watched the car lumber off, red dirt billowing in its wake. When she called me by name, I forgot about Max in my bed, waiting for me to climb on top of him.

*

This road, dirt-packed, miles of woods on either side, the river on one, was once a footpath for Cherokees coming from and going to the coast. At another time, Sherman and his troops marched through and they spared it fire, but still fired guns into pines and oaks and bodies and the bodies fell there and bled there and decomposed. There were two churches. New Bethel, at the beginning of the road on the paved part, closer to the railroad tracks and town, close enough to be removed from lore, to be considered a house of the Lord and nothing else. The other church was offset from the dirt path, burrowed in the woods, a twenty minute walk from my house. I'd heard people say it was a place for devil-worship. I'd heard people say the Klan convened there. I'd heard people say there was always blood on the steps, even after rain came.

I heard these stories from people, but I heard them first from my mother.

She liked to take walks through the woods, down our road, and by the river. She brought me with her. Occasionally a car would approach when we walked the road and I remembered heads swiveling as they passed. Some would stop.

This ain't a safe place to be walkin, they'd say.

My mother would turn, look whoever in the eye and say, we know. We live here.

She took me to the church in the woods once. It was summer and I was small and stick-limbed. The church was white with large sections of chipped paint. To the right of the building was a grand oak with sprawling limbs I wanted to climb and rest on. The scene looked to me like something so soft and quiet, something I'd imagine or paint up in my mind if I were reading about it. Even the woods around it felt like they were nestled close for protection and I thought, *how nice*, and I grew even fonder of them in that

moment than I already was. My mother walked a few paces ahead and made her way to the oak. She placed her hands on the trunk and turned to me.

What have they told you in school about lynching?

I remember shrugging, same as I would if someone asked what's your favorite game? When did we land on the moon? How many ounces in a cup?

People used to hang each other from trees, she said. By the neck.

She sat me down under the oak, had me lean against the trunk. We plucked dandelions while she told me about the man they'd strung up from the limb above me, how they caught him with a pretty girl who wasn't his people. The girl white and smooth like buttermilk, she said. She put one of the dandelions behind my ear and slid her hand down my face to hold my chin.

They say that if you stand under this tree long enough you can feel the noose around your own neck. She inched her hands toward me, her long fingers open, sprawled, then she placed them around my neck so gently. And then with the slightest pressure, squeezed. Squeezed more.

Momma, I screamed. I tried to push her away. She let go then and tickled me on my side.

Oh, baby, she said. I'm sorry. When she reached up to pull the dandelion out of my hair, I winced. She touched my cheek again and said, I'm not going to do it again, Sadie. You relax, now. She started pulling petals off and piling them on her palm. When she plucked them all, she held it in front of my face and blew them, petals like confetti sticking in my hair, landing in the bowl of my dress over my crossed legs.

Another time, when I was a little older, we came upon the bridge and my mother said, A mama threw her baby off the ledge here one time. And when she watched it sink but could still hear it cry she threw herself off.

My mother reached for my hand then, and I took it and stood to meet her by her side. Look how fast the water's moving for a creek, she said. I folded over the concrete but kept my heels on the ground and let the rock I was holding tumble out of my palm and plunk straight down in the muddy water.

Because of the rain? I asked her.

No, she said. It's from all the tears.

I watched a branch get caught on a cluster of rocks upstream until the current maneuvered it so that it broke free and washed under the bridge, out the other side where it would get carried to the river.

You're my baby, my mother said, twisting my curls together at the nape of my neck into a tight knot and let them spring loose again. She leaned over and rested her chin in the divot of my small collar and told me to listen.

Do you hear weeping?

When she had asked me moments earlier if I could hear the wheezing and gurgling of the wounded soldier, we were kneeling in the dirt and I laughed and said no. When she didn't laugh I said that it was because the sound of birds rustling through leaves and chirping on branches was too loud.

Now her chin dug into my skin and her breath cut through the humidity, warmer.

I can hear the baby, I said this time, closing my eyes. I can hear the baby crying.

What I heard was the lull of the water and her careful exhalations in my ear, breath like the woods.

There was a time when I wanted to please her; when I thought she could be pleased.

*

If I hadn't anticipated it, I might have cried or disappeared when they found her body on the bank of the creek, bare feet colored dark curious blue by mid-September water. Instead, I thought of the scene like a painting I might stop in front of at a gallery, glance at, move on from, come back to. Something subtly striking about the composition, something worth remembering about the strokes. My mother's hair tangled in the underbrush on the bank. My mother wearing her one green dress.

She was a small story in the papers but that was enough. She wrote her own tale, became one of her legends.

*

I learned more things about Max. That afternoon, I didn't ask him to stay; I didn't tell him to leave. He sat at my kitchen table in a chair he tipped back, looked me in the eye while we shared the meal the church ladies brought. I thought about the way he'd just twisted his fingers in my hair and pressed his thumbs into my hips, how he had run his hands over my body like he was trying to learn it. Across the table he looked at me and said that I was the first black girl he'd ever fucked. I watched his mouth and the way it moved, knowing that his accent meant he didn't know the right questions to ask about me and this place. And knowing that was all the relief I was looking for then.

All Things Duly Veiled

*“The female contains all qualities and tempers them,
She is in her place and moves with perfect balance,
She is all things duly veil’d”*

—Walt Whitman, *I Sing the Body Electric*

In the clearing by the river Sara watched Stella release one set of her talons from the rodent she had swept up on the other side of the field before the tree line. Sara didn’t know what she’d flushed out of the brush, small rabbit or squirrel, but watched Stella bob her beak down and pull away stringy sinews and tufts of fur. Every so often the bird paused and surveyed the surroundings. She inflated her body, ruffled her spotted chest and striped feathers, spread her wings to their full span, which wasn’t far off from Sara’s height, and pulled them around to cloak her kill from the gaze of anything nearby.

The heat was intense in the holler, even in the early morning, like it was all settled in the dip, like it couldn’t ascend the mountains surrounding it, and Sara’s hand and forearm were coated with sweat inside the gauntlet. She started to cross the field, toward Buck, who was watching and assessing her, waiting to give her advice, likely waiting to see if Stella decided to fly off to another county instead, like he constantly warned she could. This was only the third day of letting Stella off for free flight, only the third week after having trapped her, and Sara knew letting her fly and hunt like this was a risk, but

she felt something with Stella the moment she and Buck had trapped her off the road near his place, from the moment Stella went rigid in Buck's grasp on the tailgate of his truck. And it wasn't anything magic or spiritual, she didn't think, but she couldn't deny the strangeness of having a wild animal, a predator, respond so quick to her whistle. To perch so still on her arm like she was supposed to be there. Sara stepped through tall, thin summer grass baked brittle by the sun and came to hunch over Stella to see it was a squirrel she was still tearing innards and skin from.

"You'd better get her back on the gauntlet," Buck called from a few yards away. "This bird don't trust you all the way yet."

"Shouldn't we let her finish?" Sara responded. "She worked for that. That's how this training works, isn't it? Positive reinforcement." Buck approached and took his own gauntlet off his arm and smacked her hip with it, called her a sass, and smiled so the one dimple showed. Sara quickly turned back to the bird. "She's not going anywhere cause she's got what she wants right here."

"I'm saying you need to exercise caution every time you're with her and handle her, is all. Cause she could fly off whenever, or she could still foot you like you was that squirrel." He nodded at the ground. "I'm not saying on purpose or nothing, it's just they're animals, see? You gotta stay smarter than them."

Sara remembered one of the first few times Buck gave her this lesson, before she became something like his apprentice back in the fall. In the field behind his house where they'd met for her first session, he'd pulled his gauntlet off his left arm with his teeth while a Peregrine perched on his shoulder, to show her a band of white-washed and faded marks wrapping around the outside of his wrist to the fleshy pad under his thumb. "They

don't look it now," he'd said around the leather, "but those was some deep wounds. You don't think of your own muscles like pieces of meat until you got a inch of hawk's talons sunk nearly all the way in."

Sara found Buck's advice hard to retain, unlike other things from their time together, like the way his faded Stetson smelled dirty-sweet like river water, like the right way to swing a lure packed with meat so that it'd launch into the air and not skid across the ground, like the best way to whistle so that the birds responded quick, like the way his forearms were toned and tanned and his drawl was so thick it made her aware of her own.

Stella paused over the squirrel, finally, so Sara whistled twice and with two pumps of her wings, Stella came to rest on Sara's arm. She clipped the jesses to the hooks on the gauntlet and reached in her pocket for a piece of shredded rabbit meat she'd saved and frozen from Stella's first hunt, which the bird accepted and took like communion. Sara cupped the top of Stella's head in the crook of her palm and ran it down her back a few times, and in her pale eyes, a look of what Sara perceived as pleasure.

"Don't put your head so close to hers, I told you." Buck said. Sara backed away, slightly, but when she was alone with Stella in Buck's barn or walking trails with her to man her, she let her get as close as she wanted. She liked the feel of the feathers against her own skin and the slight pressure of talons clutching her arm.

"Gotta admit, though," Buck said, "that was a pretty kill." He reached over to stroke Stella's bloated belly and she immediately darted her beak to his hand, catching the middle of his thumb.

He hissed, cursed, jerked his hand back and shook it. “That’s what I’m talking about right there, see.” Stella cocked her head. The nonchalance in the bird’s attack forced Sara to stave off the smile she didn’t think Buck would appreciate.

“She’s never done that to me.” Sara said. “I’m sorry. You alright? She get you good?”

“Just nipped it. A little blood. Ain’t bad.” He stuck his thumb sideways to his mouth and sucked on it, pulled it back and wiped it with his other thumb. Sara dragged her free arm across her forehead and knew the wisps around her hairline were laying themselves down in the sweat and looking like little creeks on a map. She noticed a few drops of blood slide off Buck’s hand and drip slow like it was a leaking faucet. They landed inches from her feet.

“Still bleeding,” she said.

Buck examined his finger. “It’ll stop.” He turned back to the bird. “And she’ll come around to me,” he said. He reached out, slowly this time, and grazed the edge of Stella’s tail feathers. She shuddered on Sara’s arm then tucked her head into her shoulders and stared straight ahead.

“Not if I can help it,” Sara teased.

“When’d you get it in your head that you could back talk me, little lady?” Buck took his Stetson off and dropped it over Sara’s head. It fell past her eyes and she felt like a child. Stella flapped her wings against it and Sara felt her try and pull away from the gauntlet. She squeezed the ties even though they were clipped to the jesses and Stella rebalanced, reapplied the clutch of her smooth, black talons. That pressure. Sara tilted the

hat up with her other hand and looked up at Buck who was squinting at her with one eye closed.

“Looks good on you,” he said. “Rodeo queen.”

“I’m no rodeo sweetheart. Too rugged,” Sara said.

“That was a good fly today, though. I think that’s a promising bird. You want, you could come back this evening and we could give her another go.”

Sara wanted that very much. She took the hat off and tossed it to Buck. She turned to Stella at the same time Stella turned to her.

*

When Sara got home Esther was back frying eggs and bacon. Coffee dripped into the pot with a chipped rim. Their tiny, littered place was hazy with smoke that made elongated geometric shapes of slow moving swirls in the morning sun. Sara and Esther had lived there alone, with a mother somewhere, gone, a father in federal in Granville for the last year.

“Where’ve you been?” Esther asked, without turning around. Usually it was Sara asking her sister this question, though she hadn’t in a while. Esther’s bed was often empty; it was no different this morning when Sara rose before light to meet Buck out in the clearing. An egg popped in the cast iron.

“With Stella,” Sara said. “And Buck.” She kicked her boots off, let them clunk together and fall like dominos against the vinyl wood-paneled walls.

“When am I going to get to ask you that question and you tell me it’s none of my business? Be a damn teenager.” Esther shimmied a spatula up under the egg and flipped

it. "I'm getting tired of telling you to hang out with real people instead of that bird all the time."

"Well quit making it your problem," Sara said, coming to stand by her sister, hip to hip, reaching into the cabinet for a glass. "Cause it's not one." Esther was taller by a few inches, but their legs were the same length. Esther's were just shapely and sun-colored from days at the river with men and boys, with her friends, after work shifts, sometimes during work shifts, and she had the long, slender torso that Sara envied. Sara's own torso sat short and squat on legs that stretched thin as twigs. "And I do hang out with people."

"Buck does not count," Esther said. "Grown men who pamper wild animals and prefer them to women are not the kind of people I'm talking about."

"Buck's nice."

"I know Buck's nice, but you know he's ten years older than you."

"And you know you have your own bed to sleep in, right?"

Esther turned and leaned against the stove. She had their mother's frame, the angles. She had lips that stayed the color of poppies, lips ripe and full on the bottom and on the top a pretty line that traced a distinct, soft stretched *m*. They were lips some of the men and boys around liked to trace with their fingers. Sara knew because she'd seen and because Esther wasn't discreet in anything and would tell you herself.

"One day you'll understand the things I'm trying to tell you. I don't get why you don't yet, but maybe that's your choice."

"What things?" Sara asked, breaking through a beam of light, moving past Esther to the refrigerator. She poured a glass of milk and chugged it half down as Esther flopped

fried eggs onto a plate and poured the butter and runoff oil out of the skillet and right on top.

“Sex and love things.”

“I’m sixteen.”

“Exactly.”

“Esther, what are you getting at?” Sara asked as she sat down at the table squeezed into the corner of the kitchen. Her skin was stiff with sweat that had dried from the morning. She opened the blinds on the windows and Esther set their breakfast on the table and joined her in a seat.

“Look, I’m not Mama,” she said, “but you haven’t got anyone else to tell you these things.”

“I still don’t know what things you’re talking about,” Sara said, filling her plate with food.

“I’m talking about you and Buck, alright?”

“What about me and Buck?”

“You and Buck having sex.”

Sara let the plate clatter down on the table and felt her face get hot. “That is not what Buck and me are doing. I go over there for training and that’s it. Swear it.”

“You don’t need to get all defensive. I’m not saying you are. I’m just saying that even if you wanted to, you need to be smart about it. And I’m telling you this in a way anyone else probably wouldn’t. I’m telling you it’s not something to be ashamed about. It’s something you should own cause it’s your body and not a lot of people are gonna tell

you that, is what I'm saying. But Buck's older than you." Esther sipped on her coffee, the mug slow to leave her lips. "Illegally older."

"I know that," Sara said, ripping a piece of bacon in half. "That's why I'm not trying to do anything. He was older than you, too."

"Not in a way that mattered. Hear me, I'm just telling you things I wish someone had told me."

"You sure you're not just telling me this because you're jealous of all the time I'm spending with him?"

"That's what you're getting from this?" Esther looked Sara in the eyes but she had her pretty lips twisted into something of a smirk. "Baby girl, that was a long time ago and I don't mean to offend, but that was before he got all weird. That nature thing y'all got going on is not my bag. Never was."

Sara tapped on the table with the rounded end of a fork, debated whether to tell Esther she was going back over there that evening or not. She didn't.

"I'm in love with Stella," Sara said. "Not Buck."

"That's even more concerning," Esther said. "You gonna eat that crispy piece?"

"Yeah, duh."

Esther finished her coffee. "I'm working today. I'll bring you some food back for dinner." Sara nodded. Esther had taken on so much when their mother left, and all of it when their father did. Sara tried very hard not to forget this most days.

*

Connie Bridges threw an end of the year party a few weeks ago, where a good portion of people from Sara's high school were either hooking up or blacking out at

Connie's mother's property near Asheville. Esther had made Sara go, had offered to take her there herself, had encouraged her to loosen up a bit. Drink a little, she'd said, but not too much. And don't let a guy make it for you. You make it yourself. Sara had gone though she didn't want to. She wanted to be in the woods instead. At the river or with the birds, alone or with Buck. But she also thought making an appearance would keep people from talking too much, the way people talked in places like this.

She didn't let Esther take her. She got a ride with Maggie Blackwell and Gen Gates, two girls she used to go to youth group with when her mother was still dragging her family to church all those years ago. They still talked at school, at lunch and in classes, and Maggie and Gen were no more the popular girls than Sara was the loner, but those were the roles they came closest to. Those were the ones that absorbed them and so the ones they played.

They listened to hip hop none of them knew the words to the whole ride there and all smoked a cigarette from the pack Gen bought at the Quik-Trip with her fake before they left and when they pulled up to Connie's place and parked at the end of the driveway and a long line of cars, Sara felt nauseas but Maggie and Gen grabbed at her elbows and pulled her excitedly up the driveway.

