

NEED: STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

The intent of this thesis is to create a literary fiction collection centered on diverse adolescent girls. In recent years, women writers have moved away from the domestic sphere of authors whose writing focused solely on the daily lives of women, and have begun penning epic stories and novels whose themes were previously tackled by men alone. Authors show that the craft of expansive and immersive literary fiction transcends gender, allowing women more freedom with the types of stories they choose to write. That's not to say that domestic fiction is unimportant or "less than" other types of literary fiction, however. The difference is in choice—women are free to create works in other genres, forms, and conventions separate from domestic fiction, but can also reclaim and reinvent the genre to show the importance of everyday women. Each story in this collection highlights the complex lives of adolescent girls while exploring universal themes of women from a literary fiction rather than young adult fiction perspective. Issues such as sexuality, virginity, and popularity—which all girls experience at least tangentially—are often relegated to young adult fiction. Their purpose is to build a relationship of trust between characters and readers who are experiencing the same confusing period. Literary fiction allows deeper exploration into these issues, showing how larger psychological and societal problems result in adolescent physical manifestations, such as the sexualization and commodification of women's bodies. This thesis will add to the current literary conversation by highlighting teenage girls, a demographic whose importance is often downplayed by modern society.

DEDICATION

For friends and family who offered assistance when I stumbled along the way,
and for Nana, who still has a copy of the first story I ever wrote, age four.

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STAR CHILD

The ultrasound technician slathers the hump of Anna's abdomen with near-translucent gel, smearing it with a wand attached to the monitor across the bed. It freezer burns her skin as it slides sticky-sweet like popped bubblegum through the gel coating her barely-rounded belly. She takes a deep breath, shivering as the cold blue sterility of the room washes over her. A bit of gel globs together and rolls down her side, puddling where it lands in the waistband of her pants. No amount of shifting will make it feel any less like she wet herself, so she doesn't bother. Her mother would jab her with the end of her pointer finger and tell Anna to stop squirming, anyway. That's what happens at every doctor's visit, from the time she was six, unable to stop braiding her brown hair down the middle of her forehead while the doctor checked her reflexes, to the time she was seventeen, her heels placed in stirrups while the doctor scraped between her legs.

"I've found the heartbeat," the technician says, pressing harder into the skin of her stomach. "Want to take a look?"

Anna leans forward, crumpling the paper under her elbows as she pushes up and supports her weight on her hands. The ultrasound technician keeps the wand in place while she turns, pressing deeper into her skin when she shifts around. She can still see what the camera's picking up even when he fumbles, nearly dropping it.

The thing on the screen looks like a gerbil. Her precious bundle of joy is a gross little rodent with an oversized head. There's a blob that must be the legs, but the grainy image makes them look like a tail sliding back and forth, a little gerbil or possibly the spawn of the Devil.

Anna knows better, has watched *The Miracle of Life* three separate times in health classes over the years, but can't stop herself from blurting, "That's normal, right?"

"Well, see how you turned out," her mother says, waving a hand. "Your sonogram looked exactly like that."

Anna drops her shoulders, lets out the catch of air in her lungs. Her nose is small and upturned like a mouse, and her front teeth buck just enough to make her self-conscious but not enough to have gotten teased during recess in elementary school, but those features come from her father, not some horrific genetic anomaly that makes their family prone to rodent births.

The technician squeezes more gel from the bottle, but his cold fingers don't return to Anna's body. "You know," he says, laughter thick in his voice, "this is my first two-fer."

"Ours, too," her mother says. Anna hears the paper crinkle as she shifts around on the other bed in the room. Typically ultrasounds are a one-person-at-a-time affair, but the receptionist at the clinic had cackled openly at their predicament and shooed them back at the same time, saying, *this shit is messed up*, before calling over her co-worker to join. Anna had opened her mouth to respond, but her mother had grabbed her by wrist and tugged her toward the exam room, muttering about not wasting the opportunity to get out of the clinic faster.

"It's a shame we left our coupon at home," Anna's mother adds. She probably fixes Anna with a glare, mouth downturned, frown lines prominent, but Anna doesn't bother turning around. Her mother can pull the passive-aggressive card all she wants, but it doesn't change the fact that her mother's pregnancy was also accidental, a drunken hook-up in a bar when she was old enough to know better.

"Another strong heartbeat," the technician says. "You're both lookin' good."

Anna glances at the screen as he prints a still of her mother's sonogram. The baby looks like a gerbil too, though it won't have Anna's mousey nose.

She places her hand over her abdomen, careful to avoid the tacky gel coating her skin. There's no movement in the miniscule hump, almost like her pregnancy isn't real save the image on the ultrasound screen and the pee-stick still resting at the bottom of her bathroom trash can. Anna slides off the table, fastens her too-tight pants, and pretends to check her texts while her mother reaches up to caress the ultrasound image of the baby on the screen.

#

Anna hasn't been to the children's wing of the library since she was a child herself, when her nose barely peeked over the short shelves as she leaned her head back, straining to see the stars knotted with fishing line dangling from the ceiling. Her left hand clutches four musty astronomy books from the adult section to her chest as she runs her right along the top of those same shelves, the smooth wood cool beneath her fingertips. The stars of her childhood were replaced with birds of all sizes and colors that float mid-air on the same nearly invisible string. She wonders if the children dream of being among those birds the way she dreamed of being among the stars, if they spread their arms and fly on tiny stomping feet where she once looked at meteor showers through a telescope made from a toilet paper roll.

She bypasses the picture books she pored over as a kid, with large drawings of galaxies and nebulas she still knows by name, and heads to the furthest row with the "Maternity" section marker. While she's not showing more than a slight bump that could be laughed away as a food baby, Anna's still glad that the ancient librarian is distracted by a child who knocked over a pile of books and doesn't stop to ask if she's finding everything okay.

She sinks to the carpet cross-legged, sets the astronomy books aside, and smooths her dress across her thighs before pulling a lightweight book from the bottom shelf. *Your Baby and You* is printed on the cover beneath a pointillism painting of a happily pregnant woman clutching her stomach. Anna frowns and flips through the pages without absorbing any of the information. The book is broken down week by week from the first trimester all the way to the baby's second birthday, but it might as well be gibberish. *Your Baby and You* has helpful diagrams and the textual intelligence of a third grader, but Anna would rather take an exam on the material in the astrophysics book on top of the other stack, even though it uses concepts and equations that Anna will never learn by the end of her AP Physics class. She can cram the science of cause and effect, of friction, of an object in motion staying in motion, but bringing a new life into the world is foreign and overwhelming.

Nevertheless, she adds it to her pile and pulls two more baby books from the shelves. One is the timeless classic *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, the other a self-help guide for mothers dealing with depression after choosing adoption. Anna rubs her hand over the cover of the second one, feels the grooves of the text in the title. Being pregnant isn't on her five year plan—and really, with a plan that includes graduating at least *magna cum laude* from M.I.T., she shouldn't have agreed to the physics of fucking her boyfriend in the first place—but her mother believes that adoption is just shirking responsibility. “You need to step up and accept your mistakes,” she'd said, patting the hump of her own slightly swollen belly. That's what she'd done when pregnant with Anna seventeen years ago, and what she's planning to do with the newest baby at almost forty. Both mistakes.

It had taken Anna two weeks to tell her mother, until she was sure the jut of her belly was obvious even though it was too soon to see any physical changes. She'd stayed late at school, dealing with her first detention ever because she refused to change into gym shorts in phys ed for the third day in a row.

"Dress out," the coach had said as she stood with her hip cocked and a volleyball tucked in her side, her long nails tapping against the underside of the ball.

Anna sat on the bottom level of the bleachers as her classmates filed into the gym from the locker rooms, some of them already holding volleyballs they'd snagged from a bin near the door. She watched as two junior varsity football players spiked their balls at third boy's chest and laughed as he stumbled backwards and gave a wheezy, "Fuck you!" while flipping them off, and she'd pulled her backpack closer to her chest to hide the invisible baby bump. "I can't," she had said, and the coach physically removed her from the gym before handing her a detention slip for later that afternoon.

In detention, she'd worked up the courage to tell her mother as soon as she walked in the house, but the door was only cracked halfway open before her mother hollered, "Looks like you're going to be a big sister," from her usual spot on the couch. When Anna stepped fully inside she could see her mother's tired smile, could practically hear her father shouting as he revved the car engine and drove away, so she blurted, "I'm pregnant," before she could stop herself. Her mother had stared at her for almost a full minute, the passage of time marked by the cat clock ticking on the wall, before she'd said, "Well, shit."

Pregnancy hadn't happened the first time Anna had sex. That's what she'd told her friends, conversing in hushed whispers once her baby bump was visible in the beginning of

September, that her boyfriend had convinced her they'd be okay without a condom, that he'd *pull out, baby, and nothing bad will happen, I promise*. In reality, the combination of a sexually active high school romance, a broken condom, and an accidentally-missed birth control pill were to blame—no one's fault, really, except both of theirs. He should have noticed that the latex ripped. She should have taken Tuesday's pill instead of sleeping through the alarm. She shouldn't have yelled at him, crying, holding the positive pregnancy test in her hand, he shouldn't have broken up with her, refused to answer her calls.

Anna lies to her friends because she has to, because otherwise she's nothing more than an inevitability, the latest turn of the wheel in her family's long line of single mothers. Other people in town had placed bets on her to break the cycle instead of burning out at seventeen, but a lot of money traded hands after word spread at school that she received a doctor's note to skip phys ed for the rest of the year.

