

FRIDAY IS A PLANET: STORIES

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Friday is a Planet: Stories* is a collection of short fiction that explores the ways loss can alter family bonds. Characters in these stories have lost daughters, sisters, mothers, and friends. Some characters go to extreme lengths to return to their loved ones—one woman hallucinates, another time travels. Others deal with the loss in more conventional ways, through support groups and the emotional outlet of community theatre.

What ties these stories together is a sense of post-loss confusion and mystery. The characters are unsure how to move forward, or if they should try. The men and women in these stories struggle with faith as they navigate life after loss. They question who to have faith in. They wonder whether it is ever okay to let faith lapse.

While attempting to answer these questions, the characters discover different questions. What are the connections between faith and loss? Faith and hope? Faith and forgiveness?

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## THE BELL GAME

The weirdest thing about what happened after everyone vanished? The church bells wouldn't stop tolling. 1.) Nobody died. It was an eternal life situation. 2.) It was annoying for all the people who are left, always having to listen to the bells every second that remind them 1.) They should go to church more often and 2.) That someone they love, or a lot of someones they love, are gone now.

We sat outside after school and played the Bell Game. Someone said the name of a vanished person, and then the next person had to say another name and then around the circle like that until someone couldn't think of a new name or someone said a name off-beat. This person owed everyone a soda with their own money. Sometimes the stoners played this game. Sometimes the regular people. Never the people who prayed around the flagpole. They thought it was sacrilegious.

"You're being sacrilegious," they told us.

"You're being sacrilegious," we told them, because it was true, because they were. They only prayed for the vanished who went to their church, not all the vanished in general.

Lissa played the game with me because she was my best friend and I was in love with her, but she'd rather hang out with the flagpole people. Her sister, who vanished, was a flagpole person. Lissa used to be a flagpole person, but lately she wasn't sure. I'm glad; I've never been sure, and this puts us on the same page. There are other things we're not on the same page about, like purity rings (she wears hers) and what is normal behavior for two girls who are just friends. But I'm glad we're on the same page about the Higher Power issue: it makes me feel less alone. And, my mom vanished, so any time I can feel less alone is great.

One particular day when we're playing the game, Lissa fidgeted more than normal. She tapped the rubber soles of her boots against the cement and shredded a dead leaf with her fingernail. Mark, the guy who made up the game, the guy who's kind of a legend because his whole family vanished, frowned at her. We played a round:

"Hannah," Mark said. Mark normally won the game, because he never ran out of names to say.

The bell tolled. "John."

The bell tolled again. "Miguel."

"Jeanette," Lissa said.

Nobody looked at each other while they said the names. They looked at the ground, or at their shoes, or at other people's shoes. Sometimes, they looked at the trees.

Lissa didn't play the game right. Each time, she said her sister's name, even though if you repeat a name you're out. Also, every time she said her sister's name she said it quieter than last time. It's like the opposite of the penis game, where one person says penis and then the next person says it louder and then the next person says it louder until someone's too embarrassed to yell penis in public. That's the game we used to play until the people vanished.

The bell tolled.

"Coke Patrol," said Mark. Lissa looked up from the toes of her boots. Her fingernail punched through the dead leaf she'd been shredding. She got up and went to the Coke machine without doing a head count. I followed her.

"Dude. You OK?"

"Fine," she said.

She put change in the machine, pressed the button for grape soda, which nobody liked, and I listened as it tumbled into the pick-up slot. She grabbed it, shoved it at me, and bought another.

I touched her elbow. (That's one of the things she's told me is weird for two girls who are just friends to do, one of the things I think she's wrong about.)

"Lissa, everyone hates grape soda," by which, of course, I *really* mean, I love you, what's wrong, talk to me. She stepped back so my hand fell into the air between us. She shrugged, took the can from me, and walked back to the group.

#

On the way home from school, riding in Lissa's car, I knew something was up with her. She kept flipping through all her radio presets: country, Christian, rock, Christian rock. Rain battered the windshield.

A car braked in front of us. "Watch the road," I said.

She braked quickly. "Asshole!" she yelled. The cross hanging from her rearview mirror swayed.

She rapped her ring against the steering wheel. She honked the horn.

I brushed her hair back from her face.

She continued to watch the road.

"I need to date God for a while," she said.

I sat on the hand that had touched her face. I looked out the window. Cars driving past us sprayed water onto the passenger door.

I shouldn't be surprised. She used to pray around the flagpole every morning before class. She still listened to Michael W. Smith. I shouldn't have allowed myself to think she would reject all of that for me. She used phrases like, "God put it on my heart to call you tonight." God has never put anything on my heart. I think he may have put Lissa in my heart, but that would be blasphemy, and anti-Bible, and anti-Jesus.

"You can't make out with a cosmic force," I said.

"It's not about that, Corrine." She sighed over-dramatically.

We sat without talking for a minute.

The car in front of us had its hazards on. The lights pulsed, red in the wet gray, and I closed my eyes. Tears fell off my eyelashes. I wanted to reach over and hold her, but, she was the one who upset me, so I tightened my seatbelt.

"What, then?" I asked.

"I don't want Jeanette to be disappointed in me."

I wanted to say, well, tough shit, missy, you made your choice when you laid your head on my lap and put my hand on your hair. I wanted to say, people have to be around to be disappointed.

I stayed silent.

"If she was here, I mean, if she comes back, I mean," Lissa's hands fluttered at the steering wheel. We were stopped in traffic.

I shifted the car into park.

"Let me drive," I said.



She nodded and I got out of the car. Water dripped down the part in my hair, and I thought of the part of her hair as she put her head in my lap, how it showed white and vulnerable like pale skin under a bikini. Cars honked; I glared.

I opened the driver's side door and she leaned into me. I tilted my face up so my lips wouldn't touch the part in her hair. I kept my hands in my pockets. Rain drenched her t-shirt.

"Alright," I said.

I moved aside to let her get out. We both got back in the car and sat, watching the yellow headlights of the cars across the median.

#

My purity ring was rattling around in the bottom of a drawer someplace. I thought about it as I looked out at the rain on the hoods of the other cars gridlocked with us. The night we got our purity rings, before we promised that true love waits, the youth pastor tried to scare us into salvation. The youth pastor yelled into the mic taped to his face, sweat running down his graying temples and into the collar of his too-tight plaid button down. I was kind of shutting him out until he said:

"What if you died tonight?" Lissa went super-still beside me. She told me the other day that she was afraid that she'd never do anything important. I wanted to tell her she'd already done tons of important things, like be there for me, and be there for me, but she doesn't think those are real things. She just thought those were friend-things, like that all friends did those things and I told her no; all friends don't stay up with you until four in the morning listening to you cry about your mom. Not all friends love you when you don't love you.

“Where would you go?” The youth pastor sat on the edge of the stage now, Converse-clad feet dangling. Dude had my shoes. Dude was trying to be hip, probably. I hated youth pastors. They were always talking about salvation and pizza and frickin’ foosball, for some reason. Like I like to twirl plastic men.

A guy on stage who wasn’t the youth pastor started to play acoustic guitar, really soft. The youth pastor leaned forward now, like the three of us were in conversation in a small room. “God loves you so much,” the youth pastor said. “More than your parents love you, more than your friends love you. More than you love you.”

I clenched my teeth.

“Let Jesus into your heart,” he said, “And you will have a partner for the rest of your life.”

I wanted to be cynical. I really wanted to be cynical. I even tried to think about how pastors hate gay people, and no snarkiness emerged. I thought for a second that maybe it wasn’t about the pastors, then, but maybe about something else. Something bigger.

I wanted a partner for the rest of my life.

“Open your hands,” the youth pastor said. “Let Jesus fill them.”

I did.

#

Out in the parking lot after the altar call, Jesus was an extra person walking between Lissa and me, kind of shiny and transparent like a ghost, even though that’s probably not correct according to doctrine or whatever. But, what I felt back in that auditorium, the not-alone feeling, had very little to do with doctrine.

I hugged Lissa around the waist because I wanted to share my peace.

She twisted around and waggled her purity ring at me. After the altar call, the youth pastor had given a presentation about how we should wait to have sex until we were married. That was fine with me, because I did not look hot naked. We both bought rings.

“Leave room for Jesus,” she said.

I paused; I watched her walk ahead of me. She looked back. The streetlights made her earrings sparkle.

I took my purity ring off and slipped it into my pocket. She didn't get that I *was* leaving room for Jesus. Actually, I was *making* room for him.

#

The rain wasn't letting up. A jerk was tailing me, headlights blinding me in the sideview mirror. I pulled off the road into the lot of a strip mall with a church in it. If I believed in the type of God that controlled each aspect of a believer's life, I may have seen meaning in this. Instead, I turned off the car.

“Hey look,” I said. “It's your boyfriend's house.”

Lissa made some noise that could have been a laugh.

I got out of the car and tiptoe-ran to the church, the way people do in the rain. Lissa followed me.

Inside, past the front desk where an old man sat playing solitaire on the computer, just outside the sanctuary door, was a small wooden box. It was bolted to the wall and had a golden plaque above it: “Prayer Box.” Beside the box, on a little shelf, were golf pencils and slips of yellow paper.

The old guy at the front desk was absorbed and ignoring me, so I picked up a piece of paper and a pencil, used the wall as a hard surface so my writing came out looking like a stucco rubbing.

I watched Lissa's hands as she wrote Jeanette on a prayer slip and I felt selfish; I'd just written Mom on my slip, like I was the center of the universe, or a child.

Lissa's hair covered her face as she bent over the slip, and I was glad she couldn't see how embarrassed I was. Lissa made me want to grow up.

Lissa held her slip in her hand when she saw the prayer box was full. I tried to cram mine into the box and I rapped my knuckles loudly against the wood. The old man looked up from his solitaire.

"Lots of people have been praying lately," he said. Why was this guy still here? Why was this church still open? Did it mean something?

"Would you pray with us?" Lissa asked.

The old man came out from behind the front desk and we stood in a small circle.

Lissa and I have prayed together thousands of times. This time felt different.

Normally she closed her eyes when she addressed God in all his patriarchal names. I knew because I always kept my eyes open. Part of me wanted to study the faces of the devout to see what I was missing. Does faith live in wrinkles around the mouth?

This time, Lissa prayed with her eyes open.

The old man nodded and said Amen.

I let go of their hands. The prayer circle seemed too tight, or maybe my chest was too tight. I accidentally tried to pull the door open when the push bar says push. The bells above my head chimed on my exit.

The parking lot was cool and damp. I could breathe. The rain'd stopped. I heard the bells above the door chime again. Lissa sat beside me.

Out in the parking lot, it was mostly empty except for a dark red eighties car with rims. Under dim streetlights I saw some woman in spandex leave Gold's Gym and cross the parking lot quickly, looking over her shoulder and playing with her keys in her hand. The bright neon soles of her sneakers reflected in the puddles on the dark pavement. The prayer card buzzed in my pocket.

Night had fallen while we were in the church. The stars were bright tonight.

I sat on the curb and pulled a cigarette and a lighter out of my pocket. I lit it and took a drag, the end glowed. I closed my eyes and breathed in. Lissa closed her eyes and smiled.

What it would be like for us, in the morning?

The old man came out of the church and I dropped my cigarette in the closest puddle. The water was deep enough to ripple a bit when the cigarette hit the surface and floated, damp and hissing.

"Need a ride?"

I shook my head, looking out into the empty parking lot, at the blue and purple streaks left by the oil on the asphalt.

He locked up and drove off, loudly.

I took the prayer card out of my pocket and unfolded it. I brought it up to my face. It smelled exactly like pencil lead and nothing like my mom.

People used to tell Mom and me we had the same handwriting, and I squinted at the loopy script on the card, trying to memorize the curves and dips. She used to leave me notes in my lunch boxes when I was a kid, small, bright pink Post-Its that she'd cut into hearts.

If I ever have a daughter, I would fill her lunchbox with notes, so many that they would spill out when she unzipped the box. But, I guess, I might not ever get there, the having-kids stage. All of us might be gone by then.

I took the lighter out and played with it. I shook it. The lighter fluid's low. I pressed the button again, and a weak flame emerged. I felt like I had a star in my hand, actually, and then I thought, *that feeling's stupid, Stupid. You sound like an English teacher.*

I brought the flame to the edge of the prayer card. It caught. I held it by two fingers on the opposite corner and felt the heat rising. Lissa held her card and I lit it. We watched the cards smolder, smoke obscuring the stars the way clouds would.

## FRIDAY IS A PLANET

Tasha would jeer at my pit stains. One time she laughed when she saw my underwear above the waistband of my jeans. She's one of the more sassy kids at the afterschool center where my husband Will and I are social workers. Tasha and I love to hate each other, if I'm being honest.

I keep my hands at my sides as I sit on the bench to oversee the action of the playground. Will sits next to me, also overseeing. (We should actually, according to government codes, be only a certain number of feet away from the children when they are playing on the structures still drying from last night's rain.) But, we're sitting on the bench. Will shades his eyes. The day after the storm is bright, puddles collect at the end of the slide and water dries on the top of the monkey bars, but not so quickly that some of the more adventurous kids—C.J., Isaiah—haven't already dropped from the bars onto the mulch, and then scrambled up to sit on top again, using their shorts as towels to soak up the water. By shading his eyes, conveniently, Will can refrain from looking at me. We haven't spoken since this morning—"Can you pass the coffee?"—and we won't speak until we pick up our daughter Valerie from the friend's house where she spends the hours after kindergarten before we get off work. Will ignores me resolutely, like a kid, like that time Mary Anna gave C.J. the silent treatment for leaving the cap off the only pink marker that wasn't already dry.

I called Will Mahatma Gandhi.

He called me middle-class.

This might seem petty but it's not—our fight is really about me being frightened and him being overly—and maybe insincerely?—magnanimous. I don't like going alone to visit the kids

we serve at their homes. He doesn't mind risking our daughter's safety to prove points, like, I'm less racist than you, or, this neighborhood isn't *that* dangerous. To which I say, screw you, and also *bullshit*.

Will wants Val to come to the center after school, so she can hang out with the other kids and we can keep an eye on her. I don't. The center is in a bad neighborhood. Will hurts my feelings when he calls me middle class, because it makes me seem callous. You don't go in to social work, I tell him, because you're a cold person. Oh, he told me last night, you just become a mother to thaw yourself. It hurts me to think that he sees me as unfeeling or rigid. In an earlier time, like in the first few years we were married, I would have made a special effort to seem especially flexible and full of feelings. But marriage has taught me about the boundaries of the self. Does anyone ever really know anyone else, or if we are all just functioning on the assumptions about the selves we think other people are trying to show us? I wish he would talk to me.

He doesn't get it. Just because I want my daughter safe doesn't mean I'm a cold person. Just because I worry about her doesn't mean that I feel like she's superior to the kids that I do let play in the bad neighborhood. Just because I use the phrase bad neighborhood doesn't mean that I'm judgmental. You can put your family before other families and still be selfless. You're allowed to love your daughter most. You're allowed.

Last week, on a rare occasion when Val came to the center because her babysitter was sick, he let her play on the playground at dusk because he let Tasha and C.J. play outside at dusk. Tasha and C.J. live in an apartment building with a playground, so you wouldn't think that it's a huge deal to give them extra time on the playground at the center. But, the playground at Tasha



and C.J.'s apartment is always empty because it's too dangerous to play there. At dusk in this neighborhood, you hear pit bulls bark. You hear yelling inside some of the houses. You hear screams.

“What are you trying to prove?” I asked him, standing in the doorway to the center so I could see the playground and still talk to him while he's picking up the jackets and books and a Nerf football that the kids left that day. “Don't worry, everyone already thinks you're Martin Luther King. You don't have to put our daughter on the march to Selma.”

Most of the kids at the center happened to be African American. Our family of three was not. That had connotations I hadn't intended.

“You have to stop doing this halfway,” he said. By this, he meant social work. A lot of the “doing the social work halfway” thing came from fear, but I didn't tell him this—he probably already knew anyway. He wasn't stupid. He'd seen my face on the couple of times I'd waited at the doors of the kids' homes for the parents to answer. I always fidgeted at front doors, looked over my shoulder, looked away from people who looked at me, jumped when I heard cars backfire. It was embarrassing, because I wanted to be tough, and brave, and able to handle things. Once, I applied to work at Department of Children and Families and declined the job when they told me I would have to remove children from their homes. Will would never have turned down that job. Sometimes, I resented him for how well-suited he was for social work. I wanted to be well-suited for it. I wanted to go home and fall asleep soundly, without worrying about—and this was the most embarrassing thing—my own or Val's personal safety being in

jeopardy because of the ideals I tried to hold. I would die if she got hurt because I was trying not to be racist.

I heard a scream from the playground, and turned quickly. A car painted orange and yellow, with a Reese's cup logo, drove by, rims flashing silver. C.J. yelled out in excitement. No one was hurt. We were fine.

When was the last time I got that excited over something at work? After work, Will organizes games to play. I fill out incident reports. Val comes in and I smile at her, and he smiles at her, but we don't really look at each other. He calls me "Mom", as in "Show Mom what you did in school today," or "It's Mom's turn to pick a show to watch." It's like, are we at the name-tag stage of our marriage? Do you know me anymore?"

Mary Anna comes up to Will and me on the bench. She sucks her thumb. Judging by the dirt on her other fingers, she'll probably get a staph infection. Mary Anna doesn't have any other kid friends at the center—or anywhere, I don't think. She pees her pants even though she's way too old to pee her pants. She sits between us and leans into me. Even though the humidity hasn't broken, I can breathe in the space she's created between Will and me. I put my arms around her and squeeze her shoulders.

The next day, Val dies. And it isn't the neighborhood's fault, or the other kids'. She doesn't suffer from anything lofty like anti-racist ideals, or because I decide to do something stupid and reckless like give a homeless person a ride. Her death is my fault. Just mine.

#

The day I killed my daughter, I was angry at her. She'd picked up this behavior from kindergarten: A little boy there had just recently gotten a baby brother and so he terrorized the teachers by running around the classroom, arms splayed, screeching like a bird of prey: "Babies! Babies!"

Valerie had been screeching around the kitchen all morning. I shooed her outside to ride her bike. Will was out there, so I figured they could bond. I certainly couldn't spend any more time with her. She'd been so underfoot lately that she'd stepped on my toes as I tried to make macaroni and cheese the night before. I shooed her outside. She went, stomping and huffing. I closed my eyes and prayed for the pounding at the base of my head to stop. I heard her open the garage door and pictured her mounting her bike and rolling down the driveway, her untied shoelaces dangerously close to getting caught in the spokes. She carried a plastic Tinkerbell in her bike basket, an old McDonald's toy from the time they were promoting the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> remake of *Peter Pan*. Tinkerbell's rubber face was misshapen from being left one too many times in the hot car. One of her wings was missing, but Tinkerbell rode in Valerie's basket anyway, a copilot that always flew crooked. Later that day, at the hospital, I would think, "I do believe in fairies. I do. I do." It wouldn't help, neither would the doctors' calm fingers or the nurses' patient voices. I shooed her outside. My last words to her: Go.

The best I can figure is that Val was so lost in her world that she didn't hear or see me backing out of the driveway. This doesn't make any sense, because we've drilled into her a (probably) unhealthy fear of walking in parking lots. We always hold hands when crossing streets.

That day she'd worn dark blue nail polish that she'd painted on herself. Later that day, at the hospital, I remember thinking it was strange that the nail polish—messily applied—was relatively unmussed. It didn't look like nail polish that had just been through a collision. Strange, that her nail polish was collision-proof when the rest of her wasn't.

I used to think she had piano hands: long, thin fingers, wide palms. At the hospital, they bandaged her hands. They didn't remove the bandages before they laid her in the casket. Her favorite song was "Piano Man", and I wondered if the piano man had piano hands; her fingers like white keys, bruised knuckles like black keys. Blood.

I read somewhere about a man with terminal cancer who wrote more than 800 letters to his daughter, so she could have more than enough to read after he died. I'm going to switch it up. I'm going to write dinner conversations, on normal days. Not birthday dinners. Normal dinners. Like this:

Scene: DINING ROOM. NIGHT.

Val, Will and Emily sit at the table, eating broccoli and grilled chicken.

Will: How was your spelling test?

Val: (swing-kicking legs under the table) Good. I only missed one.

But maybe she didn't swing-kick her legs. Maybe she didn't care about spelling tests. Maybe I'm remembering the ordinary moments totally wrong because they are overshadowed by the one, huge, Unordinary Moment. It could have gone like this:

Scene: DINING ROOM. NIGHT.

Will: How was your spelling test?

Val: (swing-kicking her legs under the table) I don't want to talk about it. I want to churn butter.

Emily: Not until you finish your broccoli.

I miss those moments. Or what I remember of them. Or—I miss what I imagine I would like to remember those moments meant. That we were happy.

I began writing in a journal again after Val died. I ignored the margins, because I had too many thoughts that couldn't be contained and some were Val and some were not and most were not and some were grocery lists. Lettuce, Bananas, Bread. And then I felt guilty because it was a journal to help me with my feelings and I was writing about which type of lettuce to get at the store, whether organic was really worth the extra \$2.50. And what were margins anyway, except barriers? Barriers between what I had and what I have lost.

#

On the way home after the funeral, Will and I have three conversations: one about Valerie, one about the center, and one about needing to go to Target—my mom is coming to stay for a couple of weeks and she has requested an air humidifier. Personally, I am surprised I can put together sentences at all. I would be comfortable if I only said thirty words for the rest of the month. I should tape record myself and play it on a loop at the center—keep your hands to yourself, sit down crisscross applesauce, hands to yourself. Interaction with the world doesn't really seem to matter all that much.

Every August 4<sup>th</sup> between 1944 and the year she died, Miep Gies, who hid Anne Frank and her family, would lower the blinds, shut off the lights and disconnect her phone to mark the

day the family got arrested. I figure I should be like Miep. I want to be like Miep. But the world won't let me, and that might be one of the most devastating parts of losing Valerie—nothing has stopped. We still run out of toilet paper periodically. We still need to run to Target to get an air humidifier. It would be so nice if the world would just let me process for a minute. Just let me take a breath, I'm hyperventilating over here.

But really all the conversations are about Valerie, because everything between us since Friday has been about Valerie. Before Valerie was born, she took over our lives. In life, Valerie took over our lives. In death, Valerie has taken over everything—our lives, our possibilities, even our ability to put sentences together. It's like Will and I are in a play (we used to go to the theatre a lot when we were first dating, and Will has mentioned lately that he might try acting himself.) But it's like we're in a play in a nightmare—we're disconnected, but each of us knows the lines we should say. When we went to a community theatre production of Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things*, Will got annoyed and wanted to leave at intermission because he said the actors were not "in the moment." That's how I feel now, too. That's what our interactions are like. We miss connecting with each other because we are searching for our next lines. For example:

Will: I called the Board of Directors and told them we're taking time off.

Me: My mom's coming in.

Will: When's your mom coming in?

Me: I have to go pick her up at the airport.

Will: She should be here.

Me: There's snow in Minneapolis. The planes are grounded.

Every time we try to talk about something not directly about Valerie, she nudges in. It's like she's yelling at us from the backseat to turn the radio up. It's like she's watching us learn how to deal without her and she doesn't like it.

Will: I can go to Target while you're at the airport.

Me: Thanks. I think we're out of Lunchables.

Will: We don't need them.

And then we're out the play in the bad dream that we're both suffering through. At his line, I wake up. I'm not looking for my lines anymore, or searching for a way to connect with my partner. I'm thinking about retreating backstage. Permanently.

When my mom and I get back from the airport, it gets worse. All she wants to do is talk about Valerie. As in, "Did they play Billy Joel at the service?" or, "What are you going to do about her room?" or, "Will you get a new car?"

I always figured the next car we would buy would be Val's, but I don't mention this.

Neither of us answers her horrible questions. Eventually she stops asking and puts a well-wisher's frozen lasagna into the oven to cook.

My mother also insists on looking at photo albums that she's brought with her, and going through my Facebook to answer people's comments and thank them for their condolences. I haven't really even looked at Facebook lately, because it's all pictures of my friends' kids. My friend Beatriz with her son Juan at their most recent trip to the beach. My friend Alyssa from the MSW program posted a picture of her daughter in the preschool play about the food pyramid. Baby bumps, sonogram pictures, pictures of cute new baby announcements made by older siblings holding tiny chalkboards. What am I supposed to post? A picture of the food I ate during

the dinner in which Will and I said only, “Pass the salad dressing?” On my dark days, sometimes I want to post a picture of the three of us and caption it #tbt. Sometimes I want to post pictures of her service, of the casket, just to make people squirm. I find I care less about other people’s feelings now, and that sometimes I want to fuck with them just to fuck with them. Look Beatriz, look Alyssa. Write this on your baby announcement chalkboard.

I expect to be angry at myself. I expect to be angry at Will. I do not expect the deep desire to spew vitriol over the internet. I do not expect to look at Juan and wish that he’d drowned on his beach trip.