Connie's mother's place was expansive. A six-bedroom mountain house on forty acres of land, a pool, a pool house, a stable, a woodshed. Plenty of places for teenagers to sneak off to if that's what they wanted to do. Sara had been sticking close to Maggie and Gen before they made it to their third and fourth drinks and found themselves holding hands with upperclassmen, Triston, a junior Sara had seen rolling a joint behind one of the vending machines at school, and Van, one of the wide-shouldered senior football

players. Maggie and Gen looked at Sara like, *sorry*, with their drunk-eyes, and followed the boys to one of those secret places. Sara finished the Budlight she had in her hand, no stranger to them. Her father let her chug as much as she could of one when she was ten. And she'd hated the taste, but had risen to the challenge, finished it all while her father laughed hysterically and slapped his knee in a lawn chair.

Sara grabbed another can of beer and walked out of Ms. Bridges' house with all its lights dimmed and music loud and tried to figure how she'd pass the hour until she could call Esther to come pick her up. She pushed through throngs of people, some of whom were tangled up with one another, all of whom looked different in the colors of the firelight, and walked through the backyard until she got to the stable, much nicer and elaborate than the one at her place. Connie's was so sleek with its clean lines and white paint with green trim, and inside, with its good-looking horses and specific places for tack and accessories. Sara had never known that type of clean could feel so good.

She came to a stall and clicked her tongue and teeth for the most lovely mare she'd ever seen up close to bring her face close to Sara. She reached her neck over the side and flared her nostrils and lifted her lips and Sara patted her sleek, velvet shoulder. Sara always liked the smell of a stable and she knew that was strange. It wasn't something she'd willingly share with anyone. Unless they asked, what is one of your favorite smells? Then she'd answer because it was honest, and they'd either ask why or would say it was odd and not ask another thing. She was petting the mare but thinking of her old Appaloosa when she heard footsteps and saw Grant Shuller, a junior she'd had an art class with last year when she was a freshman. He walked toward her, concentrating

hard on his gait, it seemed, so he didn't fall over into the side of a stable door and Sara ran through the different kind of exit strategies she might need.

He was alright in looks as far as her options went. Handsome in that his skin was clear and his body was filled out in a nice way, not tall and gaunt or short and thick. And his eyes were at least an interesting brown like a stone in a creek. And from what Sara could remember, he was an okay artist. When he came up and tried to kiss her without a word, the mare nudged him with her muzzle. Sara wasn't so sure what was happening but didn't feel the impulse to run like she thought she might. The closeness of his lips to hers, even unannounced as it was, was new, made her warm. When he tried again, his lips landed on hers in what she thought was the right way, and he tasted a little like dip and yeast, but the mare nipped his shoulder and Grant pulled away and cursed and said, let's go somewhere. We can't do anything with this fucking horse right here. And the stable and everything around her suddenly became very familiar and not and though Sara was more than curious, she said no and left him holding himself up on the stable door, cursing at the horse again. Esther picked her up thirty minutes later but Sara didn't mention the kiss, the horse, nothing really except the beers, which Esther found hard to believe but congratulated her for.

So it was true; she had been thinking about these things, these sex and love things Esther had been bringing up, but she wasn't sure if it was her own doing or Esther's influence, and wasn't sure which she wanted it to be.

*

When the Appaloosa pony died young to untreated colic that made her belly swell like pregnancy, that barn in their backyard lost its charm. Pretty soon after, their father

sold off Esther's horse, the Palomino with the gentlest temperament, rather than replace the dead one, Sara's, like he originally told her he was going to do. They had no other animals to house, the chickens picked off over the months by coyotes and foxes, and it didn't look like they were going to get more any time soon. Sara was twelve, Esther was set to graduate high school in less than six months. It was around this time their mother started to seem like a sketch of a person, a rendering based on someone else's description of her, one where she got away before they could snag a good look at her face.

The Appaloosa died, the Palomino sold, their mother drove away in the better car.

Sara spent a lot of afternoons and nights in the barn loft after that, braiding leftover straws of hay that still littered the splintering plywood, reading school library books about animals, Indians, runaways. She drew pictures up there, played board games alone and taught herself how to play cards. She crafted love notes she'd never send to boys in her class, boys that made her feel a little outside herself.

Eventually, she watched her sister sneak off the porch for the first time and traipse through their field to the gravel road, using her cell phone to light the path in front of her.

That first time was in the fall three years ago. Esther had graduated, but stayed around, worked full time at the Wendy's right outside of Waynesville to help pay certain bills that their father could barely pay. She didn't go to school but didn't care so much about missing out. It had been a year without their mother and it was a late Thursday evening after dinner when the trees were peaking and the holler was filled with the smell of smoke pouring out of chimneys and off piles of burning leaves, overwhelming but sweet in its comfort. Sara sat with her feet hanging out of the loft window, trying to pick out constellations they'd just talked about in science. She thought she found Cassiopeia

and when she couldn't find anymore and when it turned out it wasn't Cassiopeia after all she made up her own. The night had been quiet. Their father had clicked on the television after dinner and had slipped off to sleep, and Sara was always relieved when he did. They both were, she and Esther.

Sara heard the crack and twang of a spring coil, and Esther appeared suddenly, legs first through the window in the bedroom they shared. She didn't notice Sara up in the barn, didn't notice when Sara climbed down the ladder and sneaked a distance behind her all the way down the dirt road that led to Buck Pinkett's place.

That was when Sara only knew him as a first and last name together, as the young guy that sometimes came around and brought feed for the horses and drank beers with their father on some weekends, the guy that sometimes carried a big bird around on his arm. She remembered looking out some nights and seeing her father with it on his, and thinking to herself, or to the bird, whoever, *get off, don't get close to him*.

Buck's cabin lay at the base, the furthest from the other houses, where woods and mountain began its steepest incline. It was September and an intrusive kind of cold that Sara didn't notice when she was wrapped up in her blanket in the loft. But she could feel the tightening in her chest and the thinness of breath pouring in as she kept a mediated distance between herself and Esther, making quiet, invisible steps on the darkening path. Above the smaller hill, she could see the smoke rising out of Buck's cabin where she knew he lived alone. She'd heard him saying something about this with her father on one of those Saturdays. Just him and his bird and some dogs.

When her sister's figure began descending the dip on the other side of the hill Sara quickened her pace for a moment and stayed crouched behind an old rusted tiller

while Buck's door opened and Esther was swallowed up into the only little bit of light around.

Esther didn't use windows anymore. Now she walked straight out the front door and sometimes locked it, sometimes didn't because there was no one there to tell her she couldn't.

*

She had plans for the summer. One of them was to spend as much time with Stella as she could, to know her more fully than she'd known anyone or anything else. And this didn't seem like it would be hard, as it was already happening. Her other plan was to finish turning her Appaloosa's old stall into a mew so that Stella could live with her instead of at Buck's. She was constructing it on her own, building much of it from leftover and stolen bits of chicken wire and branches she had already collected on solo walks through trails. And she'd convinced Esther, though it wasn't a hard sell because Esther thought it was a little badass, to drive her to a few construction sites around the county at night when the builders were gone and the houses were still and quiet skeletons. She took nails and mostly scraps, a few two by fours that still had lumber store barcodes stuck on them, which she only felt a little bad for. At some houses, if they were really sure they were alone, she and Esther got out and walked through by the lights of their phones. They pretended like each place was theirs, talked about what they'd put where and what colors they'd paint the walls. Esther was always thinking up extravagant arrangements and wanting magentas and poppy reds and even oranges and Sara preferred the empty rooms, the space they allowed as is, and wanted richer colors. Deep greens and blues.

For the mew, she'd watched plenty of videos online and had made enough trips to the library in town that she was sure she could build it right. She knew it probably wouldn't pass regulation standards, but that wasn't a priority. Neither she nor Buck, for that matter, was a licensed falconer and she knew that the Department of Fish and Wildlife strapped a big fine to this, but she wasn't threatened by it. She knew all the codes and regulations, she just didn't believe in them. As far as she was concerned, those were put in place to keep people from stealing and breeding and selling and keeping the birds in poor conditions, things she'd never dream of doing. And Buck wasn't this type either and he had been at it for nearly eight years without consequence. It's 'cause nobody pays much attention to the goings on of simple mountain people, he'd said. They were standing in his kitchen when he'd said that and she'd laughed quickly then, both from the nerves of stepping in his house alone with him, and the thought of them as mountain people.

Her last plan for the summer was this: to get kissed, real and right this time. Grant Shuller's not official. Grant Shuller's too much of a taste of what it could be like to go back to not thinking about it. Sara had replayed it so many times, changing it a little with each repetition. If it had lasted longer. If there were no horse. If it were a girl. If there were hands. If it were Buck.

The thoughts weren't consuming, but they were there. Just like Esther said.

Though this was what she spent much of that day thinking in the barn, while she cut chicken wire and measured planks and slats of wood. She had recently dug out her father's toolbox, which was rusted, but full and useful. She made cuts, not as smooth as she wanted, but good enough. She climbed to the barn loft to sketch the plan, used her

phone to look up pictures, and used her measurements to mark her sketch. Esther texted her from the house at lunch, said she made some sandwiches and was leaving for work. Said to call if she needed anything and that she'd be back around six. Sara texted back and told her she was going to a movie with Gen. *One of the girls from the party*, she added. Esther sent back a question mark and then another text that said, *good for you have fun*. Sara said *thanks, I will*, and then wondered why she sent that in the first place. She heard Esther crank up her car and from high on the hill and in the barn loft, watched her pull away until she was on the main road and gone.

While Sara waited for evening to come around she made her way back into the house and showered. She got out and looked at herself in the fogged bathroom mirror, at her body with its nice parts and the parts she'd trade in if she could. She towel dried her hair and rubbed gel between her palms, scrunching her hair up and to her scalp to hold the curl, then she walked naked into her room for underwear, slipped them up her damp legs, and then into Esther's room where she rifled through her sister's bureau. She dug out a pair of cutoff jean shorts so small the pockets stuck out underneath. They made her legs seem endless after she pulled them on. She paired it with a cotton and lace camisole that made her boobs look pleasant, small but enough.

On the floor, Esther's makeup was spread on the carpet in front of the floor length mirror leaning against the wall. There were lipstick kisses lining the side next to the border, different shades, like a gradient. Sara picked up some mascara and brushed it on her pale lashes and batted them. Then she sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the mirror and picked up each product, tried different things out. What she ended up doing with them surprised her, and she stared at her carefully made up face. It was subtle, she

thought, and with it, she looked a little more like Esther. The shirt wasn't working, though. She couldn't fly Stella like that. Too much skin. She kept the shorts, pulled on a pair of Esther's black boots, but found another shirt. One that was flowy and sheer, one that felt sexy and sweet at the same time, her bra peeking through just barely. Sara looked at herself in the mirror again and felt pleased with what she saw, a little embarrassed but otherwise impressed.

She checked the clock and grabbed her keys, locked the door behind her and walked the mile to Buck's house.

*

He had cleaned up inside. There was no longer a fleet of beer cans on his peeled, vinyl countertop, like there had been the last time she'd been over. It looked like he'd vacuumed, the carpet different shades with lines that went in every direction.

"Let me get you a drink," Buck said. "It's hot out. Let's see," he leaned into his refrigerator, pocketknife sticking up and out of his back pocket. "I got sweet tea. And I can make some lemonade—got Country Time packets in the cabinet. You just gotta pour it in some water and stir it. Like those little tiny packets, know what I'm talking about?"

"Sweet tea, please," she said, tucking her still-damp hair behind one ear. Buck nodded and grabbed a glass from the drying rack, filled it with ice and tea and handed it to her. Sara noticed his dirty nails and hands and found it charming. She also noticed the ziplock bag full of meat on his counter. Meat from one of his bird's hunts, meat they'd use to train Stella with. She sort of chuckled.

"What're you giggling at?" Buck cracked open a beer for himself and sat across from her at the table, leaned back in his chair.

“How normal it is that there’s a bloody bag of critter meat on your counter.”

“Nothing weird to see here,” he said in an exaggerated version of his own voice.

“You got makeup on?”

“Yeah, a little,” Sara said. “You’re weird for noticing.”

“It’s pretty,” Buck said. Sara felt her face get warm but hoped the actual blush would hide it. He didn’t mention anything about the shirt.

“I’m building my own mew,” she said, rolling her glass in a circle along the edges of its bottom. “So Stella can come live with me. I got good space for it. You should come see it.”

“How come you ain’t asked for my help yet?” He smiled. “Cause you don’t need it, you little independent thing. You don’t need me at all.”

“Not true,” she said. She rocked back in her chair a bit and it creaked.

“You mind if I get another one? I got a high tolerance, don’t think I’m trying to get all sloppy drunk. That’d be irresponsible. It’s just refreshing.”

Sara thought about telling him that she drank beer sometimes, too, but she thought that was trying a little too hard. It got a bit strange-quiet in the kitchen and between them, so Sara said, “You wanna go out?” She motioned to the field.

“Yeah, yeah,” Buck said. “Let’s learn this bird.”

He grabbed the bag of meat, full of blood, from the counter and the two of them walked out, screen door slamming with a pop behind them. The sun was turning into deep colors, God’s show-off palette, her mother used to say. She thought about saying that to Buck, but kept that in too. They grabbed their gear from his shed.

Buck's mews were freestanding and well constructed. Clean pine and thick chicken wire, a tarp draped across the top, the work of a guy who cared about the animals he was housing. Buck's Peregrine in one, Stella in the other. She sat on her perch in the corner of hers and shuddered when they approached.

"We'll get to start some team hunts, soon. Stella and Magnum. Wanna start bringing the dogs, too. We'll get there. Your bird's a talent," he said, "Here." Buck handed Sara a gauntlet. Sara slipped it on and tightened it, put a piece of meat in her curled fist, the rest in a bag that she kept strapped at her waist. When she unlatched the door and slipped in, Stella looked her right in the eyes. That was a feeling Sara would never get over, that thrill of walking in to a space with a bird of prey, that the bird was acknowledging her existence as another predator, a superior one, and would willingly climb onto her gloved arm anyway. It was a real relationship; one they were strengthening each time they interacted with one another, learning what trust really meant. Sara ran a hand over her bird's head and Stella made a small call, the high-pitched, strained one that signaled satisfaction or desire—something good.

"Bring her out," Buck said. He had the leather leash in his hand and was swinging it at his side. Sara clipped Stella to the glove and ducked out of the mew. They walked to the small paddock that Sara guessed used to have other animals like hers had had other animals. Buck had two perches about twenty yards from one another, wire going from one to the other. When they first caught Stella and were first training her, she was learning to fly between those, and she'd be leashed by the ankle and connected to the wire. Sara would stand at the other side and whistle and Stella would fly to her, attached

to that wire like a cable car. She'd land on the perch beside Sara and Sara would reward her with a string of meat.

The leash training was different. It had pocket on the end to stuff with food, so that they could swing it and release it for Stella to catch, mid-air.

"Ready when you are," he said, handing it to her. Sara let Stella off her arm and onto one of the perches. She walked some distance away and whistled once. Stella came to attention. Sara wound the leash and let it fly high in the air and Stella launched off the perch, snatching it feet-first and taking it to the ground.

"Damn, she's sharp," Buck said. They stood over her while she picked out the meat inside and Sara heard a car driving up the gravel road. It was Esther's.

"That your sister?" Buck said, brow crinkled.

"Yeah," Sara said. She stood still while Esther got out of the car, in her Wendy's uniform, hat and all. She pulled off her sunglasses and walked toward the both of them.

"What are you doing here?" Sara asked her. Esther looked at her with her eyebrows raised and said, "I could ask you the same question."

Sara left it at that.

"Esther," Buck said, nodding, smiling. "You here to watch your little falconer?"

"Oh my god, that sounds so lame," Esther muttered under her breath. Sara heard and found that she agreed. She looked at Buck and told him, yeah don't say that again. She turned back to her sister hoping to give her a look that said, no really, what are you doing here, but Esther just crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked at Sara's clothes like, really? "I'm actually here to pick Sara up, but while I'm here, show me what this is all about."

Sara exhaled and suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to be trekking through the woods on her own.

She knelt down to get Stella on the glove. She picked up the leash and stuffed it with another piece of meat from the bag.

“Is that raw?” Esther said. “Oh my god, sick.”

Sara rolled her eyes.

“You never were fond of this stuff,” Buck said, laughing. “But it is cool. Your sister’s a natural.”

Sara started swinging the leash and when she let go, Stella pushed off her arm, her broad wings generating a wind that blew the hair back from Sara’s face. But instead of snatching the leash, she flew past it and it hit the ground. Stella rose higher and then she was circling the sky, taking what seemed like beautifully choreographed turns around the trees. She let out her screech. Sara couldn’t help it; her skin prickled all over.

“What’s she doing?” Esther asked, her hand a visor to her eyes.

“Being difficult,” Buck said. “That’s alright, though. There’s someone here she don’t know.”