The book on adoption takes Anna over the allowed number of library books to check out, so she leaves the astrophysics one for the librarian to reshelve. She puts it on a little table next to an assortment of coloring books, hoping that another child will find it and dream about the stars.

#

Pale yellow streamers crinkle across the living room, draped like deliberately casual scarves across the neck of the doorway. The crackerbox house is stuffed tight with friends and relatives—two sets of one, one of the other—laden with boxes wrapped in pastel ribbon. Holding two baby showers would be an expense they couldn't afford, not when the food and guests could easily overlap.

The dingy couch, left over from the house's previous inhabitants and stained more places than not, sags under her weight as Anna drops to the cushion and swings her ankles up to relieve the swelling, bloating pressure on her feet. Aches and pains start at her toes and make their way up her spine, lodging at the base of her neck. Her mother has been force-feeding her prenatal vitamins, but Anna doesn't think they're working. She had pulled out a small clump of hair the other day, but her mother didn't seem overly concerned as she shook another handful of vitamins into her hands.

"Don't complain," she had said, popping another vitamin herself. "When I was pregnant with you, I gained thirty pounds and never got it off." Anna's hair didn't regain its luster, and her nails continued to chip, and she threw up for three solid days.

She's deflated, limp and lifeless and as dull as her mousy brown hair and the couch she sprawls on, even as the baby becomes increasingly active. The night before, she'd felt a particularly hard kick and looked down, saw the imprint of a perfectly formed human foot in her stomach, like it could pierce right through the skin, like that movie she watched once where an alien burst from a man's chest, killing him instantly.

Her mother unwraps another package of diapers and places them in the pile that could become a truly impressive fort if they stacked them all together. "Thank you," she says to whichever aunt gifted the diapers. Anna lost track an hour and two cupcakes ago, when she stopped paying attention after her mother loudly proclaimed that Anna's baby was going to rip everything apart on the way out if she kept feeding it like that.

Aunt Justine, her mother's youngest sister with four children of her own running around in the backyard, leans into her mother's side, squealing as the baby does another somersault

against her flattened palm and leopard-spotted manicure. “Do you know if you’re having a boy or girl yet?” she asks, and the other guests nod along, also curious.

“I want be surprised,” her mother says, then, confiding like a secret, “but I’ve already started picking out names.” She divulges the merits of old-fashioned names like *Elizabeth* and *Benjamin*, ones she’d planned for Anna’s never-arrived siblings years ago, when she and Anna’s father were still together and potential names were flushed down the toilet along with clots of blood. Anna remembers the first two pregnancies, her mother had invented some elaborate fairy tale explaining how the baby in her tummy went to stay with another mommy instead, but by the third she’d ignored Anna and chainsmoked half a pack of Marlboros on the back porch while Anna’s father packed the trunk of his car.

Aunt Justine pats Anna’s knee, and her smile for Anna is all teeth and no lips, stretching across her face like the grin of a horse. “What about you?” she asks.

“I don’t know the sex either,” Anna says. She fidgets, tries to get comfortable though her feet prick like pins and needles. “And I haven’t picked out any names.”

Aunt Justine takes a bite of her yellow-frosted cupcake. “You’d better get on that,” she says, talking with her mouth full. “That baby’s going to be here before you know it.”

Anna is well aware. Her due date is two days after acceptance letters go out from M.I.T. She double-fists the pregnancy books and the Pearson SAT prep guide, but can’t focus on either for extended periods of time when the baby decides to roll around in her stomach.

“I may not need to pick a name,” Anna says, voice low, shooting for nonchalance. “I’m actually considering adoption, and the resources I’ve found recommend not getting—”

The almost comical echo of silence in the room halts Anna mid-sentence. Aunt Justine's frozen with a cupcake halfway in her mouth, giant teeth embedded in the frosting. The other partygoers are in similar states of shock, straight out of a Saturday morning cartoon, dropped jaws and wide eyes and a stillness of breath like all the air had been sucked into a vacuum. Anna's mother, on the other hand, draws her eyebrows together until a wrinkled line etches down the middle of her forehead.

"Adoption?" Aunt Justine asks, scandalized. She places a hand against her cheek, fingers splayed on her skin, as though she simply can't believe it. It's possible that she can't, since Aunt Justine was born to her mother at eighteen, and her daughter to her just under twenty. "Someone else raising *your* baby?"

Before Anna can reply that it would be *their* baby at that point, her mother cuts in. "I also like the name *Bronwyn*," she says, giving Anna a disappointed look before handing a napkin to Aunt Justine while gesturing for her to wipe her teeth. Tension hangs in the air for a few seconds before the attention shifts back to Anna's mother, popping the moment like a ball of poisonous gas. They attend her with interested ears and questions about the name's country of origin.

Anna shrinks as best she can behind her heavily pregnant belly, turning to gaze out the window at the hints of reds and purples signaling dusk. A honey-colored *CONGRATULATIONS!* banner obscures most of her view, but what she can see of the sky is beautiful.

#

Anna misses the M.I.T. application deadline. One day she has two months to retake the SAT hoping to get a higher Math score, the next it's December 11th and interview scheduling is closed. Her phone chimes with a reminder of the deadline, placed in her calendar months ago by

her then-boyfriend, current-absentee baby daddy, with a happy emoticon and a myriad of exclamation points.

She suffocates in her bedroom. The walls constrict, squeeze her to death.

When Anna was thirteen, she read a book on how feng shui could improve not only the energy of a room, but a person's entire life. She took the concept to heart, pushed the bed against the far solid wall, away from the path of her opening door to avoid too much movement, and elevated it on four stacks of old magazines she had lying around to increase good airflow. Serene, blue paint covered the mold-green walls, which she'd borrowed from the neighbor who painted his den and had some to spare.

Now, they threaten to flatten her. She thrusts her arms toward opposite walls, fingers curled into claws, spins violently to alleviate the pressure, kicks over the pile of long-overdue but not forgotten library books at the foot of her bed. Her life is a mess, but so is a whirlwind, and she spins and destroys everything in her path until she trips over a carseat box and falls, catching herself on hands and knees. The movement stuns her, and she takes a moment to breathe, hunched on the floor with her belly brushing against the carpet.

Anna's mother throws open the door, waddles duck-footed and bow-legged around her pregnant stomach. "What the hell are you doing?" she asks, crossing her arms across her breasts. They heave with the exertion of moving so quickly.

Anna closes her eyes and counts to ten to stabilize her heart rate just like one of the pregnancy books said. She wordlessly holds up her phone, the calendar alert still binging in the background.

Her mother takes one look at the calendar and *tsks*. “I thought you were choking to death or something,” she says, shaking her head in seeming disbelief that all this ruckus could be from something as simple a college application. “I hope you didn’t break anything.”

“I didn’t,” Anna mumbles, cowed. She crawls forward to start reorganizing the contents of her room. Her SAT prep book. An unopened package of white onesies. A deflated beach ball the color of Mars.

“You know, there’s nothing wrong with the community college in Bradenville,” her mother says, watching with hands on hips while Anna picks up her belongings. “It’s not M.I.T., but it’s a good school, and I’m sure applications are still open. Speaking of,” she added, “you need to start looking around for part-time work, because I am *not* about to support your child.”

Anna’s heart leaps into her throat. “I don’t want this baby,” she says, almost a whisper. The confession both weighs her down and makes her feel as if she could fly. It’s the first time she’s said it, aloud and not just to the book on adoption, curled under her covers with a flashlight in her hand like she did when she was eight.

Her mother doesn’t pause, completely ignores what Anna said as she continues to speak. “There’s nothing wrong with starting there while taking care of the baby. I’ve heard they have a pretty great daycare service.”

“I don’t want this baby,” Anna says again, her voice louder, gaining strength the more times she says it as she rises to her feet. “I don’t.”

“I heard you the first time,” her mother says. “I didn’t want to acknowledge what a selfish brat you are.”

Anna inhales sharply. She opens her mouth, but her mother holds up a finger to stop her.

“You can’t seem to stop thinking about you, when you should be thinking about the baby,” she says. “*Your* baby.” She crosses the room, stepping over the debris until they’re pressed nearly nose to nose. “I didn’t want you, either, you know,” she says, poking Anna hard enough in the chest that she feels it through the new layer of pregnancy fat covering her clavicle, “but I sucked it up and raised you anyway, and—”

“And look how I turned out,” Anna says, interrupting with a humorless laugh that feels a little wild as it explodes from her chest. She gestures with wide arms to the disorder of her room, her stretch-marked stomach. “A teen mom like her mother and her aunts and grandparents, in a family bringing two babies we can’t afford into the world. What a great example you set for your daughter. How *proud* you must be.”

Anna feels the sting across her hairline before she sees her mother bend down and fling the adoption book hard at her head, before she registers ducking out of the way a half-second too late, before she hears the scrape of book-edge meeting flesh like a piece of newspaper ripping in half, before she tastes the copper wire of blood in her mouth where her teeth dug into the soft pink of her tongue.

Anna’s mother breathes heavily, shoulders and chest heaving, swollen belly rising and falling with each movement. “I was a *damn* good mom,” she says, eyes wild, whites showing like a spooked horse.

A thin trickle of blood streaks down Anna’s forehead and globs together in her eyebrow, but she doesn’t wipe it away. She shrinks into herself, her arms folded protectively over her stomach, the baby pressing its feet flat against her palms for a brief second before it kicks violently against her.