Before Val died, I would have thought that only a hard, heartless person would willingly wish tragedy on someone else. That’s false. I did it. Looking at Facebook, I pictured Juan playing in the ocean, ducking his head under the waves. Instead of crying because he got salt water in his eyes, I pictured his body thrashing and then floating, bloated and rigid. I logged off Facebook immediately. I sat at my laptop, thinking, “Who am I? And if I don’t know me, how can Will? How will we find our way back to each other?”

If it were up to me, if I didn’t have to make my mom think I was working through this, I’d deactivate my Facebook. I’d turn off all the lights, let my phone die, and sit in the dark. But my mother believes—she thinks she’s an expert, because my dad died—that the best way to deal is to move forward. I want to tell her that I can’t move forward because I can’t move. Now it’s my mom’s turn to join me in the community-theatre volunteer actor disaster. We blunder about like we’re not off-book in our own lives.

We say this:

Me: You don’t have to wash the dishes.



Mom: I need to do something. They have to be done.

And Will, who doesn't like my mother: I'm going for a run.

And then he leaves me with my mother, her soapy hands slippery when she touches my arm.

My mom stays for two weeks. Then, Will and I decide to go back to work at the afterschool center, because we're not sure what else to do, and we place our hope in the turning of days.

#

I go to the therapist because my mom thinks it would be a good idea. I go during the week she's still here so she'll know that I went and then maybe she'll get off my back about it. She wants to help, and she's helping in the way she knows. There's a bit of condescension in my attitude toward her, which I'm not proud of, and neither am I proud of using the accident to win in the Life is Horrible Game. But I have found that the accident makes people scared of me. My mom is a little nervous, I think, that she'll say the wrong thing, or offer to help in the wrong way. She's afraid I'll start crying if she loads the dishwasher the wrong way. Not because I did that. I mean, I didn't do that. I yelled at her when she didn't put the forks facing prongs up in the silverware drawer.

I tell her it's too soon, and she doesn't believe me because she thinks she knows the best way to deal with Val's death. Not sure why she thinks this, because she's not Val's mom. She saw her three times a year: Christmas, summer, and Spring Break. But, Mom thinks I should go, and I go, because she means well, I think. She went to therapy after my dad died and it helped her. I tell her losing a daughter is different than losing a husband.

Will gives me a ride to the therapist's office because I'm not driving yet. I've always made a lot of decisions based on fear, and Val's death has made that worse. He tells me after the session we'll go to dinner at my favorite restaurant—this Mexican place where you can sit outside on the sidewalk. It's sweet that he's trying to make me happy. I wonder if it'll still be my favorite place. I wonder if I'll still like the food.

He drops me off and I walk inside. I take a deep breath. I probably should have changed my clothes—there's a stain on my jeans and I need to wash my hair. But, doing all of that would require that I sit and think less, which I can't right now, so. I give my name to receptionist and wait. A *Parenting* magazine sits on top of a stack on the end table. I turn it face-down and take incident reports out of my bag.

I stare at the reports. I examine Tasha's signature on the bottom—we make the kids sign the reports in which they're involved, as a sort of personal responsibility. Tasha puts a swirl on the end of the last "a" of her name. Soon, before I've done anything except take the cap off my pen, my name is called.

I go into the therapist's office. I hope it feels less like a dentist's office than it did in the waiting room. The therapist is an older woman, maybe in her sixties. She wears a pencil skirt and a blazer.

"Hello, Emily," she says. "I'm Kathleen." She's not smiling, which I think is weird. I always smile at the kids when they come in to talk to me one-on-one. It eases tension and makes them think they haven't done anything wrong. Maybe coming to the therapist was a bad idea. Maybe Will and I should have just gotten margaritas instead. (Not that I'm conflating alcohol

and therapy. There are many instances in which therapy fulfils a pressing need for people. Even people I've worked with. But, I don't think it's going to work for me right now. I need to forget.)

"Hello," I say.

I don't see that she has a file or anything, or a paper where she has marked down the reason I made the appointment. I tell her quickly, so she knows.

"My daughter was killed because I hit her with a car."

Kathleen pauses. I try to pick off the dried spaghetti sauce on my jeans.

"Sorry," I say, because I don't know what to say.

"What do you want to tell me about it?" Kathleen asks.

The girl I killed was beautiful. She had dark brown hair and pink-pink lips. She loved to giggle. She loved princesses and dress-up and preschool, even though she wasn't so hot on kindergarten. She loved bike riding, and she knew all the words to "Piano Man." She'd ask me, sometimes, who I was pretending to be. Mostly, I played along: an astronaut when I was vacuuming, a dolphin trainer when I was doing the dishes. Once, when I was trying to nap, I told her I was a dead cat on the side of the road. I shouldn't have said that.

The girl I killed loved bike riding. When she got excited, she'd talk in loud gibberish, her face flushed and sweaty, little curls around her forehead. She knew exactly what she was saying, and it was up to me to catch up or get left behind. She loved to play pioneers. She would put a hula hoop in the back of a wagon, put a sheet over it, and pretend to go on the Oregon Trail. Once, she wore a tutu to bed.

The girl I killed was too small and slightly surprised when it happened—*that* it happened. We hadn't expected each other. She would ask me who I was pretending to be, the girl I killed.

I never pretended to be a racecar driver.

We never played emergency room.

She was beautiful and surprising. She loved princesses and preschool and Billy Joel. She knew what dysentery was. She liked grapes but not raisins. When she was mad at you, she'd twist the skin on your arm, and when a Billy Joel song came on the radio, she would unbuckle her seatbelt and stand with her head through the sunroof and scream the lyrics—no matter how many times you told her to sit down.

“There's an old man sitting next to me,” she'd holler, “making love to his tonic and gin.”

The girl I killed loved to read. She loved *Peter Pan*, and we read the illustrated version so she could look at the pictures. I skipped over the parts about the ticking crocodile because I wanted to protect her. She kept a plastic Tinkerbell in her bike basket. That was supposed to protect her, too. It didn't. Nothing did. Nothing ever does.

The girl I killed had a scratch on her face. It was long and curved like a laugh line. It was a let's-get-you-a-Band-Aid-and-an-extra-hour-of-TV scratch. The scar cradled her mouth, but it didn't keep her safe.

The girl I killed, when I killed her, had gravel in her zigzag part and in her pigtails. Her arm and her hand were stretched out, like she could almost be helped up, dusted off, comforted, kissed. Her kidneys bled. Her stomach bled, her intestines, her appendix, her spleen. She wore a tutu when she rode her bike, because even ballerinas need to go west.

She had a cradle scar and flushed cheeks and curling hair and bleeding kidneys. Her plastic Tinkerbell fell out of the bike basket and landed in the cul-de-sac. I was out of the car and she was under the bike.

She dislocated her kneecaps. She would have needed weeks of physical therapy, casts. She would have been pampered; I would have let her drag her covered wagon across the kitchen and leave it there. I would have let her do anything. She would have noticed how I check my back mirror ten times now before pulling out of the driveway. She would have heard me lay on my horn until passers-by saw I was backing out. She would have seen the sorry in everything I do.

The doctors had to cut her tutu off. The shreds, I keep in my pocket—my pieces to bear.

The girl I killed looked small at the hospital, on the gurney the blue paper hat she wore kept slipping over her eyes. In the OR, where they don't let families, I imagined the doctors putting the oxygen mask over her nose and mouth. If she'd been awake, if the girl I killed had just been getting her tonsils out, she would have told the nurses that the oxygen smelled like strawberries.

I imagined the doctors trying everything they could. I tried not to imagine their faces towards the end, just before one of them called Time of Death. Underneath the anesthesia, I knew the girl I killed was thinking of me. Even with anesthesia, I would always be thinking of her.

I tried to tell this to the girl I killed through telepathy, when I was sitting in the waiting room in the plastic chairs drinking cold coffee, holding Will's sweaty hand and trying to ignore the TV bolted to the ceiling. It played something inoffensive, a nature show. But, I would have told the girl I killed, some moments were meerkat-appropriate and some were not.

The girl I killed, before I killed her, would have hated the smell in the waiting room. She would have plugged her nose and whined, because the little girl I killed was sometimes a brat.

The waiting room smelled like tension. But I wouldn't have told any of this to the girl I killed. I would have said the waiting room smelled like cleaning products, because the doctors and nurses have to keep the room sanitized for when the people come out of surgery ready to go home and rest so they can get better faster.

I tried to speak telepathically to the girl I killed, while we were separated. Fight, I said. Fight harder. Then, the doctor came to get us in the waiting room.

The girl I killed wouldn't have been able to sit still at her funeral. She would have kicked the back of the hard wooden pew at the church, she would have pulled the Bible from the pocket in the back of the pew in front of us. She would have, had she been beside me instead of up front alone under a bunch of flowers, asked me when she could go home and watch *Jake and the Neverland Pirates*.

At the funeral, the girl I killed would have hated the music. I'd asked the quartet to play Beethoven's Sonata 8 in C minor, Op. 13. I asked them to play this because it's the same music as Billy Joel's, "This Night," which, the girl I killed would have reminded me, was her second favorite Billy Joel song, next to "Piano Man." The quartet played Bach, though I'm sure I didn't ask them to. I wanted to walk out, and the girl I killed would have followed me, and we would have gotten a moment just the two of us. We needed more of those moments, because I'd assumed we would have had them. We deserved them.

I had stuff to tell the girl I killed. About everything.

The girl I killed was in a closed casket at the funeral but I imagined her anyway. The girl I killed, after I killed her, would have been made up by the morticians, sewn up by the doctors. She would lay in the casket with the purple silk lining touching her face. Had she been alive, the

girl I killed, she would have touched the silk with the tips of her fingers and stroked it until she fell asleep. She used to touch my face like that. I imagined her asleep in her casket, the girl I killed, because that was easier. I imagined her smiling, even though that didn't make sense because that wasn't the last way I'd seen her and the injuries she'd sustained would have made it difficult for the morticians to construct anything that resembled a smile.

The girl I killed would have laughed at the pastor. He gave the sort of elegy that someone gives if they don't know the person that well—*she's in a better place, she's not in pain*. The girl I killed would have laughed at his voice. It was squeaky and high, and it made the whole situation more than a little absurd. It was one of the things making the situation more than a little absurd. Another absurdity: the girl I killed was alive four days before the funeral. Another absurdity: we'd planned to go to the park this weekend. Her favorite TV shows were still recorded on the DVR. *Jake and the Neverland Pirates*, *Little House on the Prairie*. *Calliou*, because she liked to pretend she was still a baby sometimes. One time last year she came out of her room, the girl I killed, before I killed her, dressed in her old clothes that were three sizes too small. I wanted to go backwards too.

The pastor at the service for the girl I killed sounded like Robin Williams might had he been doing an impression of a pastor at a funeral at the end of a romantic comedy. His voice was distracting. And it made me angry, because his voice made people at the service look around at each other. They weren't thinking of her. The funeral for the girl I killed should have just been an hour-long moment of silence.

I should tell the therapist all of this about Valerie, but I don't. Instead, I sit in the chair, looking at her while she looks alternately between me and the pad of paper on her desk.

“The only reason I would take notes is so I can help you later. So I can remember the details of your story.”

But I haven't told her anything yet, except that I hit Val with my car. I didn't tell her about The Oregon Trail, or “Piano Man,” or Lonestar, Val's imaginary cowboy friend. The therapist, Kathleen, doesn't know anything, really, and she wants me to tell her everything. It seems like such a huge effort to explain everything to a stranger, when right now it takes so much energy to just to open my eyes in the morning. I'm not even sure if it's possible to explain how I feel. Yesterday, the Ken Burns documentary “The West” was on—I recorded it and played it on repeat, pioneers trekking across the country over and over. I'd wished I'd had it on VHS tape, so I could have rewound it, and watched the wagons move back east again. I guess, if I were to try to explain how I feel, I would tell Kathleen I can't sleep. I'm hungry, but I stand in front of the fridge until the fridge light turns off.

“But I haven't told you anything,” I say.

She smiles. “In case you want to, the paper's there.”

“Can I draw a picture?”

She smiles again, like she knew like something like this would happen, like she knew she would get through to me somehow.

This shouldn't make me mad. This makes sense. Kathleen probably sees fifty clients, and they each have stories they need to tell. She's worked with grieving parents (ex-parents?) before, I'm sure, so she probably knows what works for people who don't know how to talk about what they are feeling. But it does make me mad. Because she didn't know Val, so she doesn't precisely know what losing Val feels like.



I take the pad from her desk, she gets another, and takes notes while she watches me draw.

In my professional opinion, because I sometimes do approximations of therapy at the center with the kids, it's a good idea to take notes during appointments with your clients. It's probably protocol for Kathleen to take notes. Personally, though, I don't like being studied. It's like when the police questioned me at the hospital. (They ruled it an accident.) They always seemed like they were trying to trip me up, to discover a secret motive I was hiding. There was none. I wasn't hiding anything. But, they took notes, too. I'm worried Kathleen's going to use what I say now against me later. Like, she would use what I say today in order to professionally recommend that I see someone on a more regular basis. That should be my choice. I should get to choose who I grieve in front of. It's personal, and I want this meeting to be over. I need to talk to Will, and we need to go to the Mexican place.

"I don't think therapy is right for me," I say. I put down the pad with the start of the drawing—I'd started to draw someone screaming. I imagine—if I'd continued—that I would have broken the pencil lead darkening the black hole of her open mouth. I leave the drawing on the chair, the pads of my thumbs dark and shiny with graphite.

"That's your choice," Kathleen says. "You're welcome to go and come back later."

I stand up. I don't think I'll want to come back later. Maybe I don't need someone professional to talk to.

"Thanks for trying to help, anyway," I say.

Kathleen opens the door for me and I leave. Out in the parking lot, I see Will waiting for me. He leans against the car, looking through a worn copy of a book of poems by Pablo Neruda.

He puts the book on top of the car when he sees me. We don't talk as I walk closer to him. He holds his arms out and I walk into them. We hold each other for a long moment. I can see us leaning into each other in the side view mirror of the car. I can feel his breath on the place where my neck and shoulder meet. There's a lot I want to say—about what I didn't say to the therapist, about how I feel small. It's nice to just be here for a minute though, the two of us, since it's going to be the two of us who are going to have to be here, in the grief, in this life without Valerie.

“Let's get plastered,” he says.

I laugh.

We get to the Mexican restaurant and they've put chips and salsa on our table even before we sit down. We eat and peruse the menus. There's a couple of non-Hispanic people to our right who are ordering in Spanish. Not broken Spanish, either. It's *me gustaria* this and *me gustaria* that, all fancy with their future subjunctive tenses. Pompous assholes.

“Tacos,” I tell the waiter when he asks.

“Fajitas,” says Will.

The waiter leaves. Will and I eat more chips and salsa. Mom did not come to dinner with us, on purpose. She thinks we need alone time. Will and I have been married for seven years, but lately we haven't gone out by ourselves. It was hard with Val—either we had to arrange a babysitter or go to a restaurant where she would eat something on the menu. It was a limited list of restaurants: Chili's.

This is the first time we've gone out to a restaurant since the accident on that Friday, and it makes me feel jumpy. I almost knock my margarita over when the waiter sets it down. Will keeps leaving the table to go to the bathroom, even though he hasn't had that much to drink yet. It's awkward—each of us are trying to figure out how to act now, as a pair instead of a group of three.

Will and I went to a really awkward party once. We went separately, because we weren't together yet. (In hindsight, that's what probably caused all the awkwardness—romantic uncertainty.) I had promised myself I would be chill; I wanted to ask him why he stopped talking to me two weeks before, right after I told him a bad joke. I'd thought—I was 70% sure—that he was interested in me. I was interested in him. I mean, I thought of him whenever I saw a blue car on the road, because he drove a blue car. I noticed every single time he talked to another woman.

I walked over to a table and set my coat down.

The party was in full swing already—I'd been trying to do that “fashionably late” thing. People danced on a faux-wooden dance floor in the center of the room, other people sat at tables and watched people who shouldn't dance dance. (A fat guy in a dress shirt and tie was standing perfectly still in the middle of the dance floor. Every fourth beat, he clapped his hands. People looked sideways at him.)

I grabbed a drink from the bar and resolved to have fun at this party as an unattached woman. I resolved to rock this party.

I saw Will looking at me from where he stood talking with a couple of friends. A woman who looked like me put her hand on his shoulder. She wore a dark blue silk dress, and the hand she put on his shoulder was smooth and manicured.

Often, I bit my nails. I wanted to especially right now, watching this.

I gripped my drink tighter so it wouldn't slip out of my sweaty hand. Fuck.

He looked at me again. I couldn't pretend I didn't notice him—that would have made things more awkward. I walked over to his group.

"Hey," I said.

He smiled and pulled me in for a hug. I tripped off my heels and fell into him before I caught myself.

Great.

"You've met Dana?" He put his hand on the other woman's shoulder.

I stared at his hand on her shoulder for a minute. And then another minute. I forced myself to look away. I needed to get it together. Will and I weren't even dating. We'd almost kissed once, and once, he put his hand on my knee. That was it.

"Hey," I said.

She appraised me.

"Cool party." she said.

I nodded. Or shrugged. Then, I looked out to the dance floor. The fat guy in the tie was still standing out there.

Dana and Will and I stood around in a circle, not talking. I wish I knew someone else at this party. The DJ started to play Mary J. Blige. The fat guy, I guess deciding that Mary J. Blige was not his jam, walked off the floor.

"Best dance song ever!" said Dana.

Will quickly took a sip drink to hide his smirk. I shifted my weight closer to him. My heels hurt my feet.

"Come dance!" Dana touched Will's elbow.

I looked at my drink. I wish I knew someone else at this party.

Will shifted his weight toward me. The buttons of his open suit jacket brushed my hip.

"My legs are broken," he said.

Dana frowned, puzzled, and then walked away.

I smiled.

"It's good to see you," Will said. He hugged me again. His fingers ran down my back as I stepped away. They trailed my ribs, like he didn't want me to step away. Maybe I was projecting.

We stood quietly for a moment. I could have started the conversation like this:

*So. Can we talk?*

*I need to tell you something.*

*I'm getting this vibe.*

Instead, we stood quietly for a long moment. I sipped my drink. Will finished his. He didn't look at me, but watched Dana dance. She made eye contact with him and motioned him over.

He looked at me for a second, but didn't say anything. Should I try and be funny? Should I tell him how I feel? Should I try and do both at the same time and hope he gets it?

He touched my arm and walked away.

Was he waiting for me to make a big romantic gesture? I'd never made the first move in my life. If I didn't make the first move, would he assume I didn't want him to make a move?

I sipped my drink. My hands were sweating again, and I wished I'd picked up a cocktail napkin. There were napkins at other tables I could grab, but I didn't want to leave the group. I needed to make sure I knew what, if anything, was going on between then.

Will grabbed another beer and took a drink as he walked out to the dance floor. He set it on the edge and moved toward Dana, who moved fluidly, uninhibited, in the center of the floor.

They danced. The beer bottle teetered when a woman in green knocked her heel into it. It spilled, amber liquid spread quickly over the floor. I grabbed a napkin from someone else's table, righted the bottle, and cleared the mess. I picked up the bottle and finished the rest that hadn't spilled, imagining his lips had been where mine were.

"Buen appetito," the waiter says as he sets down our food. The fajitas steam and sizzle and Will leans back. After the waiter goes, he asks, "Do you want to leave? Is that why you're acting quiet?"

I don't mention that I'm not the only one who has been acting weird, because he'd been up and down to the bathroom fifty-six times in half an hour. I wonder if there was a family with kids sitting near the bathroom, or if he'd been lingering at the station where they store the highchairs they sometimes offer to people who bring babies into restaurants. I'd actually swiped crayons from the hostess station on our way to our table earlier, two reds and a blue. Now the crayons were in my pocket and I touched them. They knocked together like bones and I put my hand back on the table.

"Sorry," I say as I spoon salsa onto my tacos. "I was thinking of earlier."

"Of Val?"

This stresses me out. I just spent the last hour thinking about Val, and the hour before that. I'm tired. Would there be a time when we would talk about something else? Would there be a time when we would want to talk about something else? When I got pregnant with Val, I worried that I would lose my identity and just be a mom. People started asking me where I would find Mommy friends, as if my other friends weren't enough anymore, as if I wasn't Emily, but Mommy Emily. Now it seems like I've lost my identity again.

"Actually, no," I say.

Will picks the onions out of his fajitas with a fork.

I wonder if maybe I should have said yes, and let him agree that he was thinking of her, too, and let him talk about her for a minute, if he needed to. If we were at a different place, I would have wondered more about what he needed, I think.

"Of the time you took that woman Dana to that party, right before we got together," I say.

I take a bite of my taco, an uneven bite without all the ingredients, full of guacamole and sour cream. Salsa drips out of the other side of my taco shell.

"I can't think about Val right now," I say.

He nods.

"I would have to run home right now and lock myself in the bedroom with the lights off."

One time I had wisdom teeth surgery, and then went to the mall the day after. I had to sit on a bench in front of a soft pretzel place, because I was too tired to stand up. Being at this restaurant right now feels a little like that.

I walk around every day like it's constantly two in the morning after a long, full day and people are trying to get me to motivate to go to a bar. It's exhausting, trying to do all the normal

things that people expect you to do to seem like you *working through it*. A friend suggested I try to exercise more, for the endorphins. I went running, but ended up sitting on the sidewalk a few houses down from ours, because I'd had to move out of the way for a family on bicycles and then I couldn't keep going—like someone was trying to punch my spine through my stomach, and I had to double over and sit. Sitting outside at night alone looking at the constellations helps a little, but not much. Andromeda was a daughter.

Will takes my hand across the table.

His hand is cool, dry, and steady, the wedding ring on the ring finger of his left hand is a little loose. Hands expand in the heat, I guess, and it's chilly at the sidewalk table outside the restaurant. Paint flecks are caught in his cuticles from a project we did at the center earlier today. My palm sweats, and I start to pull my hand from his to wipe it on my jeans. He squeezes my hand, and I let it rest in his.

I've missed the closeness. The mariachi band comes over to sing a cheesy love song.

There are moments when I feel like I've never met this guy who looks like Will, who lives in Will's clothes, who sleeps on Will's side of the bed. This Not-Will laughs at the wrong jokes. He tries too hard. He forgets that we have a history, a kid together. He forgets our child. This Not-Will has the guts to caution me against becoming too attached to Mary Anna, a first-grader at the center who has Val's dark wavy hair. The Will I knew, the Will I loved, *that* Will once waited in a coffee shop all afternoon on his day off to keep tabs on a client.

I wouldn't have to explain to the Will I knew that I need Mary Anna because Val is gone. It's probably unethical on some level, and I'm not saying that I'm replacing Valerie with Mary



Anna. It's just nice to go to work and see a little girl with Valerie's hair. Sometimes it's nice. Sometimes it's awful. When Mary Anna walks up to me on the playground because she hasn't found anyone to play with the comparison stops anyway, because when Mary Anna's close I can smell her. She smells like pee.

This accusation—"You're replacing her"—is another tiny loss in this huge grief that scrapes my skin every time I roll over in bed at night. It is the loss of trust in my perception of the world. The scraping is so raw and rough sometimes that I expect to wake up and not have skin at all.

I watch Will sleep on the night before the first day we return to the center. He doesn't kick; he doesn't toss or turn. The sheet stays pulled up under his chin where he tugged it before he fell asleep. He seems peaceful, which baffles me. The sheets on my side are twisted into a ball at the foot of the bed. Will doesn't know that a murderer looks at him, watches him, and traces the inside of his ear with a pinky finger. He doesn't see that a murderer lays beside him, raw skin and pulsing heart and ragged nails. I sleep with my eyes open. Or, I pretend to sleep while I look at his face from underneath my eyelashes. I examine this face I no longer recognize. Will sleeps on.

Two weeks and seven hours after Valerie died, I stand at the back door of the after school center, trying to remember the security code. Dead leaves twist to the concrete. The sky is gray and smells damp with promised rain. I take my gloves off and hover my fingers over the number pad. I try not to think of this as a sign—I can't remember the code because I'm not supposed to

remember the code, that the Universe is telling me that I'm unsafe around children. This is not a sign, just an inconvenience. This is not a sign.

"What's the code?" I yell to Will.

He grips a plastic storage bin, pulls it out of our trunk, and sets it down. We did end up getting a new car, a navy blue sedan. The salesman kept saying it was a good family car. We pretended like that still mattered.

I drove the car here without running into anything, the first time I've driven since Friday. Inside my gloves, my hands still shake, and I rub them together against the cold to disguise the tremors.

"7451," Will yells back. He shuts the trunk and picks up the storage bin from the asphalt.

I type in the numbers and the lock clicks. I hold the door open for Will and he walks past me into the center with the box. Inside are clothes Valerie hadn't worn for years, clothes that had been sitting in the garage ready to come to the clothes donation closet at the center for months. They were clothes that Val hated and hardly wore even when they weren't too small for her: a plaid jumper from my grandmother, a T-shirt from a museum gift shop with a giant cockroach on it from Will's brother, the childless entomologist.

I let Will bring only the clothes that don't smell like Valerie or have any of her stray hairs on them. I will not part with the clothes we have pictures of her wearing.