But Sara recognized the position a hawk’s body took on when it was locked in on something it wanted. Stella swooped briefly, riding a small tailwind upward, the moment stretched out as she froze and held still before she pivoted like on a hinge and dove down, wings tucked closer to her body for speed.

Sara realized what was happening in what felt like slow fragments. But in front of her, she watched Stella swoop up and make the reach, strong legs stretched far in front of her and feet splayed for immediate puncture, wings wide and feathers spread for guidance

to the right spot, a tactic that hadn't failed her yet. Sara heard a broken up, muffled scream that could have come from Esther, who'd covered her face and ducked as Stella's body blocked out the sun and shadowed them all, could have come from Buck, who crumpled to the ground, could have come from Stella, who was perched on top of Buck, one hallux buried deep below his collarbone. He writhed while Stella continued to flap her wings to pull away, talon still stuck in his skin.

He yelled, his face puffed out and splotched red. The bloodstain started growing in diameter around Stella's foot. Buck reached an arm to her leg, but Sara bolted to him, to the ground, to her bird. She threw the gauntlet off.

"Buck, hey," Sara said. "Don't move. Don't move and I'll get this. Don't touch her. Don't you touch her, I got it. Lay back." Esther knelt down too, her eyes pulled so wide, her poppy mouth in a flattened *o*.

Buck sucked through his teeth. Stella was trying to pull out, flapping, batting her wings against Sara, against Esther. Frantic, scared.

"Esther," Sara said. "Can you keep her still? Can you put your arms around her if I pull it out?" Esther bobbed her head a bit, not a full nod, but got to her knees and leaned in toward Stella.

"Careful. Don't bend her wing. Don't squeeze. Just contain her."

Sara placed one hand on Buck's chest, her hand gaining some of his blood. His head had slumped back and his face was losing color. "Buck," she said. She moved that hand to his neck and squeezed. "Come back, stay here."

She worked both hands to Stella's talon and pulled, putting the slightest pressure on Buck's chest, thinking maybe it would slip right out.

“Oh my god she’s so strong,” Esther said. “She’s gonna bite.”

“No she won’t,” Sara said. She gripped and pulled her bird’s foot harder and then the talon slid out, the full, thick inch of it. Buck grimaced and clenched his teeth. Sara felt blood pool out, so warm against her hand.

“Hold her, keep her still,” Sara instructed. She knelt and pulled off her shirt, Esther’s shirt, and balled it up and stuck it to Buck’s wound. Esther looked at Sara over Stella who had gone still, as Sara knelt over Buck in her black lace bra, pushing the thin cloth to his chest for pressure. His eyes stayed closed. The cloth soaked up blood quickly.

“I need to call an ambulance,” Esther said. “What do you want me to do with her?”

“Just let her go,” Sara said.

Esther stood fast and Stella pumped her wings and lifted from the ground. Esther ran to her car. Stella did a smooth glide, staying a few inches over the grass to the perch fifty yards away and Sara kept the pressure on Buck’s chest, but watched her bird pump her wings until she was high up, getting smaller and circling wide above them. Sara wondered if she’d come back down to her or if she’d find some other, wilder place.

Wild Randy O'Cain

Before anyone called her Wild Randy O'Cain, their backyard was a menagerie, the perimeter of the twenty acres post and barbwire-fenced for the horses and cow and emus and chickens and goats to roam at their leisure. There was an algae-frosted pond she and Ann Mereë had dug out themselves. In it, five alligators submarined around when they weren't busy sunbathing on the banks in the reed grass they smushed flat with their low riding bodies.

The boa constrictor, when they eventually got him, stayed in the barn, in what used to be Ann Mereë's favorite horse's stall, restructured and secured with strong plexiglass visitors could press their faces against. Ann Mereë Windexed it at the end of every day, one of the chores on her long list of responsibilities, which consisted of house and horse maintenance, but mostly the bookkeeping, the paper trails Randy swore made her feel like she was dying and would therefore never go near. At the boa's case Ann Mereë wiped away handprints, oily face prints of foreheads and noses and cheeks, and the deliberate streaks where younger kids liked to mimic the flicks of the boa's greased black tongue. The other horses and the cow still stayed in the other stalls at night, unthreatened by the creature one, two, three stalls over that could crack their bones with one generous coil and squeeze. Randy often wondered if her animals knew one another's potential, but she also liked to think that they all had an agreement that came about from their shared experience of being well loved. But even the loved had their days; she

eventually had to fence in the gators when she kept thinking she was only miscounting the goats and chickens.

Ann Meree told her this from the beginning, when the land was officially theirs, money paid, signatures inked, when their plans were dreamy and expansive. When they were young and first sat down at their kitchen table to draw out their plans, they were full of the future and they drank cold beers while a fire popped in their furnace. They had few pieces of furniture but their house was warm. Randy proposed her visions that were Ark-like in their improbability: goats, horses, chickens, owls, gators, coyote cubs, a bear. Few fences.

“You’re asking the lion to lay with the lamb,” Ann Meree said. She had never been able to disregard the religion of her childhood but often allowed the less distracting parts of it to sneak into her life as an independent adult. Prayer, sometimes, because she remembered liking what she thought it could do.

“But wouldn’t that be something if they could?” Randy beamed. “People would want to see that metaphor. If we raised them all from real young? And don’t you like the thought of letting nature just happen?”

Ann Meree finished her beer and put her hand on Randy’s bouncing leg. “The natural disappears as soon as we finish that big fence, she said. We can’t confine a bunch of animals and hope they work out their differences. Nature *will* happen. Be sensible,” she said. They both knew this was obvious, but Randy had a habit of denying the given with such enthusiasm, Ann Meree often had no choice but to question it herself.

“Okay, but what if?” Randy was messing with her and Ann Meree was imperceptive to it.

“No what ifs here, unless we want these acres to turn into an arena. If we’re gonna do this, we do it right. We run it considering all circumstances. We build more fences. We forego the food chain toppers.”

Randy kicked back in the chair, pulled her hair into the tiny ponytail she could barely make. “I don’t know,” she said, letting it fall loose again. “I think we could make some things work.”

“You’re insufferably vague,” Ann Mere said.

“Part of my charm.”

“Use charm with visitors, insight with blueprints.” She tapped her ballpoint pen on the legal pad between them and couldn’t help but smile at the way Randy’s hair had fallen, stiff enough with oil and dirt and curl to stay in place. Ann Mere loved that she could sit and sketch her if she wanted, could reach out and touch her if she wanted.

They carried on with their plan-making, made compromises and jokes and lists and decisions, which came as easy as either of them had ever known.

*

With a farm came hospital visits, and plenty of them. On a list of causes, you could check off heatstroke, blunt trauma(s), a fractured rib, two sprains (both ankle), a string of potent migraines (that turned out to be nothing more than that), rashes, a broken wrist. They were nearly pulling equal weight, Ann Mere and Randy, Randy ahead by the heatstroke and one sprawling rash. They had a family physician, Dr. Grovner, a Gullah man who said bone like *bowan*, yard like *yad*, and was fascinated by them. He knew the particulars of their lifestyle so well after a few visits he’d started to play a game that

Randy loved more than Ann Meree loved: sometimes guessing at the cause of their being seated across from him in the examination room.

“The horse bucked you? The gator grabbed a foot? Just kidding. No, the emu chased you and you tripped over a root. Headbutt from an angry goat?”

He’d guessed it right once and they’d had a nice laugh, despite the very act of laughing causing a great deal of discomfort to Randy’s bruised rib.

“Dr. Grovner, please visit us,” Ann Meree had said during that visit. “We will entertain.”

He promised he would. He would very much like to. Although, he admitted, he liked the taste of gator more than the sight of them. “Do you hate me for that?” He asked as he felt around Randy’s midsection for tenderness.

“I don’t, but they would.” She flinched once at his fingers prodding her skin. Ann Meree had a hand on her shoulder and said, “but we won’t tell them that.”

“They are too cryptic,” he said. “And too many teeth. Things of nightmares.”

“Bet you’re afraid of snakes too.”

“Oh, the most,” he said. He listened to her back. “Breath in, please. Out. Good.”

Randy inhaled, exhaled, waited until the diaphragm of the stethoscope was off her skin to nod at Ann Meree and say “Just like her.”

“Smart girl. What can I say about you?” Dr. Grovner jutted his chin toward Randy. “Ah,” he said. “I know you are the wild one.”

*

Snakes, Randy had always loved. They were the gateway to her obsession with the natural world. She picked up her first one out of fascination and a blind trust in her

humanness as a young girl, five or six, just a striped garter, made for a child's hands, and she never stopped. Of course she learned their dangers from books, from teachers, from her father, but she learned how to work them by being near them. The first time she interacted with a moccasin on the banks of the Ashley River she was flushed with adrenaline parading as confidence.

She told this to Dr. Grovner at dinner, who was now, by his request, only Isaiah to them, and had quickly become a dear friend. He had said that night, as they sat at their kitchen table with empty plates, tell me how you became Wild.

Randy said, let's migrate to the living room for this one and let's top off these glasses, why don't we. Ann Merree brought the wine and settled in for the story she'd heard before, the one she could remember Randy's vocal patterns from the first time she told it, the places where she got all hushed, the words she drew out. She remembered all this from Randy's first telling because she had wanted to remember everything about her, especially then but even now.

"All you gotta do," Randy said in her father's voice, "is work your fingers right up under it like nothing. She'll be so sun-warmed and tranced she won't know no difference. Let me show you, he told me.

Almost did let my daddy go first, but I was just as eager to test my luck as I was to impress. So I said, I got it, and walked, ears booming and hot like hell, right up to that cottonmouth's thick, brown body so still in the warmth."

Randy continued her story as Isaiah and Ann Merree reclined on the couch in front of the fireplace and steadily drank their wine.

She told how she kneeled behind the snake, a foot or so away, and watched for a respectful minute, appreciated the dullness of his color, how his bands had faded with age and given way to fated simplicity. As she kept her eye on him, she inched closer, quiet as she could, until she was within reach, until she could, if she went for it, have him in her hands. She felt her father watching close.

In her mouth there was nothing to swallow and her stomach thumped like a trapped, raging thing but she propelled her arms forward anyway, as if the individual parts of her never communicated, up until the moment the cottonmouth seemed to come to, simultaneously flattening his body and coiling lightning fast into a mass.

“I lost my grounding with the shock of seeing the snake move so perceptively and I fell on my ass into the sand around the log. And would you know I heard that moccasin’s tail swish, flick, stutter against the loose bark before I heard my father asking me if I was alright? From the ground, I could see that snake’s unhinged jaws just cresting a curve of his body, milky mouth opened with purpose.

So I said, I see what you’re saying, fella, and pushed myself back up to a squat so I was eye level with him. When I stood slow and navigated around the end of the log, he didn’t follow my movement, just tucked his head in, tilted it back so the mouth was still flung wide open and honest.”

Randy was up from her chair at this point, squatting on the rug on the other side of the coffee table, her whole body now involved in the telling of the story.

“So my pops says, You done got that little gaper all pissy. What’s the move? So I told him I thought that snake was bluffing and he wheezed out a laughed and said, shit, girl, you trying to call him on it?”

Dr. Isaiah Grovner laughed at this.

“You and your father have an interesting dynamic,” he said.

“Had,” Randy said. “But interesting is a good word.” Isaiah nodded.

“Please,” he said over his wine glass, “I need to know how this ends.”

Randy picked right back up where she left off. “That moccasin stayed so still,” she said. “If we coulda had one second to talk, we coulda struck up a deal, I know it. You want the animal to know you respect it, but how can they understand that when you’re just prodding and poking at it, you know? But anyway, at that point, that snake released the tight coil of his body, barely, and raised his head above the rest of him. He stood his ground while my pops walked up and handed me a thick branch. A forked one. I took it from him, knowing then the obvious, of course—that he was waiting on me to prove myself. And I was going to, dammit, but not to him, to me. So I told him to back up and I saw that bastard smile to himself.”

Randy paced around the coffee table that had become part of her set design and Ann Merece was tickled. Tickled maybe from the wine and Isaiah’s company, too, the first person they’d had over consistently aside from the veterinarian since they moved in. And he’d brought this delicious rice dish he’d made himself and he was so kind and so smart and Ann Merece felt suddenly protective of their friendship with him, like she needed to ensure that she and Randy kept it, and not only through hospital visits. It was so new to her, to feel this open around another person, to feel like she could hug Randy or sit close to her on the couch with someone else there.

Ann Merece had slipped away from Randy’s story while she thought about this and came back to find Randy using the fire poker as a prop, raising it in the air in front of her

and eyeing the end of it like that snake she'd been talking about was twisted up on it right then. And Randy had such an active imagination that Ann Meree didn't doubt she really saw it there.

"I love a good origin story," Isaiah said, when Randy had all but bowed at the end of hers. "What's yours?" He asked Ann Meree.

"Mine is unimpressive and obvious," she said, her head a little heavy in the good kind of way. "That's why we've gotta look for people to balance us out. Keep us from being too much of ourselves."

"That is not an unimpressive woman sitting beside you, Isaiah. That woman knows everything. And she loves me, so there's some strength right there."

Ann Meree felt her face flush warm.

"I think we're all a little bit drunk," she said.

"So we are honest," Isaiah said. "And if we are honest, I must say I am rooting for the two of you and for this place. I have never met anyone that treats one another as the two of you do."

"I like this guy," Randy pointed to Isaiah and flopped on the floor beside Ann Meree's feet, resting her chin on top of Ann Meree's knee. "You may hold the highly coveted spot of best friend, if you so choose," she said to him, her eyes starting to half-close.

Ann Meree wanted to fold this moment up, keep it close to her always.

*

Way before the boa, Randy told Ann Meree: I've got an idea. Ann Meree was picking the oldest horse's hooves in the small stable, the horse who would die the next

day. She was loosening clods of mud and manure packed in tight. It was a Sunday afternoon, and though they'd stayed loyal to Ann Meree's request to keep a Sabbath by not leaving the farm and simply spending the day together, neither could call it a day of rest. Too much to do, too much to want to do. Ann Meree used to go to the little white church tucked away in woods two towns over, where she was from. Used to have Sunday lunches with her mom, dad, sisters, but those days felt so unfamiliar now, like those memories and images were only borrowed.

Randy was sitting on a lidded bucket she'd brought in, bandana around her forehead, dirt all over, overalls cuffed above her sturdy boots with thick soles.

"What's the idea?" Ann Meree asked, running her hand down the horse's leg and lifting it gently.

"A way we can make some more money."

Ann Meree kept her focus on the picking, but she was listening. They needed ideas because it was true they needed money.

"We need a gimmick. A shtick."

"That's the same thing."

"A crowd pleaser, a party trick."

"I wish she'd just tell us," Ann Meree said to the old horse, who only offered a gust of an exhale.

"I want this—we need this—to be more than just a petting zoo, a cute little farm."

"That's why I let you have the gators."

"And I thank you for that."

"Right. So?"

“So I’m thinking we need more snakes.”

“You mean the things that get chopped up with hoes? People love those.”

“They would if they weren’t so busy being afraid of them.”

“Cliché,” Ann Meree said. She stood and pulled a brush from a hook on the wall, started running it over the old horse’s dapple-grey coat, her face close. She had a feeling, a heavy, deep one, as she ran the brush the length of her neck, that this routine would only be theirs a few times more. She thought back to the time she flipped a penny into that fountain at the mall as a girl with her mother and sister, wishing for a horse because that’s what she thought girls wished for when they had the chance to. Her sister kept asking, what’d you wish for, what’d you wish for? But Ann Meree wouldn’t tell her because she knew how wishes worked.

“100 percent profit,” Randy said behind her, her voice with a bit of an echo.

“Because—”

Ann Meree turned to say something to that but instead let out: “Jesus!”

“Whoa, Holy Roller.”

Randy was feet from her with a snake, black as night, on her arm like some accessory.

“Are you out of your mind?” Ann Meree asked, heart fluttering. “Snakes spook her,” she said, stepping in front of the old horse. “Get that thing away. Right now.” Ann Meree felt her horse’s hot breath on the crown of her head.

“I can catch them all. No buying, no deals. And I’ll hold them and charm them. We’ll use peoples’ morbid curiosity to reel them in and then we’ll go Discovery Channel

on them. Enlighten them. Think school groups—field trips. We could be that kind of place.”

“Randy, I’m serious. Back up.” Randy did. A few steps.

“Education and entertainment. This is what I’m thinking. You listening?” Ann Merece kept her eye on the slender body extending into and examining the air around it.

“Look at me! Randy said. “Live shows! That’s what I’m thinking. In a snake pit!”

“I need you to put that away. Let him go. Away from here.”

“It’s a black racer. It’s harmless. These things are usually scared shitless when you catch them but look. Look how calm he is.”