Anna's mother reaches forward, gathering Anna by the waist and pulling her into a tight hug. An embrace instead of another blow. "Wasn't I?" her mother asks, voice small like a child's as she presses Anna's nose into her shoulder. It's an *I'm sorry*. Their stomachs touch, push against each other, and Anna imagines their unborn babies pressing their hands together between the layers of skin.

"Yes, mama," Anna says, voice muffled against her shirt. *I forgive you.*

#

The hospital room smells like sickness, a cloying scent that permeates every fabric, every possible corner. Anna shifts on the bed and rolls slightly to the side, staring at the array of metal instruments placed, just in case of emergencies, at her bedside. She squeezes her eyes shut through a contraction that feels like the worst pain of her life, though is apparently only a small taste of what is yet to come. That myth about women's cycles syncing up—like the Earth feels two uteri in close proximity and sends waves of fertile energy pulsing through them—must be true, because not only did Anna and her mother ovulate at the same time and get pregnant at the same time, but they go into labor at the same time, as well. Technically, Anna went into labor first, when her water broke over the kitchen tiles while she smeared butter on her toast, but her mother's broke as she drove Anna to the hospital three days before her due date, one day before her friends find out if they're going to their first-choice college.

Anna and her mother can't afford separate rooms. All that divides them is a thin green curtain pulled closed on a metal track. Aunt Justine flits back and forth between both sides of the room, wiping Anna's forehead with the same washcloth she uses on her mother.

The IV needle under the skin of her palm pulls and tugs with every movement like it's trying to escape from her body. It and the baby both, she thinks, as another painful contraction starts in her abdomen and blossoms through the rest of her. It feels like her baby is determined to journey into the world before her mother's. That won't happen, though. Anna's only six centimeters dilated when the doctors tell her mother to push.

The thin curtain blowing gently in the air-conditioned breeze doesn't stop the sound of her mother's agonized screams, but Anna can't imagine how the contractions could get any worse. She squeezes her fingers hard into the pillowcase, the whites of her knuckles matching the color of the sheets, when Aunt Justine and the nurses race to her mother's bedside for moral support. The steady beep of the heart rate monitor picks up before settling with the contraction, relief spreading through her as the pain briefly subsides. There's still a blunt pressure in her lower body that she can't ignore, but that's minimal compared to the other pain.

From the other side of the curtain there's a long, drawn-out groan from Anna's mother that seems to last hours, before Aunt Justine cheers over the nurses' scuffling feet and a baby's first cries. It sounds healthy, at least—one thing Anna did glean from the pregnancy books was the importance of a baby crying its way into the world.

Anna misses the sex of the baby as another contraction cracks through her body like lightning. The heart monitor speeds up as she gasps and twists against the sheets, sweat cascading down her forehead that she can't wipe away fast enough.

Her side of the room is busy at once, three nurses parting the curtain, sliding soiled gloves off their hands, quickly scrubbing them with dry antibacterial soap before replacing them with fresh ones snapped tight to their wrists in the same motion. "That must have triggered some

stronger contractions,” one of them says, gesturing to the curtain that blocks Anna’s view of Aunt Justine cutting the umbilical cord, her mother stroking the baby’s hair while it suckles. The nurse peeks underneath the sheet and feels around, increases the pressure between Anna’s legs. “You’re definitely at ten now, hon.” Another nurse pushes her knees to spread toward her chest, instructing Anna to hold them there if possible.

The doctor rolls over in his chair, hands yellow and freshly scrubbed before he peels blue gloves down his fingers to the wrists. His moustache peeks over the top of his surgical mask. “How’re you doing, Anna?” he asks, chuckling with doctor’s humor when she can’t answer as another contraction wracks her body. “Just what I like to hear. You’re already a big sister today,” he adds, pushing her knees to her chest. “Ready to be a mother?”

Anna doesn’t know. She’s barely set to graduate high school, working with her guidance counselor to plan an alternate curriculum that will ensure she at least gets a diploma at the end of the school year, while her friends pile on the AP and Honors classes to beef up their already-fabulous college applications. Are mothers supposed to be ready after studying for nine months how to change a diaper, how to tell if an infant has colic, how to stimulate a newborn with classical music and bright colors? She remembers the gerbil on the ultrasound, before everything became real and she could pretend there was just a class pet in her stomach.

Her body splits open from the middle with every push the doctor orders, every muscle pull, and every strain as she clutches her knees and bears down against the doctor’s hands. “The head’s stuck in the birth canal,” the doctor says, pressing his fingers inside to feel around. “Doesn’t want to come out.”

Anna killed both gerbils she ever owned. The first one escaped when Anna left the lid open before her second day of kindergarten, and was subsequently sucked up by the Bissell vacuum. The second met its untimely end with an accidental, or perhaps purposeful, suicide by gerbil wheel-hanging.

“Just one more big push. I know you can do it.”

One more, one more excruciating second, and then the pressure fizzles to a dull ache. Anna’s body sags into the bed, exhausted. Her hair mats to her face, sweat sticking in her neck and chest. A sloppy smile works its way across her cheeks as the baby cries, loud and obnoxious.

“It’s a girl,” the doctor says, voice cheerful like this is the first baby he’s pulled from its mother’s womb. “She’s got quite the set of lungs on her.”

Anna reaches out for her baby when the nurses hand her over wrapped in a white blanket. It’s an autonomous reaction like breathing, cuddling the infant close to keep her warm, keep her safe. The wailing increases, forcing Anna to look down at the bundle in her arms to soothe her. Pink skin. Anna’s nose. One foot and one hand black from ink, five toes and five fingers smudged and stamped on the birth records. Five on the other clean ones, too—all present and accounted for.

The baby stops crying as Anna makes shushing noises, bounces her gently to calm her. She’s damp and purple and wrinkled with a tuft of brown hair stuck to the top of her head. Aunt Justine snaps a picture of the scene, blubbering about the beautiful miracle of life as she no doubt uploads the picture to Facebook so all the family can coo as well. Anna guides the baby’s mouth to her breast as she stares at the white popcorn ceiling that forms Orion’s Belt, and Ursa Minor, and billions of stars and galaxies waiting to be discovered in the Hubble Ultra-Deep Field.

The baby snuggles close to Anna's chest as nurses clean everything up, bustle around, and eventually leave to check on other patients. Aunt Justine leaves as well, headed to the cafeteria for a cup of coffee and a better Wi-Fi signal. The last nurse pulls back the curtain between the beds on her way out, promising to be back soon. Then she's gone, leaving Anna and her mother and her daughter and apparently her brother alone in the room.

The silence stretches like taffy, pulled and saccharine, and Anna can only watch in the elongated moment as her mother nuzzles her baby's cheek while staring just below Anna's neck. She's never particularly seen herself in her mother, and spent a great deal of her childhood trying to distance herself as much as possible, but she's in that face even though can't possibly look the same. Her mouth is pulled too tight, lips pursed and jaw clenched, to appear that content.

"She's gorgeous," her mother says, cracking that silence as she jerks her head in Anna's direction. "Like you. Good job."

The warm, solid weight in her arms grows even heavier. She wants to say something, but she's thousands of miles away from the hospital room and already dead, a star burnt out yet still visible to the human eye like a perverse and natural beauty. Anna holds the baby closer to her breast and closes her eyes. The baby's tiny back rises and falls with each breath.

NEED

Derek's 2002 Ford F-150 only coasts to a pause before Cori jumps out of the passenger seat, the momentum of the still-moving vehicle propelling her up the driveway and toward the sound of manic children in the backyard. She'd known about Natalie's fifth birthday party because it's all their mother has been talking about for the past three weeks, but there's a difference between knowing that Natalie's entire pre-k class would be at their house on Sunday for a clown and a bounce house and cake, and experiencing their shrill voices that threaten to amp her hangover to unforetold levels. The last two shots of tequila the night before had been excessive, but she'd needed them at the time, the sour burn in her skull muffling the glide of Derek's fingers across her chest. She'd woken up drunk, thinking herself sober until she stumbled out of his bed and nearly cracked her head open on the toilet trying to pee.

Cori's hand pushes open the wooden gate and her feet crunch gravel beneath the black soles of her Rainbow flipflops, but everything is slow and purposeful, time dragging almost to a standstill. It takes extreme effort to connect skin to wood, shoes to ground. It's been an hour since she'd lurched awake, but she's still drunk, she thinks—at least a little drunk and most definitely high.

"This will help your hangover," Derek had said, wiggling a Ziploc bag of skunk weed in the air. He'd grabbed her by the wrist and led her down the stairs, laughing and poking her in the ribs as she stopped every once in a while to pick up discarded articles of clothing scattered across the floor. From the cabinets underneath the kitchen counter, behind the skillet, he'd pulled out a gallon milk jug missing its bottom half. Cori had never smoked out of a gravity bong before, but

Derek had smiled and said he'd show her everything. He placed his hands over hers to lift the jug slowly from a pot of water, and she sealed her lips around the neck and inhaled as he plunged the jug down again, the pressure forcing smoke into her lungs faster than she could inhale. When she breathed in after the initial inhale and scorched the back of her throat, Derek had kissed her right there, bracketed against the sink, until she forgot about the acrid burn in her mouth. The high hadn't kicked in until halfway home, but it hit *hard*, Cori rubbing the fabric of her skirt over and over while Derek sped down the back roads of their town blaring "Immigrant Song" on loop from his iPod.