Our clothes closet at the center is almost completely empty. The last box we got from a church downtown sits in the back of the closet. It's full of clothes from 1998. People don't get that kids who need clothes donations also want to be stylish. Before Friday I was in the closet

with Mary Anna after she wet her pants and I could only find size 6X jeans, which weren't going to fit. She'd balked at the Spiderman underwear I'd suggested because we were out of options.

Will finds comfort in clearing out things that none of the three of us were emotionally attached to. Last night when he was loading the bin into the trunk, he was singing Metallica, which surprised me because that was definitely a pre-Valerie Will favorite. I mean, for five years we've been listening to The Wiggles.

Does he feels kind of like he's floating outside of time, like I do?

I get a weird taste in my mouth when I follow Will into the center and watch him unload the box into the closet. I taste almonds, which I associate with guilt. When I was younger my mom kept a dish of almonds next to the chair she would send me to for time-out. But there's no reason for me to feel guilty about this, on a practical level. I'm doing a nice thing. It's just that on the spiritual level of things, donating Val's clothes seems *final*, maybe even more final than the service, in some ways, with the pastor's talk about everlasting souls. There is nothing everlasting about these clothes—most are already faded a little.

After Will finishes unloading the bin into the clothes closet, he goes into the office. When he's gone, I move into the closet, and turn off the light by pulling the string hanging from the ceiling. I stand there for a minute in the dark. The clothes are sorted into categories: girls' small, girls' x-small. Will put the plaid jumper from my grandmother in a bin with Girls' Misc. written carefully on the lid in permanent marker. The cockroach T-shirt sits inside the unisex bin. I take a deep breath through my nose. I don't smell Valerie here.

It's not that I don't agree with Will taking these clothes and putting them in the closet. I'm not attached to these clothes. Valerie was not attached to these clothes. I just don't want Val to

think we're forgetting her. Sometimes, she would get mad that we spent so much time with the kids at the center. She'd spent the last month before she passed doing her nails with those little glittery stickers like Tasha did. I found the stickers yesterday in a drawer in the kitchen—turquoise kittens and purple dolphins.

We would have donated these clothes eventually even before everything happened on Friday, but we might not have done it so soon. I could see the bin getting buried beneath a box of old Halloween costumes, maybe shoved behind a bike with training wheels, once Val had graduated to a bike without training wheels.

All day at work I keep picturing the box as it would have been in our garage, buried under Christmas decorations and swim noodles. I picture Val denting the box the first time she pulled into the garage too far when she was driving. I picture the box gathering dust and dried leaves when we forgot about it in the corner. I picture making one of those T-shirt quilts out of all of Val's old clothes for her college graduation.

Will seems unburdened by donating the box. The kids at the center could certainly use the extra clothes. It's not like her spirit is in the plaid jumper my grandmother gave her. And this way, in donating, it's like she's able to help a bunch of other kids, too. Donating the clothes is the right thing.

I take the kids out to the playground in the afternoon. Mary Anna plays by herself under the slide and it takes me a minute to realize she's wearing the stupid cockroach T-shirt. I walk over to her.

"Mary Anna. Did Mr. Will give you that shirt?"

She keeps on playing with her doll Hot Pocket, pouring sand into a bucket and then sticking her inside it. Mary Anna's hair, brown and wavy, sticks to her neck and the sides of her face. I want to lift her hair from the back of her neck like I used to do with Val, her hair wet from running through the sprinklers in the summer. Like Val, I imagine Mary Anna sitting on my lap and leaning back into my chest.

"No," says Mary Anna. "I grabbed it by myself."

The kids are not supposed to go into the clothes closet alone. I tap my hands against the wet plastic of the slide, trying to look casual.

"Why that shirt?"

Mary Anna dumps sand all over Hot Pocket's head. She's decided to employ that kid trick, selective deafness.

I grab her arm and pull her up.

"You're changing," I say.

Tasha and Isaiah watch us walk across the playground. Mary Anna yells.

Over Mary Anna's shoulder, I see Tasha give Isaiah an "I told you so" look. That girl is nine going on seventeen. Last week on a home visit I caught her hanging out with seventh grade boys in her building.

Inside, I pull Mary Anna over to the closet. She drags her feet and makes herself as heavy as possible.

Will comes out of the library.

"Another accident?" he asks Mary Anna.

"No!" She stomps her feet in grubby pink Converse knock-offs.

I look at her. Valerie is dead. It's like the light has changed, and Val is gone from Mary Anna's face. I reach out and touch Mary Anna's face, for vestiges of Val, like my fingers can will my daughter back into the curl of Mary Anna's damp hair. Mary Anna pulls away and sticks her thumb in her mouth. Will sends her on an errand and she walks away, watching me warily.

Will lowers his voice.

"What's up?"

I'm not sure if I should explain that I feel judged by Tasha, or guilty for bringing in the box of Val's old clothes, or nervous about driving home. But also, I'm proud of having made it this far through the day without locking myself in the office.

"The cockroach shirt," I say.

For a moment I'm not sure whether I'm going to laugh or cry—it seems like I could do both, or either.

I press my forehead to Will's shoulder and wait to understand my feelings, and how to move forward, and how to face the kids.

I wake up before the alarm on Friday and watch the ceiling. Gray light shines through the blinds. I can't breathe. When I try, I find that I can only inhale, like a gasp, and I do this until I'm light-headed.

This is the third Friday without Valerie.

I get out of bed and watch Will sleeping for a second, his chest rising and falling gently. I walk into the bathroom and turn on the light—yellow and jarring. I blink. There's a drawing taped to the mirror—a treehouse with the large, crooked, kid-writing label, "The Girls with

Glasses Club.” Val got glasses the year before kindergarten. She polished the lenses for the half-hour ride to the elementary school. I wear dark heavy frames that allow me to skip a week or two when plucking my eyebrows. Our Girls with Glasses Club had a secret handshake, one I can’t remember now, at six in the morning, staring puffy-eyed into the toothpaste-splattered mirror.

I take the plastic sleeve of birth control pills out of my toiletry bag; it’s streaked with mascara and covered in face powder. I hold it, running my fingers over the raised punch-out circles. The pills are the same pink as newborn toenails.

I pop a pill out of the package and into my mouth. And then I take another one, an insurance policy, just to be sure.

Not that it matters, because Will and I haven’t touched in any kind of intimate way in four months. Before Val died the space between us seemed so large that I would intentionally put myself in his way, so that he would have to brush me as he walked by. I remember the last time he touched me on the waist—we were at work, and in crisis mode. There was an aggressive stray dog on the playground, and Will touched me to pull me around the corner of the building, where all the kids—except Isaiah, who was being chased by the dog—were gathered. For weeks after, I would remember his hand on my waist when I thought of that day, instead of worrying about whether the dog had bitten Isaiah.

After Val’s death, we’ve leaned into each other, but it’s like we have to learn how to touch all over again. I miss him.

Once, Valerie asked me what the birth control pills were for, and if I was dying. For about two months before the accident, Valerie was death-obsessed. She rattled off to me all the different ways pioneers died on the Oregon Trail: dysentery, scurvy, Indian attacks, wagon

accidents, scalpings, tuberculosis, consumption. Valerie asked me if I took the pills for consumption. I said the only thing consuming me was her, and then I pretended to chomp on her neck. She twisted away, screaming and giggling and I have to close my eyes to remember the sound.

Ever since Val died, Will has become meticulous about his beard. He washes it with Keratin anti-frizz shampoo; he uses one of those vintage straight razors for his neck. This straight razor rests on the counter now, slightly golden with the reflected sunrise.

Will comes into the bathroom and touches my waist before he gets undressed to slip into the shower. I think about the stray dog at work. I want him to stand closer so I can touch him, too. But I don't step closer to him, because it's Friday. After Friday, I've spent a lot of time panicked about what to do and then choosing inaction out of confusion or fear. The other day, I couldn't choose between Ranch dressing and Cesar dressing at the grocery store, so I left without either.

"You in there?" Will asks.

I look at him through the mirror as he pulls the shower curtain shut. Does he realize what day it is yet?

"Yeah." I sit on the closed toilet. I listen to the water spray the ceramic tile, the small farting noise of the almost-empty shower gel bottle. I should probably go to the store.

"Why don't you come to my acting class?" Will says over the water.

Will goes to an acting class at the local community theatre. It's a beginning scene study class. From what he says, it's a lot of public, emotional displays. Two women are doing a scene from *Agnes of God*. Will says the class helps him. It lets him cry hard and often, it lets him laugh



when he feels like it. I'm not sure if all of this means that he thinks he can't be emotionally honest with me. I hope not.

“It'll help to get out of the house.”

I get off the toilet and raise my hand to the shower curtain, dry plastic under my fingers. I appreciate the offer, but he doesn't understand. I almost pull the curtain open so he can see in my face that it's not him I'm rejecting. I'm glad he has that outlet. It's just that I feel controlled by feelings I can't understand. If I opened my mouth to cry on command, the world would flood. I take my hand from the shower curtain and leave the bathroom.

#

Valerie believed you could catch ghosts with jellybeans. She'd leave the beans in patterns on the carpet—circles, squares, spirals, lopsided hearts. Sometimes she'd try to spell out the ghosts' names to get the dead to come back to her. But Valerie spelled badly, and even though she never wanted to correct herself, she thought being called "Winiferd" kept the ghost of the little girl who lived in the attic from returning to us. I didn't tell her that people who are gone don't come back, no matter how you spell their names.

Valerie and Will ghost-hunted together on Saturdays. Val would leave jellybean trails, Will would pick up some glowsticks from the grocery store and they'd sit in the closet in Val's bedroom, watching and waiting in the dark. Val wore the green glowstick necklace and bracelets. Will had an orange stick like a night traffic conductor. While they waited, Val would sometimes fall asleep on Will's shoulder and I'd creep in and snap a picture.

A photo from their last Saturday, a gray Saturday, was in the slideshow at her memorial service. In the photo, the two of them sit in the closet, Val wearing her green glowstick necklace

like a crown. As I remember, that picture was taken just before bath time and bedtime. In it, Val leans against Will's shoulder. She's fake-asleep. She pretended to fall asleep sometimes in the closet right before bath time—she wanted to trick Will into carrying her into the bathroom. Will knew, of course, that Val wasn't really asleep. But he liked the way her head fell against his shoulder as they walked. I took a picture of this too. Not for the memorial service. I keep it in my nightstand drawer.

They would ghost-hunt until it was time for bed, and then Will would claim a headache. After he would carry Val to the bathroom, I would be stuck with bath duty.

One Saturday, when Will had to meet with Mary Anna's mother about a behavior issue, I tried to ghost hunt with Val. She lined up the jellybeans, trying to lure "Hidee." We sat in the closet to wait, wearing glowing necklaces and bracelets, carrying sticks.

"Switch the jellybeans," I said to Val. "H-E-I-D-I." She looked at me earnestly, mouthing the letters. I guess she wanted to catch the ghost so badly she'd forgotten about not wanting to be corrected. She walked into the bedroom and knelt by the jellybeans on the carpet. Her hands shook. She never looked at me for reassurance. I considered calling her back into the closet.

We waited for a moment. My cell phone vibrated on the nightstand. Nothing happened. The nervous wonder left Val's face. In its place, hurt and betrayal. She glared at me. You'd think I'd just admitted to killing off Dora the Explorer. It's like, sorry, kid, but I can't control the supernatural universe.

She pushed herself up off the carpet and walked out of the room.

"Daddy doesn't care if I spell things wrong," she yelled from the hallway.

Her bedroom door shut.

Right before Val died, she was going through a phase where she didn't like me all that much. I was on bath duty. I was Head Chief of the Broccoli Police. I made her clean up her own mess when she tried to churn butter once.

Though, to be honest, right before she died, I was going through a phase where I didn't like Val that much, either. Once, she insisted we use candles instead of electricity. Creative, yes. Helpful when I have incident reports to type up? No.

Sometimes, my sadness becomes like a diseased organ, something that someone should try to excise. A bum hip. My sadness is a bum hip that makes getting around difficult. The pain from it—constant, *just* under the surface even on good days—colors the way I talk to people, what I don't say. I hobble around, let my hip make decisions for me about where to go or how far. My grief shapes me.

My bum hip acts up when I pass the candy aisle in the grocery store. As a result, I don't buy Wheat Thins, also in that aisle. Sometimes, even with all the precautions, and keeping weight off of it, and walking gingerly, my hip aches. It pops and scrapes, leaves me out of breath, hanging on the backs of couches for support and balance. When the shooting sadness catches me, I think of what I don't often tell people about Val.

1. Valerie once tried to send a letter to President McKinley. (About the Homestead Act.)
2. Valerie once tried to run away from home. (She got to the cul-de-sac three streets down from us.)

3. Valerie once succeeded at ruining my grandmother's 90th birthday party, three days before my grandmother passed. (She didn't like the smell in the nursing home—"farts and barf and cat pee.")
4. Valerie told racist jokes. (We were asked to leave her friend Brittany's birthday party when she told one about how many Jewish people you could fit in a car. The punchline? Three in the backseat and 150 in the ashtray.)
5. Valerie liked to play Will and me against each other. She had a favorite parent.
6. Valerie would not eat hot dogs.
7. Valerie once threatened to call social services on me.
8. Valerie had a favorite parent.
9. Valerie told me who that parent was.
10. Valerie told me who that parent was. (In a fit of rage after the churned butter incident, she told me I was "no fun, not at all, and also not very kind.")

Will is also the favorite adult at the center, out of two. One time, he led them in a dance battle when they weren't paying attention in Reading. Incidentally, this led them to release all their energy so they could pay attention. If it were me, I would have just kept getting more and more frustrated, and probably eventually I would have given in, and allowed them to quit reading. I have a pathological need for people to like me, which Will doesn't seem to have. It gives him more confidence, He doesn't have to back track and tell people he's kidding when he makes a slightly off-color deadpan joke. He doesn't worry about stepping on parents' toes when disciplining their children. I get tangled up sometimes, in the, "You know, this is just my opinion, but I think you might try this," bullshit.

I imagine Will's sadness as a tipsy ex-girlfriend. Someone that might control your emotions a little, might make you say things you wouldn't necessarily say, but also one that you can talk down, talk over, control, get away from, put in a cab. His sadness is not a state of being like mine, it's not existential, but able to be dealt with. I wish I could put my sadness in a cab and watch it drive away.

Like today, when we're driving to the center after picking the kids up from their houses after school. Normally we'd pick them up from school, but they'd had a half-day for teacher conferences and spent the afternoon at home. C.J., dressed as a ghost for Halloween, pinches his sister, Tasha, who's dressed liked Beyonce. My first inclination (the state of my sadness forces me to act on first inclinations) is to tell C.J. he's got to sit out at recess. Will, while driving, senses that C.J.'s getting restless and asks him about the candy he got at the school Halloween party. C.J. forgets Tasha and starts talking about a King-sized Twix he received. Will's sadness does not affect him at work. It doesn't nag or niggle. Mine, dull and uncomfortable, pops up when I shift my weight. Here, while I look out the bus window:

Valerie dressed as the ghost of Laura Ingalls Wilder for Halloween last year. She wore a sunbonnet and white face paint that was impossible to get out of her hair.

Here, while I twist to search my pockets for a hair elastic:

Valerie only ate black jellybeans. She knew how to cure scurvy.

We stop at Mary Anna's bus stop.

The hinges on the bus door creak as Will pulls the lever to open it. The door folds in on itself, and the autumn breeze blows dead leaves and small sticks into the corrugated rubber stairwell.

There's another little girl at the stop next to Mary Anna. There shouldn't be—we only pick up Mary Anna at this stop, the last before we drive back to the center. The little girl looks like she could be Mary Anna's little sister, Jackie: same dark curly hair, and I wonder if Mary Anna's mother wants Jackie to start coming to the center, too. Jackie rummages around in her backpack at her feet. Mary Anna ignores her. I'm not surprised, given the types of social skills I've seen Mary Anna exhibit—she's super clingy to adults, and, by her first-grade teacher's account, she ignores younger girls on the playground and only attempts to talk to older girls, who ignore her.

Jackie has bright, sparkly turquoise stickers on her nails that catch the light when she zips up her backpack. She straightens up and looks toward the bus. Then, she opens the door of Mary Anna's apartment and yells from the doorway, “You forgot your backpack!”

Wait. There's two Jackies. Wait. There can't be two Jackies. The girl I thought was Jackie steps closer to the bus and I can see her more clearly. It's Valerie. I bang on the bus window. C.J. and Tasha turn around to look at me.

“Calm down,” C.J. says.

I pause, because that doesn't make any sense right now. I can't calm down. I bang on the window again. Valerie doesn't look at me. I try to open the window, push the grimy metal bar down. It sticks. My fingers hurt from the grooves in the metal of the window bar, the tips of my fingers pulse red. If she would just look at me, I would feel like my feet were on the ground. I could take a breath if I saw that she knew me. Please, I think. Goddamnit, please.

I smack the bus window, feel the smooth glass under my sweaty palm. She doesn't turn at the noise. I ball up my fist and bang on the window, the force rattling the glass in the frame. The

fog from my breath obscures my vision and I wipe my sleeve across the window so I can still see her face. She turns her back and I scream. (Vaguely, I'm aware of Tasha and C.J. turning to look at me again.)

I want to see the way Valerie's forehead wrinkles again. The way her smile's kind of crooked, the scar she got on her upper lip from falling off the monkey bars. Why won't she turn around again? What did I do? What do I do? She keeps walking away from the window. Then it's like my sadness is an actual bum hip and I can't move, even though I want to run down the aisle with such momentum that I tumble out into Mary Anna's yard. I try anyway, getting up from the seat and lurching forward, yelling like some sort of injured gorilla. C.J. stands in the aisle blocking my way.

"Fucking move," I yell.

Will puts on the parking brake and runs down the bus aisle. He grabs me tightly. I shake him off, or I try to, but he won't let go. He moves me into an empty bus seat.

Valerie walks onto the bus and past Will, who stands in the aisle. He doesn't acknowledge her. She sits in the back. All the kids are looking at Will and me now. Mary Anna's crying. I stop trying to open the window and sit with my arms at my sides. Will needs to leave me alone, walk back up to the front of the bus, and start driving again. I want time to look at Valerie.

"I'm fine," I say, looking past Will's shoulder toward Valerie at the back of the bus. It's not true, but Will seems to at least pretend that he believes me—probably more because we're at work than because he actually thinks I'm doing well. He gets up and goes back to the front of the bus. He sits and pulls the door shut.

I rest my head on the back of the bus seat in front of me, inhaling the smell of sweaty feet and pencil shavings. I hear quick footsteps come toward me from the back of the bus.

I look into the bus aisle without lifting my head and see small *Little Mermaid* light-up sneakers, blinking teal. She touches my hair, and I lift my head.

Valerie's hoodie's too thin for the end of October. Her curly hair is tangled. The tutu she wears is caked with dirt and covered in ketchup stains. I touch the tips of her fingers.

She frowns with her eyebrows. I can't quite read her face, but I can tell that this isn't going to be the joyous reunion I'd imagined. She looks around the bus and none of the kids acknowledge her. She has a new-kid-on-the-first-day look on her face.

I open my mouth to speak and Val covers my mouth.

I stick my tongue out to taste her hand—it's salty—and she takes her hand away. Does she not want anyone to know she's here? That doesn't make sense, because it seems like I'm the only one who can see her. Does that mean I need to start going to that therapist again?

She moves down the bus aisle. Wind rushes through an open window. I hear someone shout about laundry detergent down the street. The world is coming back. Or, my perception of the world is returning—my senses can take in more than *Val's back, Val's back*—and I smell something sour. Someone should tell C.J. that he needs to start using deodorant. Valerie, when she walks by me to sit at the back of the bus, smells like cinnamon gum, which I never let her chew. I take a deep breath and my heart slows.

After she sits, Val takes a copy of *Little House on the Prairie* out of her backpack. I want to hear her voice. I walk back to her seat. I feel Will looking at me. He's always telling the kids



to stay seated while the bus is moving. I sit in the empty seat in front of Valerie and twist to look at her.

She reads, her small finger underlining each sentence. I rest my chin on the top of the back of the seat.

"Valerie."

She doesn't look up.

"Valerie," I say louder.

She looks up from her book. I hold out my hand for it and she gives it to me. It's solid. I flip through the pages and goose bumps appear on the backs of my hands. It's a real copy. I mean, it's a copy that she was holding that I'm now holding. I mean, if she were a ghost, she'd read a book I couldn't hold, right? But, our hands have touched the same pages. I drop the book and it falls under the seat, next to a piece of dried gum stuck to the floor. She takes my hand—her nails are bluish through her chipped polish. She smiles at me.

#

When we get to the center, the kids go to the library and do silent reading while Will and I get their snacks ready. Normally we would supervise, but Ella, the part-time snack volunteer, is out sick. We leave the library door open, and we can faintly hear Mary Anna and Tasha arguing about Miley Cyrus' latest video. I watch Will stick straws into juice boxes. What should I tell him about Valerie on the bus? For some reason, he didn't notice her. Should I tell him anything? He's the one who believes in ghosts and presences. I don't want him to think she's come back as a ghost because I don't think that's true. But since she did come back, that brings up all sorts of mental health questions on my end, since I can see her and touch her and taste her and smell her.

But, I can't keep her to myself, even if it does bring up those questions. If there's a small possibility that she's otherworldly or supernatural, I want Will to share her with me.

"I saw her," I say. I open some packages of Uncrustable PBJ and put them on a Styrofoam plate.

"Who?" Will keeps laying out juice boxes: Apple, grape, apple, grape.

I pause. Will sounds like he's having a good day today. He told a joke in the car on the way to work this morning. He hasn't told a joke in two weeks. He's not thinking about her now. And if the kids came out of the library and needed something, to drop something like this on him in public—but she's *here*.

"Val," I say.

He doesn't say anything. He squeezes a grape juice box too hard when he sets it down, and purple juice squirts out of the straw and forms a puddle on the table. He doesn't wipe it up. Saying her name out loud makes her return seem more real.

"I'm sorry. I should have waited," I say.

"She's here?"

I nod.

He laughs, ripping a paper towel from the roll. It doesn't rip along the perforation, and white cotton pieces fall to the floor. He rips another towel and slams the roll onto the table.

"You're joking," he says.

I shake my head.

"You don't believe in that stuff." It seems like he thinks my admission is unfair. He wipes up the juice, scrubbing it like it's maple syrup. Underneath his beard, his jaw is clenched. I can tell by the look in his eyes—dull and flat.

I touch his shoulder and he steps away from me.

"*I* believe in that stuff," he says.

Will does, in fact, believe in ghosts and supernatural presences. Early on, he took me to a fortune teller. I'm not sure if that was a backlash against his mother's conservative Christianity, which held very real beliefs in Hell but did not ever purport to acknowledge the possibility that the dead might come back. (Which is funny, because of a little thing called the Resurrection.) The fortune teller we went to (Mrs. King's Psychic Readings) operated out of a small brick house on the side of a highway. That night, we knocked twice, found no one home (or at work?) and we left.

Will also lost someone when he was just beginning to become interested in social work, someone he's only mentioned to me once. That one-time mention included the name (Elliot), but not much else. There may have been a gun involved. Once, playing Never Have I Ever as drunk grad students, Will said he got held up but wouldn't explain the story. After we fell in love, or, after I fell in love with him, and started to tell him that I loved him, I didn't want to ask because he didn't seem to want to talk about it. Back then, I had a romantic view of what a person in love is supposed to do. It didn't include going against what your partner wants. My vision of love has changed now, of course. It includes clearly communicating what you need so your partner can help you get what you need. Or, that's how I would define love had not certain things conspired on a certain Friday that leave me unable to breathe properly or operate a car without shaking.

I wonder why Will doesn't talk about Elliot. Was it a playground shooting? I wonder whose lap Elliot rested in, how the blood pooled, whose pants the blood soaked. It wasn't Will, and that makes the situation more complicated.

Or maybe there wasn't a playground shooting at all. Maybe Elliot was one of those kids that have so much stacked against them that it is almost impossible to stay in school, or out of a gang. Or maybe Will saw that Elliot needed him but also that Elliot didn't want any help. Maybe Elliot just vanished one day, late for an already-rescheduled appointment to talk about interpersonal relationships at school. That's one of the most devastating truths about social work. Sometimes, no matter how much you want to help someone, there is absolutely nothing you can do. It's kind of funny in a sick way—we try to empower people but we feel powerless.

How complicit did Will feel? Did he have doubts about being able to continue to do this job? If he did, that would make me feel better—not so *middle-class* as he would put it. I would feel better if I knew he didn't see himself as a savior figure, because that is the wrong reason to do our job. Maybe my reasons to continue with social work aren't always the most altruistic, but seeing yourself as a savior figure is definitely bullshit.

Will places napkins and plastic forks beside each plate. He counts and recounts the place settings, even though he knows how many he needs. It's probably a way to avoid talking to me.