“I’m not fucking playing around, Randy. Let it go.”

A curse from Ann Merece was so rare; Randy lowered the snake back into the bucket and returned the lid. She picked it up and left the barn. She wanted to apologize but wasn’t sure what for, so she didn’t.

They had a weird, distant night, like the kind they had sometimes when they turned into themselves—Ann Merece withdrawn, Randy restless. They spent it in separate spaces of the house both on purpose and on accident.

But the next day, nearing dusk, they had forgotten and the peculiar evening before was washed away as they stood together over the old horse’s body in the field. The other horses showed concern, keeping close but still grazing idly. Randy was the one to find her. As sad as it was to see her strength gone and limbs stiff on the ground, Randy was glad it was the way she went, maybe quick and painless in a minute of the day. Ann Merece may not have talked to her again if she was the one to have to put a bullet in the old horse’s head. Even if Ann Merece was the one to ask her to do it.

Ann Meree cried for a while with her arms folded across her chest and Randy let her. When she sank to the dirt, Randy knew she needed it and left for the house, called a guy, came back out after some time and pulled Ann Meree from the ground and into her arms and kissed her forehead.

“Coffee, whiskey, or warm milk?” Randy asked Ann Meree, after she’d held her for a while. The butterscotch horse had bee-lined to them and started nosing their hands and pockets, looking for apples.

“Have respect, sir. Please,” Randy said to him, patting his neck. He nudged her thigh. “Fine, here.” She pulled a carrot from her sleeve. “I don’t even know how you knew that was there.” The other horses lifted their heads from where they munched. Lumbered over. Randy gave the other carrots to Ann Meree, who shared them, who felt better watching their movements, loving the careful, deliberate way they chewed. The goats bleated from their pen. They all seemed to know when another was getting something they were not.

“I got someone coming to help take care of this, Am,” Randy said. Ann Meree nodded. “Now what can I fix for you?”

“I’ll have the milk. In one of the thick glasses.”

“That’s my girl,” Randy said.

*

In the month following the old horse’s death, Ann Meree came back from the Seed and Feed one afternoon to find Randy in the barn talking to a man in a suit too short, sheets of plexiglass leaning against the wall beside them, a big crate between them. The old horse’s stall had been cleaned out, her bridle still draped over the half door.

“What’s this?” Ann Mereë asked, rolling the bag of feed off her shoulder and onto the ground. She righted herself and strolled over with hands on hips.

Randy scrunched up her face. “I need you to not be mad.”

The man reached out to offer his hand, his sleeve racing past the wrist. “Harry Bardell,” he said, “Animal Dealer.” Ann Mereë shook it.

“Handshake of a businesswoman,” Harry said.

Ann Mereë shot some kind of look over to Randy. Randy was expecting this look, but not for a few more hours. She thought Ann Mereë’s errand list was longer.

“And what kind of animals are we dealing here?” Ann Mereë kept her eyes on Randy who looked like a Stooge, whistling with her hands in her pockets, rocking back and fourth from heels to toes, all innocent, hoping for a laugh.

“I’m more of a Reptile Man, I’d say, but I can get you wolf cubs, bear cubs, wild cats. The big kind.”

“How legal is this?”

“Oh, I got credentials. And here’s this,” he said, producing a business card from the liner of his coat. A grainy black and white photo of himself holding an iguana over his head like a trophy, his phone number scrawled in pen in the negative space.

“Can I talk with my partner for a second?” Ann Mereë asked. Harry looked at his watch. “I got another delivery in a half hour,” he said.

“*Another* delivery,” Ann Mereë repeated. “This will only take a second.”

Ann Mereë wished she had a cane to hook around Randy’s neck. Yank her off the stage so quick.

*

Of course the boa stayed. All thirteen feet of her. And of course, the kids who came loved her. Ann Mereë never did, but she learned to work the Windex and the rag because she knew what it meant to do something out of love and because she had such faith in the half inch of plexiglass between her and the creature in the old horse's stall.

She may have learned to love her if she'd have brought the crowds like Randy was convinced she could, but the crowds never grew up into crowds, just stayed a steady sprinkling of homeschooled kids and mothers and old people looking for something to break up the days in their weeks. And they loved most of these people but they both knew these people wouldn't be the ones to keep this place up and running in the years to come.

Ann Mereë spent several mornings a week flipping through phone books and driving into different towns while Randy took on extra tasks around the farm. She wasn't sure what she was doing, what they were looking for, what they needed. Sponsors? Advice? Better advertisements? Volunteers? They bought a recurring ad in the newspaper but they'd compromised on size for the cost of repetition, and theirs looked the same as the used car dealer's, same as the *I Buy Pianos!* Man's. Only seven people who came to visit said they'd seen it paper, so Ann Mereë pulled it.

After a group left one afternoon, a mother with four kids at various levels of obnoxious, Randy said: this is why we have animals. She and Ann Mereë were leaning over the emu pen where one of the giant birds had pecked the oldest boy's forehead, the one who'd found a stick and tried to poke at the mob when they came close to the fence. He bruised. They left.

“I saw that son of bitch,” Randy said to the emu, running her fingers through the wiry feathers on his neck.

“Can’t imagine this will be good for business,” Ann Mere said. “I feel like that woman has a mouth on her.”

“She should have raised her kids not to be little assholes,” Randy said. “So whatever.”

“Can’t be a whatever, Rand,” Ann Mere said, turning serious. “We’re sinking, here. What’s the plan? We need one.”

Randy opened the gate and walked in with the mob. They circled her and probed her with their skinny necks and ash-grey beaks. Could have been out of affection, could have been out of expectation. Her hands got lost in the mass of feathers on their bodies. If emus could tell jokes, Randy believed their delivery would be appropriately deadpan. Ann Mere stayed on the outside of the pen, trying to remember what was next on her list for the day while dodging thoughts of which animals would sell for the best price. She hooked her hands on the fence post and pulled back into a stretch and said, come on, Wild Randy. Give me something.

*

It took a week to dig the snake pit, what Randy insisted on calling the Danger Zone, which Ann Mere did not oblige. But it took Randy no time at all to catch and cage snakes of various sizes, colors, and threats. She kept them in plastic bins for the first few weeks, wanting to test out the specs and success of the show before they made any more investments. Randy didn’t feel all that comfortable housing them this way, thinking about the land she snatched them away from, the lives she interrupted for the sake of her own,

but what else could they do? She justified their temporary discomfort by thinking of what she could afford for them if all went as planned. Heat lamps, spacious tanks, hearty meals.

“If you say you can do it,” Ann Meree had told her, “then we try it.”

“I’ve done it all my life. It’s nothing to it.”

Ann Meree demanded that fangs be removed but Randy refused that—said that people were going to be paying both to see their fears and to see if that day was the day she got them sunk into her calves or forearms. Ann Meree argued for simple theatrics, but Randy argued for authenticity and they spent that evening, too, in separate corners of their home.

When they had to sell one of the horses, Ann Meree finally called the local newspapers again, this time to ask for coverage. She detailed the premise of the show, made sure to sell the drama, and told them they’d have their first Sunday matinee in two weeks, 3:00, tickets \$15. All ages.

The reporter kept the questions going and Ann Meree found surprising pleasure in talking openly about their farm, herself, Randy, and the animals to this reporter she didn’t know over the phone, but before they ended the call, on a notion, asked him if he could leave her last name off, regretting that she’d mentioned it in the first place.

The reporter agreed, and probably wondered about the request, but said he’d love to write the story anyway. A photographer showed up to the farm that afternoon to snap a photo of Randy in the center of the pit with the boa draped across her neck, a shot Ann Meree declined to be a part of. The story ran in the next day’s issue. Ann Meree drove into town to pick up a few copies, curious to see how the writer had framed and put the

facts together. Randy didn't ask any questions. She was buzzing with too much energy, liking the way the photo turned out. She left her coffee on the counter and her toast half eaten to go handle the snakes for a while.

"I want to make sure they know the stage directions," she said. Ann Merece covered her face with the newspaper. Randy snuck around it to plant a kiss on her cheek. Ann Merece watched Randy through the kitchen window more or less run through the field to the barn where she'd spend the next hours talking to the racers, the garters, the corn snake, the moccasin, the rattler—her co-stars.

*

Isaiah called. He'd seen the article in the paper.

"You know that is something I cannot treat," he said.

"A wise man is on the phone," Ann Merece said over the receiver to Randy, who was scrubbing dishes at the sink. "He says you're a lunatic."

"Tell him to stick to his specialty and I'll stick to mine," Randy said.

"But very seriously, do you know the cost of antivenom?" He said into the line. Though they'd never said it in any direct way, Isaiah was aware of the financial troubles. They'd talked around it at dinner before, and Isaiah, intuitive as he was, understood their situation. Before he left that night he offered to help them out. Just a loan, he'd said, to Ann Merece, which you can pay back. With interest, if you don't feel good just taking my money, he'd joked. She was overwhelmed by this offer, if for nothing other than how generous it was. Still, she declined politely and Isaiah said he understood, that he would probably have done the same.

"She says she knows how to not get bit," Ann Merece said.

“It’s quite a sum of money,” he insisted.

“We’ve discussed it,” Ann Meree said.

“Not with me,” he said. Ann Meree could hear the concern beneath the joke.

“You just be careful. Use caution. Remind Wild Randy, if you could, of her humanness.”

He wished them well on the opening day, apologized for his shift that would keep him from being there. He promised to be there for shows in the future, but for this time to have his phone on him should they need something. Anything, he said.

It was minutes later that the reporter called and mentioned a follow up article. The story had generated a buzz, he said. People were calling in with more questions about the performance and he had a hunch they’d have a crowd the coming Sunday. He wanted to cover the event.

If you allow it, of course, he said. Ann Meree thought through it as best as she could in the few seconds she had to. What if something went wrong? She knew that was a question the reporter was asking himself, one he was maybe even hoping for. Was all press good press? Randy would say so.

“Do I have the right to request it not go public?” She asked.

“Is there a reason you’d want to do that?”

*

That Sunday there had never been so many people on their farm at once. Ann Meree had spent all Saturday making apple cider donuts, and Sunday morning brewing pots and pots of coffee for guests to enjoy as they walked around the farm. Many arrived an hour, two hours before and the grounds felt alive in a palpable way and it was hard not

to get wrapped up in that feeling. When they passed each other once on their way to tending different things, Randy grabbed Ann Meree's arm.

"Look at this," she said. "This is so great." Her hair was carefully curled, her face still plain but pretty; she'd refused the little bit of mascara and blush Ann Meree suggested. "I love you," Randy said, flush with excitement, adrenaline, shaking her hands like she was trying to dry them. She leaned in to kiss Ann Meree but stopped short. Ann Meree's body had tensed.

"Is that such a good idea?" Ann Meree asked, looking past Randy's shoulders at the parents, the kids, the reporter by the barn who was gearing up to interview her.

Randy huffed like she did but instead of picking anything apart, headed off to take the snakes to the pit, where in a little more than fifteen minutes she'd dazzle and pause and gasp in all the right moments. Speak the line she already decided would be her catchphrase: *This guy? Aw, he's just a regular old house pet.*

Ann Meree closed her eyes for a second but carried on and made her way to the reporter, a small man who seemed even smaller up close. He had a notepad tucked into his shirt pocket because he had one of those too, and stuck his hand out to her.

"Frank Duritz."

"Ann Meree," she said, grabbing it and shaking it firm.

"The handshake of a businessman," the reporter said with a smile. "Beautiful place here. Great turnout." Ann Meree nodded. "We'll keep this brief so we can cover the show."

"Fine with me," Ann Meree said.

His questions started simply.

F: Whose idea was this? AM: I really do think Randy deserves most credit.

F: Do you have a favorite animal? AM: I've always loved horses. Since I was a little girl.

F: Are there more animals you're thinking about getting? AM: I'm trying to talk Randy out of some wolf pups and bear cub.

F: How do you feel about the snakes? AM: About the same as any normal person feels about them.

F: Does it worry you to see your friend playing with the poisonous ones? AM: She knows what she's doing and she'll show you.

F: How long have you two known each other? AM: Oh, years now.

F: And how did you meet? AM: On the beach.

F: Is Wild Randy more than a friend? How do your families feel about your relationship? How do you think people here feel about your relationship?

Ann Merece turned to see Randy decorated with a few snakes and standing near the ladder with her enthusiastic audience closing in around the edges of the pit. Randy was already making them laugh about something. Ann Merece heard the collective sound rise up loud like it was some new, gentle animal.

AM: I think people will feel just fine, Frank.

Ann Merece excused herself and left the reporter with his notepad and pen hovering over it. She walked toward the crowd and lost sight of Randy, who was descending the ladder into the pit. The crowd murmured, low and polite, while Ann Merece pushed her way through it, careful not to knock donuts out of their hands or spill their coffee. She said a few excuse-me's and the people parted, allowing her a close,

bird's-eye-view of her partner standing in the middle of an assortment of writhing, slithering things, the black box with the rattlesnake Randy had decided to go with dead center and still closed up. Randy had talked through a few moments of the show with her, but Ann Mereë knew there would be more; something Randy would improvise in the moment or something big that Randy wouldn't have told her to keep her from worrying or saying no to it. Ann Mereë pulled her sweater tighter to her as Randy looked up and to her audience, to the people who were there to see her triumph and to the people who were there to see her fail. When she locked eyes with Ann Mereë, she winked, picked up one snake and let it twirl around her fist and arm while she said, to everyone and in her showman's voice, "They call me Wild Randy O'Cain but I don't see why."

They laughed; they grew quiet, waiting. Randy stepped over the slow-moving things around her and leaned over the box, looked up to the audience with such assuredness. She leaned closer and the people hushed. The kids, the mothers, the couples. She reached out, rapped on that black box, mimed listening very hard with her hand cupped to her ear, but everyone, especially Ann Mereë, could hear that rattle shaking inside that box, in a warning Randy wouldn't heed.

In the Wake of the End of the World

We should have followed the white marks on the trees, we know, but we thought Jessa knew what she was doing when she took us to the trail head with the creviced incline, the one where the rocks slipped and dirt loosened and rained under our steps. We didn't think that this was her way of showing off just how much she'd learned while she'd been away at school, like she was always doing when she made it back for a weekend, a holiday, because this felt different than that. We had always trusted her, took what she said as honest-to-God truth. When we felt skeptical, we thought it was the sun, maybe the Moon Pies.

Twice within the first mile Christy almost rolled an ankle and the first time April said good thing it was just an almost because no one could carry her, and this made Christy almost cry but we caught it before it could crest, quelling it with the promise that she'd shrink in when her body began to stretch up, trust us. We told her it was a thing time would handle and we kept walking, wiping our sweat away, taking photos we could post to Instagram on the drive home. And this is the way we remember the start.

But the actual start was the first time Susanna agreed to a favor for dad; picking us up from school and bringing us home, where she was going to cook us all dinner, in what seemed to us like going out of her way to impress him. Though we didn't think our dad needed to be impressed further since she was already over often and he'd already sent our German Shepherd to live with our grandfather for a while because Susanna was

allergic to dogs, dairy, grass, color and air, it seemed, and we wanted to tell him and her: this is not the way to win us over.

After she picked us up, we sat in the kitchen. She chugged her soymilk like a bitch and tried asking us how our classes were going and wanting to talk history, but April shut that conversation down when she slapped her history book closed on the counter. Christy sat at the bar and didn't move only because she was in the middle of peeling a tangerine and wanted to stay close to the sink for when her hands got sticky. She ate it, putting the slices in her mouth by twos, didn't look at Susanna, and when she was done, rinsed her hands and patted them dry on her jeans and said, I've gotta go to the bathroom. We think Susanna regretted agreeing to this favor, and we wondered what her eyes fell on in the kitchen when they couldn't fall on us. The peels of the tangerine, stacked like a cairn on the granite?

This was the actual start: April on the phone with Jessa, leaning against the clawed foot of the antique bed, the one she wasn't allowed to take with her when she left, the one April claimed but didn't have to since Christy was still quietly obsessed with the daybed she'd had since she was six and the sheer canopy that hung above it with small, glittered butterflies scattered and clipped to the netting in carefully chosen places. Christy plunked down on the floor beside April and put her ear on the other side of the phone, close enough to hear the tin-can-sounding voice of our sister miles away. April didn't push Christy away, but let her lean against her shoulder as she begged for Jessa to come home for the weekend. What we didn't know was that Jessa was already planning to, had plotted out a hike and was going to surprise us and get us out of school early on Friday without telling our dad.