As her skirt swishes around her knees, Cori shuts the gate behind her and slings her duffel bag over one shoulder. The backyard looks like an exploded Barbie DVD, and she has to duck her head to avoid an overwhelming feeling of nausea. Hot pink streamers float across the trees lining the seawall into the canal. They match the tablecloths on three card tables and the bounce house shaped like a towering princess castle, complete with a blue tarp underneath acting like a moat. Each shade is slightly different from the next, creating a Pepto Bismol nightmare, broken only by a mountain of multicolored presents on the largest table and the blue wig of the clown making balloon animals for the crowd of tiny boys hovering around her. The scene is so different from Cori's last birthday—her sixteenth, dinner at Kobe Japanese Steakhouse with her family and then going to a Piercing Pagoda alone the next afternoon to pierce her lobes with cubic zirconium studs—that it seems like a caricature of a birthday party, the type that only happens on a TV show.

She's close enough to the house to think she's in the clear, able to slip inside and change clothes, or even take a nap to sleep off the hangover and skip the party entirely. At least put on

underwear, since she hadn't been able to find hers in the massive tangle of clothes in the morning. No one can see her, but she feels gross and exposed, and walks with a purpose to keep the breeze from lifting up her skirt. Cori almost makes it inside, her hand grasped on the knob of the French doors, but her father shouts, "Cori!" from next to the bounce house and she's forced to drop her duffel bag and heel. He's standing next to the entrance like a guard at Buckingham Palace, beefeater replaced by a University of Miami baseball hat and uniform swapped out for a Tommy Bahamas shirt and jean shorts. She winces as the sound of children intensifies with each step, reverberating through her bones like a car stereo with the bass turned too high.

"I thought you'd be back from Derek's an hour ago," he says, cutting right to the point.

She tries to reply, but her mouth doesn't want to move correctly. After a couple seconds of grinding her bottom jaw back and forth, she accidentally bites the inside of her cheek while saying: "Overslept my alarm."

Her father looks away for a moment when three children shriek inside the bounce house, but he turns back to Cori with a frown. "You know, I don't like you going over to that boy's house now that—"

"We're just friends, dad," which isn't the first time she's told that lie, and it's easy enough now, rolls off her tongue like water off a roof. "And other people were there," she adds, "so you don't have to worry."

That wasn't technically a lie, but Derek's college friends had all crashed on the couches in the basement long before Cori and Derek had stumbled up the stairs, drunk, heads stuck in their shirts as they struggled to remove them while touching each other. "Everyone will hear us," Cori had said, tucking her knees to her chest on the bed while Derek loosened his belt in the

corner of the room. When he turned off the lights and crawled toward her, she wrestled her shirt over her head and threw it toward the door.

“They won’t, baby,” Derek had said, running his fingers back and forth across her bare hipbones. “Even though you’re loud enough to wake the neighbors.”

Cori hadn’t been able to see his face, but she could hear his smile, and the sarcasm brought a humored puff of air to her lips. It calmed her, but not enough, so she punched him lightly in the shoulder. “I need something to drink first,” she’d said, and took two giant swigs of tequila when he’d fished under the bed and brought an almost-empty handle to her mouth.

A child stumbles out of the bounce house and skids on his knees, covering his shorts in dirt, and Cori’s father helps him up before sending him on his way. “Your mother’s been looking for you,” he says to Cori, brushing his dirty hands on the rubber wall of the bounce house. “She’s in rare form today, so please try not rile her up.”

“Yes, sir,” Cori says, saluting, before turning on her heels and marching off through the grass. She catches herself after ten steps and laughs, a giggle that turns into a snort because *wow*, she is so high.

Her mother is a vision in khaki capris and a coral peplum tube top, standing by the cake table and licking frosting from an acrylic thumbnail. “You’re late,” she says, using her nail to pick at cake stuck between the left bicuspids of her porcelain veneers. They’d been her fiftieth birthday present to herself, but the fake teeth didn’t fit in her mouth well and looked like two rows of Chiclet gum.

“Sorry.”

“You can make it up to me by serving the cake,” she says, a hint of suggestion but really a command, penciled eyebrows raised.

Cori sighs. “Seriously?” The cake is massive, a giant plastic Barbie doll with a cake skirt, trimmed in pink flowers and butterflies. The Barbie is African-American even though Natalie and the rest of the family are so white they’re nearly translucent. Natalie had decided last-minute that Barbie was her favorite thing *ever*, which meant she had to have a Barbie cake instead of the Snoopy Carvel cake slowly melting in the garage freezer, and the black Barbie was the only one left in stock. Its lime green eyes seem to follow her movements, and Cori doesn’t want to get any closer to the thing than necessary.

“I’ve been up since four AM getting this party ready,” her mom says. “Serve the cake.” She thrusts two plates into Cori’s hands and pushes at the middle of her back with her palm, shooing her toward their next door neighbor and her two-year-old son, Herman.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick had babysat Cori as a child when Cori’s parents both worked full time. Natalie is in pre-k half the day and spends time with their mother who now works from home at her scrapbooking supply business, but Cori had gone to Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s house every day to watch Clifford and play with Legos in their sunroom while she wrote her graduate thesis on Ayn Rand. It was an arrangement that suited everyone, especially Mrs. Kirkpatrick, who met her future wife while using Cori to pick up women at the park.

“Cake?” Cori asks, holding out a piece of Barbie’s skirt. The marbled pattern on the inside of the cake matches the frosting on the outside, pink swirls on white frosting blending into the chocolate and vanilla. She tries to find where one ends and one begins, but it’s like a Gordian

knot, woven together and neverending, and Cori knows it's just a cake from Publix but it's also infinite and fascinating.

"Thank you, Carson," Mrs. Kirkpatrick says, bouncing Herman on her left knee while accepting the cake with her free hand.

Cori bristles, the beginnings of her hangover migraine twinging at the bridge of her nose and spreading through her forehead again. She gives herself a once-over: heels, skirt, crop top, eyeliner and lipstick smudged from the night before. "It's Cori," she says, in the annoyed tone those two words have begun to automatically take on in the past few months.

"Right," Mrs. Kirkpatrick says, squinting at her like she's a foreign, unwelcome creature. She tugs Herman closer to her bosom. "Haven't grown out of that yet?"

Cori shifts her weight, cocks one hip, and sticks out her chest in an exaggerated display of femininity. "Nope," she says. "You grown out of that whole lesbian thing yet?"

"Being gay isn't a phase," Mrs. Kirkpatrick says, huffing. "When I was your age, gay men were proud to be a little swish."

She's been living as Cori for just over a year, the anniversary celebrated by biting into the warm leather of Derek's belt as his former roommate tattooed a Venus symbol in black ink just below her left breast. Their thing together had started that night, Derek buying her an ice cream cone that led to dry humping in the bed of his truck next to the Dairy Queen dumpster. They're not dating, but fucking exclusively, even though she often needs the harsh buzz of alcohol to stop overthinking his hands on her body, because everything feels right when she can't feel at all.

"If I see a gay man, I'll pass on the history lesson," Cori says, smiling with her mouth tight and eyebrows raised, daring Mrs. Kirkpatrick to say something else. "Enjoy your cake."

Cori walks away, flouncing on the balls of her feet in a strut that makes her skirt blow across her thighs. It feels good, the air whooshing around her shaved legs, the falsies in her bra, the soft cotton against her bare thighs, and one of Derek's guitar picks on a chain around her neck, but what normally acts like battle armor threatens to drown her. The straps dig into her skin. She can't breathe. Her fingers flex for a bottle of alcohol that's not there.

She's wedged between the bounce house and the fence before she realizes it, her back sliding down the rubber wall until her butt touches the ground. The grass is soft under her palms as she strokes back and forth, petting it, letting the blades run between her fingers. It's funny, the way she's stroking the grass like she might an affectionate cat, and she laughs and laughs until she starts sobbing a little, and then she can't stop laughing and crying and touching the grass and thinking about Derek's hands gripping her hair while she swallowed him down until she choked. She's not in love with Derek, but she loves the idea of needing him, and for now she supposes that's close enough.

A tug on her shirtsleeve startles her, and Cori wipes snot on the back of her arm, brushes her bangs out of her eyes as Natalie continues stretching out the fabric of her shirt through the mesh screen of the bounce house. "What'cha doing?" Natalie asks, tugging at Cori's clothes. She's pink from head to toe, striped leggings and long-sleeve shirt and tutu, with fairy wings like butterflies attached to an elastic harness around her shoulders and chest. Her hair had been in neat pigtailed, but, at some point in the afternoon, loosened from the ties and stuck straight out from her head in little tufts.

"Playing hide-and-seek," Cori says, folding her arms on her bent knees while tapping a beat against her legs.

Natalie's eyebrows draw together. "I don't see no one looking for you."

Cori leans in to the screen and beckons for Natalie to come even closer, until she can cup her hand around Natalie's ear through the mesh. "That's because I'm really good at it," she whispers, and then blows a gust of air into Natalie's ear.

Natalie giggles, scrubbing at her ear with her knuckles. "You're silly, Cori. Come play in the bounce house with me."

And that's what Cori loves about Natalie. She's never messed up Cori's name, not once, and it's probably because she's barely old enough to form memories, but Cori takes it for what it is. Even Derek has accidentally screwed up, but always apologizes with a pained look on his face, and has never said it during sex as far as she can remember through the haze surrounding all of their encounters, which is nice.