At his first assignment, Will worked in a neighborhood where kids had to crouch beneath living room windows to watch TV, had to walk not in groups but also not alone when they left school. (Walking alone was dangerous, walking in groups—especially for young boys—signaled to others that you were in a gang.) Will worked in that neighborhood for three years before he came to the MSW program. Maybe he believes in the other side because he needs to believe that

there is something better for Elliot. Maybe he needs to believe in the other side because he needs hope.

"I'm sorry," I say again.

"Did you talk to her?"

I shake my head. "She wouldn't talk to me. She touched my head."

He closes his eyes, puts his hands on the back of one of the tiny plastic chairs around the snack table. He touches his beard, longer now than Valerie has ever seen it. I try to give him a hug and he stops me.

"We're at work, Emily." He walks over to the library and calls the kids for snack. "I want to try to talk to her tonight."

I nod and step away from him, even though we've hugged at work before, and it's not like the kids would be surprised if they saw us. The kids come in. It seems too crowded now and I take a deep breath and turn to the wall to collect myself.

"Twenty minutes for snack," Will tells the kids. "Remember to clean up your area when you're finished."

Valerie comes up behind him, sits on his foot and wraps her arms around his leg so he'll carry her around like a weight. He doesn't notice anything. He doesn't pause, doesn't try to shake her off.

Will has told me before that he is exceptionally open to feeling people from the other side. When we were in college he swore the ghost of his dead uncle told him the answers to a European History midterm.

He doesn't feel Valerie.

That night, I watch Will from the bedroom doorway. He sits on the bed, the room dark except for a candle on the nightstand that smells like pumpkin pie. Around the base of the candle is a circle of jellybeans. He holds a picture of Val.

"Are you there?" he whispers. "Can you hear me?"

The heat clicks on and purrs quietly for a minute. He hugs himself like he's cold. If I were a person who prayed, I would pray for him to feel a chill or something, something that would make him believe for a minute. He rubs his beard and lies back on the bed. His stomach rises and falls as he sighs. I walk in and lie down next to him.

"Can you hear me?" he says again.

I watch the candle burn.

"Valerie. Can you *hear* me?"

Light flickers. I listen for her footsteps down the hall, for the way she used to rap her knuckles against the walls as she walked. Nothing.

Light flickers. Will rubs his thumb over the picture, over and over Val's miniature face.

Will sits up and holds the photo over the candle. He puts the edge of the picture in the flame. He watches the fire consume Valerie's feet, legs, and the tutu she wears. Bits of ashy paper fall into the candle and are covered by melted wax.

"Stop," I say.

I take his hands and we sit down on the bed again.

"She's gone," he says.

He squeezes my fingers, and I squeeze back. I want so badly for him to be able to see Valerie, for him to find some comfort like I have on the bus when I saw her come back, that I squeeze harder, trying to tell him all of this without actually telling him all of this. I imagine his hands, as I often have since he and I haven't touched lately, but all the imaginings of his hands are different than the way his fingers feel on mine right now, squeezing until he's hurting me a little, squeezing until I cry out.

I pull away for a moment, listening for any little girl sounds that signal we should be quieter. Then, I remember there's no one to be quiet for.

He takes my hands again and the tendons in his wrist pop out—I can see very clearly the vein he would cut horizontally if he wanted to. It seems then that this touch is life or death—either we move forward or we move backward, and all our chances will be done with.

I kiss him. The hairs of his beard scratch my palms as my fingers touch the smooth skin up around his eyes, where there are more wrinkles than before Friday. I kiss each of the new wrinkles, an acceptance that we've each changed, that we will have to learn each other again, that we'll have to rediscover ourselves in this way, in other ways, in all the ways. We are new people, now.

"I must have been imagining things," I say, after. "Maybe she *is* gone."

I feel him shrug his shoulders, but I know he can't brush off Valerie's return like it didn't mean anything, like it wasn't real.

"We'll try to talk to her tomorrow," he says. I comb his beard away from his face with my fingers. This used to make him smile. It's something I used to do after we'd been together, before. He turns his face to me, but doesn't say anything. I take my hand away.

Jellybeans are scattered across the carpet. I wait for a second—for a change in the air pressure, or a breeze, or a temperature drop. Nothing changes.

I pick up the jellybeans.

#

At three months out, I'm not sure Missouri is going to happen. I'm scared. Valerie, or, her spirit, won't leave me alone. I promised Will I would try to work on us, because we've got each other, for now. Hallucination Valerie nags me like human Valerie did and it stresses me out that I can't share this with Will, because I told him I must have been imagining her return. I told him I was imagining her so he wouldn't be hurt that she came back to me. He hasn't spoken to me in two days.

I think, maybe if I talk to him at work, he won't be so rude as to not talk to me in front of the kids. So, during Reading:

"Plane tickets to Independence are \$150 if we book them now," I say.

He looks up from a book he's reading with C.J.

"Let's talk later," he says. C.J. stops reading, looks at us, goes back to reading.

I panic. My mouth dries up.

"Let's talk now," I say.

"We're not ready," he says.

"You won't talk to me anywhere else."

C.J. stops reading. "That's rude," he says. "I'm deducting Social Skills Points."

I laugh, not really because C.J. is particularly funny, but because he is unexpected. When something like Friday happens, you laugh when you can.



“I need Missouri,” I say.

“I can’t,” Will says.

That kills me. Missouri is about releasing Valerie’s ashes. I can’t do that alone. Even though we had our problems before Val passed away, he can’t expect me to go to Missouri alone. He can’t be that selfish.

“I need you there,” I say.

My face floods with blood from the rest of my body. I look at my hands, expecting them to be white, blue, purple, or green.

“I don’t want to commit to anything,” he says.

“Like saying goodbye to your daughter?”

C.J.’s fingers tap on the arm of the chair he sits in. His leg jiggles. I’m embarrassed for him, and sorry that he feels so uncomfortable. This is the most unprofessional Will and I have ever been at work. But, now that we’re in the middle of the discussion, I can’t stop.

“I can’t say goodbye to her again,” he says.

I say goodbye to her every morning, when I remember again what’s happened. Right after we lost her, the mornings were the worst parts of the day—that time when I’d forgotten for a few hours that she was gone, and then I had to remember again.

“Please,” I say. My voice goes an octave higher than its normal pitch, and I turn red again. I feel backed into a corner. I can’t drop the subject now, it’ll look like I’m backing down. I can’t press it because I don’t want to cry in front of the kids. Forcing him to talk to me now was a horrible idea. Last year, when Val learned that Will and I didn’t have ESP, she asked me for an ice cream and when I said no, she asked Will. Each of us felt cornered, and we told her it wasn’t

nice. Now, I see what I was doing to Will in front of the kids—he had to balance professionalism with being a good partner. But, even though I know all of this, I stand in the middle of the library with planted feet. I will not let him walk out on us.

“I can’t go to Missouri,” he says.

I push further. I stand stronger.

“What if you just stood there next to me?”

I don’t think he could just stand next to me to say goodbye to Val. Last week, he bought three tubs of her favorite ice cream—bubble gum—to put in the freezer even though he only likes pistachio and my favorite is cappuccino. His grief makes him act. If he decides to come to Missouri, he’ll definitely want to release some of the ashes himself. I think one of the things he hated most about losing her that Friday was that there was nothing he could do to help when we got to the hospital.

All I wanted was to see the fight in him again, to make sure it was still there. His face looks like he saying, *Really? Can you hold off? Please?* I shouldn’t have mentioned Missouri at work. That was stupid.

“I can’t,” he says. He turns back to C.J. and the book, but C.J. has scooted to a different chair. He has abandonment problems. His father promised to take him to Six Flags three years ago. Instead, C.J.’s father went to prison for stealing a car.

I’m embarrassed that my plan to incite Will into coming back to me backfired. I squeeze his shoulder as I leave the room. I hear one of the kids fall out of their chair as they lean forward to watch me go. I’m glad we can provide *Days of Our Lives* for them.

#

I think one of the things about marriage that I didn't know, or didn't *want* to know, is that a lot of marriage is about failure and how you react to it. Will and I have failed each other in huge, unforgiveable ways. The accident, one. The isolation because of the accident, two. The fear that the isolation might break us apart, three. Maybe it's just where I am right now, in my headspace, but I think failures and fear and fear of failures have kept us from being intimate after Val's death. Not sex. Intimate in other ways. Like sharing. Like, caring to share, like purposefully getting in the other person's face and saying, I'm here. Like, whispering, with eye contact, "You cannot forget about me." Even if you lock yourself in your bedroom (like I did), even if you go on a drive and purposefully turn off your phone (like Will did.)

I've failed him hugely. Once, on accident, and then after that, on purpose. If we said what we really meant, I would ask him if he's strong enough to take all the times I intentionally fail him, intentionally hurt him because I'm just thinking of myself or Val or Val's memory. That should be part of the vows—in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer, in the worst moments, in intentional snubs, in devastation. Do you take me as your wife in devastation? In hope? On days when we've run out of coffee?

I think marriage vows and failure as I walk alone through the neighborhood, at night. It's chilly: kids are playing inside instead of out. The sprinklers have turned on and are alternately watering the road, the lawns, and the cars parked in the driveways I pass. I stop and start, a sprinkler-avoidance dance, the Martha Graham of water that smells like rotten eggs.

I look at the stars as I walk, because I don't want to look into the windows at the families. Even the ones who are absorbed in their own iPads are ones who can breathe each other's air. Even the families that don't speak except about what's on TV are ones that make me pause, put

my hands on my knees, and take deep, gulping breaths. I want Val to ask me if she can watch *Jake and the Neverland Pirates*. I want to refuse her, just to keep her with me for a second longer. Just a second.

My dad was an astronomer before he retired, and he told Val one time that space is completely silent, because there is no atmosphere, and therefore nothing through which sound waves can travel. She thought this was the coolest thing. When she wanted us to be quiet, she would request “space time.” Will would joke, “Is silence on a continuum?” She wouldn’t get it, but I would laugh: time travel jokes.

My dad also told me this: If two pieces of the same metal touch in space, they will be permanently bonded.

#

In the grocery store, I keep thinking of all the things Val won’t ever do. Not big things, like prom, or driving, or going to college. I keep thinking of the small things. Like, she won’t go to the grocery store alone. I open the freezer in the frozen food section to pull out a frozen pizza.

Val will never make frozen pizza. Val will never be tall enough to reach the shelf where this frozen pizza is. Val will never gain the freshmen fifteen that comes from frozen pizza.

After this, I can't seem to remember what else I came to the store for. Salad. It was stuff to make salad. Lettuce, tomatoes, onions. Lettuce. Tomatoes, onions. It provides a nice contrast to Val can't, Val won't; Val can't, Val won't; which has been circling around the empty space in my head. The empty that is my head. Yes.

I pick up the lettuce, which is heavier than I expected. Normally, I mean before Friday, we bought the pre-washed lettuce in the bag, because that's the kind Val might maybe consider

eating. Now, I consider a whole head of lettuce, and put it back down because somehow it seems violent. I buy the arugula in a plastic container instead.

Tomatoes. Onions. Check out.

#

The door to Val's room is open. This is strange. I haven't gone in there since Friday. When my mom was here, and she wanted to go in, I wouldn't let her, even though she said she just needed to say goodbye, that it was part of her healing process. I still didn't let her and she left, broken like me. In those early weeks, I sought vindication. I wanted everybody to feel like me: like shit.

From the doorway, where I lean because I'm too nauseated to stand up, I see the room looks the same, mostly. The lid to the dress-up trunk is ajar, a sparkly ear piece to a tiara sticking out of it. A poster of 70's-era Melissa Gilbert on the wall is starting to curl at the edges.

Will sits on the floor in the middle of the room, wearing a bunch of plastic necklaces and playing that game *Pretty Pretty Princess*, which we'd bought for Val out of nostalgia because I used to play it.

For a second, I wonder if he's finally seeing her, too. If they're playing together, and I'm interrupting some kind of metaphysical father-daughter bonding. Every Wednesday they used to go on date-night: the zoo and then ice-cream. They'd come home smelling of cake cones and monkey poop.

I watch him for a second from the doorway, the wooden molding digging into my shoulder. He looks alone—his shoulders are slumped, his hair sticks up in the back. He doesn't glow like he does when he's with the kids, or how I imagine he glows when he goes to his acting

class. I think there's a certain kind of intimacy in letting someone see you at your worst. Seeing him ruffled and sad, I feel special, bestowed upon, chosen.

Will moves a piece on the board and picks up another plastic necklace. Another pile of necklaces rests across from Will on the floor.

I shift and kick the doorjamb accidentally. Will looks up.

"You're in here," I say, even though I should probably say something else.

He makes a move like he's going to get up and come over to me, but then he just shifts positions and stays on the floor. I stay in the doorway, holding it up.

"Have a seat," he says.

I smile and sit down across from him. Val is definitely not in here. We are alone. I haven't seen Val for twelve hours. (She stormed off early this morning because I told her she couldn't play covered wagon in the kitchen.)

He picks up a lavender plastic necklace and slips it over my head. It gets caught on my ears. He adjusts it, and I remember how nice it is to be touched.

I roll the dice. We play for a while, until both of us are covered in Easter-egg colored plastic jewels. There's a black plastic ring—if you land on its square, you have to wear it and you lose. Game Over. I pray to roll low numbers, so my piece never reaches the black ring square on the opposite side of the board.

"What about a support group?" Will asks.

He rolls the dice and lands on the crown. He lifts it from the center of the board and puts it on his head. I smile, thinking of how Val would laugh if she saw him dressed like a princess.

He used to let her put lipstick on him—she would smear it all over his chin and cheeks, and call him beautiful.

Up until this moment, my grief has seemed singular; I haven't given much thought to other parents who'd lost children because no other parents had lost Valerie before. It might be nice to talk to other people about her, people who would see the version of her I told them about, instead of the version of her that was true. Not that I would intentionally lie, it would be nice to have people believe in her, instead of know the truth: sometimes she was a brat, just like the kids who are still alive.

“If I go, will you consider Missouri?”

I hope he's not still hurt from our discussion about Missouri at work the other day. I really hadn't meant to hurt him, it's just that sometimes what I want to say is not the same as what I actually say, in the moment. I'd thought about a million different ways that conversation could have gone, none of which belittle him or his grieving process. But, I'd thought of them after we'd fought, after I thought it was too late to apologize.

He nods.

“OK, then,” I say. “Support group.”

#

The next morning, Will and I go to support group before we have to be at the center to meet the school bus at 3 pm. The support group is held in an old elementary school that smells sweaty, like the children—just out of gym—just left. The room we enter has a circle of folding chairs in the middle, the counters are covered with drawings, spilled glitter, and dried glue. I pick at the dried glue on the counter while I survey the couples already seated in the circle.

I study them like an anthropologist. Hopefully they don't see through me, understand that I don't understand myself.

The couples clutch at each other. They hold hands, wrap arms around shoulders, hand each other tissues.

Will has already moved to the circle, leaving me on the outside. There's an empty chair beside him, but he's not looking back at me, expecting me to fill it. He looks at his hands and I follow his eyes. His hands are folded in front, in prayer, even though he's not religious. His fingers grip each other tightly, and this makes me lonely a little bit, somehow, and I pick more insistently at the dried glue on the counter. Pieces come off in my hand. I close my fingers around them.

A man in large glasses and wrinkled khakis walks into the room and clears his throat.

"Alright, let's get started."

I move to the circle, take the seat beside Will, put one of my hands on top of his clasped ones. It's like holding onto a rock. Does Will feel adrift like me?

The man in wrinkled khakis (his name tag reads Lou) asks the couples a question—"How do you feel today?"—and they begin to speak. Sometimes for each other, sometimes at the same time. They finish each other's sentences. They don't use pronouns when they speak, their speech is filled with *he* and *she* and *it*, because they have the luxury of someone there to decode their grief language for them. I look at Will. When we talk about Valerie, we use her name. I wonder if it's because we don't trust each other to remember her in the same ways. For a moment, I want to tell him all my secrets, talk to him until two in the morning like we did on our first date. I have this urge like people do with new boyfriends to know everything. I guess this new version of



Will is sort of like a new boyfriend, both of us so irreparably changed by Friday we are different people.

This is what I would say to the Will I knew:

When Valerie appeared for the second time, in the tub with her clothes on, the tub paints staining her fingers, I didn't feel happy, like I thought I would. I felt lucky, maybe? I was definitely shocked, and relieved and—don't hate me—excited that I was the one who got to have her back and you weren't. I wanted you to be jealous because I thought maybe that would ignite you, when you've been walking around with ashes for eyes since Friday.

Words don't mean the same as they used to before Friday, so I'm sorry if I say the wrong thing. I shouldn't have made you feel small by pinning you in a corner about the Missouri thing. I want you to want to be there with me. It's like the words I can think of to express myself don't really do any justice to the feelings roiling around inside me. The six-letter *scared* does no justice to the feeling I get when I pull out of the driveway—that I'm going to drive off the edge of the world accidentally, or that the police are going to stop me at a light and take me to prison retroactively so I can rot like I should. Sometimes I'll come home after a drive sure that I've hit someone even though I haven't, even though I would know it if I had.

I've had to rewrite my language, rewire my brain, so I can live in a world where four minutes of lapsed judgment (maybe two bad decisions in those minutes) can alter irrevocably the rest of your plans, what you think of yourself, the way you define family.

I was extra vigilant. Val used kids' mouthwash every time she brushed her teeth. We had shelves of parenting books, even ones we wouldn't need for years—*How to Talk so Your Teen Will Listen*, and others—that we haven't boxed up yet but that I want to throw on a bonfire. I

made a mistake. And it is that mistake, not that we read to Val every night, or that we took her to art class and ice-skating lessons, that makes other moms whisper about me. So I can hear them. They don't pretend. Maybe they think if they talk, loudly, if they point, if they pull their kids away from me in stores, that this won't happen to them. Before shit happens to you, you think that if you immerse yourself in it that you'll save yourself from it. It's why I chose social work. It was the—one of the—selfish reasons. On our first date, Will, I lied to you. I told you I got my MSW so I could help people. I lied to make things easier.

I thought if I threw myself into it I would be spared. From big tragedies and small ones. It didn't work. If anything, it made me more open to the small tragedies, the tiny tragedies of daily life. Like when you wouldn't want to talk about your day when you came home, which made me feel more connected to you than when we were lying in bed next to each other. I wanted to stay friends with you, separate from the intimacy, and the joint-parenting and the marriage. Friends share, Will. Couples, they expect each other to mind-read, they communicate through touches and silences and gestures. We needed to be friends.

I never had a best friend, because I kept parts of myself from people. That's another reason I joined social work—to hide. You're not supposed to share with your clients. If you do, it's considered undue attachment. And I figured, if I spent enough time not sharing, and not connecting, I would cease needing people. I immersed myself in finding affordable housing, and setting up GED tests, and performing intake interviews.

I needed a friend, not a daughter. I'd never been a kid person. I didn't coo over strollers, I didn't exclaim over pictures of my friends' kids. I read zero Mommy blogs. Val was an interloper. She messed with our relationship, which wasn't just about us anymore. It became

about preparing to be parents and you were so excited about being a dad—you were the one who bought the parenting books too early. You started cleaning up your language even before she was born, when before you were the first to grin and say, "That's what she said." You lost part of yourself when you became a dad, and I didn't feel like myself either, bloated and nauseous and craving lamb kabobs.

But something changed when I felt her kick. She began to have agency (but she couldn't get up and leave) so she became a repository for my problems. My listener when I needed to talk, and you were practicing saying "fudge" and "shitake mushrooms" when you stubbed your toe. You were becoming more alien and she was becoming a part of me—she ate what I ate, listened to the music I listened to—(You had declared The Smiths too depressing for a baby.) How could I not confide in her? She could never turn away, shut the door, sigh, get up out of her chair like my clients could. She couldn't pretend to listen like you could. She was my hostage friend. I took advantage of her.

When she was born I tried to make up for it. I let her have space, so she created a pretend universe. She spent her time galloping down the Oregon Trail in a tutu. She developed an imaginary friend—a cowboy named Lonestar—who she talked to while she galloped. She would have long conversations with Lonestar—I think he was named after that steakhouse where they encourage you to throw peanut shells on the floor—about school, and how to ford imaginary rivers safely, how to keep your barrels of cornmeal dry when you are crossing the Snake River in a Conestoga.

Because I commandeered her during pregnancy, I left her space in childhood, and she grew. I let her play outside by herself, which I know you didn't like, but which I thought would help her to learn to solve her own problems.

That brings us to Friday. When she was biking and you were out there with her and I was headed to the grocery store. Will, you know the rest.

Alright. The Will I knew is not the Will I know. And the Will I know is at support group with me. And I promised I would try.

I wonder if we use Val's name because we worry she'll really be gone if we don't keep conjuring her. Maybe we're talking to God, reminding him that she mattered to us.

Lou looks at a young couple next to us. Their nametags say Kim and Derrick. Derrick begins to speak.

“Our son Henry died last year from leukemia.”

Kim puts her hand on Derrick's knee. They have the whole united-against-a-common-enemy thing down. I looked at my knees. Bare, in shorts, which was also probably inappropriate. I should shave my legs more.

I drift.

We stood outside in the backyard because the air conditioning in the house was broken and the A/C guy was three hours late. We were all in our bathing suits and Will sprayed the hose. The water arced in the sky and sent rainbows onto the patchy grass. It puddled in the dirt and ran down our tiny hill. Val galloped around making horse noises. I looked into the driveway for the A/C guy.

Cold water hit me.

"Hey," Will said.

"What?"

"Watch this."

Val galloped up to the edge of the stream of water from the hose. She stepped forward. Will moved the hose. It reminded me a little of how someone might dangle a ribbon in front of a cat. Will's lightness was the first thing I was attracted to about him. It was one of the things I loved the most about him, that he could laugh things off. I worried about the A/C guy, and why he wasn't here yet and how we were going to get through bedtime and bath time and story time sticky and sweaty. Will lived in the moment.

Val stopped galloping and squinted through the sun at him.

"Dad. My oxes can't ford the river if the river moves." Then she started galloping. Will moved the hose so the water streamed over Val's feet, covered in grass clippings.

"Give Mommy the hose. You should retire," Val said.

I didn't look at Will so I could keep a straight face. He laughed loudly, and put his arm around my shoulders. He was warm from the sun and I leaned into him.

I laugh, and Kim and Derrick stop talking, confused.

"Sorry," I say.

Lou looks at me.

"Would you like to share?"

The load? The night sweats? The weight?

"Our daughter was killed," Will says. The clutching couples clutch tighter to each other—most of the kids who had passed had been sick. Valerie was singular, she'd become an

event to be examined, a mythic saint shot down by a mythic monster. I can't stay in this room any longer.

I get up and Will puts a heavy hand on my knee.

"She was four years old," he says.

I frown. "She just had her birthday. She was five. You got her the damn bike for her fucking birthday."

"Let's not get hostile," says Lou. "This is a safe space."

I laugh. I feel like there's a grenade under my chair. I address the couples.

"You think so?"

Will's hand tightens on my knee.

Guilt is a stomach cramp. New and immediate, it isn't the large, rolling, bulldozer guilt that I've lived with for months that normally keeps me from getting out of bed. It is pick-axe guilt, sharp and exacting, the kind that makes me want to push down every little girl I see in the grocery store. I imagine the pick-axe chipping at me like I was a statue. Soon, there will be nothing left. With a bulldozer, it would be quick. I would have similar injuries as if I'd gotten run over by a car.

One of the men in one of the couples: balding, pudgy, and red-faced, opens his mouth to respond. The woman with him shakes her head. He closes his mouth. His chins wobble. I want to laugh but it feels like riding a bike must have felt like for Val: new and scary. Even though I know I knew how to laugh once, I don't think I'll know it again.

#

On the way home, I think about what it would be like if I could create the world:

I would outlaw cars and driver's licenses. People would walk everywhere and I would walk with them. We would walk to school, to work, to doctor's appointments, to funerals. We would walk in funeral processions. Sometimes we might walk on our hands. Old people would walk, dragging their oxygen tanks. Babies would learn to walk and it would be a televised national event, an initiation.

I would hold Val's hand and we would walk for miles and I would listen to every story she told. We could jaywalk, crisscrossing the street on a whim. We would lay down in the middle of the street and sleep there, our dreams uninterrupted, dried drool at the corners of our mouths when we woke. Our neighbors would sleep in the middle of the streets too, until there would be no need for houses, except as keepers of domestic detritus.

After we slept in the middle of the street we would get up and walk some more. When we got tired we could carry each other, lean on each other. Mothers would carry children. Children would carry mothers. Forgiveness wouldn't be a four-letter word. Husbands and wives would clasp their children's hands and swing them up into the sky as they walked. They would never have to worry about the children coming back to earth.

#

The next day at work, Mary Anna plays in the plastic kitchen, pouring imaginary tea into a tiny yellow cup during free time. She mumbles to Hot Pocket, something about how she can have Cheetos and Twinkies for dinner. Being healthy doesn't matter because the aliens are coming after dinner anyway to take them on a field trip to another galaxy.

I lean back against the couch, from which vantage point I'm taking my adult supervisor role very seriously. The kids mostly ignore me, which is mostly fine. It used to hurt my feelings,

right after Valerie died, that the kids weren't clamoring to play with me. But then I realized that I filled a different role for them than they filled for me. I was an authority figure to them. To me, they were possibilities.