We'll call him when we're on the way, Jessa said. And she said this so easy. We imagined her with a boy in her room, her ankles bare and crossed on his lap while they sat on her bed, maybe her trail guidebook opened, seasoned with post-its and highlighter and fragmented reviews in her slanted, boyish-print. Maybe a candle burning, maybe the television playing to no one. We counted off days: Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday night endured a family dinner that Susannah cooked. We made sure to wear our sneakers to school Friday.

We can say—all of us—there were few times we'd heard our dad sound angrier than he did when we were in the car, windows down on I-40, three hours of highway between us and him and at 12:00 on a school day (do you remember Christy's face in the backseat? Like she was about to lay an egg). And of course Jessa got the worst of it because there was no other way of putting it. How did you even sign them out? He wanted to know. We clenched our teeth just a little after Jessa said that people are surprisingly kind to girls with dead mothers. He used words we expected him to use. We all heard them in some way.

But we kept driving into the mountains, eating our Subway sandwiches, balling up the papers when the sandwiches were gone and casting those and the crumbs onto the floorboards. Because even if we were all thinking about our dad's face and our dad's disappointment, we were still hungry and still riding the high of leaving our classmates stuck in their desks. We kept listening to Jessa's music, music we'd never heard and didn't fully understand, and let it fill gaps in conversation like it was made for only that. Soon after, we found ourselves parked and emptying out our bookbags, replacing the

notebooks and loose papers with bottles of water and Moon Pies and apples and granolas, a bedsheet, two hammocks, three bandanas. Jessa brought the real camera, slipped it on over her head and across her shoulders. April brought a three inch knife that she could expertly whip open and shut, which she practiced a few times before shoving it back in the front pocket of her Jansport.

This time it was Jessa's face that looked like Christy's had in the backseat an hour earlier.

Did you take that to school?

I was smart about it.

April.

I'd never get caught.

We knew this was true. In school, April got her work done, made the grades. April only brought her recklessness to us. Most times we didn't know what to do with it, but we absorbed the force of it, willing or not.

This is a seven-mile hike, Jessa said. That should be three hours? Four? Or we can take this one, Jessa pointed to a green line that we recognized the shape of. Shorter, but we know this one, she said.

I say new one.

Are there waterfalls? Christy asked.

Just creeks and rocks, I think.

Whatever you guys want works for me, Christy said.

Let's do it, then. I need photos, Jessa said. She handed the trail guide to Christy.

We noticed one thing and not another: noticed that we were all together, alone, reeling with freedom. Didn't notice Christy place the trail guide on the trunk of the car.

We'd each eaten a Moon Pie. We'd each had a bottle of water. We were talking about what we'd do in the wake of the end of the world when the sun started sending rich colors through the woods.

First of all: how does it end?

Disease, Christy said.

You have to be specific. What kind? And does everyone go slowly or all at once?

It's like, really fast.

I think if it's disease then we'd all go with it. I don't think any of us are smart enough to outwit it.

But that's not the point of the game, April said. The point is we've survived, so then what?

I just know if there are zombies of any kind, I want to die. I don't want to survive, Christy said, falling behind to take a picture of a walking stick she'd leaned up against a tree. We turned and watched her crouch to get a good shot.

You can't kill yourself, April said. That's too easy.

Then I let myself get attacked, Christy said, changing her angle, holding her phone up high. Jessa took a photo of Christy taking a photo. We heard the single click of the shutter.

But then you keep living as a zombie.

Would that be so bad? Then your brain is mush and you can't think about who's gone or what you miss.

I thought everyone got wiped out by disease, not zombies?

Does the disease make the zombies?

I'm confused.

This is such an easy game. How did you guys mess it up?

What time is it?

We were just supposed to be creative. Use our imagination.

6 o'clock. On the dot. Now's the time—

—To get shot.

What's that from?

The creepy murder mystery April wrote when she was little.

We should get back. I think we're close, though.

(Who remembers it like this?)

In all versions, we play the game. But in another version we were playing this game before we came across the waterfall, which we called a surprise, not a mistake. We were walking, it was not yet dark, and we heard it first. April had just said she would make her home in a water tower for easy defense, drained of water (to be stored elsewhere), rigged with levers and pulleys and ziplines for quick escapes. Christy said she guessed she would learn to hunt. Jessa said she'd try and find more people we could live with. Strength in numbers, she said. Then we came around the bend of the mountain,

and the unmistakable sound of tons of falling, rushing water matched with the image of it.

I thought you said there were no waterfalls on this trail? April had her bandana folded thick and across her forehead.

I didn't think there were.

So pretty, Christy said. Let's go down there.

We should head back. Sun's going to start setting.

For like, five minutes?

Yeah, we're right here.

For twenty, we photographed each other in the mists, in different poses, from different angles. Jessa didn't let us shoot with her camera. It was film and each shot counted, and this was a roll for her project in school. Humans in Nature, she tried to tell us. What nature looks like when we interfere, even in the smallest ways, she said. We're not sure any of us really got it. We watched her try to capture blurred motion shots of water over rocks, hoping—not sure—to have found the right aperture, the right shutter speed. We let her take pictures of water running through our fingers, of leaves clutched between our fingertips.

We've got to go, she said. Look at the sky.

This was when, in this version, the colors got rich. This was when the sun sent us a message.

Was it a wrong turn? It felt the most simple explanation and at the same time, the most impossible.

The trail felt very little like a trail, but we kept walking. The white marks, which were likely not marks at all any more, were hard to make out in grey scale dusk.

Had it happened before the waterfall? Had it happened so close to our car—at the start? Before we talked end of the world? When we started losing light? None of us were sure. We couldn't agree on a timeline.

But we all should have felt it somewhere in our guts when we first got off-kilter, since we'd grow up on trails like these with our family, those weekends spent walking. But like the movies where this happened all the time, our cell phones refused signal, Christy's drained and dead from hours of use, and unlike the movies, we felt no nudge forward into the next scene. We felt, instead, like our feet were sinking into the ground, like our stomachs were being pulled down with them and we waited too long to tell each other that we were all feeling this.

We started placing blame when the trail disappeared entirely. We started thinking of our father when the light disappeared entirely. We had been thinking of our mother in parts and pieces the whole time, like we always did.

Under Jessa's instruction, we slung our two hammocks between trees. Every rustle became threat, became larger. Every chirp, every hoot. We worked at a slow pace in the glow of dying phones and when we had the hammocks up, we knew who Christy was going to want to sleep with and truthfully, we all wanted to crawl into one together, to wait out the night close instead of comfortable.

Isn't this a time to start thinking of all the things you never got to do in life? April asked from her hammock.

We didn't answer her.

Well, I can't come up with anything, she said.

None of us slept well. Some of us didn't sleep at all. In the dark, it was as if everything were brighter.

But when light and fog appeared in some hours, we found our way to sleep for a few because our bodies asked for it. Then we packed up, shared an apple, found a stream, drank from it, waited to see what it would do and shit in the woods when we found out. We kept walking in what we thought could be a right direction. April, flicking that blade out and in, out and in as we trampled over years of leaves.

When someone is looking for you, you should stay put, Christy said. That's what they used to say at camp.

We don't know if anyone is looking, April said.

Though we all hoped it—we knew our father was making calls before sundown. (And if it wasn't hope and if it wasn't regret—what was it we were feeling?)

We split another apple. We tried to agree on staying put, making a home base, but we were tired and clouded.

I brought us here. I need to get us back, Jessa said from a hammock. This is all my fault.

I left the trail guide, Christy said to the ground.

You're both on to something, April said, playing with her knife again.

I don't even know how to start a fire. And I brought a camera instead of a flashlight.

If we get hungry enough, will gross things still look too gross to eat?

So we can't just wait it out. If we walk, we're bound to run into something, Jessa said. We rest, we walk. Rest, walk. We'll eat gross things if we have to.

We started losing the sun again. We thought it would try to hold out for us a little bit longer. We set up our hammocks and we felt brittle.

The voices we heard when we were still and quiet felt like dreams.

(Who heard them first?)

We followed their sound. Jessa was the first to try to call out, throat dry, tongue thick: *hey!*

We joined and gave the call more voices, more power to carry further. *HELLO.*

We still didn't see anything still, but a man's voice echoed: *who-de-whooh!*

Where are you? We cried.

Where are you? They answered.

Rounds of call and response; we found them by a small fire next to a creek. Two young men, boys?, ages hard to specify, two horses with reigns tied to a tree, colored orange. They looked, to us, so real and not, boys in costume. They wore chaps and wide-brimmed hats, had ropes hanging from the horns of the horses' saddles. We all thought they were imagined.

Oh shit, we heard one of them say.

Christy was the first to speak and it was through tears she couldn't help. We're lost, she said. We're so lost. We need help. Jessa pulled on the handle of Christy's flower-print bookbag.

Where'd you all come from? The older-looking one asked. He stood and walked toward us. His hair peeked out from under his hat, long, black, and bristled. Where're you trying to get to?

The Ravenwood trailhead, Jessa said, meeting the eyes of the other boy. He had what looked like the first few days of a beard he was trying hard to grow.

You're about as opposite of that you could be, then. At least a good ten miles, he said.

Thought you knew your way around better, did you? You get separated from someone? The blackhaired boy said.

No.

Just us, Christy said. (We weren't sure of the right things to say to them or even if this is what we said, but their lines stuck; we remembered those.)

So you know, you ain't even on a public trail anymore. You're on private property, the bearded boy said. This is our uncle's land.

We need to make a call—do you have phones? (This seemed right.)

They shook their heads. We don't bring those when we're out for a ride. Ruins the aesthetic. The black-haired boy spoke like he was wrestling something. This was when we all noticed the way he was looking at Jessa. How he looked away only to come back to looking at her harder.

Is your uncle's place close?

'Bout a two hour ride. Here, the bearded boy said. He reached into a saddlebag and pulled out a bottle of water. You all look like you need it a little more.

We passed it around like a prize and meant to have manners and pass it back with some left over, but we drank every last drop.

Jesus H, how long have you been wandering?

Two days, Christy said. Can you take us home? Can you please take us home?

Christy, Jessa said, calm down.

We can sure get you back to our place. Get you some food and showers and all that. Then we can take you where you need to go or you can wait there or whatever.

What kinda luck is this, huh? The black-haired boy said. He was grinning now in a way we couldn't interpret. You all finding us. We've never been saviors before, he said to the other boy. Shit, that's luck. That's goddamn luck.

We watched them pick up bottles, put them in the saddlebags, kill the fire. Our eyes went to different things: the ink black trees, the stars, their hands tying our own bags to the saddles. Our minds went everywhere.

Them two can ride Toyota and Mac'll walk, the black-haired boy said to Jessa. And you can ride with me.

If we all could have felt how close he had spoken this to her ear, her neck, if we all could have felt that, the next few hours would have seemed so different. We would not have been too clobbered by relief to feel disappointed that we had not saved ourselves. To realize that these were not what saviors looked like.

Gospel Tents

Nothing about Double Branch Baptist ever changed except the trees and shrubs around it, except the dirt patches in the parking lot in front of the church getting bigger, except the number of headstones in the small cemetery behind it. Not the people, not the numbers on the placard behind the pulpit that said: Offering last Week, Attendance last Week. Not Gertie Murden, the pianist who was as much a part of the décor in the church as the splay of flowers in front of the pulpit every Sunday, the velour curtains framing the baptismal pool. It's how I could go almost a year without setting foot inside and still feel the same thing when I walked through the door to the Fellowship Hall with its linoleum tiles and laminate wood-paneled walls. That fake tree was still sitting in the corner. The bulletin board on the wall between the men and women's restrooms was still lazily covered with old event flyers and newspaper articles about different congregation members and photos of the youth group at Music Camps and Bible Drill Meets. I could reconstruct this place corner to corner from memory.

When I walked across the open space, over the yellowing, dirt-collecting floor, I had to half smile. I was leaving this place, going far enough away that it would no longer be just down the road and my parents couldn't guilt me into *just one Sunday* anymore. I carried the Crockpot to the small kitchen in the back corner and set it on the counter next to the ancient coffee maker, plugged it back in like my mother had instructed, flipped the knob to low. Lenah followed close behind with two casserole dishes stacked on top of

one another, attempting to grip all handles with the potholders. She set them next to the Crockpot and unstacked them. Macaroni and green bean casserole, a dish I always strayed away from because of the fried onions that were too difficult to dodge. But mom had left those off because this party was for me. This little family gathering my farewell.

Lenah went back to my truck to get the cake she'd let me help with; I got to spread the chocolate icing between the layers and slather it on the outside. She said she didn't want my help with the whole process because it was a cake for me, but really she didn't think I would make it right. I saw her smooth out the frosting layer I'd done when she thought I wasn't looking.

We were the first ones there, me and Lenah. Mom and Dad were stopping by Bojangles to get a few buckets of chicken and gallons of tea. I had no idea what time everyone was supposed to get there or how long this thing would last or who would be here. It was revealed to me too soon to be a surprise gathering, my cousin Andy texting me a few days ago and telling me he couldn't wait to see me. And because I hadn't seen him in some time I said, when will that be? He texted me back: *well, shoot*.

Outside, Lenah kicked on the bottom of the door, her fingers clutching the cake dish. I let her back in.

"Hey, get these hairs out of my mouth," she said, squeezing through the door. I brushed them away and followed her to the kitchen.

"What time is everyone getting here?" I asked.

"1:00."

"Let's go to the Sanctuary until everyone does."

“Why?” She set the cake down, lifted the lid and swiped a finger around the base of it, sneaking a taste of icing.

“Because I’m never going to play music with you again.”

She groaned and shoved me and said, “Why did God make you the most dramatic person on the planet?” And I shrugged and we walked out and crossed the rusty-roofed breezeway to the side entrance of the church. The painted metal doors opened easily, and we walked into dark and down the stairs that lead to the small room evenly lined with wooden pews. Ours was the fourth from the front on the left. Eighteen years, same spot. The Sanctuary was still dark, but light filtered pale yellow through the tinted windows. I sat down at the piano on the small stage.

“Who am I?” I asked, hunching my shoulders and spidering my hands up and down the keys without hitting a note.

“Gert Murd,” she said with a sniff of a laugh.

“The one and only.” I pressed down on some keys now, made what I knew of a few chords. Though I knew the names of notes and how to make majors and minors of each, my piano playing was shit. Lessons were wasted on me. Gertie Murden told me when I took from her like Lenah still does, she said: quit just hitting keys until you find the right note. She said: you got the answer key in front of you. You don’t have to guess.

“Play me something,” I said to Lenah.

She was leaning against the pulpit. “I hate having to try and think of something.”

I pulled a hymnal out from the piano bench and opened it up to a random page.

“Now you don’t have to think, just play.”

She groaned again but came and sat beside me, bumped me over with her hips. She squinted at the music for a second and readjusted her hands on the keys so that a few of her fingers rested on the black ones, and she started playing. Measure by measure, it came out smoothly, as if she'd practiced that piece for ages. When she finally hit a wrong chord and the notes crashed into one another like a quick accident on the highway, she stopped, leaned closer to the music and adjusted her fingers again, bringing them down into something once again pleasing and minor. She finished the hymn and flipped a few pages and started playing one I'd always loved, one I sometimes found myself humming even though I hadn't sang it in this church in years.

"You're so damn good," I said. "We really could have been something, you and me." She stopped playing. The last chord she played rung like a timid echo.

"Janie. This is church."

I stared at her, searched her face since I couldn't determine her meaning from just her tone.

"Mom and Dad aren't in here, are they?"

"You don't just come in and cuss in church."

"But," I said, gesturing grandly to the empty congregation.

"Doesn't matter."

"So can I cuss on the steps outside?"

"That's so annoying," she said. "That patronizing thing you do."

"That wasn't patronizing. It's a serious question—what difference does it make?"

It looked like she tried to word a few phrases before actually saying, "You're hard to talk to about this stuff because you don't care about it."

“What stuff?”

She made a noise, something neutral that diffused the abrupt tension. “I’m gonna go see if they’re here yet. See if they need any help setting up the tables.”

Lenah pulled her hair into a ponytail and left. I kept fiddling around with the keys, tried to read the music for hymn #164 Praise Him! Praise Him! All Ye Little Children but could only pick out the right hand line and I hated sounding inexperienced even if I was. But I liked the lonely way the notes hung around in the air of the chapel with no one in it.

*

We were nine and five, small and pale with various missing teeth, the first time we sang on a stage bigger and other than this, the rounded red-carpeted arch of Double Branch Baptist Church’s. We clutched skinny microphones and wore socks pulled up to our calves and dresses that stopped an inch from the lace trim around them. Lenah tried to hold my hand until our song started but I kept rubbing her hand away with my fingers.