"Maybe later," Cori says, smoothing out her skirt. "I like your tutu," she adds.

Natalie beams. "Thank you! I wanted us to have matching fairy princess ones, but mom said no."

"That's because it's your party, which makes you the most special fairy princess," Cori says, booping Natalie on the nose. *Fairy* and *princess* still scratch at some deep, aching wound in her chest, so she wouldn't have worn the tutu anyway, as fantastic as it would have looked.

"Yeah, you're right," Natalie says, nodding, very serious.

They sit together in comfortable silence for several minutes, Natalie humming tunelessly as the sounds of the party ebb and swell around them like a roiling ocean. The stillness lasts too long, too perfect, the two of them alone on the edge of the world, so it's no surprise when their mother's voice carries over the shrieks of the party.

“Cori!” she hollers, in that way only moms can, no doubt noticing Cori’s absence from the cake table. The vowel sounds weird, like she’d been going for the *a* and switched to the *o* at the last second, creating a diphthong where there shouldn’t be. It’s not like ice water down her back, but something similar, something fluid and wrong that pools in her abdomen. The high is beginning to wear off, her hangover is burning, and she thinks back to Derek’s fingers tucking her hair behind her ears when it took her more than five minutes to buckle her seatbelt in the truck, laughing so hard that he took over and buckled it for her. How great his skin had felt against hers, how great she’d felt in her skin for the first time in weeks.

“You’d better bounce me super high,” Cori says. She walks around to the front and slips through the drawbridge of the bounce house while her father talks to one of the other parents.

Natalie shrieks as she scrambles to her feet, wobbling on unsteady limbs, her fairy wings flapping up and down with bounces like they might actually give her flight. She catches Cori around the middle and topples them both over, elbows and knees jamming into each other’s squishy, vulnerable bodies. Natalie immediately recovers, jumping dangerously close to Cori’s ribs, but Cori lets herself sink into the floor, spreads her arms out to their full wingspan, and waits for a perfectly timed jump to send her soaring into the air.

MOLT

As the last of the sun disappeared behind the trees on the other side of the lake, Jean hauled herself from the dock, grabbed the cardboard container with her new pet parakeet, and trod toward her house, her wet feet leaving quickly-evaporating footprints against the wood. The forked-blade weeds and crunchy crabgrass prickled against her bare ankles, and little black aphids clung to the downy blonde hair on her legs, where they hitched a ride until she brushed them onto the patio before slipping through the sliding glass door.

Her mother emerged from the kitchen, sauce-stained wooden spoon bobbing in the air with the sway of her pumpkin-shaped hips. As she walked, it splashed tiny flecks of spaghetti sauce onto the frilly half-apron covering her lower body. “Jeannie?” she called, voice pulling upwards at the end like a farmer’s wife calling a pig to the trough. “Jeannie, dinner’s—oh,” she trailed off, eyes finally catching on Jean, barefoot and slightly windblown, cardboard container in her hand. “What’s that?”

“Bird,” Jean answered, shaking the container, not enough to hurt the bird, but enough to make him peep angrily and flap his clipped wings. “One of my friends got him for my birthday. I have a cage and everything.”

“How considerate of them,” her mother said, though she sounded like when Jean’s father was late from work and her mother had to *speak* to him in the garage. “You’d better take care of it, because I’m not a zookeeper.”

“I will,” Jean said, elongating the vowel until it stretched into a whine. She set the bird on the dining room table.

Her mother tutted, turning back to the stove. “Get that bird out of my kitchen,” she said. “I know she’s from India, but I don’t want Anaya to think we live in a barn.”

“You don’t keep birds in a barn,” Jean said. “And Charlie’s such a pig anyway, I don’t know how she’s dating him.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say about your brother, Jeannie.”

“Sorry,” Jean said, though she didn’t mean it. Charlie had always been awful to her when she was too young to know any better. Their father named him Charlton after Charlton Heston, his favorite actor, and Charlie lived up to that name. He’d make Jean pull him around the house in a laundry basket, playing gladiators like in *Ben Hur*, until he entered middle school and started going by Charlie instead.

“And wash up for dinner,” her mother added. “You’ve probably got bird flu.”

Jean rolled her eyes, wiping her hands on the front of her shirt before digging deep in her pocket for her mother’s credit card. As long as her mother didn’t closely inspect the statement, she’d never notice the nineteen-dollar charge from Petland amidst all the online shopping orders. “Mom, no one says ‘wash up’ anymore.”

“Oh really?” her mother asked, facing the stove, spoon still flinging. “What do they say?”

“I don’t know,” Jean said, pulling her mother’s wallet out of last season’s Vera Bradley purse. She placed the credit card back in its holder. “Just not that.”

“Well,” her mother said, making a shooing motion with her free hand, “you can think about it while you wash the bird gunk from underneath your fingernails.”

“I didn’t even touch him,” Jean said, grabbing the bird’s box, but her mother pointed the wooden spoon at the hallway, not noticing a glob of spaghetti sauce drip onto the linoleum

kitchen floor. Jean grumbled and stomped, just a little, down the hall until she reached her bedroom. It was the bedroom her mother wanted her to have, lace-trimmed pillows and a bedspread dotted with peonies and a desk with a wicker chair her mother had picked up at a garage sale for five dollars. Most everything in Jean's room came from garage sales, from the stacks of paperback *Nancy Drews* and *Hardy Boys* and *Boxcar Childrens* and *Babysitters' Clubs* at the foot of her bed that had spilled over from the bookcase under her window, to the best thing she'd found so far—a rounded, white bird cage, about the circumference of Jean's arms when she hugged it to her chest, with a latching door that was the perfect size for a parakeet.

An old lady two streets over had sold it to Jean for three dollars at the end of the day last Saturday when the AmVets truck came to take the other items that didn't sell. It was ornamental and decorative in design, not like the ones Jean had browsed at the pet store, but it had a little wire perch running through the middle and some fake ivy on the bottom that Jean had already covered in newspaper in preparation for the bird's arrival.

Jean set the cardboard container on her desk, pondering the best way to transfer him from cage to cage when he seemed hell-bent on escape. She opened half of the container, holding the other side tight while she tipped it upside down, which forced the bird and the remaining uneaten seeds from the store to spill into the bottom. He immediately tried to fly toward the back of the cage, but his wings only propelled him a couple inches in the air, which gave Jean plenty of time to shut the door and trap the bird inside.

"Don't try anything funny," she said, tapping once against the bars of the cage. He tossed his head back and forth, rustling the feathers on his neck and stomach. Jean supposed that was an acceptable answer.

The front door banged open, drawing Jean's attention away from the bird. Her mother's voice floated down the hallway, shrieking Charlie's name in a high-pitched yet pleasant tone, and Jean was drawn to the sound like a dog following the smell of a ham in an old cartoon.

"And you must be Anaya," Jean's mother said as Jean poked her head around the corner of the hallway, where Jean's mother was in an awkward half-arm hug with a petite, average looking girl. Charlie hovered to the side holding two duffel bags, and apparently between winter and summer break, he'd decided to grow a goatee. "What an exotic name."

Anaya's mouth twitched, which caused Jean to look at the thin upper lip and the wide, flat nose slightly off-center on her face. "Not so exotic," Anaya said, her voice lilting in a strange, musical way Jean had never heard before. "My primary school had five."

Anaya turned to Jean, still lingering in the hallway. "And you must be Jean," Anaya said in that same musical voice. "Your brother has told me so much about you."

"Good things, I hope," Jean responded, which is something she'd heard her dad say at a Christmas party. Anaya laughed, her face scrunching.

Jean's mother ushered them further into the foyer so she could shut the door against the mosquitos gathering near the porch light. "Your father's late, as usual," she said, addressing Charlie. "Supposed to be home an hour ago."

"I saw Dad getting gas at the WaWa on 436," Charlie said, shrugging the duffel bag from his shoulder. "Probably be home soon."

Jean counted fifteen minutes of whispered conversation between Charlie and Anaya on the couch while her mother forcefully tossed a salad in the kitchen before her father walked in, loaded with white paper sacks from Chick-Fil-A.

“Sorry I’m late, y’all,” he said, tossing the bags on the dining room table next to the stack of mail. He wiped a thin layer of sweat from his forehead back into the balding patch at his hairline.

Jean’s mother turned, salad bowl still in hand. “I really wish you’d stop saying you’ll be home at six, when you know that isn’t the case, dear,” she said, using that familiar tone again.

“We’ve been married for twenty-five years, honey,” he said, rolling his eyes at Charlie like they shared a secret joke. “You know that six usually means six-thirty.”

Her mother scuffed one foot against the floor. “It’s seven.”

“Had to pitch in at the last minute,” he said, shrugging. “A whole little league team came in to celebrate their win, and we got swamped.” He walked into the kitchen, attempting to go in for a hug, but Jean’s mother huffed and stuck out her elbows, spilling a few leaves of lettuce on the floor while she mixed the contents of the bowl.

“That’s what you have employees for, dear,” she said.

“What sort of manager would I be if I didn’t help?” her father asked, crowding her mother against the refrigerator, kissing the back of her neck until she swatted him away. “Besides, we overcompensated the number of sandwiches and Bill said I could take some home.”