After Val died, I considered switching jobs. I feared there might be parental uproar, given the way that Valerie died and my role in her tragedy. The police filed a report after they left the scene: "Four-year-old Caucasian female. Hit by SUV. Child's mother, thirty-one year-old Caucasian female, driving vehicle." I kept the police report in the drawer of the nightstand on my side of the bed. Sometimes, I read it to remember. Sometimes I appreciate the police report for its chill. Sometimes I think the police report, the clinical, sanitized version of the story, might help me get through this. It tells the story, but it doesn't tell the story. Officially, it exonerates me.

On the first day back, one of the kids brought in a box of donut holes from his mom's shift at Dunkin' Donuts. On the second day, some of the girls asked me to let them fix my hair. On the third day, Tasha asked me how Valerie was feeling. I realized, then, that no one had told them. I considered keeping the truth in my back pocket: if Tasha was in a mood because her teacher made her move her clothespin to red, I could pull the ultimate trump card. Sometimes I wanted to see their faces when my truth shut them up. Immaturity was one of the weird grief surprises I hadn't expected.

In the end, though, I stayed at this job because I was selfish. I wanted a place where I could escape. Where the truth was a lie and a lie was the truth: my own Lewis Carroll novel.

An air hockey puck thunks into the goal and Tasha, playing Isaiah, slams the table with her open hand. C.J. mashes buttons on the PlayStation controller. They play games with rules.



They don't understand: reality is chaos. The only way to survive is to escape. Mary Anna understands. She's preparing for an alien invasion.

The alarm on my phone goes off and it's time for Reading. I should tell the kids they need to clean up and get ready to go. Every day they fight me during clean-up, and I don't think I can handle it today. Earlier today I told Isaiah to shut the fuck up and it was embarrassing but I couldn't stop myself. It was only the second time I'd cussed in front of the kids—the other time, when they kept chasing a snarling stray dog on the playground after I'd told them to leave it alone. Before Val died, I regretted how I handled that situation. Now, it doesn't seem to matter much. No one got hurt.

After Reading is group therapy, and then recess. The afternoon stretches out in front of me. There's a camera on the table by the couch and I pick it up instead and scroll through the pictures.

I pick the camera up and walk over to the plastic kitchen. I crouch behind the dirty, used-to-be-white wall, positioning the camera so I can see Mary Anna through a plastic window. I look through the viewfinder. Mary Anna looks down at Hot Pocket and smiles. I snap a picture. Mary Anna sets a plate of cake, lettuce and eggs in front of Hot Pocket and urges her to eat. I snap a picture. Mary Anna looks up at the click.

"Wanna play?"

I nod. She takes my hand and I move around to the inside of the kitchen.

"You be the baby and I'll be the mommy," Mary Anna says. "I have to cook you dinner before the aliens come."

For a moment I consider telling Mary Anna about the heat death of the universe, what scientists predict will be the end of everything. Then, I refrain. I don't want to scare her. And if I end up trying to tell her about the heat death of the universe, I might accidentally mar the articles, tell her about the heat death of *my* universe, and the way I'm always cold now. But, she's in first grade. She wouldn't get it.

I sit on a pillow on the floor. I feel like Mary Anna is already in another galaxy, that we didn't have to wait for the aliens to take us. The aliens might have already taken me. I'm not sure except that I feel alone, like I'm the only one who speaks my language. Mary Anna hands me Hot Pocket.

Hot Pocket smells faintly of urine, but I hold her anyway. I put my face to her cloth body and breathe deeply. Maybe the smell will bring me back, like smelling salts, from this other place I've gone. It doesn't work. All I'm reminded of is shame and frustration, of the times when I had to put Val's sheets in the washer before work and cross my fingers they wouldn't smell damp and musty by the time I moved them into the dryer.

Mary Anna putters around, pouring tea and opening and shutting the microwave, where she's put the extra plates and forks.

"You shouldn't be scared. They're nice aliens. They're gonna dress you up like Miley Cyrus."

"She's my fashion icon," I say.

Across the room, Tasha laughs, and looks at me closer.

"Go get a Kleenex," she tells me.

Mary Anna has no signs of a nosebleed. She's fine. There's a wetness on my cheeks but I smile through it. I hate crying in front of the kids almost as much as C.J. does. C.J. would much rather pinch or slap or yell than cry. I told him, last week when his mom said she'd be home when he got back from the center and she wasn't, that crying doesn't make you weak. Crying makes you strong. Even so, it's still embarrassing, and I need to stay in control here.

Tasha comes up to the kitchen with a wad of brown paper towels from the bathroom and hands them to me. She hugs me. I don't hug her back. This is unnatural. Tasha is the type to tease you if she sees the top of your underwear above the waist of your jeans.

Mary Anna climbs into my lap and leans back against me. I stretch my eyes open and bite my lip and look at the ceiling and breathe. Crying in front of them would be more embarrassing than reciting the Urban Dictionary.

Will appears in the doorway.

"Time for Reading," he says.

C.J. turns off the PlayStation. Isaiah picks up an air hockey puck from the floor. The requisite grumbling ensues.

"She's crying," Tasha says.

Will glances at me, eyes soft at the edges like the kids aren't there. I can't walk down that path with him right now, or I would want him to hold my hand right there in the doorway and tell me all the things I've forgotten about us.

I push Mary Anna off my lap and get up. I crumple the paper towels in my hand.

"Don't worry about it," I tell Will.

My voice doesn't sound like my voice. Aliens have, in fact, arrived.

Will puts his hand on my shoulder as I leave.

"The office is empty," he says.

I nod. Then I walk down the hall, into the office. I shut the door. None of the kids are there so I sit on the floor and try to catch my breath. Meteors burst inside my chest.

#

I haven't seen Will pray since we met on a mission trip to New Orleans in college. So, I'm surprised when I find him in the office the next day: hands folded, head bowed, whispering.

"That's not going to change anything," I say. Is he praying to see Val again?

He opens his eyes. He sad-smiles at me.

What? I want to ask him. Do you know answers to this mess that I don't?

"1. It won't bring Val back. 2. It's not you. 3. It irks me," I say.

He unfolds his hands and puts them on his thighs. He raises his eyebrows as if to say:

There. Happy?

He's sensitive about religion. I knew that and exploited it. His mom was a Christian, but Will has turned away from it for a lot of reasons, like marriage equality. He told me once that he didn't realize you could be a Democrat and a Christian until college. He hasn't prayed much since we had Val. We hadn't figured out yet how to broach the religion thing with her—should we just pick one, so she grows up with something? Or is it worse to drag your kids into a belief you're not quite sold on? Not a problem to solve now. I guess she knows more about the afterlife than we do. Will, during a crisis, has returned to what comforts him. I should apologize.

"You want to blame yourself," Will says.

My urge to apologize vanishes. Working together, living together, parenting together, and grieving together is too much. He is absolutely right. I do want to blame myself, because I don't see anyone else I can blame. I was the one driving. And the accident couldn't have been caused by a greater force, because then I'll start ruminating on God just as much as Will is. The more I think about God the more bewildered and anxious I feel. Will's mom's God is a judge. What if Will's God is a judge? What if there are supernatural forces set against Will and me getting through this? What if Will starts to believe in judgment?

And what happened to Valerie cannot be classified as an accident. That means it could happen again. I could lose someone else.

The office phone rings. One of the kids yells, "Phone!"

"Hello?" I turn my back to Will, welcome this other person, this new distraction. I get sick of us sometimes. I blame gravity. It brings you down. (Val's joke. I can't take credit.)

"Hello. This is Mary Anna's mother, Louise."

I sit.

"How can we help?" I say. My hands sweat. Does she know about the photo shoot?

"I was wondering if I could visit one day. My mother is coming into town and she'd love to meet Mary Anna's friends."

My hands sweat harder. I glance over at Will. Mary Anna doesn't really have friends here—during indoor recess a couple of weeks ago when the kids played duck duck goose, the picker—Tasha—wouldn't touch Mary Anna's head, because she's afraid Mary Anna still has lice.

"We would love to have you come visit," I say.

#

On the day Mary Anna's mom and grandma come to the center, I start praying. To God, I guess, even though it's complicated. I've basically put my foot in my mouth, given that I lashed out at Will for praying the other day. I've noticed that grieving can make you unfamiliar to yourself, and that is another layer of the sadness, I think—the uncertainty. You've lost someone, and then you're grieving them, and then you're not you anymore. You are this person who looks like you and has your job and tries to make your marriage work. How can Will and I try to make our relationship work if we are both, while mourning Valerie, morphing into other people? How will we ever understand each other again?

I pray I won't be exposed. I pray Mary Anna is forgiving. I pray she doesn't mind getting her picture taken, that she's not on the No Media List. Last week, I'd forgotten to check.

Mary Anna's mother is a thin woman. She smells like cigarettes. Mary Anna grips her hand, her chipped nail polish standing out against the freckled skin on the back of her mom's hand. Mary Anna's grandmother is overweight, and laughs loudly.

"I'm Emily," I say.

"Helen," Mary Anna's grandmother says. "Mary Anna talks about you all the time."

I smile. What has Mary Anna said? I keep smiling.

"Let's go on a tour," Will says. We walk to the playroom, where the plastic kitchen is set up. I check my walkie-talkie to see if anyone needs me anywhere else. I check again.

"We do play therapy in here," Will says. "Mary Anna's really been doing well with it."

I hold my breath. Mary Anna doesn't mention the photo shoot or the aliens coming for us in the plastic kitchen. She doesn't mention that I cried or smelled Hot Pocket or had to take a break for the rest of that day. Will doesn't look at me or acknowledge the photo shoot at all.

I want to kiss them both.

"Play therapy's an important part of our program," I add quickly. "The kids can act out stuff that they don't have the words for, and we can figure out how to help them more effectively."

"This has helped her deal with the Gary situation?" Helen asks.

Gary is Mary Anna's father. I think. Yes. I mean, I would know if I'd checked the file for the No Media form.

"Immensely."

"Definitely."

"We love Mary Anna around here," I say.

#

After Valerie died, I started to play, "Choose Your Own Adventure." It began with small things: if I got up at 7:00, I'd have time for coffee. If I got up at 8:15, I wouldn't have time to shower.

When I realized that getting up at 7:00 or getting up at 8:15 didn't matter (that it was the getting up at all that was the problem), I moved on to bigger adventures.

Like Option A: What if I skipped work? What would happen? Some nasty phone calls? Hours alone? Silent dinners played to a soundtrack of chewing, swallowing, scraping?

Or Option B: What if I didn't skip work? What would happen? Some nasty phone calls? Hours with people who didn't understand? Silent dinners played to the soundtrack of chewing, swallowing, scraping?

But what about Option C? What if I went to work even though Will in his infinite wisdom said I should stay home because, "my behavior is scaring the children"? What would happen? What then?

#

Valerie the Ghost won't stop screaming. At first because I woke her up too early. Then because she wanted to take a nap. (She never took naps when she was alive.) Her screaming has become like tinnitus, that ear thing where you always hear a ringing. I can't sleep. She follows me around so closely that she keeps stepping on my feet when I'm trying to make dinner. I can't get away. She's reverted back to when she was two years old, and wouldn't let me go to the bathroom by myself. I want to pee in peace.

In the middle of the night, she sits at the foot of the bed and screams. Then it gets really creepy and she stops calling me Mom. She calls me Thirty-one. As in thirty-one year-old Caucasian female, from the police report. I get out of bed and stuff my feet into tennis shoes without bothering to fix the tongues or heels so I can actually walk in them. I clamber around instead, stubbing my toe on the dresser. I grab a sweatshirt and my keys. She screams and runs after me, stepping on the backs of my heels. Why hasn't Will woken up? I was too panicked to be quiet in the bedroom, I even flipped on the lights for a minute. Did he pretend to stay asleep so he wouldn't have to comfort me?

#



What scares me is I arrive at the playground but I don't remember the drive. I could have hit someone else with my car. The journey is erased from my memory, and all I remember is the heat in my chest, the heat that spread and squeezed my lungs and my heart until I couldn't breathe, and then I was at the playground, pulling into a parking spot, and I didn't remember how I got there. If I'm losing time now, will I lose her? Like, the good parts? Her warm weight when she leaned back against me when I read her a story before bed? The way she laughed and swiveled in her seat when I told her Lonestar was riding his horse right outside our car on long drives? The way she would try to track him, even though he was invisible, even though I was teasing, saying he was always just behind the car in the other lane, or just up ahead waiting behind an exit sign on the highway. She never assumed I was just messing with her. She knew I was a good person, and wouldn't hurt her. I miss her faith in me.

I can't lose the good parts.

Sitting in my car in the playground, I think I might have finally escaped the Valerie who has been haunting me. I sit and listen to the sounds of the neighborhood for a second. I've never been here at night by myself, and I probably shouldn't be here, and maybe I should be more scared of the real dangers than the imagined Valerie dangers, but I drove here on auto-pilot. In one of the driveways, a car is parked with both doors open, music blaring. A young guy comes out of one of the houses and sits in the car. I want to sit with him and lose myself in the sound, feel the bass in my stomach and the bottoms of my feet. But that is unlikely, and unlike me, and not at all plausible. Mary Anna lives near here, but she's probably asleep.

But what if she's not? What if she's just watching TV? What if I could hold her for a minute?

I get out of the car. Mary Anna's house is blue, and it's on the next street. I walk that direction, past the playground. I won't do anything weird or creepy, I'll just look through the window to see if she's there, if she wants to play. If she wants to talk, then I'll do that. I'll do that. Maybe I'll tell her a story about Lonestar, maybe I'll make her laugh by saying that the imaginary cowboy is just behind her, and then slyly I'll tap her on the shoulder so she'll think the tap came from him. What fun we'll have. What fun.

Walking past the playground on the way to Mary Anna's, I see someone at the top of the slide. In the middle of the night. A little girl. She stands at the top of the slide, perfectly still, as if she's checking wind conditions before she slides down. Teal lights twinkle at her feet—light-up shoes. *Little Mermaid* light-up shoes. It's Valerie again.

“Thirty-one!” she yells when she sees me. “Thirty-one! Watch!”

I don't want to watch. I want her to leave me the fuck alone. I want to tell her I am not one mistake I made, I don't deserve to be reminded of the accident constantly, when I'm trying to move forward. I don't sit in my house alone in the dark anymore, we have a plan to release her ashes. I'm trying to move forward, and she's a weight on my legs, a hand pulling at the back of my shirt. She needs to leave me. Maybe if I watch her this one last time, she'll let me go and grieve her in a traditional way. I'll go see Kathleen again.

I stand on the sidewalk, on the other side of the chain-link fence that surrounds the playground, and watch her slide.

The tutu she wears poofs up around the sides of the slide. She tumbles off at the bottom, and lays down on the concrete a few feet away from the slide. She watches me, her head twisted in what looks like an uncomfortable position. Blood, black, thick, pools under her hair, even

though that's not how it happened, even though in real life, after the accident, it didn't even look like she'd been hurt. She looks like I imagine Elliot would have looked, lying down shot. I turn away and sit down on the sidewalk, leaning back into the fence, feeling the pressure of the metal chain links on my neck, through my hair.

I feel warm breath on my neck and I turn my face. Val sits on the other side of the fence, blood-free, legs crisscross applesauce. She sticks a finger through the fence and touches the hair that brushes my shoulders.

“You're acting selfish,” I say. “Please leave me alone.”

“I just miss you a lot,” Val says.

Guilt punches me in the stomach, knocks the wind out of me.

I turn to face her through the fence, touch the tips of her fingers through the metal. We watch the neighborhood light up together. The guy listening to music in the car in the driveway turns off the car and goes inside. Two houses down from him, a woman in green nursing scrubs backs out of her driveway. Cartoons blare from the open door as a teenager watches her leave. The new day begins.

On the way home from the playground, I turn up the radio as loud as possible so the car will shake like I am shaking.

#

I pull into the driveway at home and put the car in park, the radio still blaring so loud that the dashboard vibrates. I put my hand on the dash, feeling the vibrations through my fingers. The steady beat of the bass calms me, and I use the beat like a life support machine, breathing in rhythm until I can breathe on my own. In. Out. In. Out. Then, I have calmed myself enough to

turn off the car. I throw the keys out the car window, just in case this phone call goes badly and I want to run. I don't trust myself to drive while emotional anymore, anymore than I used to trust myself to drive tipsy. Also, throwing the keys out the window forces me to stay here, forces Will and me to confront each other. Once, Will and I went to a David Mamet play. All the characters talked around their problems, and never really said what they actually meant. The play made me so uncomfortable I went to the bathroom during intermission and stayed there until curtain call. I can see Will through the living room window. He sleeps curled up on the couch, the blue lights of the TV flash on his face.

Making this phone call publicly acknowledges that Valerie is back and I can't handle her alone. Making this phone call acknowledges that I lied to Will earlier, when I said that I must have been imagining her return. This phone call will break his trust in me, snap it, crack. We were skating on black, weak ice to begin with, and this admonition, this admonition—we'd be over.

After I make this phone call, I will be alone. I need the radio to breathe again. The keys glint silver on the border between the grass and the concrete driveway—I haven't tossed them far. I could reach out and grab them, turn on the car, feel the vibrations of the bass, breathe again. My phone glows in the cup holders between the driver's seat and the passenger's. They say repeated prolonged exposure to the blue-white light before bed might kill you. I would welcome it. I wish the keys weren't so far away. I sing the song that was on the radio before I turned the car off, try to self-soothe like we'd had to do with Val when she was a baby, when we'd listen to her cry on the baby monitor in the middle of the night and pretend we couldn't hear her. But, I can't feel the song in my hands this way. I can only feel the weight of the phone, or the phantom

weight of the phone where it should be, the phantom weight of what will happen after I dial Will's number and watch him pick up his phone from my spot in the driveway, in the car that's grown cold.

I must do it. I have to tell Will that Val is back, for real this time. Maybe we can handle her together. Maybe that's why she returned, to bring us back, too. Back from the brink of breaking apart, exploding like a dead star. He didn't leave when the accident happened (and he could have) so maybe that means he won't leave now, either. Maybe our romantic relationship still means something to him.

I would feel less afraid if I told him Val was back. I would still be afraid, but I think the fear would feel lighter, easier to carry. Through the curtain-less living room window, I see Will on the couch. So I guess he did wake up when he saw that I left in the middle of the night and drove to the playground. This makes me pick up the phone and dial his number.

He wakes up, sits up, and answers. I wasn't imagining Val's return, I tell him. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before, I tell him. I'm sorry I kept her from you.

He rubs his face with his hand. He looks out the window, sees me sitting in the car in the driveway.

"Come inside," he says.

I open the car door and pick up the keys from the driveway. I lock the car, the beep loud enough, I imagine, for the neighbors to notice and wonder why we're out driving around at 2 a.m. I put the keys in my pocket and walk inside the house.

#

After work the next day, Will and I drive home. Valerie sits in the back seat. She kicks my chair, angry. Earlier today Val had followed me around at work, trying to get my attention. I ignored her, and tried to focus on helping Isaiah with his spelling words. At the end of the day I found her in the plastic kitchen, trying to tear the plastic lettuce.

As we drive, there is a little conversation about how to make the kids at the center feel heard as individuals. There is talk of individual play sessions, individual therapy sessions, more focused parent-teacher-center communication. There are moments of silence, at stoplights, where neither of us wants to blame the other out loud for their shortcomings at work. There are times we roll down windows, a moment when I almost miss the turn to our street.

Throughout the drive, Mary Anna kicks my seat. When I look in the rearview mirror at her, she glares at me and sticks out her tongue.

When Will walks into the house through the garage, I open the back door for Val. She swings her legs out and hops down. Her light-up shoes twinkle. She smiles at me and takes my hand. We walk into the house. Very lightly, she pinches the skin on the inside of my wrist.

After, I don't see Val for a couple days. I always wonder if she's right behind me, just outside of my peripheral vision.

#

I walk into the room and Will's sitting on the couch watching old home videos and drinking a beer. It's been a week since I've seen Val. Part of me thinks—hopes—it might be over. The other part of me feels guilty for hoping that I don't see her again. I would love to put her in a metaphysical time-out, though. Love it.

The video Will watches is of the time all three of us went to Jamestown, right after Valerie watched *Pocahontas*. Her small squeaky voice comes out of the speakers. She talks to the costumed interpreter, who is trying to explain how to mash corn kernels and asks Val if she's ever seen the movie *Pocahontas*. Val says that she doesn't need to learn, that she already knows it. Because she's not only seen *Pocahontas*. She is Pocahontas.

I laugh, because I'm tired of crying. I sit on the couch. Will hands me his beer and I take a sip from it, snuggle up against him. He's warm but his shirt's wet, and I wonder if maybe he's laughing because he's tired of crying too.

"Want to watch another one?"

I nod. I want to hear her voice again, in a way that doesn't make me question myself. She's been gone all day, so I've convinced myself that she's gone for good.

Will gets up from the couch to put another DVD in.

"Come back," I say.

He turns for the DVD player, surprised. Lately, I haven't really been vocal about needing him. I should be more vocal about it. Hearing that he's needed would probably make Will feel better. If we both know we need each other, then there's more motivation to fight this, to fight through this.

Will leans over the coffee table to kiss me. I run my thumb across his cheek. He comes back to the couch and the new video starts to play. It's her 2nd birthday, when we got out the inflatable baby pool and set it up in the yard. She wears a bathing suit with little yellow ruffles across the bottom and a duck face across the front. Every so often she puts her head underwater, blows bubbles, and comes up giggling.

"We've got the next Michael Phelps on our hands," someone off-camera jokes.

She smiles, all gums and dimples. She looks into the camera and reaches out a pudgy hand for it.

Will sips his beer. I sip Will's beer. I put my head in his lap and stretch out. Later, I realize his pants are tear-stained. After the DVD's done, we stay put. Maybe we're going to get through this.

I walk into the bathroom and turn on the light and the faucet so I can wash my face. The water is cold and my skin tingles. Someone's watching me. I turn. Pull the shower curtain back. There's no one there. I go back to the sink and squirt some face wash into my palm. I rub it into my hands and spread it over my face like a mask. I look in the mirror. I don't look like me.

I run the faucet again and splash water on my face. I press the heels of my hands into my eyes, like I did at the funeral, until I see bright green shapes on the inside of my eyelids. I breathe and remove my hands. I'm recognizable again, even though the hairs in my eyebrows are sticking out in weird directions. I smooth them.

I hear a rumbling noise like a car engine outside in the driveway. It gets closer. Closer. It turns away. Someone screams. A car door slams. Another scream. Probably just kids in our neighborhood. I shiver.

There's a sound from behind the shower curtain, like splashing water. I pull it back. Valerie lies facedown in the water, her hair floating around her head. The water runs and keeps running. I pull her out of the tub and hold her against me on the mat. CPR. I do chest compressions, the beat in time with the rushing water. She doesn't wake up.

#



I'm sitting on the bed, trying to read, and Valerie won't stop telling me knock-knock jokes. She always gets the timing wrong. God, she's aggravating. Maybe if I focus on my book, she'll go away.

"Knock knock," she says.

I keep my mouth shut for as long as possible. Then, the words bubble in my throat, dangerous and compelling. The more I talk to her, the more real she seems, the less OK I am. The more I talk to her, the worse off Will and I are. But, Will's not here right now. And these quiet moments are the ones I miss, the ones I assumed I'd have more of.

"Who's there?"

The bedsprings squeak as she jumps up and down. She seems large when she jumps at the foot of the bed, like she's growing. Like she'll push me out until there's no space and she's dangling the house on her finger with her pinky hooked through the bedroom window.

"Interumting cow." she says.

I hide my smile. She's in a bad mood today which would only get worse if she thought I was laughing at her. Earlier, I was making breakfast and she pulled every pot out of the cabinet.

"Interumting cow who?" I ask.

Squeak. Squeak.

"Moo!" she screams.

I cringe. Will is in the next room, reading the paper. If Valerie would just shut up for a minute, I might be able to hear the rustling of the pages, the quiet thump of the coffee cup on the table.

I get up from the bed to close the door and find Will in the doorway. He turns sideways so he can pass through the door with a lot of space between us.

"I just needed my wallet," he says.

"I just needed some time to myself." I answer, even though he hasn't asked me why I'm here in the bedroom, he might not have even noticed.

Will glances at me like he doesn't believe me at all. He doesn't ask me if I'd been on the phone, like I'd imagined when this moment came up.

I reach out to him. He puts his hands in his pockets.

Sweat is caught in the tiny hairs at Will's hairline. Was he really reading the paper earlier? Or does he have secrets, like I do?

Valerie sits on the edge of the bed and kicks the wall. She's angry that I'm ignoring her. I'm angry that she won't leave me alone.

Will sits on the floor and leans against the bed. While Valerie seems like she's grown, I could have sworn that Will looks like he's shrinking.

"Tell me about her," he says.

I sit down next to him. I'm really impressed actually. I think this shows growth, or a willingness to try to keep us together, that he accepts the way my grief is manifesting, even though he said he would rather my grief than his; he would rather hallucinations than absences.