Before that first show, we walked around the fair grounds, saw the tiny pigs race, watched a boy between our ages throw up just feet from a trash can. Our parents bought us cotton candy, one stick each before our performance, and a candy apple to share after and this was a dream, made our performance feel worth it in our little child minds. Right before we walked up on stage, I noticed Lenah still had blue dye in the corners of her mouth. Maybe I did too. I was afraid to lean over and rub it off, afraid it would be an embarrassing opening to a song. But our parents or those people sitting upright in the metal folding chairs under the canvas tent, fanning themselves in heat that likes to stick around welcomed or not until October or November here, they didn’t tell us and they

wouldn't have, too busy feeling things for our voices that, even then, blended smooth and right in a way that they said could only be called a gift from God.

That was our first county fair, but it wasn't long before we were doing State ones, the stages and crowds growing bigger along with us. You couldn't keep wearing the same pair of pants when you were shooting up like beanstalks, our mother told us. We played the Gospel tents and sang hymns that made old men and women cry and nod and raise their hands. I knew all the right parts of the songs to do that myself, but there were some times I saw Lenah, as an eight, nine, ten year old, close her eyes on parts that I didn't, and, I don't know, just go to some other place when she sang, while I, a lot of times, both hoped and didn't hope a good looking boy would be in the crowd watching me.

All those years, under all those tents and on all those stages, we sang together. And when I stopped, Lenah stopped. But when I picked it back up and took my musicianship elsewhere, found some other musicians and started my own band where we didn't play hymns, she didn't follow.

*

When I stepped back into the sun, into the heat, Andy was the only other person there. He was leaning into his car, grabbing Wal-Mart bags full of paper plates and napkins and plastic utensils from the backseat. Andy and I were close when we were younger, we were only a year apart, but we stopped hanging out consistently when his parents enrolled him in the private Christian school in seventh grade. We'd still see each other at church on Sundays, but hardly in between, and hardly ever since I myself had stopped showing up. He'd been to Speedy's a few times to watch us play, but it'd been a few months since I'd last seen and really spoken with him and there was probably a

reason for that; he dropped hints to me at a gig at Speedy's that he was gay. It was after a few beers, after he made some surprising request for songs he thought we should play, after he asked me some surprising questions about Robbie. I don't know if his questions were meant to be bread crumbs, because he never said to my face that he thought he liked men and maybe he wanted me to pick up on it but also, he never talked to me about it again and I wasn't gonna be the one to follow up.

I called to him and he raised his arms, hands donning grey plastic bags like big ornaments. He'd also gained some significant but unsurprising pounds since our last conversation, looking more his parents' size.

"You need any help?" I asked. He hesitated, turned around to look at his open car door.

"Yeah sure," he said. "You can grab whatever's left."

Andy's car was full of discarded fast food wrappers, the paper exoskeletons of straws and sugar. I don't know—the sight of the trash and the thought of him driving around with it in the heat made me feel like holding my breath, like his car would smell like stale fries, old burger meat. I weighted my own arms down with bags full of plastic table covers, neon-colored Solo cups. He was holding the church door open for me so I ducked out of his car quickly, bumped the backdoor closed with my rear.

"Good to see you," he said as I walked past. "I'm sorry I ruined your surprise party. I want to hug you when I put this stuff down."

We walked back inside and set the supplies on the back card table that Lenah had set up, dumping the grocery bags so that everything spilled and piled. Lenah was pulling

out the metal legs of the rest of the tables, flipping them over and lining them up. My parents still hadn't shown. Andy hugged me and I sunk into his big body.

"Things been going well?" I asked him. He responded with a twist of his mouth, a raise of the eyebrows.

"Yeah, yeah. Well, they've been going, at least. I hate my job."

"What? You can't hate Honda."

"Yeah," he said, ripping open a package of Solo cups and setting them lid down on the table. "You can. It sucks. The people suck."

"I know what you mean," I said. "Work sucks."

"Everything sucks. Let me move with you."

"Come on," I said.

"I can't believe you're leaving."

"Oh I can," I said. "It's about damn time. Place sorta loses its charm after a while, you know?"

"Is Mike going with you?"

"He don't know yet. Won't make up his mind about it. Really annoying."

"I can see how it would be."

Car doors slammed outside and in a second, the nice quiet room filled with voices, including my mom and dad's, our grandfather's, a few old couples' from the church. More were sure to come, knowing my parents.

"The fun has arrived," I said to Andy.

Lenah had set up all the tables and unfolded enough chairs. I took it upon myself to finish the trivialities—to cloak the tables in the plastic tablecloths, the ones everyone

would pick at with their fingernails, to spread plastic utensils on top, to adjust the desserts that had been brought, switching around the brownies and the pecan pie, slicing them both. I was grateful for the party, but a little resentful that it meant I had to talk to people.

“We sure are gonna miss that voice of yours,” I turned to Mr. Dangerfield, a former teacher, one I used to see all week long. He taught equations during the week and parables on Sundays.

“Hey, Mr. Dangerfield,” I said, leaving a plastic knife sticking out of the pie dish.

“I thought I told you you could call me Owen.” He smiled at me.

“Sorry,” I said, “habit.” Why my parents had invited him, I wasn’t sure.

“Well, you look darn great. Healthy. We’ve missed hearing you sing around here lately, but it’s going to be real sad knowing we might not hear it again.”

“I’m sure you’ll make it.” I said that in my bitch voice, but I really didn’t mean to. I just didn’t know what to say to people who were always saying the same kinds of things to you. During church luncheons, when I still went to them, I used to sneak off to the woods so I wouldn’t have to do what I just did.

“Well,” he said, putting his hands in his pockets, “we sure will be praying for you.”

I told him thank you so much, told him I’d need it. He nodded and took his leave and I was surprised I wasn’t the one to excuse myself from the conversation.

In the next thirty minutes I had this conversation twice. I thought a third one was about to start when Gertie Murden herself started toward me, but my mother swooped in and took my by the arm, brought me to the front of the fellowship hall.

She gave a speech and I looked out at all of the people who'd been in my life for the last twenty-three years. All of those people staring at me, who had loved me, taught me, laughed with me and angered me.

And I was ready to leave them.

*

I was moving to Memphis for music and I'd been trying to get Lenah to sing with me one more time before I left. I kept telling her I had four shows left, three shows left, two, and then it was only one and that was later tonight at Speedy's. Before we left my party at Double Branch, I said, Lenah, please come tonight. Just one song. I just wanna sing one more song with you. We can do Hank Williams. We can do Patsy Cline. She kept saying Janie you know I don't do that anymore and Janie you know I don't go to the kind of places you go to. I didn't even let that comment bother me the way she might have meant it, not even the second time she said it, because it didn't make a difference to me what she thought of the places I went to or the fact I went to them, only that she wouldn't look past them to see that I wanted that moment with her before I left everyone because she was the person I cared most about in that place and in the world. The only person I was afraid to leave behind.

We really could have had something, the two of us. I know we could have. I'd be in Memphis within the week, leaving the guys, even, and starting from scratch because I needed it and I'd finally brought my ass to making it happen, which at once brought relief and a little bit of anxiety. Part of that was because Mike and I really weren't sure where we stood, like we could kind of feel the fire burning out, for lack of a better something,

and he didn't know if he could up and leave his job and, I don't know, maybe this was saying enough on its own, but the idea of a clean slate was really appealing.

As me and Scooter and Mike loaded our gear up from our house and into my truck, I almost felt myself get a little choked up, but I decided I was better than that. These assholes had their chance. I asked them both to come with me and they said, in some way or another, that it sounded like a nice thought, but nah, they'd rather stay here in Pinehill the rest of their fucking lives. Fuck that. I barely talked to them as we finished loading. Mike and I drove in silence all the way to Speedy's. Scooter followed behind in his car that would never be big enough for him.

*

We started playing here four years ago when I was a senior in high school, Mike, Scooter, and Robbie graduated but not gone, and back then Speedy would pay us under the table in cases of beer that we'd chug in these woods and sneak what was leftover home in extra drum cases. Speedy was easy and friendly and lacking discretion, and he was just the kind of guy we needed to get our start and tonight should be the night I thanked him for that, but I had a problem with sincerity. The problem was I didn't quite believe in it.

The first time we locked in a gig here, I'd walked right up to his place after school, I'd passed by it so many times on my way there, Scooter came with me, and I said: I'm looking for Speedy. And he turned around like a figurine in a music box, slow, steady, a peppered mustache at an incline above his lips. Then you're lookin' fer me, he'd said with the same pace as his turn, like his words were held in by something, a strain just to make it out of his mouth, speech like sap. Scooter said, for small talk or nerves,

Speedy your real name? And I handed him a quick look that meant both don't screw this up and the hell kinda question is that? But Speedy laughed legato and said, yeah, my folks was prophets. He pulled a pen out from behind his ear and hovered it over a notepad and said, you want some wings? How many? You a big boy, he nodded at Scooter, bet you want twenty-five fer yerself. We don't want food, I said. We want to book a show here. We're musicians and we got a band and we're looking for somewhere to play. Speedy set his pen down and looked between the both of us. Book a show, that's big city talk, he'd said. Y'all just kids. I told him I could show him our curated set list, sold it to him that we could really play. He leaned back against his counter and stared at us and I thought maybe his thoughts moved as slow as his speech, and right on the brink of us feeling like butt ends of jokes, he finally told us he couldn't pay cash, but he'd figure something out, why the hell not, and we booked us a show that moment and had been playing here up until this one.

“At some point, we gotta really talk,” Mike said, as I backed the truck up to the loading door.

“No shit,” I said, putting the thing in park. “But now doesn't seem right, does it?”

We unloaded and when I finished setting up the stage, Speedy had a shot of whiskey for me at the bar.

“Drinks on me tonight,” he said.

I slapped my hand on the bar and said, “This is about the only thing that will make this night work for me.” I took the shot and set the glass back down. Then I reached my arm over to shake Speedy's hand, hoping that a good, firm shake would say things for us.

But Speedy spoke. He looked me in the eye and said, “You’re some woman. It’s been an honor to hear you play these last few years.”

I felt something in my throat that I forced back down. I just clamped my lips and nodded back at him, thanked him for the shot. Then I jumped on stage to run a mic and line check as people, mostly regulars, sprinkled in. I was tuning up when I saw a guy I’d never seen before, leather jacket, dark skin, walk in. From the moment he did he never took his eyes off me. He was handsome; he didn’t belong.

I gathered the guys up and we talked through a few set-marking songs: opener, closer. The ones in between I just called out and we played them in the order we felt like. I took the guys to the bar with me, requested another round of shots from Speedy, which he poured with a big smile under that mustache. I looked at my guys, hard at Scooter and Robbie, but glancing over Mike because we hadn’t made ourselves line up yet.

I said, “You’re all sons of bitches and it’s been a good run.”

We clinked our glasses. We shot. We moseyed over to the stage and started the last show we’d ever play together.

*

It happened fast, me getting drunk and getting angry.

And at that point, Mike was an arm’s swing away.

“I swear,” I said, clenching my fingers together.

“Easy, girl.”

“I’m not a horse, asshole.”

“Janie,” he said, “cut that melodramatic shit.” He lowered his hands, spread his fingers wide like he was willing something out of them, some magic, pointer wrapped around the rim of a Bud Light bottle. “Talk to me. Tell me what I did.”

Bar sounds slipped out when Rick, one of the regulars and one I might miss for his genuine sketchiness and honesty about it, flung the door open. He leaned against the outside wall with a cigar, blowing smoke with his eyes on me and the scene I very well knew I was making. I met his gaze but I let him watch. I didn’t care.

“You wanna talk? Tell me what the hell that was.” I was fuming.

“That guy’s hand was this close to slipping in your pants,” Mike said with his fingers pinched. “I came over there because you looked uncomfortable.”

“He was talking about our set. He talked about you, for Pete’s sake. Wanted to know where you learned to play like you weren’t a skinny white guy from the backwoods.”

“With his hands on you. He practically had his fingers hooked in your waistband.”

“You only came over ‘cause you were jealous. You embarrassed me and you embarrassed yourself.”

Mike yanked his stocking cap off his head and balled it up in one fist. A white Bronco painted with mud peeled out of the parking lot, the music that was blasting out of the rolled down windows fading and distorting with each yard it gained down the tree-lined road.

“You knew exactly what you were doing in there,” Mike said. “I wish you’d just come out and say you don’t want me to move with you instead of looking for a reason to make my choice easier.”

We were both maybe a little drunk, I thought. Mike looked like he was about to chuck his beer against the cinderblock wall, but I knew he wouldn’t because that wasn’t one of his moves.

“That guy was just a guy watching our show. I was talking to him to be kind,” I said, voice as flat as I could make it.

“Right.” He slipped his hat back on and marched to the building, draining his beer before letting the bottle clatter, ear piercing, into the trashcan right by the door. He opened it and was sucked inside.

Rick actually was chuckling, scratching his goatee trying to hide it. I ignored him, pulled the cigarettes from my pocket, and went around back for the bit of time left before our last set.

I smoked under one of the green-glowing motion sensor lights, leaning against the dumpster full of greasy napkins and bad produce, thinking about the likelihood of an animal in there while I took a few deep inhales without smoke to clear my mind for the next set, which was an hour and a half of pop songs we couldn’t play as well but that the people inside would be too drunk or indifferent to judge us for. Lenah wasn’t one of those people. I knew she wouldn’t come. I stared into the thick pines that shielded this little concrete slab of a building, stared far into the dark, daring myself to see something. Then I snuffed the cigarette out against the dumpster and flicked it into the opening.

The back door of the building was unlocked and I went through the kitchen that only smelled of grease, would only ever smell of grease, and Gerry, Speedy's son and cook, wiped his brow with a dishrag and dropped a basket of fries into hot oil. He nodded like he always did instead of saying words to me, and I thought maybe tonight would be the night he professed his love, but it wasn't. I nodded back and pushed through the door to find Scooter holding a cue ball in his hand, drumsticks sprouting out of his back pocket. Across the table from him, his girlfriend chalked her pool stick. Scooter walked the cue over to her and dumped it in her hand.

"Scratched it again," he said. Sara Beth could kick any of our asses at pool and I'd seen her do some of those moves where the balls jumped and curved around each other and sunk into the pockets, drawn in like magnets. This was how Scooter got a date with her about two years back, on a bet for a trick shot he called and she screwed up, which she still claimed was on purpose. She bartended here a couple nights a week, but hung out even when she didn't have shifts. I'd always wondered about the people that spent extra time at work when they were off the clock, maybe cause I'd never had a job where I wanted to spend a minute more than I had to, but I liked Sara Beth enough and she was over-the-moon for all 300 pounds of Scooter.

"Hey, our last last set ever. Show time." I swiped the drumsticks out from his pocket and set them on the green table top, in between the eight ball and twelve.

"We gotta finish this round," Scooter said. Sara Beth sent a solid around the sticks and into the pocket closest to us.

"She's gonna beat you anyway. Come on. At least act like you're sad about us."

“You’re not,” he said without looking up. “It’s going to take you at least five minutes to peel Robbie away from the pinball machine. Come get me when you’re done with that.”

“Ass behind the kit in three minutes,” I said. I turned to Sara Beth. “Finish him.”

The man wasn’t at the bar anymore. No trace he was ever there at all. I would never admit to Mike that he was right.

But Scooter was right about Robbie, up against the Pac-Man machine, moving his body like the twist of his hips and shoulders would guide the lead ball right where it needed to go. I came and stood beside him, watched his lips squeeze and contort while he waited for the right moment to launch the trigger. He looked way younger in this moment than he was, something about the tongue between the teeth, the light reflecting off his glasses—more like his teenaged son than the thirty-something he was.

“You should know that from across the room it looks like you’re humping that thing,” I said. His score went up one thousand points and the lights flashed and blipped and his name sprinted pixelated across the screen, right to left.

“I’m the high score holder.”

“You’re also our guitarist,” I groaned. “I will not miss rounding you guys up like cattle every time.” I was den mother as much as front-woman, always reminding, coaxing, gathering. I used to make sandwiches and shit for all of us at practices until I realized it was too like my mother. These gigs—the ones at Speedy’s—it was like just another practice. Same songs, space we knew, like we had just come for a beer and some pool and there happened to be instruments up on the four-inch high platform in the back

of the room and we happened to know how to play them. This right here is why you're leaving, I told myself.

And where the hell was Mike?

I made eye contact with Speedy, who was peeling the top off a bottle of beer with an opener. He tapped the bottleneck against the watch on his wrist held up in the air, playing hard-ass, but he really couldn't care less. He knew nearly all his customers by name, knew especially that their allegiance to the place wasn't affected by us. I held up a five sign.

"You seen Mike?" I slapped Robbie on the side with the back of my hand.

"Naw," Robbie said. "I've been here the whole time."

"Super."