Bill, the franchisee, wasn’t a hard-ass, as Jean’s father would say. Sometimes he would let employees take home extra sandwiches at the end of their shifts, even though it was technically against company policy, because the location turned a better profit than any other Chick-Fil-A in the region. People camped on the sidewalk for twenty-four hours to be the first hundred people in line on opening day and win free chicken nuggets for a year. Jean loved when her father brought home sandwiches. It didn’t happen a lot, but it happened often enough that she

always looked for the bags in his hand when he came home smelling of peanut oil. She would usually wrap her sandwich in foil and save it for the next Sunday, because it felt good being the only kid in the country eating Chick-Fil-A. In that moment, everyone wanted to be her instead of the other way around.

“Should have told me that before,” Jean’s mother said, gesturing to the slowly-burning pot of sauce. “I have enough pasta on the stove that even starving African children would throw away their leftovers.”

“We can eat that tomorrow night,” her father said. “You know the sandwiches are always better fresh.”

Jean’s mother mumbled something with her back turned that Jean didn’t hear, but Charlie stepped into the kitchen before her father could open his mouth. “Dad, this is Anaya, my girlfriend,” he said, and then took a step back so she could move forward.

“Hello,” Anaya said, waving and smiling instead of reaching out her hand to shake. It seemed to confuse Jean’s father, his arm left hanging in the air like a withered tree branch.

Jean’s mother smacked him on the shoulder. “You smell like fried chicken and sadness,” she said. “Go wash up, then we’ll eat.”

#

As usual, Jean said grace once they all gathered around the table, mumbling the same thing about thanking God for the harvest that she said every night. It lost actual meaning a while ago, but Jean had to keep up the pretense of prayer. She peeked her eyes open halfway through and watched Charlie’s foot rub against Anaya’s under the table, different from how he used to

kick Jean's shins at dinner when he was a teenager and she was only six. Anaya seemed to like it, though, smiling with her eyes closed and hands clasped in her lap.

"Do you eat chicken, Anaya?" Jean asked, once she said *amen* and the plates were passed around the table. "There's an Indian boy in my class, and he's a vegetarian."

"Oh, I'm sorry dear," Jean's mother said as she grabbed two of the chicken sandwiches. She removed the buns, placing them on her plate. "It didn't even cross my mind."

"Thank you for asking," Anaya said, smiling at Jean. "I don't eat beef, but chicken is fine. My family was never that strict about religion."

Jean's mother made a face that Jean knew all too well—one of confused disappointment, with words trapped on her tongue, just behind her teeth, like she wanted to frown at Anaya's lack of religiosity, but smile because it wasn't the correct religion, anyway. Anaya must have picked up on it, because she busied herself with the pickles on her sandwich.

Jean's dad cleared the awkward silence with, "So how did you two meet? We don't hear from Charlton for three months, and then next thing we know he says he's bringing a girlfriend home over the break."

"I see the quiet part isn't just for me, then," Anaya said in a teasing voice. Her socked foot rubbed against Charlie's again. "We actually met as lab partners during our physics lab last semester, but Charlie was too nervous to make the first move. Adorably nervous," she added, gripping his chin in her hand, her fingers and long nails splaying over his skin like talons. "I asked him out on our first date, and I think I heard him babble more at the restaurant than I'd heard him say all semester."

“And we’ve been together ever since,” Charlie said, with Anaya adding, “Though I do most of the talking,” as though it was a routine they ran through often.

Jean removed the top bun of her chicken sandwich. It was a little burnt and missing the pickles, though there were two slimy green indents of pickles left in the bun. She took the ketchup and drew a face on the chicken with a giant mustard nose in the center. It looked a little like Anaya’s, except her skin wasn’t the color of deep fried chicken. It was brown, but a nice brown, like a burnt sienna colored pencil.

Anaya smiled as she passed the mashed potatoes Jean’s mother had quickly made to go along with the sandwiches. “I have to confess I lied earlier,” she said as Jean scooped a serving onto her plate. “When I said your brother told me so much about you? I didn’t even know he had a sister until about a week ago when he mentioned I’d be sleeping in your room.”

Jean hadn’t been made aware of the sleeping situation, though she supposed it made sense. Her mother certainly wouldn’t allow Anaya to sleep in Charlie’s room, and the pull-out couch had a giant pee stain on the mattress from when Jean’s grandparents had visited two summers before. She didn’t know how to respond, so she shoved a giant bite of chicken sandwich in her mouth.

Charlie shrugged. “We’re so far apart in age that we never hung out,” Charlie said, as though that response made sense.

“Well *I’m* interested,” Anaya said, her left hand punctuating the words with a soft slap against the table. She added, “Tell me *everything*.”

Jean blinked. “Like what?”

“Are you seeing anyone?” Anaya asked. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“I have a bird,” Jean said, stirring butter into her mashed potatoes with her fork. “He’s a parakeet. They’re the third most popular household pet after dogs and cats.”

Anaya laughed. “So that would be a no, then.”

“Jean’s too young to date anyway,” her mother said with her mouth half-full of chicken. “I mean, she doesn’t even wear bras yet.”

“Mom,” Jean said, drawing out the vowel again. She wanted a bra, but she didn’t want to talk about it. Her *bosoms*, as her mother called them, were late-blooming, but jiggled just enough now that her mother said she’d need something to keep the boys from looking at her chest. “It’s indecent,” her mother had said while folding her own bras fresh from the dryer. They were once white, now slightly beige, as were most white clothes in their house. “Plus if you get genes from my side of the family, you’ll need something to rein them in soon enough.”

Her mother swallowed a bite. “We were supposed to go shopping for some tonight, but I might make it an early night.” She rubbed at her back, wincing as her fingers dug into a pressure point at the base of her spine. Jean was too young to remember it happening, but Charlie told her stories about how their mother used to work at the Merita bread factory when Jean was a baby. She’d hurt her back on the job when Jean was three, and had been on permanent disability ever since. She worked a little teaching piano lessons from the old Kohler and Campbell upright in the family room, but her hands were so stiff that she could only teach young children and beginners who didn’t know any better.

“I can take her,” Anaya said, offhand, as though she’d been a family friend for years who’d done this sort of thing all the time. “Bras are, like, the first step into womanhood. After your first pair of high heels, of course.”

Jean had never worn anything higher than the slight raised heel of her black Mary Janes, but she nodded sagely, anyway.

“I couldn’t ask you to do that on your first night here,” Jean’s mother said. “You need to settle in and unpack. Jean’s breasts can wait one more day.

“It’s no trouble,” Anaya said, waving her fork and smiling emphatically. “Besides, this gives me a chance to scope out more of the city.”

Jean’s mother looked like she wanted to argue but couldn’t find the proper talking points. “If you insist,” she said, blowing a quick burst of air from her nose. “Y’all can take my credit card and hit up Sears. I got a coupon in yesterday’s paper.”

#

Jean was grateful when Anaya finally found a parking spot outside Sears for Charlie’s clunky old Volkswagen Beetle. The car permanently smelled like the root beer spilled under the passenger seat, and something cloying and earthy that made Jean’s nose twitch. It lurched every time Anaya tapped on the brakes, sometimes causing the seatbelt across Jean’s chest to tighten and force her back into the seat. Every time, she had to undo her seatbelt and refasten it, until she gave up and dealt with the strap digging into her budding breasts for the rest of the trip.

Anaya took long strides for her short frame, to the point where Jean had to pick up her pace to keep up with someone barely over her height. Her jeans made a *shh-shh* noise where her thighs rubbed together through the material. Jean’s mother had given them a coupon for twenty-five percent off junior apparel, so Jean started to turn down the aisle for the children’s department, but Anaya breezed past toward the mall entrance.

“It’s this way,” Jean said when she caught up, hooking her thumb to the right where she could make out the small mannequins wearing Jean’s same pair of corduroy shorts.

Anaya wrinkled her nose as she chuckled, a bell-like noise that was prettier than her face. “We’re not getting you bras from *Sears*,” she said.

Jean frowned, one hand reaching into her left pocket, fingers tracing over the crumpled coupon. “We’re not?”

“Department store bras are poor quality and wear out after a couple months. We need to get you ones that will last.”

They stopped in front of the Victoria’s Secret, Jean peering around Anaya’s body like a five-year-old afraid of strangers. Whenever Jean and her mother went to the mall, she always passed the store with her head down, nervous-walking, embarrassed by the large mostly-naked women advertising bras and panties on the window display. Sometimes she would peek inside when her mom wasn’t looking, just to get a glimpse of the types of people shopping in the store.

Anaya walked casually inside like she didn’t care that everyone in the mall would know she was shopping for bras, but Jean paused outside the store, eyes darting left and right to look for people she knew. When the coast was clear, she darted behind a display of panties advertised at seven for twenty-eight dollars. Jean followed Anaya’s *shh-shh* to the back of the store, sticking close to her straw-wedged heels while wandering through things like body shapers and control top pantyhose that she’d didn’t know existed, let alone hadn’t thought about needing someday. They stopped outside the dressing room, Anaya clicking her tongue at the long line wrapping out the entryway.

“I’d wanted to get you fitted, but oh well,” she said. She reached forward and cupped Jean’s left breast in her palm, squeezing until Jean could feel the sharp edge of Anaya’s fingernails through the material of her shirt.

Jean breathed hard through her nose, shoulders rising as her chest expanded, pressing her more firmly into Anaya’s hand. Her fingernails were pinpricks against Jean’s skin, like the bird’s beak against the fleshy part of her inner arm when she’d tried feeding him from her palm at Petland. Jean’s mind whirred into overdrive as Anaya squeezed once and made a thoughtful humming noise.