"She's not still covered in blood or anything?"

I shake my head. A more rude, more snarky version of me would have said something like, *This isn't an M. Night Shyamalan movie.*

"Does she ever talk about me?"

I think that maybe if I don't look at him when I lie, I might be able to get away with it. So I look at the ceiling and watch the ceiling fan spin.

"She misses you."

We are each of us on opposite sides, torn apart but forced together by this huge experience that makes sense to neither of us.

#

Will walks into the kitchen. It's so humid in here that his feet stick to the tile floor, the sound like pulling the back of your legs off a leather seat in a car on a hot day. I drop the wet sponge into the sink. Suds slide down the basin and disappear.

Sleep has stolen choices from Will—he blinks into the light. The curve of his mouth is caught between Angry and Sad and it reminds me that we are insignificant. From here, this vantage point, my emotions control me. I guess Will's emotions control him, too. His pain makes me—happy, almost. Relieved? Definitely. Right now, at 3 a.m., the kitchen smells like artificial lemons. I hope he takes this a sign that I'm not OK.

"What are you pretending to be?" I ask.

This is Valerie's question. (She loved it best when you pretended—in the middle of the mundane—to be mythical: a mermaid doing the dishes, a unicorn mowing the lawn, a hippogriff folding laundry.)

So Will and I are here: so far from each other that we must speak our dead daughter's language through tin cans on long, unraveling strings. Or maybe we are connected by threads.

The smell of sour old deodorant overwhelms me when Will steps closer. He looks around the kitchen, at the cleaning supplies and the oven clock.

"Want to talk about it?" he asks.

I grab a broom and sweep, pushing the question away with the dirt and dust and dried pasta I find under the dishwasher.

Will might be playing a game, which unsettles me. He told me last week that at the community theatre he's been volunteering at, the actors sometimes improvise scenes that are full of questions. If you answer a question, you're out. I wouldn't put it past Will to manipulate me. I'll play too.

"What are you pretending to be?" I ask.

Angry and Sad battle for territory across his features. Angry has taken the space between his eyebrows. Sad flickers across his mouth and sticks a flag to claim his eyes. He gets a glass from the cupboard and puts it underneath the ice cube dispenser in the fridge. The ice cubes clink against the glass. I set the broom down and reach for my Clorox wipe. The army Fear stomps across my nose and sets up camp in my cheeks.

"Since when do you relish being nasty?" he asks.

I wipe the counter. I wasn't trying to be nasty at all.

"A merman?" I ask. "A garbage man? A happy man?"

We both watch the water fill his glass. He speaks, and I lean closer.

"Do I look happy?"

I touch his face. Will's beard hides his mouth. (He started growing the beard when he played Oregon Trail with Valerie, and he hasn't shaved.) It makes his smile seem like a secret, or a gift. My love affair began with Will's teeth.

I push the corners of his mouth up, though his lips fall slack without my prodding.

It feels like I'm wearing forty-seven wool coats at the beach. I trace my finger along Will's jaw; I rub all the hairs in his beard the wrong way.

Will steps away from me, backs up against the fridge, with the picture of Val taped to it.

"How about a dead cat on the side of the road? Is that what you're pretending to be?"

There had been a moment last year, when Will was napping, and he told Val this when she asked what he was pretending to be. She'd pounded on him with her tiny fists and I hadn't stopped her, happy it wasn't me she was railing against for once.

I meow at him, to try and make him laugh.

"Wasn't that you?" he asks.

No. He would not make me feel guilty for taking one moment for myself.

"Tell Val. She was angry at you, if I remember."

"Do it for me?"

I grab a Clorox wipe and put it over his mouth so he can taste it.

I wake up from a dream about multiple Fridays. They all line up against each other, the same image of Valerie on the concrete playing on repeat. Each Friday, I get gradually grayer, more gnarled—but Valerie stays the same. On the last Friday in the line-up, I talk out loud even though there's no one around except Valerie.

"When's Saturday?" I ask.

"Friday is a planet," she says. "You live here."

I walk into the kitchen, to Will, who stands at the counter with his back to me.

“Morning,” I say.

Will turns on the coffee maker. I think maybe he hasn’t heard me, so I’m about to apologize. I’m prepared to apologize; I should apologize, and then—

“Morning,” he says.

I take a filter out of the box in the cupboard and hold it in my hands. The scalloped edges blow in the air-conditioning. I hold it. Will takes it and puts it into the machine, pours grounds into it. While the coffee brew, he turns and holds his arms out for me. If I use the dim morning light through the faded curtains to my advantage, then I can pretend Will is different, not the one who bullies me with words like *talk* and *help* and *professional*.

We dance in the kitchen. I hear Neil Young’s *Harvest Moon* in my head and it reminds me:

One time I cat-sat for my neighbor and her husband, who were out of town for the weekend. Their cat was a woolly mammoth, 20 pounds at least and a fan of two things: lumbering and laziness. The cat’s name was Floyd; we stared at each other as I lay with him on the carpet, my almost empty third drink resting beside me.

"Floyd," I said. "What’s red and smells like blue paint?"

He didn’t answer.

"The fat clogs his synapses," said Will, from the couch. I laughed. I had just recently decided that I liked Will, because he remembered a really crappy joke about zombies that I told him six weeks ago, on the night we met.

I abandoned Floyd and sat on the couch. Will called Floyd over and scratched him behind the ears. We both petted the cat for a minute. I watched Will's hands, the way his fingers ran through the cat's fur.

"Weirdest kid at the center," Will asked. It was kind of abrupt, and it made me smile, because he'd thought it out like a talking point.

I thought for a minute. There was the kid named Courvoisier, there was the little boy who danced like Michael Jackson. There was an eight-year-old who sucks his thumb.

"Mary Anna," I said. "She names all her toys after processed food from the Dollar Tree."

Will hid his smile in his pint glass.

"I'm not kidding. She's got Hot Pocket now, but before she had a stuffed snake named Cinna Bun and a plastic fairy named Fritos."

Will raised his glass. "To childhood obesity."

I raised mine. "To parenting skills."

Harvest Moon came on the radio. Will put his hand on my knee. I relaxed.

Will turns on the faucet, the water rushing into the glass coffee pot. Will rests his hand on my shoulder and I move away, because I can't see the point.

I sit on the floor, the tile cold through my cotton pajama pants. I lie down and the cold soaks through me, reaching the pad of each fingertip and the bottom of each toe. I see the marks of old marshmallows on the ceiling, when Valerie used a slingshot to see if she could get them to stick.

"We need to clear out Valerie's room. You take the books, I'll take the stuffed animals. We'll split the pictures."

I imagine us ripping each picture of Valerie precisely in two.

Will leaves the kitchen. Through the swinging door, I see empty boxes and crates outside of Valerie's room.

Cleaning Val's room comes to me in sounds and images, like snapshots piled on top of each other on the bottom of a swimming pool, filtered sunlight spreading over frozen faces. There are empty boxes and empty crates, music plays. Plush brushes against cardboard, not unlike the pieces of tulle that rubbed together as Val ran around in her tutu. Button eyes hit the edges of plastic crates. The music is Run DMC.

We walk into the room and cover the mirrors even though we aren't Jewish.

Underneath these coats is a body that beats out of time.

So there's this:

Will sitting in a pile of dress-up clothes.

At the same time:

I lean back against the covered mirror and close my eyes. The cool glass through the cloth, and not my husband's face, makes me choke up.

And this:

My fingers stuck in tiny baby shoes from the Keep Forever Box at the top of her closet, walking through the sorted piles of books and making some cheesy joke about rappers.

Later, this:



Will reads aloud from *Little House in the Big Woods*, until all I can think to do is lie down next to him and put my head in his lap.

Soon after:

His hand on my hair, tears on my neck. His tongue licking them away.

Later, this:

Books restacked, dress-up clothes piled into garbage bags for storage. A toy xylophone with three keys missing pings into a crate.

At the end, this:

I press my face into the carpet in front of the mirror. This is what our grief may have been like if Valerie had been sick instead of murdered. I look at him without raising my head from the floor and find him looking at me. For a moment on this carpet we might cross light years.

#

So Will and I went to the theatre early for his acting class. I'd told him I would go, because he thought it would be a good idea, because it was Val's first day of kindergarten—or, the anniversary of it—earlier this week, and I'd been out-of-sorts-lately. Not that I'd been in-sorts much lately, either, but neither had I been sleeping much. So, I guess the acting class is better than another dose of Nyquil, in the long run.

It must be that people don't normally just drop in on acting classes—the people in the theatre when we get there have formed groups already and the women appraise me through faces with too much make-up. One of them wears dark false eye lashes even though she's not in costume. On stage, a young man holds a script, mutters to himself, and paces. Two young women in dance clothes—spandex, tank tops, character shoes—stretch onstage. The stage floor

is painted black with bits of glow-in-the-dark spike tape stuck to it. Two folding metal chairs are set up facing each other next to a naked light bulb in a cage on a stand that emits a pale glow. Will, who tried to give me the rundown so I'd be a bit more comfortable, calls it a ghost light. It doesn't illuminate much, as the house lights are on.

The light goes out.

A man in black with a bunch of keys on his belt loop and a headset around his neck comes onto the stage and picks up the light.

"Sorry," he says. "You're all set."

A barefoot woman walks up onto the stage.

"Alright, let's come together," she says.

The young man with the script stops muttering and the women in dance clothes stand up. We walk onto the stage and sit on the floor in front of the metal chairs which are so close to each other they're almost touching.

"Today we're going to listen to each other." The teacher calls two volunteers from the group and they sit in the chairs.

"Repeat the word your partner gives you," she says. "Match tone and inflection. Don't act." She glances at the young muttering scripthead. "Listen. Connect."

One of the volunteers—a young woman in character shoes—begins.

"Cup," she says.

"Cup," her partner repeats. They match inflections and tones; they sit mirroring each other, both with legs uncrossed, feet firmly planted on the floor. Will says this body position—neutral position—makes it easier for an actor to become a character. In neutral position, the actor

is centered. I wonder if all I had to do this whole time, to become someone else, was plant my feet.

The teacher signals for the volunteers to stop. “Two more.”

I raise my hand.

“Were you absent the other weeks?”

For some reason I start to panic, even though this isn’t a panic-worthy question.

“Yes,” I say. “I’d like to try the exercise.”

She motions for me to sit.

I sit.

Will volunteers and sits opposite me. We look at each other.

“Don’t begin until you feel motivated,” the teacher says.

We study each other. I love what we’ve built together. I can remember his face in all its expressions and that makes him more beautiful—that he’s shown me everything; that he trusts me with all the ways his face can fold. He let me see him in all his moments and didn’t turn away. I’m not sure then, how I could let him go. How do you abandon someone when you’ve seen what fear looks like on their face?

I’m not sure what word to say. He touches my knee with his; I touch my other knee with his. He takes my hand. I take his other hand. We stand. He touches my elbow; I touch his elbow. His fingers on my hip. Mine on his. We mirror each other’s movements until we are standing with our legs and feet alternating and parallel. He puts his hands above my breasts, fingers touching my collarbone. I put my hands on his chest. I must speak.

“Missouri,” I say.

“Missouri,” he says.

#

Valerie sits in the driveway with me as I load the car for Missouri. I’m trying to ignore her, as periodically Will comes outside with a cooler or an extra suitcase—and it doesn’t make any sense for her to return to me, when she loved him best. I’m sure of it. It’s really hard to ignore her, though, when I want her to tell me what the other side is like. If it’s better than this.

She still hasn’t spoken to me. She sits on the edge of the driveway, legs on the cement, butt in the grass. I watch her in the reflection from the back window of the car before I pop the trunk to load it.

“Did you come back to talk to Daddy?” I ask without turning to look at her. I keep my voice low and undetectable. I know the answer to this, so I shouldn’t be asking. I’d even scolded Valerie on occasion for asking questions she knew the answers to; I accused her of liking to hear herself talk.

But there’s a difference here: I don’t want to be having this conversation. I just think that talking to her would help me try to figure out, maybe, what’s real and what isn’t.

“You need me more,” she says.

“Daddy loves you,” I say.

“I know that already.”

She picks a blade of grass and twirls it between her fingers. I’m not sure if she means that she’s unsure of my love, so she came back, or that she’s sure that I need someone watching out for me, so she came back. There’s another question I’m unsure of, that I’m unsure I want the answer to, that I’m sure will mess us up if I ask it. I look at Valerie, not in the reflection but full

on. It's like one of those acting exercises Will talks about, where I don't speak until I've made eye contact with my scene partner, and the pressure is too strong. I don't speak until I must.

"Can you talk to Daddy?"

She makes a slit in a blade of grass and tries to whistle through it. She can't get a sound, so she throws the blade onto the driveway. It flutters and falls.

"No," she says. "Just you."

#

On the way to Independence, where we've decided to release Val's ashes, we ride in silence on the highway. The brake lights of the car in front of us pulse. We were going to be on this road for a while. I looked over at Will, reading the paper. At the start of the drive, I thought it was kind of disrespectful, somehow, to pass the time doing anything but thinking of Val. But, this was hour fourteen. Sitting in silence only works for so long, before you contemplate turning around, or at least stopping at a rest stop, permanently. The urn sits on the floor at Will's feet, tucked in between his shoes. I fiddle with the air conditioning.

"I'm not sure I can do this," I say.

"Tired?" Will says without looking up from his paper. "I can drive."

I don't say anything, because I'm not sure what to say. I could say yes or no, and both would be true. Does he mean tired physically? Or spiritually? Because both of those are true, too. Being spiritually tired actually aches. I feel it in the space between my shoulders, this melancholia. I feel it in the arches of my feet. The spiritual fatigue hobbles you in a different way than physical fatigue.

I haven't answered, so Will puts his paper down and looks at me. He puts his hand on the back of my neck and kneads the tight tendons with his fingers.

"Do you want to keep driving?" He asks. This seems like an existential question, and it does nothing to lift my melancholia. If this tight, jumpy feeling doesn't leave soon, I think I'll put the car in park and get out and walk along the highway. I curl my toes inside my shoes, just to have some focused tension that I can release, instead of this tension that seems to hang in the air, heavy like a comforter that you must air dry.

Will gives me the *use your words* look that we both sometimes give the kids. I think of shooting him back another look, another phrase we tell the kids: *you get what you get and don't get upset*.

Something needs to lift this wet comforter that has bundled us together or I will bury myself in it. Will told me once of this play that he saw in college—*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. He said it was dark, and funny—the story of a couple who is nasty to each other because they have never been able to conceive. Because they haven't conceived, they've concocted a fake child that neither of them is supposed to mention to anyone. The wife, Martha, mentions their fake son during a dinner party. The husband, George, then "kills" him. Before Val died, I would have thought of a death joke, but I would never have said one out loud. But, I guess it's like this: the worst has already happened. All I can control now is my reaction to it. I can grieve, or I can kill myself.

I search for something, anything, a joke or a funny story or a witty observation and I come up with a question.

"Who did she think she was? Lance Armstrong?"

Will takes his hand off the back of my neck. My ears hear my question the way he must have heard it—totally out of the blue and definitely horrible and I think *oh fuck. Oh fuck.* I freeze for a moment, and wonder if saying a joke like that is like the opposite of saying the kaddish that the therapist told me about. Val will drop through the levels of Heaven she’s climbed, and we’ll both go straight to Hell. Me for transgressions, her for association to transgressions that were so egregious.

And then Will laughs, tears rolling. I’m glad traffic is still stopped at the moment, because I shouldn’t be driving through this. I think this is the moment where he might actually forgive me for what happened on Friday. If he sees us getting through this, I can try to see it. We can start to forgive each other for all the times our sadness made us not give a shit for each other, for the time he “kept an eye on me” while I was watching the kids on the playground because he thought I would hurt them, for the time I asked him take a walk and look at the stars with me, and he acted like he hadn’t heard.

“Maybe she was racing for the yellow jersey,” Will says.

And then I laugh, sobbing, and the wet comforter lifts. Or, actually, I heave it off us. I lift my feet off the brake and we move forward.

I miss the weight of her, the girl I carried. We stand nose to neck, ear to ear, legs to waist. We watch the funhouse mirror and see a distorted version of ourselves, this nosenecklegwaist creature we’ve created. He stands apart. The mirror makes our eyes bigger as we watch him, our hands bigger as we grip each other.

We’re on a metal bridge in the funhouse in a tube that spins, red and white and red and white stripes. I grip the railing. I feel clarity here, her weight on my chest, her hair in my nose,

her drool sliding under the collar of my shirt. He's in front of us, I try to reach him but I am too heavy. I grip the railing to pull myself forward but I can't and I'm stuck and I want to cry, the tears falling into the spinning tube and disappearing like they were never here except I know they're here I feel then sliding down my face. I look in one of the mirrors that's on the inside of the spinning tube a moment before it turns beneath me and I see myself, dry-faced. He turns, he looks, he turns away. She's drooling on my collarbone, her lips on my skin like a kiss but not, even when I curve my shoulder into her face. She shifts and turns her lips to the air, away from my skin, and me, and anything she might want to say but can't find the words to.

I am angry. I turn her head and press her face to my skin, her lips on my neck and I close my eyes because I can pretend she did it on purpose that she wants to show me affection. I hold her head against my shoulder and I feel her start to try to move her head under my palm and then I realize she can't breathe, and I release her.

#

The wind is so cold it makes my eyes water. I hesitate; the urn heavy in one arm and the metal of the car door handle icy in the other hand. We've come to Missouri to say goodbye, finally, to Valerie in the way that we want to. A part of me wonders if the ghost of the returned Valerie will also be gone after we release her ashes. Another part of me wonders, if that's true, if I really want to go through with this. And yet, another part of me focuses on feeling the elements of the physical moment: the wind, the gravel under my boots, the bright neon-yellow windbreaker of a man closer to the shore who is not here to release his daughter's ashes.

I shut the car door. I'm not confused or foggy like I was at Val's first memorial service, the one handled by the funeral director right after her death. I see things clearly now: the green



choppy water of the river, the way Will's nose is red from the cold. He has what I used to tell Val are called "sleepy sand", dried yellow build-up in the corners of his eyes. He was crying in his sleep, I think, while I was driving.

What bothers me most about the Missouri River was the smell, a mix of dead fish and industrial chemicals. When I did research before we decided to come here, I read there were a lot of catfish in this river, and I imagine her ashes sinking to the bottom of the river, probed by whiskers on the way down. I wonder if people eat the catfish out of this river—there's a man fishing down closer to the shore. I wonder what the catfish would taste like, if you could taste the death on them, if the restaurants around here sell grief-flavored catfish, catfish à la regret.

There's a bridge over the river that I can see from my spot in the parking lot next to the car. I can't really move right now, because my legs feel heavy, like last time I had the flu and had to nurse Val through it at the same time. Right now, I'm not sure my knees would bend if I was a yoga instructor, let alone being this small, insignificant, warped person that the year has twisted like a Bonzai tree.

The bridge has metal barriers that seem that they'd be cold on this gray, wet day. Mud puddles in the uneven gravel of the parking lot, and I have to twist to avoid a brown splash from a car pulling out of a spot. Or, I would have had to twist around, if I could move. I feel like this grief experience has been about making myself smaller, adjusting my behaviors to the world around me. The last night at home, I'd planned to make pasta for dinner, and then changed my mind when I saw that the pot needed to be washed. I'd made bratwurst instead. Conditions seem set now, rigid. I'm not sure of the set condition of Will's feelings toward me now. I'm not sure, even if I'm as flexible as possible, if I can change anything about his feelings for me, or our

future together. I remember that my dad told me one time that you can only control your own feelings and your own actions. With that in mind, I take a step toward the river. It's one step. A beginning.

Will wipes his eyes and puts his arm around me. I stop the forward motion it took me such courage to begin. We stand behind the back bumper of the car, looking at the river. Another car parks in the space next to ours and a woman gets out quickly to soothe a screaming toddler. I move closer to him.

“We're here,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say.

We walk down to the river, to a scenic look-out. There's another family there, taking selfies on their phones. The daughter of the family seems about ten, the parents seem tired. One of them mentions something about deciding on a place to go to lunch after this.

I think about taking the urn back to the car and just sitting there for a while. I think about telling the family to take their Arby's vs. Denny's argument somewhere else. There's something kind of devastatingly hilarious about listening to the mom (“At least at Arby's they have Market Fresh Sandwiches” and the kids “I heard that Arby's meat comes out of a plastic tube like cake icing.”) while Will and I are about to have this serious moment. I wonder if, regionally, Denny's sells catfish a la death.

I put the urn on the stone ledge separating the look-out from the sharp drop to the river. The father of the family notices and moves the family further away to another part of the look-out. The mother pauses. Comes up to us. I think she's going to speak and I panic. What if she wants to ask my opinion on the Arby's vs. Denny's debate? This is the first question that comes

to mind, even though it's not really what I'm panicked about, obviously. What bothers me is something that I can't really talk about with strangers, which is why I've stopped answering parent phone calls at the center. Which is another one of the reasons that I hope Will will stay, or that I hope Will will want to consider trying to figure out a way to stay. He's the only one who understands the pressure of this particular weight, because he carries it too. Sometimes, we carry it together. Lately, we've been carrying it alone, almost embarrassed. Or, I'm assuming that Will is embarrassed because I'm embarrassed. People say there's a timeline on grief, and I've missed every check point.

Instead, she wraps her arm around both of us and pulls us into her. She releases us and goes back to her family.

Will and I turn to the view: dark green trees on the opposite bank, white-caps in the water.

"I love you," I say.

"I love you," he says.

I feel a great responsibility in this moment. Like, it's a way for us to show Val that we love her—we will bear witness as she begins her own journey west. I wonder about God, and the other side, and the possibility and the comfort of peace that passes all understanding. I don't remember Valerie's funeral at this moment, or the way her body looked behind the car, in the ambulance, in the hospital bed, with the tutu cut off her. I don't remember the first night, after we left the hospital and it was over, when we couldn't stop talking to each other about inane things like star facts and recent spelling tests at the center, when I touched Will all night—his hand, his knee, the top of his head, his toes, his nose, his shoulders—just to make sure he was

still there. I don't remember the way he touched me the first night, with a calm, steady hand. I remember Valerie at the beach last year, on vacation in Florida, when she wore a pink bathing suit with ruffles on the hips. I remember the way she sat, legs spread and hooked around a plastic bucket full of sand, the pink bottoms of her feet flecked with shell pieces. I remember her reaching into the sand bucket, her face concentrating deeply as she let the sand fall through her fingers.

We reach into the urn together. We release her.

#

When we get home, I see Valerie less, and I start to wonder if maybe she came back from the other side to allow us the closure we sought. I feel a bit like I've got emotional whiplash. Valerie was gone, then she was back, and then I didn't want her to be back, and now she is gone. Did I push her away?

Will keeps going to his acting class; he auditions for a play. He gets a part. One that requires him to study his lines by listening to them on a tape recorder while he helps with dinner or reviews incident reports.

I don't really do much. Sleep a lot, I guess. Go grocery shopping periodically. After one of these trips, I feel off.

I walk into the kitchen and set the groceries on the counter when I hear voices. Will's and another woman's. I follow the sound into the living room. Will and this other woman sit on the couch, facing each other. They hold scripts in their laps, but barely reference them. I hold my breath. They haven't noticed me yet.

Will clears his throat and looks at the woman until she looks at him. He says his line. I study his face. Maybe it's in the eyes, or the lines around the eyes, or in the mouth, or in the lines around the mouth, but Will looks different. He touches the woman's knee and I realize: He looks like pre-Friday Will. The same smile just below the surface of his mouth. He looks like he's about to tell a joke, and I haven't seen his face like that for a long time.

The woman looks up from her script and directly at me.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt," I say.

"You're Emily, right? Will's told me a lot about you?"

She looks at Will, the question in her voice, her eyebrows raised. Maybe she doesn't think she should have said that? What has Will told her about me? What has he revealed about us?

"Anna's niece might benefit from coming to the center," Will says. "I told her that you like to observe them at school before you invite them to come."

I nod. So he hasn't told her about Valerie. I look at his face, to try and see if this was true. He looks like the Will who went ghost-hunting with a glowstick. He's not lying. He smiles.

"We should get back to it," Will says.

I start to walk back into the kitchen to unload the groceries. Will turns back to Anna and Pre-Friday Will bursts to the surface again. I need to hold on to him.

"Anna!" I call out. "Want to stay for dinner?"

I cook like my mom: not well. So, I'm worrying that the chicken might be burnt when Anna sits down at the table.

"So is this your first show?"

Anna smiles.

"My nineteenth, actually. *Medea*'s in tech right now, so I figured this time I'd try something happier."

Will laughs over-loudly. I lean forward and look at Anna intently, so I can control my thoughts from going off in *Medea* directions.

"Well, you're very talented," I say.

For a while, we scrape knives against plates, pour salad dressing into bowls, wipe our mouths with napkins.