I quick-scanned the place and didn't see Mike at the bar, the tables, or the video poker machine by the back exit. I cracked the door to the men's bathroom and called his name; no one except Rick and his goatee that I caught a glimpse of in the mirror, thankfully only that sliver of him. I pushed through the front door to go back outside, slammed by the heat everyone always complained about when they didn't know what else to say to someone. Around the corner I heard the sound of scuffling across gravel.

Mike was at the edge of the tree line, his body inches from the man from the bar, who grabbed hold of Mike's shirt lightning fast. Mike looked like a kid. He wrenched free and shoved the man with strength that could only have come from a place I'd never seen. I took off running, even in the heeled boots I was wearing, even with the shots I had taken, and crunched through the gravel to get to the two of them, who'd started delivering swings and more shoves.

I shouted, “Hey, hey!” The fights I’d seen in real life were a bunch of tentative movements and a lot of hoping the other would miss, nothing like the choreographed sequences of films and shows, and also nothing like what I saw a few yards in front of me.

“Mike!” He didn’t hear me. He dodged a swing. “Hey, assholes!” I came right up to them and suddenly they were latched together, no chance of pulling them apart. An elbow caught my cheekbone. I didn’t know whose, but it was a hit that brought a sting to my eyes. Mike and the man were grunting, and I tried harder to wedge myself between them, stepping on a foot with the heel of my boot. The man hissed close to my ear but still groped for some part of Mike to bruise, to tear off, and their breath mingled hot on my skin for another second before Speedy and Scooter came charging toward the tangle of us, and I was thankful for the heft of Scooter’s body, the wiry brawn of Speedy’s arms. Mike and the man were pried apart like a wishbone, like it felt like there should be the sound of a snap cause they’d been fused together, and Mike landed on his ass, the man against a tall pine, both heaving, both spitting, everyone cast a shade of sickly green in the motion light, everyone frozen a moment while the Christmas lights Speedy left up year round blinked off and on against the side of the building like stars. The man righted himself and pulled a bandana out of his back pocket, wiped his forehead and neck, stepped heavy in thick boots and for a moment I thought, this was a man out of a movie, fated to play the same part over and over. His face did not look the same as it did when it was inches from mine.

“Fucking hicks,” he said. Not a one of us said anything as he turned and walked across the gravel lot to his bike parked next to my truck, as he made his ride roar to life

and careened through the gape of pines out onto the road. We watched his taillights strobe until they disappeared around a curve.

Speedy talked first. “You all almost made it without ever bringing hooligan shit to my place. Now why’d you want to go out on it?”

I looked at Scooter, Robbie, who both had their eyes locked in on a spot on the ground. I couldn’t stand to look at Mike because I couldn’t stand to feel conflicting things.

We played our last set and we didn’t connect for a second. Scooter and Mike couldn’t lock in together. Robbie was all over the place. Me, I sang fine, but nothing had heart. Nothing had soul.

*

Instead of going home to our place, I flew straight down Slab Landing and blew past the turn onto our road. Mike and Scooter could have the place to themselves tonight, live it up and drink straight from the juice carton, but my guess was that Scooter would go back to Sara Beth’s apartment over her dad’s garage in Neeses cause he wasn’t much for conflict, and Mike wouldn’t be much in the mood for juice anyway. I pushed away the thought of him alone in the house, of him sleeping in our bed alone for a long while.

I sped past Double Branch Baptist and turned into my parents’ driveway, drove the uneven dirt path past the fields through the tree line until my home was in view, all the lights off. I hauled my gear out of the truck and took it to the shed so I wouldn’t clunk around with it inside, wouldn’t hit doorframes and wake anyone up. I let myself in the back door with the key I still kept on my set and pushed the door open burglar-smooth. The kitchen was only lit by the low-glow of the microwave light and the house was quiet

and I thought maybe I'd just crash on the couch and leave before anyone got up. But it'd been months since I last slept in my bed, and it'd be more before I would get to do it again.

Upstairs, I knew the places the floor squeaked and I walked to my room on the path inches from the wall. My room was across from Lenah's and her door was cracked, blue light and low mumbles spilling out. I nudged the door, made the crack wider and slipped in. She was propped up against her headboard, asleep; neck tilted gently, lips just barely parted. She had the covers pulled up to her chest, the remote on her lap, Full House on the television. I pulled off my boots and nestled myself in the sliver of space at the edge of the bed and gathered a lock of her thin, blonde hair in my fingers and dragged it under her nose. It twitched like a little rabbit's. I did it again. Her eyes flew open and when she took me in she jumped so hard the headboard knocked against the wall.

"Freakin' a, Janie," she grumbled. I shushed her.

"Hi," I whispered. She rolled away. I lied down and tried to scoot closer to her, threw my arm over her waist, pulled her in close to me. "Talk to me."

"You smell real gross. Cigarettes are gross," she said into her pillow.

"I didn't even smoke tonight."

"Yes you did. You're gonna clog up my nose." She wiggled out of my arm and pushed herself up in bed, rubbed her eyes with both fists while her mouth turned down like she'd done since she was a kid. "What are you doing here?" She asked with her eyes closed. Her hair cascaded along one shoulder, perfectly straight, not yet mussed by pillows and sleep.

"I didn't want to go to my place."

“Why?”

“Mike and I got into a fight.”

“A real one?”

“I think so.”

“Oh,” she yawned.

“And then Mike got into another fight.”

“With punches?” She asked at the tail end of her yawn.

“A few attempts. The guy was big. Kind of David and Goliath.”

“I can’t imagine Mike throwing a punch.”

“Yeah, I know. Speedy was upset. I hate that.”

“Huh,” she said, “sounds like a night.”

“Yeah.” I stretched my legs out on the bed. “How was yours? What’d you do?”

“Went to the football game with Andrea and got slushies from Sonic afterwards.

And then this,” she nodded at the television. “Regular old Friday.”

I stared at the television for a minute. Lenah stayed quiet, not looking at me.

“Why didn’t you come to Speedy’s?” I asked her. She scratched her head, grabbed her baby blanket that she still slept with and rubbed it with her fingers, something she often did without noticing.

“It’s not my kind of place.”

“So what,” I told her. “I wanted you to be there. I thought you would.”

Sorry, was all she said. And I couldn’t understand why she was acting like she was.

I shook my head, the evening suddenly catching up with me, bringing weariness and laying it across my chest. I tried to make my way under the covers, to lie down and just close my eyes right there, wake in the morning and figure out everything then.

“No,” she said, keeping me out of them. “You need to shower first.”

I groaned. “Can’t you wash your sheets?”

“I won’t be able to breathe,” she said. “You know smoke messes with me.”

“Well, the more you’re exposed to what you’re allergic to, the easier it gets on your body or something like that.” She stared at me. “Fine,” I said, standing up. “Can I just change clothes? Will that be enough?”

“Just sleep in your own room,” she offered. I knew that was part of the reason I came over here, to sleep alone, to sleep in my bed again. But I didn’t much feel like it anymore. I got up and started digging through her pajama drawer and pulled out an oversized Vacation Bible School shirt: Put on the full armor of God! I wriggled out of my jeans and unhooked my bra, slipped it off, slipped into the t-shirt, and slipped into her bed. She didn’t object but reached for the remote.

“Can we leave it on?” I asked, turning on my side, wedging my arm underneath the pillow. It was cool. “I like the sound.”

“No,” she said, “I only had it on cause I couldn’t sleep. But now I’m good. Very tired. Very ready to get back to sleep. Armadillo.”

“I get the hint.”

“Armadillo,” she said again. Our buzzword we came up with when we were ready for sleep as kids, as teens, when we were ready for the conversation to end and the dreaming to start.

We faced away from each other in her bed, but were only inches apart. The room fell quiet, but I felt like I could hear so many things. “I’ll try not to wake you up when I sneak out.”

“Armadillo,” she mumbled once more to the wall. I closed my eyes and tried for sleep, tried not to think too much about how comfortable the mattress was.

Running in Place, With Feeling

I'd never seen Valerie naked, even growing up sharing a bathroom. Bra and underwear, plenty, but never nothing. You don't think about whether or not you've seen your sister naked until you see her almost naked in a photograph on your computer, pulled from the theater's website where she'd recently gotten cast in a show I'd never heard of.

In that photo, Valerie, the topless version of her, was draped across a mauve satin chaise lounge, placed in the middle of a sea of broken light bulbs. A single, dimly lit one hung to the right of her, her whole face, which was turned away from it, still illuminated, no shadows, and she had this distant look in her eye I know she must have worked hard to perfect. My face was burning, but I couldn't figure out what it was I was feeling so I clicked through the rest of the photoset and ate my Cosmic Brownie, drank my Cherry Coke as I saw photo after photo of my sister and her cast mates in various states of undress and positions with one another. But the one of a man pressed up close to her against an old cracked wall, his hands, veiny and tensed, gripping her wrists above her head, her face pinched and eyes shut tight—that one made me feel something the most. I tried to see it as art, but only felt uneasy and a little upset. And maybe that just meant Val was really good at her job. Or maybe it was just—we'd talked about this in Psychology sometime this past semester, what was it? Like, mirror neurons or something? Maybe it was just my mirror neurons. I see distress; I feel distress.

But the real thing was Valerie had talent and people recognized this talent because Valerie was a working actress, not just a girl who said she was an actress. Val had been a working actress from nearly the moment she left school. She joined an improv troupe, and then got cast in a small show at an independent theater, and then another and another, and then scored a few roles as extras on various films and television shows. Her most recent and most impressive role was Blanche DuBoise in *A Streetcar Named Desire* Off Broadway. She had a salary. I remember her telling this to my dad, who was still convinced acting was nothing more than a hobby, and not even a real dignified one.

Regardless, we were all proud of her. That she was a woman doing and being what she wanted, up in New York where it didn't matter that you wanted it. But we missed her. She called sometimes, but I mostly kept up with her on social media, stalked her Instagram for glimpses into the kind of life so few people would ever know, and one I only cared to know from a safe distance. I would leave comments on her posts and she'd respond with hearts and xoxo's and inside jokes and I liked her public display of affection for me, because, yeah, it made me feel better to see that she'd just say *thanks*, *love* and *miss you*, *babes* to other people on there, but really I wished she'd just text me instead. Call me every once in a while.

This was what led me to the photos, one of her Instagrams. One of her and the man face to face, lots of shadows and blue and white lights, posted yesterday with the caption: *Teaser shots! So excited! Photo by the incomparable Mark von Danwitz*. She'd included a link to the theater's website in the comment section where someone had said: *Stunning! Can't wait for the show where can we see more?* I followed the link on my phone first and then in an attempt to make sense of it, pulled it up on my computer again

today, where I sat, still in my pajamas because that was an acceptable thing for summer and the summer before freshman year of college at that, feeling all sorts of conflicting things in my head, my stomach, my mouth. Thinking: this is something I would never do. Thinking: what view of the world do you have to have to show your body to it? Thinking: what do our parents know?

*

The first weekend that Valerie came to town after having moved to New York for school, we were all together in the living room. We'd just eaten so much, Valerie's choice of homecoming meal, steak and mashed potatoes and Mom's blueberry cobbler. We plunked down on the couch and seemed to sink a little deeper. Valerie was happy to be home; at least we were seeing it that way. At dinner she was chatty and enthusiastic, asking about all of the things happening in our lives like she'd been away for years, when really it had been two months. But after dinner, we turned the conversation to her and in a minute she had sprung off the couch and pulled me up so that we stood in front of the fireplace where we used to stand during our various performances as kids. She said she was about to show us something she'd been learning in her class. Something revolutionary, she said. She turned to me.

Alright, put your hands right there so your fingers kind of meet at your belly button, like this, see? Yes, exactly. Okay now, don't breathe into your lungs the way you usually do, try to breathe all the way deep down into your stomach. Like, feel the air go all the way down there. Do you feel the difference? Like can you feel your stomach expanding?

I thought maybe I did, but I wasn't sure.

It's really unbelievable, she said. She looked to all of us, her face illuminated, lively. I mean, you can't imagine what a difference it makes. Mikhail says you can't be grounded in the scene if your breathing isn't correct. Poor technique can just really hinder you vocally, which can just absolutely take away from the scene. And I've like, already noticed a huge difference when I speak the lines, you know? Breath support is so important.

And Mikhail is? Mom asked.

My instructor.

Just Mikhail? Like, just Madonna? Bono?

We call all of our instructors by their first names. We're all really close. Really connected, I guess.

You artists, my dad said. And Valerie was still in good spirits, so she didn't address his comment specifically.

Instead she just said: I like it. It really feels like we're family.

I was lying stretched out on the floor, trying to breath into my stomach, but I understood Valerie's tone enough to snatch a glimpse at my parents. To see if they would address it or ignore it. Also, maybe I was breathing the right way? I watched my stomach rise and fall only nothing felt different.

So anyway, we've been working on monologues for the past month, Valerie said. It's been really tough.

What monologue? Mom asked.

From a play called *Stop Kiss*, Valerie said. Contemporary show. I don't think you know it. But Mikhail's way of teaching us to connect to the text more deeply is incredible.

Like how?

Valerie sparked on again. So I worked on mine last week, she says, and I was up in front of the class—this is how he does it for everyone—and I was saying the lines but I was really having trouble focusing on what the words really meant, you know? I was just saying them how I thought they should be said and he totally noticed this. So he just stops me and gets me to repeat this one word from the monologue. And every time I would say the word, he would ask me to think of a different thing associated with it. Like, something different every time I said it. Then he asked me to personalize it. To consider my experiences with the word. I didn't have to say these things out loud, by the way, I was just thinking them. But, like, after I got these solid images in my head, I could say the line again and it was like, suddenly I just felt it. And it felt really truthful, really honest.

You should perform for us right now, Dad said. Show us what we're paying for.

No, that's embarrassing.

Come on, sweetheart. If you can do it in front of your other family, why not your real one? Mom said.

It's different.

Here, Dad said. I bet I could direct you. Dad sat up, but Valerie sank down, shaking her head. Anna, stand up, he said to me. I did.

He wiggled his fingers in front of his face. Ground yourself, breathe deeply, feel the stars and colors and energy, he said. Now let's try your monologue, darling, except this time I want you to try it standing on your head. No, no! I want you to run in place. Yes! I'm brilliant. Run in place! Let's see what truth we can bring to this. Go on!

I said *to be or not to be* over and over, running, panting, pretend-passing out.

No, no, no, he said. With feeling, darling. Feeling. Run with feeling! He feigned disgust and dropped his head to his hands. This just isn't working, he cried. Bring in the understudy.

I laughed until I noticed the look on Valerie's face, the disappointment, the way her eyes dropped down at the corners. She excused herself and left the room, returning with a coat.

I've gotta go, she said.

Sweetheart—

We heard her snatch the keys to her car she hadn't driven in months. Then we heard the door slam, the engine crank.

*

On our drive back from our third trip to Target that week, I told my mom I was planning on visiting Val before I moved. We were slowly but surely making the necessary check marks on my going-to-college list, but were always forgetting things like hangers and dryer sheets and extension chords because we were similar in that way.

"With all that money you made at your job this summer?" She asked, switching lanes without her blinker.

"Ha," I said. "But there's this thing called graduation money."

“Yes. Money that you’re supposed to use throughout the school year. For necessities.”

“I’ll get a job for that,” I said. “Work-study at the library or something. I’ve looked it up.”

“Because looking it up is as sure as getting the job,” Mom said.

“You’re snappy,” I told her, turning to my phone and putting my feet up on the dashboard.

“Am not.”

“Now you’re a four year old,” I said. She just kept her eyes on the road. I put my phone up to the side of her face. “I’m gonna put this video on social media so everyone can see how you’re acting.” She cut her eyes at me.

“You did not just record me.”

“No. Messing with you, Ma. But seriously. I think a trip to visit Val would be the right way to start the school year. It’s already been so long, plus, when will I have the time while I’m in school? When I’m studying *and* have a job?”

“Have you talked to her about it? Are you sure she even has time for *you* with the new show and all?”

I was curious to press her for information, to see if she’d seen what I’d seen, or knew what I knew about just what type of show it was, but I held off, mostly because I was assured by her lack of computer savvy. “No, I haven’t asked Val,” I said. Then I told her I wanted to check with her before I asked Val because Mom loved when I said responsible stuff like that.

“And what are you going to do while she’s in rehearsals?”

“Hang out in the city? Go to museums and stuff? Stay in Val’s apartment and eat Pizza Rolls and watch Netflix like I’ve been doing all summer? I don’t know. Do I need to have a schedule?”

“No, but I don’t want you walking around the city by yourself.”

“Why not? Valerie moved there when she was my age. She did it.”

“You’re not Valerie,” she said. I thought she meant something by that but I didn’t decode it. What crept to my mind instead was that if she said no, in less than a month I’d be three hours away from the home, on campus at Chapel Hill, where I could make this trip in a weekend and she wouldn’t know. But then I immediately felt bad, like I’d already done it and she’d found out.