“Probably 32A,” Anaya said, releasing Jean’s breast before turning to rifle through one of the white drawers to her right. Jean, not knowing what else to do, moved next to her and opened another drawer marked 32A on the top row. Her fingers slid across the fabric, pulling bras out of the way to reach the ones in the back, operating by touch and not by thought as her mind stuck firm on the feeling of Anaya’s hand on her chest. The cloth was soft against her fingertips, not like the rough cotton of her mother’s bras she’d had to fold occasionally when helping with the laundry. And they didn’t seem as elastic and worn either, molded into a shape entirely different than the little bumps poking out of Jean’s chest. Jean thumbed to the back of the drawer and pulled out a lime green one with some sort of padding inside—daring, but practical, she could hear the girls in her grade saying. She wore a lot of green, so it would look good when she changed into clean clothes in the locker room.

Anaya looked pleased at her choice. “That’s a good t-shirt bra,” she said. “I have one for when I’m being lazy around the house, and I really like it.”

“This isn’t an everyday bra?” Jean asked, and Anaya chuckled again, the bells in her voice ringing in a discordant tone.

“Not unless you don’t want to show off the goods,” she said, cupping her own breasts in her hand.

“The goods?”

Anaya continued rifling through her own drawer. “We need to find you something with a bit of *oomph*, and a little push, because those tits will need all the help they can get.” She raised her eyebrows and pulled out a pink bra with lace around the edges. “You’ll probably grow into larger boobs since you’re still a baby, but until then you need to fake it until you make it.”

“What are you?” Jean asked. She reached out a hand and squeezed one of the pink cups. The bulk of padding squished between her fingers like the expensive mattresses she sometimes napped on in Sears while her mom shopped.

“34C,” Anaya said, moving her shoulders and giving them a little shake. “Your brother’s a fan.” She handed the pink bra to Jean along with a black one, and a red one with less material that Anaya called a “plunge,” and pushed Jean toward the dressing room line. “I’ll be there in a sec, might as well try something on myself while we’re here.

Jean got in place behind a girl waiting to try on a swimsuit and a woman her mother’s age with something in her hands that looked simple and white, no plunge to be found. There had to be more like that in the store, but Jean looked at the signs and didn’t see anything close—only ads for push-ups and multi-ways and a bunch of bras that looked exactly the same but were apparently five different styles. She almost asked the woman where she found those bras, intending to pick up some for herself instead of the ones in her arms that made her feel

uncomfortable and small, but Anaya bustled back with three bras of her own and slid next to Jean in line just in time for them to make it to the front.

“Can we go in together?” Anaya asked the saleswoman standing guard in front of the dressing room. She bumped Jean with her hip, nearly knocking Jean over since her knees were locked tight. “Getting her first bra.”

The woman beamed and said, “Of course,” before showing them to a handicapped stall in the back. “Let me know if you need anything.”

Jean hung the bras on a rack above a white v-neck shirt that was apparently for seeing what the bras looked like in a one-size-fits-all shirt, like the jeans in the *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* books she’d read last year. By the time Jean turned around, Anaya had already stripped out of her shirt and bra. Her dark areolas were so different than Jean’s own tiny, pink ones that hardly looked different from the freckles dotting her chest and shoulders. These were something more, mature and adult in a way that made Jean nervous. She spun to face the wall, stomach tight and constricted with jitters and a creeping sense of shame, and crossed her arms at the elbows, gripping the hem of her shirt to pull it over her head without messing up her ponytail.

“Do you know how to put one on?” Anaya asked, thankfully her back to Jean as she rifled through her choices on the wall before taking the off the hanger.

“No,” Jean said, fumbling as she tried to do the same with her pink bra. Once she got it off the hanger, she unfastened all of the clasps in the back.

“You can pull it over your head or fasten it in the front and then twist it around, but that’ll stretch them out,” she said, facing forward in the mirror with the cups of the bra pressed against her chest. “But if you put your arms through the straps like this—” She slid the straps over her

shoulders and Jean copied her, standing with her arm pressed against Anaya's body, "—and then bend forward a little, your tits fall into the right spot." Anaya leaned over and Jean watched as her breasts dangled, nipples pointing toward the floor.

She did the same, but her boobs didn't really hang. The fat just pushed forward as gravity pulled down their weight. But like Anaya, she pressed the material to her chest and then reached back, attempting to fasten the hooks. Anaya seemed to get it in one motion, quickly snapping all three together, but Jean fumbled trying to just get one.

"It takes practice," Anaya said, coming behind Jean and taking the two pieces of material from her hands. "I used to sit at home for hours and do this until my fingers were sore." She hooked all three and then smiled in the mirror, rubbing Jean's shoulder. "And then you have to do a bit of adjusting, and you're set."

Anaya reached into her bra and lifted up one boob to shove it in the right spot. The other, slightly smaller, was already in the perfect place, but she jiggled it around just to be safe. The wire underneath Jean's breasts dug into her skin, and she bent forward again, shaking to mimic what Anaya was doing. That helped, marginally, but Jean shifted her shoulders in discomfort. She couldn't imagine wearing one of these things for the rest of the day.

"Look at you!" Anaya said once she'd finished adjusting herself and fluffing her hair in the mirror so it spilled over her shoulders in what Jean supposed was an alluring way. It detracted a little from her nose, which was probably the goal.

Jean looked at the line running down her chest between her breasts, how prominent it seemed from this angle, in this bra. It was still there when she glanced in the mirror, her small breasts pushed together and lifted to create false cleavage.

“Much better than the one your mom wants you to get,” Anaya said, pulling an exaggerated, disgusted face in the mirror. Her own bra was cream and sheer, with black lace and beading running from the top the middle of the cups like raindrops. She rooted around in her purse for a bit before pulling out her iPhone, unlocking the screen, and opening one of her apps. “Just have to take a quick picture for later,” she said, holding the phone at an impossible angle above her head, facing down to catch just her head and chest in the shot.

Jean ran her fingers under the lace along the top of her own bra, feeling her warm skin beneath the scratchy material. Tiny hairs pricked up on her arm. She’d probably have to start doing her own laundry now—no way would her mother be okay with these.

Jean pulled at the back of the bra, moving to undo it, but Anaya’s hand around her own stopped her. “Why don’t you just wear it out of the store?” Anaya asked. She ripped the tag from the bra and held it between her first two fingers. “Now that you wear bras, you have to wear them all the time.”

Jean stared as Anaya did the same with her own bra and put the two tags on top of her purse while she changed back into a shirt. She tried to copy the smooth movement as Anaya sashayed out of the dressing room with the rest of their bras. Watching herself in the mirror from beneath partially-closed eyelids, Jean turned her chin to the ceiling to keep her hair intact as the fabric slid over her head. Her shirt settled on her torso differently than normal, over the bulge of cleavage on her chest, the hem an inch above her pants, exposing her midriff. It looked weird, the pale flesh between her shirt and jean shorts, not tanned like her arms and calves—more like the paleness of the thonged stripe between her toes from her flip flops.

By the time Jean finished dressing, Anaya was already at the counter paying for the bras. The total on the register made Jean's heart thump hard and nervous in her chest. "I can't afford that," she said, moving to put her mother's credit card back in her pocket.

"It's cheaper per bra to buy six of them," Anaya said, pointing to the sign behind the cash register. The saleswoman nodded along in agreement. "I'll split the price with you, and it won't be much more than twenty dollars different than if you'd bought department store ones." Twenty dollars was almost two weeks of lunch money, but Jean nodded as Anaya swiped the card from her hand and completed the purchase, forging her mother's signature at the bottom of the receipt.

Jean grabbed the bag with her three bras and Anaya grabbed her three, and they exited the store as two of the mysterious people Jean imagined who shopped at Victoria's Secret. She didn't feel any more grown up, just itchy, where the band of the bra dug into her back and the tag irritated her skin.

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As Anaya hummed to the radio on the drive home, Jean stared out the open window and wished for silence. She sometimes liked to pretend that her fingers were a person running along the sidewalk, hopping over the intersections and driveways, running from someone who always seemed to be right behind and going the same speed. It was dark, which meant the streetlight shadows provided extra obstacles for her fingers while Anaya flipped through all the stations pre-programmed on Charlie's radio. The silence continued into the house, the only noise coming from Jean's father snoring in his armchair, a book on 1960's Hollywood splayed pages-down across his chest. All the lights were off except the lamp next to Jean's father and one in Charlie's

room down the hall, which meant Jean's mother had taken a muscle relaxer and fallen asleep while watching *Law and Order: SVU*, and Jean was, as usual, in charge of her own bedtime.

"I think I'm going to go say goodnight to Charlie before I come back to bed," Anaya said, ruffling Jean's hair. Jean slicked it back down with her hand, which made Anaya laugh and repeat. "We can watch a movie together or something. It'll be like a sleepover," she added, and sauntered down the hall before Jean could mention that she didn't have a television in her room.

The bird was chewing on the bars of his cage when Jean entered, gnawing off some of the white paint with his beak. He'd apparently been at it for a while because the fake leaves at the bottom were dotted like snow where he'd ripped up the newspaper covering them. She tried to put her fingers through the bar to stroke his head, but instead of leaning into her touch, he flitted to the back of the cage just out of reach. When he puffed his feathers and flapped his wings, Jean sighed and threw her bag from *Victoria's Secret* on the floor next to her closet.