"Is theatre a release for you, too?" I ask. Man, I'm winning the awkward medal tonight. After Val died, I lost my ability to small-talk, not that I was much good at it in the first place. It seemed pointless, and boring. How do you talk about *American Idol* when your daughter has died? I asked Will about it, once, and he said, "How can you not want to pretend that Simon Cowell's slights are the most devastating things you've heard?"

Anna looks sideways at Will and smiles. Maybe they don't ask each other why they act, maybe they just do it. But I need to know, for Will, the why of it. Why is the largest moon that orbits Friday, its grainy blue light casting shadows over everything.

"I'd say so," Anna says. "I guess."

It is at this moment that Will decides to try his hand at telepathy. He looks at me.

*Why are you being so personal?*

*Did I tell you about Friday's largest moon?*

Will doesn't answer me, telepathically or otherwise, and he and Anna start chatting about the director's daily prima donna outbursts and the other cast members' penchant for singing Sondheim. I'm left with my thoughts, and I spear a piece of chicken.

When Will says he's going to the theatre, I imagine this:

Will sits in a metal folding chair in a rehearsal hall, the other actors mill about and check their phones and sing songs they heard on whatever Original Broadway Cast Recording they were listening to in the car on the way to rehearsal from their 9-5's. In my imagination, Will smiles at all these actors, maybe he even kind of flirts with the woman who is his scene partner. It's easy and fun between them, because they don't really know each other, though, ironically they use someone else's words to communicate, as we did, that night in the kitchen. But their shared language is crafted by an impartial third party more interested in rhythm and flow and syntax, whereas our kitchen-night words were crafted by a partial third party interested not in syntax, but sins.

What I hope isn't true:

Will lays down in the middle of the dark stage in front of an empty house. The ghost light flickers in the middle of the stage, throwing just enough light for him to see his hands in front of his face. None of the other actors are here. They spend their time before rehearsal in the greenroom playing cards or smoking or eating vending machine food. Will can hear them anytime anyone opens the stage door, which only happens once (the stage manager comes in to unplug the ghost light and lock the prop cabinet after rehearsal) and Will realizes he's missed rehearsal entirely. Laying in the middle of the stage, Will smells sawdust from the scene shop. He gets gluey spike tape stuck to his palms. Maybe Will cries a little, because the escape is not the escape he longed for. Maybe Will finds comfort in the dark.

Anna raises her eyebrows at me and I realize she must have asked me a question.

“Sorry, what?”

“*Medea* opens Tuesday night,” she says. “Do you want my comp tickets?”

Anna turns to Will.

"I'd love for you to be there," she says.

Will smiles at her.

Telepathically, Will says, *I don't feel like I can get out of this. She doesn't know about Valerie.*

I don't answer, and Anna starts to chat again. I feel like I'm watching them through a telescope.

#

Will and I haven't gone out together in a long time. The lobby of the theater is dim and full of older people in jewel-toned outfits. (Greek tragedy is more the taste of the over-70 crowd.) People sip wine from the types of clear cups they give you on airplanes, and there's a lot of loud embracing when the actors find each other.

The lobby lights flash twice, and people start to move into the house. Will and I follow them. We walk down the house-left aisle to find our seats. There are Greek columns on either side of the stage in front of the curtain. In the pit, I can hear the orchestra tuning. The violinist plays an A, the cellos and the violas and the basses join in. For a moment, they all play the same note, different octaves, complimenting each other.

We find our seats, the house lights go out, and the dissonance begins.

Anna seems to do well, from what I know about it. Will doesn't grimace or get up and leave, like during the time we saw the David Mamet show. Anna acts like she had a person who is very knowledgeable about grief tell her how to perform the second act. Her emotion seems



kind of passed down, second-hand, and false. Will seems to be trying to make a point of not noticing how this show mirrors our year. I mean, betrayal and dead kids? Dead kids who are murdered by their mothers?

Why did we agree to come tonight?

At intermission, I sit still, while other patrons go out to use the bathroom or get drinks, and possibly judge the acting or the direction. I'm certain that whoever is using me as a model for this show won't give me permission to move, because then the spell would be broken. Please, break the fucking spell.

When Will comes back from the bathroom, he looks at me like he wants to say something. I see you, Ghosthunter, I want to say. Please make a joke right now because I can't and I need one. He reads my mind.

"Those babies gonna get *kilt*," he whispers as the lights dim.

He sounds like the kids from the center. They say *kilt* (instead of *killed*) when they beat each other in board games or on spelling tests. It's a little racist or classist, but I laugh anyway. What do Will's theatre friends say? Everyone's a little bit racist? Sometimes?

I can't breathe from trying to hold in my laughter. We stumble out of our seats and down the aisle and out into the lobby. Outside, we explode, holding on to each other to steady ourselves.

#

In the lobby, in plainclothes, I see the EMT who was first on the scene of Valerie's accident. I haven't seen him since the accident. For a second I don't mention his appearance to Will, because I think he might not really be there. If Val's come back, there's no reason why

other people from that day wouldn't start showing up where they shouldn't. Though I think the EMT is really there, because I see him in plainclothes, not in uniform like I saw him last. I only ever see Val in the clothes I saw her in on Friday. The EMT must be real.

“You see the EMT?” I ask Will.

He nods. He jingles the keys in his pocket, takes a breath.

“Should we talk to him? Do you think he remembers her?”

Lately, I've been trying to talk to people who remember Val, even vaguely. I called her preschool teacher, to discover Val's at-school side. (She loved to work in the mini-garden there, something I never knew.) I thought about calling Mrs. Dodge, the woman from whom Val took piano lessons. I want I can know whether Val smiled or grimaced over the piano keys, if she ever had to be reminded to be careful of the key guard when she first sat down, or if Mrs. Dodge had to remind her to cut her fingernails. I wonder what I could learn about my daughter from the EMT. Her blood pressure, I guess. Her vitals. Knowing her vitals won't bring her back, of course, it would just give me a fuller picture of her, maybe of what her future medical history might have been. And all of that doesn't matter now, and all of it matters even more than it would have had Friday never happened. We will only ever know Val in a very small way. Though, I've discovered, that's really the only way we ever know anyone: finitely, with unanswered questions, with doubts.

“I'll get the car,” Will says. He touches my shoulder and then leaves.

The EMT looks different than I remember him, though, admittedly, I mainly remember a man in light-blue, shouting and pushing. He has a lot of wrinkles around his eyes, though he looks young. He stands talking to a woman who touches his elbow when he speaks. I want to

speak to him, and I don't want to speak to him, in equal measure. Unfortunately, in the way of the world at moments like this, the EMT and the woman stand right in front of the bar/coat check, and we need to go home. I take a deep breath and get into the coat check line. The out-of-work actor (one of those gay guys that Will says play straight onstage and can almost pull it off, except when you look too close and notice they pluck their eyebrows) hands people their coats. The line inches forward. I'm three people away from the EMT. Two. Showtime.

I want to give him a piece of my mind. Why didn't you try harder? I want to ask. Why didn't you get there faster? Why couldn't you do anything? Who gave you your license? I want to spill the EMT's wine all over his shirt.

But then, as has happened in the time since Val died, the layer of cellophane that keeps me separate from the world wraps me tightly. It hurts to move or breathe so I do neither. I want to lie down on the lobby carpet and nap and then wake up, because there's always a moment when I wake when I've forgotten what happened. In the mornings, I think she's still here.

I grip the counter of the bar to keep from sliding down to the carpet.

"Ma'am?" The EMT says. "Are you alright? I'm an EMT."

He doesn't remember her.

I squeeze the forearm he offers me—a bright red mark appears. I remember the red he forgets: her lips, the insides of her ears, her gums when she grinned, the bottoms of her sneakers.

"I identify with the character," I say.

He releases me and steps back. His eyes drift back to the woman who touches his elbow. He probably thinks I am an overdramatic MFA acting student. Some of those are in the audience: I see them in the corners of the lobby now, folded in on themselves, fingers on temples.

“You couldn’t save my daughter,” I blurt out.

He smiles, which is strange, given the circumstances. He gives me a spiel, the party line. He cites statistics. I walk away.

Later, Will walks in the lobby, angry. “I had to go get the car in my suit jacket. It’s freezing.”

“Sorry,” I say.

He waves off my apology.

“The EMT was in there,” I say. I hate how my voice sounds wounded and petulant, but I can’t help it.

“Was someone hurt?”

That was out of left-field. I was expecting anger, or sadness. Not—polite detachment. The walk out to the car is silent. I think about Missouri.

#

I go back to the therapist. Now, I want to talk about Will and me, and how he’s been distant lately, and how I’m not sure how to—or if I should—bridge that distance, or if it’s better, maybe, to let him drift and come back to me on his own. I wonder if Kathleen’s going to ask me to draw any more pictures. This time, when I go, I’ve brushed my hair, and my clothes are clean. I’m in a different place than I was in last time I saw Kathleen, and I hope she notices, I hope she knows that I can do it without her. Right now, I’m viewing Val’s return like a secret that you have in middle school—it’s not as cool when you let somebody in on it.

The therapist says, "Seems like you're making progress."

I nod. I resolve not to mention Valerie's return. This will just be a normal appointment. Normal. I tell Kathleen about how I made dinner last night from a new recipe, because that takes energy. Making duck—when I've never made duck—shows I'm doing fine.

"How have your Fridays been lately?"

I don't mention Valerie on the bus. Because this is a normal appointment. Normal normal. I'm feeling better. I'm feeling better.

"We went to Missouri to release her ashes."

"How was it?"

Should I be truthful here?

"How did you feel?"

I'm embarrassed to say I felt affirmed, or relieved, in a weird way. Like letting her go was right, or necessary, at least. I'm embarrassed to say that I felt selfish—a part of me was sad because I wasn't sure if I was going to have to let go of both the Valeries in one day. Turns out Hallucination Valerie is still here. I tell Kathleen I felt sad, but not that I felt selfish, calm, but not that I felt relieved.

"How much do you think of her?"

"Always."

"How does thinking about her make you feel?"

I don't mention the pit I felt in my stomach when the Valerie I saw the other day, sitting on the front porch waiting for me to get back from work.

"Sometimes it's funny."

Kathleen smiles. Good sign. She believes I'm acting normal, adjusted.

"What do you remember?"

"Will bought that app to get people to run faster that makes zombie noises. He would go up behind her and turn it on. It's how he got her to ride her bike."

And then I start thinking about Valerie riding her bike.

"You want to talk about Friday?"

"The accident?"

I don't mention that for a second I thought she meant the Friday on the bus, when Val appeared.

"If you're comfortable."

Images rush at me. My foot hovering on the brake. Valerie in the rear view mirror on her bike. Somebody told me that the more often you remember a memory, the more it changes. If I remember Friday enough, maybe I'll be able to change the outcome.

Did I see her in the mirror? The police ruled it an accident. If I'd hit her on purpose, I would feel different. Right? Like John Wayne Gacey, or Ted Bundy, or Susan Smith, right?

Late last night, I watched a documentary on Susan Smith, the woman who put her toddlers in their carseats and let the SUV roll into a lake. I searched for myself in her, sure I would find some similarity in the way she talked about her kids to the police, the way her eyes looked when she thought of them. Does Will see her in me?

"Are you uncomfortable?" Kathleen asks.

"Do you think Susan Smith regrets what she did?"

The therapist marks something on her pad.

"Do you feel like Susan Smith?"

"Sometimes at night when I can't sleep."

I wonder if Kathleen sees me as a woman consumed. Even though I might feel like Susan Smith sometimes, that I don't want other people to see me like Susan Smith, a woman defined by her role in her childrens' deaths. I want Kathleen to see me as an equal, a peer, as someone who has given therapy sessions a time or two herself. I want to have the relationship with Kathleen where she might whisper about her clients to me in a break room.

I want to talk about Will. Before Missouri he infantilized me at work, probably because I'd embarrassed him by talking about setting the plans for the trip in front of C.J. Anytime there was a big behavior issue—when C.J. called Isaiah the n-word, or when Mary Anna started scratching Tasha with her fingernails because she wouldn't let Mary Anna use the purple construction paper she'd wanted—Will wouldn't let me discipline the kids. He stepped in and literally pulled C.J. away from me.

I tell Kathleen I'm not sure if going to Missouri was the right thing for us, as a couple, apart from it being the right thing for us as Val's parents. That much time together, on the drive and on the drive back, made me realize how far apart we've grown—I used to be curious about his thoughts, every moment, and on the drive back, there were three hours stretches where we didn't speak. The alone time with Will made me realize how much I wanted to talk about releasing Val's ashes with Val herself, even though that wasn't possible. (Hallucination Val did not accompany us across the country, which at first I thought was a good thing. But then, I realized, it left Will and me to face each other.) I'm worried, I tell Kathleen, that I don't love him like I did. I'm worried that he won't be able to love this new person I am now.

"Make a coffee date with a girlfriend," says Kathleen.

I'm not expecting that. I'm expecting something deep and profound, because Kathleen has shown herself in the past to be deep and profound. We've talked about nihilism. Coffee doesn't seem like it would be a valid psychological tool, to her.

And there's the fact that I let most of my friends go, after Val died. It was easier, at first, when I didn't want to get out of bed, to only explain myself to Will or to my mom, and not have to try to think of reasons to cancel dinners that would be acceptable to people who hadn't lost children. (My top reasons, at the time—"I don't want to eat," and "Seeing children in public places where I don't expect them fills me with rage" weren't going to cut it.) My friends stopped calling, and I didn't reach out to them.

I'm embarrassed to tell Kathleen that I don't have any friends anymore.

"It will help. I promise," Kathleen says.

#

On my way home from the therapist, I stop at a red light and think about who I might call to set up a coffee date. Alyssa has moved away, but Beatriz—I could call Beatriz. Her son Juan had been a friend of Val's. We'd known each other since we were pregnant. She was the one I called in the middle of the night to ask how hot you were supposed to heat a bottle, or when it was no longer acceptable to wear sweatpants out in public, or the best way to get spit-up out of a shirt.

Beatriz already had twins who were two years older than Val and Juan, and she'd gone back to work (as an art teacher.) She was superwoman. Sometimes, I would call her just to talk about what she was making for dinner because I needed to hear an adult voice, to have a conversation that had nothing to do with who Val was pretending to be.



Back then, I could be myself with Beatriz. I didn't have to hide the fact that having a baby was sometimes horrible. I could admit to Beatriz that I missed my job, that I missed the kids I didn't parent precisely because I didn't parent them. She understood that I questioned (more than once a day) why Will and I had decided to have kids. Will came home from work excited to be with Val, full of energy. He wouldn't understand when I didn't want to play dance party, when I just wanted to shut myself in the bedroom with the lights off and listen to the silence.

My mom had post-partum depression. I didn't. I didn't look at Val and wonder why I didn't feel connected to her—I looked at Val and wondered if she would be able to survive the strength of the connection I felt, or if it would be better to not be born at all into this role of best friend/confidante/Alpha Omega. It's a lot of pressure for an infant. After we came home with Val, I wouldn't let Will hold her for the first six hours. I was terrified she would be taken away and I would be alone again. My favorite kid at the center before Mary Anna, a little boy named Josh, had just been placed in a foster home across town at the time and he wasn't going to be able to come to the center anymore.

But Valerie Amelia was mine. She lived in my home. No one would take her away.

Beatriz understood. She never asked to hold Val. She didn't expect me to give her up for a girl's night. She would come over and the three of us would have a girl's night, and she would be okay with that.

I get back from the therapist and call Beatriz. I ask her to come over and she doesn't betray that she thinks it's weird that I'm calling, because I haven't called. She doesn't say she thinks it would be weird to hang out without the kids. Not that I'm expecting her to balk at hanging out with me without Juan or Val, but it crossed my mind, that she wouldn't quite be able

to see me yet in this new incarnation. I'm struggling with it, with seeing myself as a mother without a child. Does that make me a mother still?

"I'll bring the wine," Beatriz says.

"Don't," I say, because I don't trust that I'll say the right things if I have any wine. I'm just as nervous I am when I meet a new person, even though Beatriz is not a new person. I am the one who has changed.

Beatriz comes over with tea and coffee cake. There are fancy tea cups with rims so thin you can almost see through them, there are tiny forks. Lavender tea and cinnamon cake. Skim milk, cloth napkins. It's a party, or, as close to a party as I've been to lately. It's the approximation of a party.

"Good cake," Beatriz says.

"Good cake," I say.

Beatriz has her keys on the kitchen table next to her purse, and it reminds me that her stay here is temporary, in my house, in my life, in my place in the universe. She has Juan to get back to, she has her husband, Brent. On her keys is a picture keychain, of a Juan with a birthday crown on, the kind they give kids at restaurants when they give them free scoops of ice cream and then leave the parents to deal with the sugar high.

"Juan outgrew Matilda," says Beatriz. Matilda is (was) Juan's imaginary friend, a mermaid. When Juan and Val went to preschool, they were the two kids with imaginary friends. They attempted to play four-square at recess.

She was trying to pick up where we left off—before the accident, Beatriz and I had talked about how we thought that Val and Juan might be getting a bit too old for imaginary friends.

We'd wondered if the attachment was something we should worry about. It's sweet, a part of me thinks, that Beatriz wants to welcome me back to the place we'd once lived in. Of course, the other part of me thinks she's being horribly insensitive, talking about Juan at all, mentioning anything about him, even having her keys with his picture on the table where I can see them. I want to throw her keys across the room, or hide them in the drawer with the dishtowels.

I almost tell her I've missed her, and us, and the way we used to be. I decide that would be too much.

"Are you okay?" Beatriz asks. "Do you need me to go home?"

"I don't know," I say. "No, please."

She touches my shoulder, and I lean my head against her fingers.

"How's Will?"

"He wants to leave," I say. I've never told anybody that before, except maybe Kathleen. I'm not even sure if it's true. It's just what I imagine he's thinking, with all the time he spends at the theatre, with all the silent evenings we've had lately. I hug Beatriz, and realize Kathleen was right. It's nice to come back to the world like this.

#

I ask Will a question when we're sitting on the front porch after work, watching the neighborhood after a hard day. We just learned that Isaiah has been getting Mary Anna to touch him inappropriately sometimes when they hang out on the weekends. It's devastating for Mary Anna, and Isaiah, and both of their families, but there's not much we can do with rumors about what the kids do on the weekends. We can talk to them, we can call parents in, we can drill it into their heads that boys and girls need to respect each other, but at the end, we still drop them

off at night. On the weekends, they spend their forty-eight hours in mysterious ways that we cannot control.

Will's been unhappy for a while, even before Val died, even before she came back, even before she drove us apart. Maybe I shouldn't ask him this question, when he's already had such a bad day. I certainly won't make him happy by bringing it up. Maybe it's selfish to bring it up now, because he was the one who had to talk to Isaiah about what it means to be a respectful young man. He and Isaiah stayed in the office for an hour. But, I need to ask him now, about his ideas about our future, and where we are going, I want to know if we've gone in different, irreconcilable directions.

The neighbors across the street have a giant inflatable snowman in their front yard, and white icicle lights in their shrubs. It's almost Christmas. It's really too cold to be hanging out on the front porch, but the house seems small lately, and cluttered with her. (Right now, Hallucination Val is having a nightmare in her old bed. She yells. When I checked on her, the sheets were tangled at the foot of her bed, and her forehead was damp.

I hesitate. Should I even bring this up? I want him to be happy. What if asking this is unforgiveable? But also, I don't want to keep him here, devastated because he has to look at me every day and remember Val.

"Why do you stay?" I ask Will.

He continues to watch the neighborhood and doesn't say anything for a moment. On the sidewalk, a family walks by with a golden retriever. When the mom stops to pick up the dog's poop in a baggie, the kids blow on their hands to keep warm. The dad lays his hands on the kids'

shoulders, leans down and whispers to them. They smile, and clap their mittened hands. The dad must have mentioned hot chocolate.

I stick my hands under my armpits. I should go back in and grab gloves. Will's breath comes out in clouds. When Val was younger, she wondered why we all turn into dragons in winter.

In the silence, I imagine how he might respond—he stays because he misses her, because he misses me, because he misses how we were before. He stays because he's scared, he stays because leaving would be arduous. He stays because he loves me.

“Do you stay because I remember her?” I ask.

I watch the family walk down the sidewalk. The dog's leash gets tangled in the youngest kid's legs.

“I'm not staying,” Will says. “I'm going to my mom's.”

That's my answer then. Fuck. I shouldn't have said anything. Fuck fuck fuck.

He walks away and I follow him to the bedroom. He goes inside and lays on the bed, turns on Metallica. I linger in the doorway until he shuts the door.

Later that night, when I try to apologize, and tell him that I was out of line, that I shouldn't have insinuated that he wasn't as committed to this as I was, he ignores me. He goes to sleep without telling me good night. He leaves for work the next morning without asking if I need a ride or if I'm planning to drive separately. In the office, he leaves his house key on the desk. I take it and slip it into my pocket. I tell myself that this is just a gesture, that I can give them back to him at any time.

#

The therapist has a bookcase full of books in her office, behind her desk. I read all the titles, or, as many as I can, from my chair: the normal ones that I would expect her to have, books about counseling and trauma and grief. Then, a strange one: an old copy of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the spine cracked. I take this as a good sign—she believes in the goodness of people. But, I could be wrong. Maybe she just feels trapped.

A car alarm goes off in the parking lot and I look out the window. Leaves blow, and the streetlights flicker yellow, turned on early with the gathering storm. For the first time I feel safe here, inside out of the rain. I imagine sitting by a fireplace with Kathleen, wearing socks, drinking hot chocolate. I wiggle my toes inside my shoes.

“Want to start where we left off?” the therapist says. I remember last session, when I didn’t tell her that I saw Valerie on the bus, or that I saw Will break down, when he thought I wasn’t looking. When I didn’t tell her that I thought, before Val died, that Will and I would be separated by now.

I think about Anne Frank. She admitted to her diary that she wasn’t actually in love with Peter at all, that she was just with him because he was in the attic, too. Circumstantial love. I wonder, if I let Will out of the attic, if the pressure to conceal and be concealed wasn’t so heavy, if he would walk away. Would I want him to? Would I want to walk away myself, and not consider the consequences?

I haven’t talked to my mom since she visited the week after Val died. A couple of times, in the middle of the night, I’ve called and then hung up. Sometimes, I write out messages I want to leave on her machine: *I’m scared, please call. I’m sad, please come. I’m tired.* Will finds these

messages sometimes around the house, and he throws them away. We rattle around the attic, hiding from each other.

“Do you think they ever got sick of eating potatoes?” I ask the therapist, about Anne and her family in the attic.

She doesn’t laugh at this question. She considers it. Because of that small thing, that small show of validation, I want to tell her everything.

“I’m afraid I killed her,” or “I’m afraid he’ll leave,” or, the thing I’m scared to say out loud: “I’m afraid that he’ll stay because I killed her. I’m afraid that they’ll both stay.”

Kathleen and I talk about philosophy and religion, big questions. “Is it bad that I loved her more than him? That some days, now that she’s gone, I don’t see the point of us?” This would make more sense to the therapist had she known (had I told her) that, for a few months before Val died, Will and I talked about schedules, and whose turn it was to go to parent pick-up, and whether I had baked cookies for the bake sale or if he should go get cake from the store. All of our conversations surrounded Val and what she needed. We hadn’t had a date night alone in three years. A year and a half ago, we talked about a double date to The Melting Pot. It fell through when Val got a fever.

All the clothes I feel beautiful in are pushed to the back of the closet, gathering dust. There’s a dark green one that drapes and clings that I touch sometimes, before I pull out the machine-washable modest cotton shirts that I wear now. I don’t have the shoes that go with that dress anymore. I took them to Goodwill.

“What if I only want to stay with him because he remembers her?” I ask.

Kathleen doesn't answer for a moment. Out in the waiting room, I hear the receptionist clicking at a keyboard and the phone ringing. She doesn't pick it up. The phone keeps ringing.

"Are you more alive the more people remember you after you're gone?" I ask.

Maybe the receptionist has headphones in. She still hasn't picked up the phone. The therapist doesn't answer this question either. Seriously, like, what am I paying her for?

"Tell me," I say. When I was thirteen, I had a horrible couple of months with friends. One of my best friends stopped talking to me, and when I asked her about it, she said, "You know what you did." I didn't, obviously, but she kept up her silent treatment. I would go home and cry to my mom and ask what I should do, what I should have done. She wouldn't tell me.

"Do you know about the kaddish?" the therapist asks. I shake my head and she explains. The kaddish is a prayer that some Jewish people say after a loved one has passed. They believe that the more people who pray for them the closer to God the loved one gets in the afterlife. She bows her head and I stare at the gray roots on her scalp. The receptionist picks up the phone. I listen to the silence for a moment. Then, I bow my head, too. It's not lost on me that I attacked Will for praying at work. It doesn't make sense, that Will's prayers for Val make me angry while the therapist's prayers don't. Maybe it's because the therapist knows Val only through my descriptions of her. Maybe it scares me that Will can stake just as equal of a claim on the memory of Valerie as I can, because he can propagate this myth that I was a horrible mother. The therapist is on my side. I guess technically she's impartial. She's not on a side of this discussion that Will and I are having that I'm not sure I want to be having, this discussion I can't let go of. If we fight over Valerie, she's still here. If we fight, we're still here.