“I just miss her,” I said. “And I don’t know when I’m going to get to see her again.”

“I get that,” Mom said. “And I know you’re on your own in a month. But I’ve gotta be Mom while I still can.”

“What if I promise not to walk around by myself at night? What if I go to Val’s show every night?”

“I might rather you walk around by yourself.”

“I have no desire to become an actor, I promise you. This trip will not enlighten me.” I said this with my eyes closed and fingers arranged in an *ohm*.

“I need to think about this one, Anna Bell,” she said, as we pulled into our driveway. We got out and I helped her with the Target bags and took them to Valerie’s room, where we were stocking everything. Then I grabbed a Cherry Coke out of the refrigerator and closed myself in my room.

I wanted to drive to New York to save a buck, but the furthest I had ever driven my car was to my grandparents' lake house, only three hours away and my parents were with me. And I'd already had my license for a full year then. It was just the other people they didn't trust, they'd said. It was always that—the other people. I liked the idea of me and the road and some snacks and music, but not nine hours of it. And I knew I wouldn't survive driving the roads in the city. I remember this from the last time we went to visit Val, when we'd seen her in *Streetcar*. The way people stopped and started and yelled with their horns. No thank you.

So I went ahead and bought a plane ticket, one that left a week from today. I looked up how to take a taxi because any time I'd ever done that was with someone else ie: my parents. I looked up fares from the airport to Valerie's address, tried to figure out how I could surprise her because it'd be hilarious to see her face seeing me at her door with a suitcase. But that wouldn't work. I'd call her for the first time from the airport so she wouldn't have time to excuse herself. I'd tell her not to worry about picking me up since I knew how to take a taxi and I'd tell her just to have some pizza hot and ready for me when I got there. And Valerie loved herself, but she also loved me, so she wouldn't leave me to fend for myself and hopefully she would listen to me about the pizza.

There was a knock at my door and I minimized all windows, put a pen in my hand.

"Yeah," I said.

My mom slipped her head in.

"Talked to your dad," she said, upper half of her body folded over the side doorframe, bottom half hidden in the hallway. "If you want to visit Valerie, you should."

“Thanks for that. I’ll buy a plane ticket.”

“But we were thinking,” she said, slipping in completely, becoming a full body.

“What if we made it a family trip? It’d be a little easier on your pocket. We’d pay for your ticket and meals.”

“Oh,” I said, because what else do you say but oh. You could say *I mean*, with an ellipses.

“We could go see Valerie’s show. Book a nice hotel. Buy some back to school clothes on Park Avenue.”

“I mean,” with an ellipses.

“Just kidding about Park Avenue. We can’t afford that.”

Mom sat, barefoot with legs crossed, leaning forward for my answer. I geared up to practice being straightforward, like I was going to be with Valerie: *So, tell me how you decided to walk in front of people naked!*

“You guys don’t have to do that,” I said. Try again, I said in my brain. “Actually, I thought it might be nice for it to be a sister trip.” Close, but not quite. “I want it to be just Val and me,” I said finally, with what felt like great effort. Mom folded her hands together and uncrossed her legs.

“I understand,” she said. “It was just a thought.”

“I’m sorry.” I couldn’t help the apology.

“It’s okay, honey,” she said, “I’ve got to get used to this. It’s good practice and I appreciate the honesty. Buy yourself a plane ticket.”

She closed my door back.

I started researching Val's theater and the places around it I would make her take me to. On Google maps, if you put in the address of the theatre and clicked on the street view, you could see a blurred, distorted person in front of the door, their legs angled like they were being sucked into the pavement and I thought that was neat.

*

My parents dropped me off at the Charlotte Airport; I boarded the flight kind of nervous and thrilled at the same time. I sat next to a woman who asked me my name and I told her it was Claire, because I'd seen someone do that in a movie once, tell someone a name that wasn't their name. I had a backstory ready to hand her if she wanted it. She didn't. Her name was Annette and she read a Danielle Steele book and bought two mini bottles of Jack Daniels to pour in her plastic cup of coke. The flight was short; I barely had time to listen to my two favorite albums of the moment.

I called Valerie when we had landed at LaGuardia and I was waiting for my luggage.

She picked up on my second call and said, Annabellllleeeee, all dragged out like that.

I said, what are you doing?

She said, I'm out to lunch with some cast mates.

And I said, oh that's great, guess what, I'm in New York.

And she said, you're what?

And I thought, *you heard me*, but I said, New York! And I'm coming to see you.

You sneak! She said. And maybe I was hearing what I wanted to, but it sounded a lot like she was smiling.

How are you getting here? Do you have a ride? Do you need my address?

I just need you to order me a big, hot pizza, I said. My luggage came around the carousel and I snagged it with both hands, my phone pinched to my shoulder.

I guess that means you'll be here soon.

An hour, maybe. Just be excited to see me. You can be mad at me later.

We hung up and I suddenly felt very young, in good and bad ways. I watched Annette grab her leopard print bag and when she passed by me I smiled at her and that woman pretended we had never even met. I followed the signs in the airport with the little car icon for ground transportation, only really getting turned around one good time.

Other than that, getting the taxi was a breeze, but talking to the taxi driver and paying him for it was not. All he wanted to talk about was his kid and I had to pretend like I was interested and ask him all these questions about a four year old I didn't even know. What do you even ask about a kid that age? Like, does he like to nap? Has he ever eaten Playdough? I asked those and the answer was no to both but it turned into a really riveting anecdote about this one particular nap he took and I was like, wow, I'm really thankful for that one. And he kept showing me pictures on his phone and turning around and looking at me and I was like, you are paid to keep your eyes on the road, why don't you do that? I didn't say these things. I watched the fare calculator for a good portion of the hour-long ride, which I shouldn't have done because it made me nauseas on two accounts. I got a text from Val: *txt me when you're close!* When we got into the city, I didn't know I had been gripping the side handle extremely tight until I had to release it to let Val know we were apparently on her block. My fingers were still creaking open all slow as I dug through my purse for fifty dollars, sixty with a tip. We pulled up to Val's

building and I gave the driver my money. I thanked him and told him to tell his son hi for me, and then felt weird about that as he sped down the street.

Val's building had real-life fire escapes and I had a quick vision of us sitting on one in the nights to come, listening to the sounds of the city and talking about life and stuff. I'd make her do that with me. As I was looking up at them, Valerie's head appeared out of a window, her hair big, wild, her waving big, wild.

"Sister!" She yelled. "Welcome back to the most beautiful city in all the land! Do you need help with your bags?"

"No!" I yelled back to her.

"Then come to 4B. I'll buzz you in!"

I rolled my bag across the road and walked up to Val's stoop. The door unlatched and I made the climb up all those flights and just like that, I was face to face with my sister and I was just excited to be there.

"Your hair is so big," I told her, touching it, pulling it with my fingers. "So curly."

"I have to ask you something that might make you feel weird."

I said, okay, shoot, and all she did was ask me if she could smoke. And I wanted to say Oh, sister, if you knew what inspired me to make this trip.

"Can we do it on your fire escape?"

"We?"

"I meant you."

"Why?"

"Because it feels like that's what we should do."

She looked at me like, you're pathetic but also kind of cute about it.

"Leave me alone. I know you're so New York it hurts, but not me."

"Give me that," she said, grabbing my bag. "This is so light. How'd you do that?"

"Figured I could wear a lot of your stuff."

We walked into her apartment and the first thing I noticed was not how small, but how bright it was. She had these high ceilings and two huge windows with lots of smaller panes and it was really actually kind of gorgeous because the light fell in dainty rectangles all over the hardwood floors and angled up on the one dark grey wall. The rest of the walls were white. And everything felt so clean. There were plants in the windows and they were growing, full and leafy. She had a candle lit on her coffee table by a bowl of decorative balls and she had actual bookshelves with actual books on either side of her television. And these shelves even had knick-knacks. Like, a small statue of praying hands and a cool old clock and one colorful high heel that I was honestly a little confused about, each on top of a short stack of books that I wondered if she'd actually read. It looked really nice, though. Magazine or Pinterest nice.

"You've really done a lot with your place," I said. "It feels so cozy."

"I think so too. It's small but I like it." She set my stuff down beside the white couch and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket. "Shall we?" She asked, motioning to her bedroom. "Window's in my room."

I nodded and followed her. Her room was minimalist. White bedspread, clean-lined nightstand with a pair of glasses on the base of the lamp and an ashtray, which Valerie grabbed and handed to me. There was a red wingback chair in the corner, a decorative pillow on it with an embroidered ampersand. On the wall opposite her bed, she

had a black and white framed print of a quote: *Bitches Get Stuff Done*—Tina Fey. She stood in front of her window and hit it hard three times with the heels of her hands.

“Gets stuck sometimes,” she said. She pushed it up and open and climbed out and again I followed. “Close it back most of the way, would you? I don’t want the smoke to get in at all.”

“I never really pictured you as a smoker,” I said to her as set the ashtray on the metal grating and closed the window. We leaned over the edge of the fire escape and she lit her cigarette.

“I never pictured you as the type to make a surprise trip to New York City all by yourself. Which, is pretty cool, obviously, but something we need to talk about.” She sucked on her cigarette and took a breath, blew out a stream of smoke over her shoulder. She was so tiny and right.

“I know. It was really last minute. But I was thinking that when I start school in a few weeks, I’d get really busy and didn’t know the next time I’d see you.”

“I’m glad you’re here. But I do have things going on that I’m still gonna have to do.”

“Like what?” I asked. “A new show?”

“Yeah, I’ve got rehearsals for a new thing at a new theater. Seven to midnight tonight and tomorrow. Noon to nine on Sunday. You can hang out here at night. Get out and explore during the day on your own on Sunday, maybe. We’ll try to pack in as much as we can between everything. I really am glad you’re here, sister.”

“What if I just came to rehearsals with you?”

“They’re so long, though.”

People passed on the sidewalk under our feet. Headphones in. Straightforward! I told myself. Fess up.

“I saw the photos for your play, Val. I already know what it’s going to be like.”

“Still weird,” she said, blowing more smoke.

I looked at her and she widened her eyes at me like, what can ya do? “You don’t care that I saw the pictures?” I asked.

“They’re on the Internet, aren’t they? Anyone can see them.”

“Then why can’t I come to rehearsals? What’s the difference?”

“The difference is that you’ll be there and watching me and some of the scenes are not PG and that makes me feel weird because you’re my baby sister. Sweet, innocent little baby sister. And it’s not an easy show for reasons besides the nudity.”

“Just let me come with you,” I said. “I’m here.” And Valerie snuffed her cigarette out against the ashtray.

“You are, aren’t you,” she said.

*

She put in an order for me at the coffee shop because I didn’t know what to get at those places. Something good and sweet and strong, I told her, though I didn’t really know what strong meant. We were on our way to the theatre, but she wanted to stop in, sit with me in one of her frequented spots and talk. I was in her world. It was like once I admitted that I really wanted to be there, she really wanted to hear my thoughts. Like, she kept asking me all these questions and posing all these hypotheticals. Like, when we were just a block away she said, why is it okay to have women’s bodies stripped and plastered all over advertisements, but the minute we see a girl just post a casual picture of her

body, we get all pissed and weird about it? Why is it glorified in one aspect and shamed in another? And was like, dang, Val, I don't know, but I said, I think it's about privacy and respect. And she said exactly, you're kind of on to something there. Privacy and intimacy is subjective. But what do you mean by respect? What is that?

I had grabbed a table by the window and saw a new message in a group text between my mom and dad and me: *Hope you two are having fun* from Mom and *Tell the actress we said hey and love her* from Dad. I responded and put my phone back in my purse. I put my chin in my hand and stared out the window, drummed my fingers on the table, and decided that I already liked New York. I liked Valerie's place and I liked the walk to get here to this coffee shop that I also, surprise, liked. I felt older. I felt chic. I thought that might be a weird thing to feel good about feeling, but still. Valerie came with two cups in her hand, both large, and set them down, scooted the chair out and took a seat across from me.

"So what else?" She asked. "This is a mocha, by the way. It's pretty much hot chocolate."

"What else what?"

"What else do you want to know about the show?"

"I mean." I dragged the cup across the small table. "I'll probably have more to ask after I see it. But do you, like," I wanted to ask something I'd been thinking, but got embarrassed with each word, "actually have sex, like, on the stage?"

"There is no sex," Valerie said.

"Then why are you naked?"

"Some of the scenes just make more sense with our clothes off."

“I don’t get it.”

“That’s alright.”

“At the first rehearsal, the director said nudity was just a costume. That my body was just my character’s body. But it doesn’t feel like that. I think she was just trying to make me comfortable. I mean, that is *my* body on stage. My own naked body. That people will see in a matter of weeks.”

“The director’s a girl?”

“And the writer.”

“This whole time I was thinking the director was a man. Like, he wore a beret and black and had a posh accent.”

“Nope. Woman. And a badass.”

We sat and talked for another hour and I drank that whole drink. Valerie smiled a lot and talked excitedly fast, but also said a lot of things I didn’t really get. We left the coffee shop and walked together down the streets of the East Village, the theatre just a few blocks away.

We stop in front of a faded, red, brick-faced building with a lighted marquee yellowed like coffee stained teeth. Beside and around it, tessellated posters with my sister’s face on them. I watch her eyes follow them as we walked past.

She grabbed the handle of the door, *New Line Experimental Theatre* etched on the glass, and looked at me and said, “You can walk out whenever you want. If it’s too much, if it’s too embarrassing. But I’m glad you’re here,” she said. “I’m really glad.”

“I think I am too?” I said, scrunching up my nose. “I’m about to see your boobies.”

Valerie punched me on the shoulder and we walked inside.

The theater was small, but the space was cool. I believe the word I'd heard to describe that kind of thing was *intimate* and that made sense. I was nervous and really sketched out, clearly not used to naked bodies in general and not won over by the idea of using them for art. I didn't let Valerie in on this in any direct way. Maybe she could read my vibes, though. That seemed like something she could do. It didn't help that the espresso was soaring through my body. Taking wide leaps and loops and plunges all over, even into parts of my fingers. I felt it everywhere.

Valerie told me where I could sit, pointed to the middle row.

"Are you alright?" She asked, kind of smiling.

"Yes, Valerie, I am alright." I hit that *t* extra hard. I chattered my teeth because it just started happening, not because I was cold. Maybe I was cold. Actually, it was cold in there. Valerie slid her purse off her shoulder and rolled her neck once. She waved to a woman at the front of the stage.

"That's the director. I want you to meet her. Her name is Elspeth."

"Elspeth? Really? Do I have to or do I have the choice to pass?" I asked. "I'm nervous with cool people. And I'm just nervous in general."

"She's going to like you."

She took me by the hand and led me to the woman she just waved to. She had burgundy hair and burgundy lips and the best cheekbones. She smiled at me and I was like, wow, your teeth are nice. She stuck her hand out to me and looked me straight in the eye and it felt like it was deep down into my soul.

"This is my sister," Valerie said. "She's visiting for a while."

“Elsbeth,” the woman said.

“Anna. Nice to meet you.”

“Okay,” Val said, “I gotta get warmed up.” She touched my back and left me standing next to the director.

“Are you involved in the theater?” She asked.

“No, not really. Only in that I’ve watched most of Valerie’s performances.”

“Your sister is a genuine talent. She can transport you. Really,” the director said, nodding with a coffee cup in her hand and staring at my sister who was folded over, arms dangling. A voice called from the wing, “Fifteen!” And the cast responded with a collective, *thank you, fifteen*.

I settled into my seat, taking some deep breaths. The cast of five people finished warming up together in a circle. They stretched. They stood in a train and squeezed each other’s shoulders. They opened their mouths and made long, loud sounds, and the director scribbled away in a notebook. And then the director stood and said, “I want us to start off with Act Two, Scene Four. I want to see what it looks like just jumping straight in.” My sister nodded, looked at me once, and disappeared off stage. She came back from the wing, suddenly naked and white in the lights and against the black stage. There she was, every small curve and stick straight part of her, looking down at the floor in the center of the stage, shaking her hands and breathing so deep I could hear her exhalations. Then she looked up. She started this monologue and she was this woman who had experienced sexual trauma. And even though the director stopped her and kept asking her to start again, each time she spoke cut me. I could feel something in my chest. In my stomach. What was it.

And I sat there thinking, with my knees on the back of the seat in front of me and my fist curled up against my mouth, that maybe I understood. It was a feeling that I was afraid would dash away from me soon. And I wanted to tell Valerie this right then, but I'd tell her as we walked back to her apartment, that for a small moment what she was doing made a whole lot of sense.

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