As she turned, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, the strip of skin exposed at her belly. She removed her shirt with one elbow digging into the fabric as she yanked it over her head, and twisted left and right once it was off to get a full view of the bra. It was pretty, but the red mark already cutting into the skin beneath her breasts wasn't. Pressing her chest against the mirror, she stared down at her cleavage, looking first at her reflection, then at the way her breasts flattened out of the forced shape when she moved forward and grabbed the edge of the mirror for extra leverage.

A thunk on the wall startled her, thinking she had bumped into the mirror and was about to fall over, so she gripped harder to steady it. She heard a groan from Charlie's room as though he had food poisoning, but Jean didn't feel bad and they'd eaten the same food. She pressed her

hands against her stomach, giving the little bulge there a slight squeeze, but nothing happened. Then another groan, and a higher-pitched one from Anaya, presumably, and Jean flushed because she wasn't stupid. She knew what sorts of things Charlie listened to from his computer when he thought she'd gone to sleep. The bed squeaked, and Jean couldn't help herself, leaned her ear against the wall.

Even with the sound dampened through the wall, Jean heard her brother say, "You're beautiful," as the bed creaked again. It was wrong to listen but she couldn't stop, wondering if Anaya left her bra on, if her brother liked that. She pictured her brother's hand gripping Anaya's breasts, through the cup, squeezing with pressure like Jean had felt from Anaya's hands. She squeezed her own breast, watched in the mirror as her hands completely covered the fabric across her chest. It didn't feel good, but it didn't feel wrong, either.

On the walk home from school one afternoon, eighth grade girls in front of Jean had conversed in hushed whispers about kissing games at boy-girl parties. They had said if you made a fist with thumb untucked and stuck your tongue into the open space, it was sort of what a boy's tongue in your mouth felt like. Jean had tried it at home later, licking the closed palm of her hand until she felt silly and gross, swearing off kissing as she wiped her wet hand on the bedspread. But every few days she'd try it again to see if it would feel different and good, or at least like it *could* feel good, which continued until Charlie caught her one day over winter break and thought she was still sucking her thumb.

The bed thudded hard against the wall again, and Jean sprang from the mirror, embarrassed. She ran to the bathroom, not even bothering to put on her shirt before slamming the door behind her. The overhead light was broken so she flipped on the shower light and exhaust

fan instead before turning both the hot and cold sink taps on full blast. The deafening buzzing noise drowned out the sound of hard, Florida aquifer water pounding against the porcelain basin. Water leapt from the sink and soaked the bare skin above her navel as she leaned over to splash some against her cheeks. It cooled her skin, so she rubbed some on her face, letting the water drip from her hands on the countertop and not caring about the mess she made.

Jean splashed another handful of water against her forehead, but most of it missed and ended up sluicing down her neck instead, drenching the cotton and lace stretched across her chest. The material damp was even more uncomfortable than it was dry, so she hastened to remove it, nearly getting her arms stuck as it pinned her elbows to the side of her head. When she finally shucked it off, she stared at the bra in her hands, holding it between thumb and finger like tweezers clamped on a hair. She hated it. It was expensive, and she was going to be in a ridiculous amount of trouble when her mother investigated the charge from Victoria's Secret and noticed the one from Petland, but mostly the bra didn't feel like her. Since fourth grade she'd anticipated the moment when she finally became a woman who wore bras over huge breasts and somehow used tampons, though she couldn't figure out yet how they even worked. Now, she couldn't wait to be rid of it.

She threw it in the small bathroom trash can, pulling papers and wadded Kleenex from the bottom to hide it as best she could, but even then the bra was still glaring and visible to whomever would empty the trash. None of her other options were better, though. A bra would easily sink to the bottom of the lake, but Jean didn't think she could pull that off without getting caught. She thought about shoving it in her drawer or under the bed, but then her mother would make her return it and buy replacements from Sears, which she didn't want, either.

Jean heard someone's footsteps down the hallway and, fearing it was her mother, threw the bra in the toilet and closed the lid, sitting on top of it with legs crossed, quiet and waiting for someone to jiggle the handle. When the footsteps passed, she stood up and pried open the lid, staring at the bra floating in the toilet bowl. Jean wasn't an expert by any means, but the idea couldn't hurt—the bra was already half down the hole, so she figured it would be safe to flush.

She reached her hand in, wrinkling her nose even though the water was clean, and poked the bra even further into the hole before flushing. The water began to rise, and Jean was afraid it would overflow as it came ever closer to the lip of the bowl. She leaned toward the pipe to turn off the water like her dad had taught her several years ago when she'd accidentally flooded the bathroom, but the bra sucked down and disappeared into the pipes along with the water. It was exhilarating and terrifying to watch, and Jean spent several long minutes staring into the empty toilet bowl, as though waiting for something else magnificent to happen.

Jean washed and scrubbed her hands thoroughly up to the elbows and then walked bare-chested like a child back to her room. Her shirt was where she'd left it inside-out on the floor, and she slipped it back on and changed out of her shorts into monkey-printed pajama bottoms. Methodically, she grabbed the other two bras from the Victoria's Secret bag and flushed them as well, scrubbing her hands clean each time like a holy ritual.

When she emerged into the hallway, she noticed that Charlie's room sounded quiet and still, like they'd fallen asleep in a beautiful yet intimate embrace Jean had read about in a fantasy novel in the school library. Jean left her room and went to the kitchen for a drink of water to fix her rapid heartbeat and the dryness in her mouth.

Her father was still asleep in his chair where she'd left him, mouth open and throat gurgling with the hint of snores, but Charlie was in the kitchen, standing next to the fridge in maroon boxers drinking Sunny D straight from the bottle. They stared at each other like mirrored deer in headlights, the open fridge door casting a shadow on them both.

Charlie bent over and picked up a yellow dishrag from the floor, wiped his mouth with it, then chucked it toward a pile of used towels between the kitchen and laundry room. "You're being weird," he said, putting the bottle away before shutting the fridge door. The light from the moon and the muted television was enough so they could see, but it created darkness in the hollows of Charlie's face. The disappearance of the light from the fridge ended her entrapment, so she pulled out a Tampa Bay Lightning cup from the cabinet above the microwave.

"I'm always weird," Jean said, filling her cup with ice from the dispenser in the fridge. She walked over to the sink, ducking under Charlie's arm and wriggling back and forth until he moved out of her way so she could turn on the faucet.

"It's strange being home," he said, bracing his hands behind him on the counter. "I feel like a kid again."

"Do you miss it?" she asked, taking a sip of water.

Charlie was quiet for a moment, and Jean wondered what he was thinking about. The Indian burns he'd give her when she'd tattled. Fishing off the dock with bits of hot dog hooked on fishing line wrapped around their fingers. Stealing change from their dad's wallet to buy temporary tattoos at CiCi's Pizza every Friday night, and then punching Jean in the shoulder when she picked Lisa Frank ones instead of the Avengers.

He opened the fridge again and rooted around the cans of soda, eventually pulling out one of the Natural Lights from the hidden stash in the back. “Yeah,” Charlie said as he popped the tab on the beer, raising his eyebrows, almost daring Jean to wake their mother from her induced slumber and get him in trouble.

Jean nodded, turned on her heels, and went back to her room, forgetting her cup on the counter. Anaya was there like she belonged, staring at the bird in his cage and making exaggerated faces as he squawked. She was dressed in only her shirt, no pants, and if the way her nipples poked through the shirt was any indication, no bra, either. Anaya chirped at the bird like Snow White trilling a gentle tune, but the bird ruffled his feathers, seemingly distressed. When Jean shut her door, Anaya jumped like she’d been caught doing something wrong, but she recovered quickly, reaching Jean in three purposeful steps. She smelled like strong, freshly-sprayed citrus perfume as she gripped Jean’s shoulders in a short, tight squeeze.

“We can tell ghost stories and shit tomorrow night,” Anaya said. She spun on her heels and climbed into Jean’s side of the bed, immediately pulling the covers underneath her chin. “I’m not up to it now.”

“That’s fine,” Jean said. She paused for a moment by the door before removing her pajama bottoms and kicking them toward her desk. “I get tired when I travel and stuff, too.”

Through the door, Jean heard Charlie shuffle down the hallway. He paused in front of Jean’s room, and she could imagine it, the way he probably pressed his hand to the door, or leaned in and listened like she had earlier. After a few seconds, the footsteps continued down the hall, and his door squeaked slightly before it clicked shut.

Jean crawled under the covers on the wrong side of the bed and turned toward her window, her back to Anaya's face illuminated by the screen of her cell phone. The moon shone directly on the bird cage, and Jean watched as he continued to chew on the bars like an ear of corn. Sometimes, Jean would sprint home from school so she could stop by Petland for a few minutes without her parents noticing her absence. She'd spend most of the time watching the hamsters run back and forth along the glass of their pen, driven crazy by the small enclosures and constant chatter of other animals. They'd either run themselves into a heart attack or bash their heads into the wall, but either way they died tragic deaths while she observed and held less crazy ones in the palms of her hands. Birds were supposed to sleep at night, but this one wasn't, and Jean was afraid that she'd picked a broken one by accident.

Jean closed her eyes and listened as Anaya typed rapidly on her phone, paused until a notification rang from Charlie's room, and then typed again once her phone vibrated on the wooden surface of Jean's nightstand. On the desk, the bird peeled and ate white paint from the bars of his cage. "Good night," Jean whispered, and Anaya responded even though Jean had been talking to the bird.

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