Together, the therapist and I say Amen.



Opening my eyes, I see Kathleen looks tired today. I wonder who she goes home to: A husband? A wife? A dog? A daughter?

“Do you have a daughter?” I ask her.

She takes a deep breath, and in her eyes I can see she’s taking a step back from me, mentally. Does she think I’m nuts? Has she really been infantilizing me or placating me, like people do with the types of crazies who go around yelling about secret messages in nutrition labels on cereal boxes? I wonder if she was praying for Val at all. I wonder if or in what she believes.

“It’s not like I’m going to hurt her,” I say, offended, though I would have done the exact same thing to a client had they asked me. “I’m sad. I’m not Charles Manson.”

“My daughter and I don’t speak,” the therapist says. I feel a smile spread across my face, my exposed teeth cold from the sharp intake of my breath. She knows she shouldn’t have told me this. I know she shouldn’t have told me this. I also know I shouldn’t be smiling like a goon at this revelation of a broken family, but I am. Maybe I see myself in her. Maybe I see a version of myself in her, a version that ends up on the other side of this.

“Our secret,” says the therapist. I guess she means we’ve both been inducted into the breach of confidence club.

“Of course,” I say. It feels really nice to be trusted again, even with this small thing.

After the appointment, I leave the office. It has gotten dark early, with the storm, and I can see the stars peek out around the edges of the clouds. I pause and look up before I get in the car and drive home. It’s the first time I’ve felt that Val’s up there, maybe. I’m a supernova: bright, bright, bright.

#

I've built a bonfire in the backyard, near the abandoned swing set. I sit in front of it in a lawn chair; watching the orange sparks reach up into the sky. There's no moon tonight. The ghost of Val is back. I'm conflicted, because part of me loves that she's still here—I cling to her, especially since Will and I aren't doing well. When we said I love you in Missouri, it wasn't exactly a lie. But, the peace we felt there evaporated when we got home, and back to work, and back to play rehearsal, and back to life as a family of two. I think there's a way to love someone and still want to be apart from them. There are circumstances, I think, in which love is too hard to maintain. I don't want to be in a romantic relationship with another man. I want a time machine. Barring a time machine, I want to be in another universe, one in which Val the hallucination is Val the living girl.

In front of the bonfire, I can pretend to be in that other universe. Will and my feelings for him are on the other side of the darkness outside the orange ring cast by the fire. I can't cross the darkness alone. If I move from the fire, I'm afraid Val will be gone. I will have to face the darkness, and the feelings I don't know how to work through, and the man I love. I stay in front of the fire, my face hot and my back cold.

In the darkness, in the yard of another house, a dog barks, deep, aggressive. A car idles in the driveway of a house down the street, a low rumbling. I watch the blue tinted flames at the base of the fire.

Val twirls in the light from the fire, humming something I don't recognize. I've brought one of her favorite books, *Peter Pan*, out here to read to her, but she doesn't seem interested—the books lays open on the ground.

She twirls closer to the fire and I worry about the sparks falling into her hair. She picks up a stick and pokes the fire, pushing on a log so it crumbles, sending more sparks into the air. I want to warn her to be careful.

Then, I realize, she doesn't need to be. She could jump directly into the fire and it wouldn't matter. It would be easier, without Hallucination Valerie, to make the marriage work. There would be fewer secrets, fewer torn loyalties. I drink from the third glass of white wine I've brought out here. Valerie or Will? I wish I could keep them both. But, Val needs me more.

The sequins in Valerie's tutu sparkle in the light from the bonfire. I pick up *Peter Pan* and hold the book on my knees and the wine in my hand and start to read. She stops twirling and sits on my lap, heavier than I expect. I spill my wine. The spreading stain on my jeans smells like grapes. I open the book.

"Once upon a time," I start and Val leans back into me. She smells like s'mores even though we haven't made any.

She strokes my cheek with her little baby hand while I read, like she used to do when she was small enough to sleep in our bed.

I rest my chin on the top of her head, trying to soak in her heat, because the bonfire doesn't do it for me anymore.

"And Peter Pan had a best friend named Tinkerbell, and she was a fairy."

I sip my wine.

"Like me. I'm a fairy princess."

"You're my fairy princess."

I sip more wine.

She kisses her hand and puts it on my cheek.

I finish my glass. I feel relaxed now. The Will/Valerie dilemma doesn't seem so hard anymore. I've decided: I'll stay here by the fire forever. The grass will grow up past my knees, People will drive by and take pictures.

"Do all the voices," Val demands.

I do. She giggles, especially at the deep gravelly Captain Hook and the high squeaky Tink. I laugh at her laugh, and close my eyes tight because I want to remember it. I imagine grass growing, my feet firmly planted in earth.

Will comes out of the house and Valerie stops stroking my cheek. She gets off my lap, sits in the grass by my chair and pouts. Her tutu puffs out around her.

"Can we talk?" Will says. Will doesn't come out to the bonfire often. This is my space. My space with Val. I want to push him out of the orange circle.

Val draw stars in the dirt with her pinky. An ember glows near her, or a firefly. I can't tell.

"What?" I say.

"I miss you."

I take his hands. I twist his wedding ring with my thumb. I can't think of the right way to say this. I mostly don't want to hurt him. But there's a little part of me that thinks, maybe if I drive him away, maybe Val and I could be together. Maybe I'd be happy. He doesn't understand us. And Val and I don't need that.

Maybe I could cut him loose like a balloon. Snip. Maybe he'd float away, I wouldn't have to watch him judge me anymore. I wouldn't have to see his jealousy of what Val and I have.

What scissor-words could I say?

"I miss *her*," I say.

Will takes a step back from me, drops my hands. He walks away, slowly vanishing into the darkness beyond the reach of the fire. I look at Val, and there are tears in her eyes and my cheeks are wet and I don't turn around to watch Will walk away. I can't.

Val watches him go, the toes of her light-up sneakers on the edge of the circle, her face dim. The fire only reaches part of her. I hug myself.

After a while Val comes back to me. We sit and watch the flames, like reverse shooting stars, and I wonder when things will be right again.

#

"You kissed Anna."

The words echo against the cold tile on the kitchen floor, and I wonder why we have all of our serious discussions in the kitchen. Will sits at the kitchen table, checking email. His laptop has a wireless mouse that he loves but I've never seen the purpose of, given that laptops come with touchpads. He looks up at me. His hand tightens on the plastic mouse. He clicks something loudly.

"Don't be ridiculous," he says, staring at the computer screen.

"The way she looks at you," I say. "She knows what your mouth tastes like."

I'd gone to a rehearsal for the play the other day, right before tech week. Will said it was the last rehearsal where they'd be free to discover things about their characters, before each movement and moment got linked to a sound cue.

"Of course she knows what my mouth tastes like. We kiss onstage."

“I never approved that.”

He shuts the lid on his laptop.

“You never *approved* it?”

“Right.”

“Jesus, Emily.”

He gets up from the kitchen table and pulls his laptop charger from his bag. He jams it in an outlet across the room and then goes back to the table again and plugs in the computer. He opens the lid. The white light on the screen gets brighter.

“You use tongue, don’t you?”

Tongue is forbidden in stage kissing, I’d read on the Internet. Unless expressly approved by both parties as a way to get into character.

“What do you want me to say? Yes? Would you forgive me quicker if I said yes?”

“I would forgive you quicker if you promised to stay with me.”

He laughed at this.

“You only get out of bed half the time. The other half you won’t look at me. I try to talk to you about normal, everyday, living world things, and you’re empty.”

He types and clicks. His email makes the swooshing sound of sent mail.

“I’m not,” I say. Could he really be so deliberately manipulative and hurtful? One of the things that I first loved about Will was the way he valued me.

I leave the kitchen, unplugging his charger as I go. I end up in the backyard, watching the ashes from the fire pit from yesterday. They’re gray and powdery, insubstantial.

#

After the bonfire incident and our discussion in the kitchen, Will and I don't speak for a week. Maybe he'll never speak to me again. I wonder if we'll become one of those couples who sleep in separate rooms, who don't eat together at the end of the day.

### 1. The First Day.

I upload the pictures from Mary Anna's photo shoot onto my laptop. Her face grins up at me through the computer screen glare. She's missing teeth so the comparison with Val won't be perfect. I pull up the picture of Val from my phone and size both pictures so they fit on one page side by side. Like Val and Mary Anna were friends who got invited to each other's Disney-princess-themed birthday parties and then whined at the same pitch when they both came down from their sugar highs. In the picture I can almost see the girls turning to each other, playing one of those clapping games. They would laugh and Tasha wouldn't be there to tease them about wetting the bed. Tease Mary Anna about wetting the bed. Mary Anna had accidents. Val had peed on the toilet since she was two and a half. She'd be embarrassed to have an accident. She wouldn't wear pee-soaked jeans to school like Mary Anna.

But in this picture they're perfect playmates. I can hear them speak to each other. I imagine lunchtime play dates. I close my eyes.

Will's key in the lock. Will's voice in the hall. I press print, then slam the laptop shut.

### 2. The Second Day.

I watch Will get ready for work. He gets out of bed and goes into the bathroom and I hold my breath and panic until I see him again. He puts on jeans and a shirt. He touches the picture of Val on his bedside table. He leans down toward me. He smells like Old Spice and I would have reached for him if I felt like I could have. He kisses my forehead and I put my hand around his

wrist, my thumb on his pulse. He moves toward the bedroom door and I curl up in the comforter again, away from the door so I don't have to watch him leave.

### 3. The Third Day.

I pass through the kitchen on my path from the couch to the bathroom. The picture of Val and Mary Anna is under a magnet on the fridge and I take the picture off the fridge to look at it. A small card falls to the ground as I remove the magnet. It's a business card. Dr. Kathleen Herbert, Psychiatry. On the back, in Will's handwriting, "More sessions?"

I hold the card in my hand until the edges curl up, wet from the sweat on my palms.

### 4. The Fourth Night

I dream that Valerie and I are auto-mechanics. In this dream, she wears a blue, smudged, extra-large T-shirt over her tutu, and she goes under a car at the shop on one of those skateboard things. I've let her go under the car because I won't fit. The car is a little plastic motorized kids' car. She's safe, it'll give her confidence to know that she can fix something on her own.

I turn my back.

Then, I hear a noise like a pig grunting. I turn around, and Val's little feet and scrambling on the sides of the skateboard thing, like she's stuck under the car.

"Just get out," I say in the dream. "It's a Barbie car."

She squeals and scrambles and I look underneath the car. She's got a collar on like our old dog, Pebbles, and it's stuck on a thin metal pipe attached to the underside of the Barbie car, even though every other part of the car is plastic. She scrambles, and the collar gets tighter.

"Valerie," I say. "Unhook it."



She can't twist that way—her hands are pinned underneath her body. I reach underneath the car and grab her tutu and pull, thinking the collar will snap if an adult uses all her strength.

The tutu comes off in my hands. There's no noise from underneath the car.

I wake up. I open my eyes and for some reason I'm staring at the leg of the coffee table in front of the couch. The blue post-DVD glow of the TV casts a sheen onto the carpet, the leg casting a navy shadow like a bruise.

There's something salty on my lips. We were watching home videos but we didn't eat any popcorn. I touch my face and it's damp. I laugh, because I am able to cry again. I haven't cried since Missouri. I sat dry-eyed at the bonfire, through the latest appointment with Kathleen.

I sit up. Will lies across the couch, one throw pillow under his head; his arms flung wide like a martyr. I stare at him as he sleeps. There's dampness in his eyelashes, his cheeks are red, his hair mussed. I reach out and grab his hand, hanging over the edge of the couch. It's warm. He has short fingers like Val. I tug on his hand.

He opens his eyes slowly. We stare at each other, appraising maybe, looking for signs, looking for a place big enough to place the blame of why we fell apart. The hollow of his collarbone is too cramped, the space between his lips too dark. His shoulders look like maybe he could carry the blame there, strong and muscled. Val used to ride up there when we went to parades in our subdivision.

His hands are too beautiful to place the blame in.

I find the perfect place, and I wonder why I didn't think of this all along. It's the space between us, small enough to contain the blame, big enough so that the blame can grow and shift into something more terrible than either of us meant.

He puts one of his hands on my face, tracing the contours and soft parts. He runs the back of his hand up and down my cheek. I stand up so quickly that the back of my knees bump the coffee table. He drops his hand.

He puts his hand up to his own cheek, his eyes watching me as I walk back toward the bathroom—the smallest space in the house so that maybe my thoughts will stay small, maybe my blame will stop growing, heavier and more solid and more like a child every day.

Will strokes his own cheek, seeking comfort.

#### 5. The Fifth Day

I go to therapy with Kathleen, for Will. It's a comedy routine. When I was doing so well with her before, now I've gone backwards.

#### 6. The Sixth Day

I wake up when Will gets home from work. I don't remember him leaving for work. On the kitchen counter, he's left a note from Mary Anna's mom saying she's pulling her out of the program. There's a Post-it attached. "Happy?" it reads.

Since Will and I aren't talking, I have a lot of time alone with my thoughts. Sometimes, I address my thoughts to Will, all those "Remember that?" sort of things that come up when you have such a long, shared emotional history. Like once, for Valerie's birthday, we took her out to Independence, Missouri. It was the town where a lot of people picked up the Oregon Trail and headed west, back in the day. It rained a lot that weekend. We weren't doing so well, then. Remember? Or what we thought wasn't *so well*, before we knew not to use euphemisms because they don't help anybody get anywhere.

Remember that day when I asked you if you thought we should try couples' therapy? It was on that same vacation in Independence. At a diner with dirty floors. I asked you about couples' therapy in between bites of carrot cake, because Valerie had to believe we were here to celebrate. You smiled insincerely at me over the rim of your coffee cup, the bitter steam fogging up your glasses.

But I look back at my carrot-cake-eating self and laugh, a little. Imagine, couples' therapy because I couldn't get you to understand that when I talked about the electric being turned off at Mary Anna's house I didn't want you to fix it, I wanted you to listen to how it made me *feel*.

The problem, I believed then, was you interrupted me when I talked, and you didn't actually listen when you looked like you were listening. You were pretty good at pretend yourself, sir. I understand now how the theater has provided such a respite for you.

But two people can pretend, dear. Two people have been pretending for a very long time. Two people have been pretending for so long now that a third person has slipped in somehow, maybe by mistake, maybe by one person wanting a buffer so badly that a buffer appeared. We needed something between us to keep us from running at each other with dull kitchen knives, I think. We needed something else besides each other's faces to look at every morning. I counted the minutes, some days, until you went to work in the mornings. I stayed in bed until I heard you lock the front door from the outside because I didn't know what to say and I didn't want to be that wife: the one who watches the husband go off to work, the one who gets up to see him off, the one who feels left behind until he comes home again. You can only have that sort of relationship with one person, I think, and still maintain a positive view of yourself.

My brain begins to trick me, in this week of not talking. I remember things I'd thought I'd forgotten. Like this:

Val's screams make the bus seem small and tight, even though it's not full. High pitched and screechy, the screams cut through C.J. and Isaiah singing and pounding on the back of the seat in front of them. Val sits in a seat near the front of the bus.

I put my hands on the back of the bus seats and walk down the aisle to her.

"Miss, I got this," Tasha said.

Tasha slides into the seat next to Valerie.

"You're okay baby," Tasha coos. "We're almost there."

Val stops screaming, surprised. I stand in the bus aisle for a moment. Then I sit in a seat close to Val and Tasha so I can monitor the situation. Tasha puts her arm around Val's shoulder, plays that "got your nose" game with her. Val laughs. Tasha puts her head on Val's shoulder. I look at Will through the bus's rearview mirror. I raise my eyebrows in a "will you look at that?" sort of way. He smiles.

#

I hear Will banging around in the bedroom, opening and shutting dresser drawers, while I'm in the bathroom brushing my teeth. I spit, rinse, investigate.

A suitcase rests on the bed. Not one of the ones we got as a present from my mom last year, perhaps a subtle hint that we needed to get out more. This was one of his suitcases, old, with a wheel that sticks. The suitcase is open, and empty. There's sand in the bottom of it, and deodorant streaks in the built-in toiletry pocket. He hasn't used this suitcase in years. I stand there in the bedroom, between the bathroom door and the bed, unsure of what to say. He pulls

out a couple of shirts from the dresser. On top is a light blue button-down, my favorite shirt on him. He lays the shirts next to the suitcase, and then walks into the closet, slowly, slightly distracted, like I would imagine he would if he had the type of job where he went on business trips. He comes out of the closet with two pairs of dark jeans.

“We’re almost out of toothpaste,” I say.

He walks past me into the bathroom and roots around in the back of the bathroom closet.

“There’s some in the back here,” he says. “Mint or cinnamon?”

He must see something in the closet that he doesn’t expect, because he grabs it quickly. He holds out the toothpastes in front of me, three of them: mint, cinnamon, and bubblegum, with a picture of *Dora the Explorer* on the package. I touch the bubblegum one with my fingertips.

I choose mint and Will takes the cinnamon. He leaves the bubblegum toothpaste on the dresser. He zips the toothpaste into the toiletry pocket, fingers lingering on the zipper’s teeth for a moment. Then, he moves to the dresser and takes out some undershirts.

“This is drastic,” I say. “We can try something else.”

He holds the undershirts in his hands. I remember, the first time we slept together, how soft his undershirt was under my shaking fingers. I remember the next morning how happy I felt, knowing he was there before I opened my eyes.

I touch the white cotton, wanting to feel safe and hopeful again. We stand for a moment in front of the dresser. I have this ominous feeling that the next thing I say will be the clincher, the phrase that might make him put the shirts down, unpack the suitcase.

“You should use the rest of the toothpaste before you open another one,” I say. He turns away from me, puts the undershirts in the suitcase. By this, I’d meant, I’d like you to stay until

the toothpaste runs out. I hadn't meant anything neurotic. "You're the most important person to me," I blurt out. This is more direct than I'd intended. But maybe directness and clarity is what he needs. It can't hurt.

He turns back to me, and touches my face, my favorite place to be touched. I relax for a moment. Maybe he needs to hear, explicitly, how important he is to me. Maybe that's it. Maybe I should explicitly tell him more things, like I'm not sure if I will ever know how to be happy again. If he doesn't stay and use the toothpaste, I know for sure that all my chances at being happy for the rest of my life will have passed. I see all the gray days of the future, just set up to get through, just marked by clocks ticking. My grandma, before she died, would say, "Can I go to bed yet?" at 8:30. When I was younger I always interpreted that as "When can I be alone?" I don't want a life where the only thing I look forward to is going to bed, where I wake up still tired in the morning. One of my goals is to be happier than my grandmother. If Will leaves, Grandma and I will be neck-in-neck.

Will kisses my forehead. "I wish that were true," he says.

He takes his hand away and turns to zip up the suitcase. He carries the suitcase into the hall and I hear him set it down by the door, the stuck wheel clicking against the tile.

Will and I met during a practicum when we were both getting our MSWs. I noticed him, actually, because he reminded me of my dad—he was loud, goofy, and good with kids. He always seemed just about to tell a joke. Even back then, I was a bit serious and uncomfortable with myself and my body. I was prone to sadness, even though I was nowhere as sad as I would be.

I knew I liked him when we were at a party and getting a little drunk. I was standing in the kitchen and this plastered guy stumbled up to me. He put his face down at my ass like he was going to bite it. (I learned all of this after it happened, I was busy talking to friends). This plastered guy leaned in for the kill and Will, out of nowhere, put his face between the plastered guy's face and my ass. He said, "Hey there!" like a cowboy.

What I thought was weird, looking back, was that Will wasn't even anywhere near me when the plastered guy stumbled up. It was like he was aware of me from another room, like I sparkled to him. I didn't sparkle for myself yet.

#

Will, know that I loved you. Know that I know that you know that I loved you. Know that bringing the wrong shoes to the funeral home doesn't mean that you didn't know her. Know that walking out of the funeral to sit in the car is understandable. Know that I didn't blame you. Know that I wanted to follow you.

Know that, until the end, I considered us invincible. Know that I know that you considered Anna, because you were hurt—because I hurt you. Know that I'm sorry.

Know that, at the beginning, I thought of her always. Know that later, thoughts of her came up at strange moments—staring at the pasta sauce choices in the grocery store; waiting for my car at the mechanics, brushing my teeth.

Know that, when she came back, I didn't want her. Know that I wanted you. Know that I wanted to fix what you and I had had. Know that it wasn't my choice to see her, that I was scared when I saw her. Know that I never meant to exclude you, to form some secret club with her. Know that I know she loved you best. Know that I noticed the way you lit up when she came

into the room. Know that if I could have shown her to you I would have. Know that I wish we weren't stuck. Know that I miss you.

Know that I've seen the way you grieve her. Know that I've followed you to the playgrounds, know that I've seen you watch the other children. Know that I've asked God to forgive me.

Know that I know that you blame me. Know that I've realized that this is what we can't get past. Know that I see it as clearly as I see her now, this blame like a twitching beast between us. Know that if I could spear the beast, shoot, maul, massacre it, I would. Know that I know you won't meet me halfway. Know that this is why I holster the spear. Know that I would pick it up again if you asked me to.

Believe me.

#

Valerie and I have taken to driving around town at midnight, because otherwise she won't sleep. Like a baby, except she's five years old. Something about the vibration of the car or the hum of the radio stops her screaming, which she's been doing non-stop, and it gives me a headache—every day this week I've taken an Aspirin at breakfast and another at lunch.

I want to call Will at his mom's house. Sometimes Val and I write him letters. Valerie likes to draw pictures for him, of us, when we were happy. She drew a picture of the three of us—I was a small stick figure in the corner, and her representation of herself took up nearly the entire page.

We drive. We end up at the playground at the center. We sit on the swings. No one else is around. I would like to talk to somebody, I think, to share so the pounding in my head will stop.



I'm tired.

When Val was alive, I used to wish she would never get any older, that she would stay the same kindergartner forever, that she would never get tired of me, or think I was obsolete, or love me less. Now, I realize how stupid I was. What would Kathleen say if she knew I was hanging out in the middle of the night alone at a playground in this neighborhood? I should call Kathleen and set up another appointment.

We swing and she keeps screaming. I pull earmuffs out of my purse and put them on. They don't muffle anything; they just make my head hot. I can still hear her screaming.

I scream, too.

I have to get out of the house, away from Val. I go to the performance of Will and Anna's play and watch from the wings. They don't know I'm here. I told Will that I had an emergency parent meeting with Tasha's mother. Instead, I stand just behind the black velvet curtains. I snuck in through the stage door, past the call board and the greenroom and the entrance to the fly loft.

It's strange seeing a play from this angle. The fact of the façade is in your face: the flats that are painted to look like walls, the phone on set that doesn't ring (it's a sound cue), and light switches that don't really turn on the lights. There are numbers marked on the back of the flats, directions for the set crew. There's a typed list of quick changes taped to the flat just outside the door that sways if it's slammed.

Will and Anna sit at a kitchen table, in 1940's period outfits: slicked back hair and a printed dress with a belt. Will's character is angry, and he pounds the table with his fist. His face is livid. He's never been livid, in all the time I've known him. Sad, of course, angry, multiple times, defeated, every day. But livid? Livid seems to be a privilege of people that do not have

that much going on in their lives, that they can feel one emotion so fervently that it gets to a fever-pitch, that it's not tainted by other emotions, or doubt. With this livid face, Will is a stranger to me for a moment. It's kind of exciting to realize that there are still sides of him I haven't seen. It gives me hope. It makes me think that grace is possible.

Maybe Will's essence is distilled onstage. He becomes a version of himself that he can make sense of, like I do when I am with Valerie. By taking up other people's words, stepping into other people's clothes, maybe Will has become his own emotional self.

I wonder which words we'd repeat to each other now.

When Val was a baby, I could tell what each of her different cries meant, most of the time. It was the only moment when I was good at reading people. Will, however, always knows, even from across the playground, when one kid has wronged another, by the looks on their faces.

I wonder if he's been lying and pretending and hiding from me this whole time like I've been lying and pretending and hiding from him. I wonder if he knew that Valerie was back before I told him.

Anna's character cries, and Will runs his fingers through his slicked-back hair. Anna's overdone make-up runs a bit. She reaches for him and he turns away.

The stage goes dark and then the lights come up again. Will and Anna's castmates rush from the wings to take their bows. The audience claps. Will and Anna come out last, holding hands. They stand in the middle of the stage, bow, and wave to their audience. I slip away, back into the house, so I can see him and maybe begin to understand.

#

At 7 a.m., I get up and make breakfast. I haven't spoken to Will in four days, because he's asked me not to call. I call Beatriz, instead, because Hallucination Val has also disappeared. I've made Val's favorite breakfast—pancakes with chocolate chips, one that previously we only let her have on her birthday or on very special occasions—but her plate rests untouched on the table. I watch the extra chocolate chips I put on top of the pancakes slip off and fall into the syrup as I wait for Beatriz to pick up the phone.

Ring, ring.

What if she doesn't answer? What if she's out of town? What if she hated our tea and decided that she never wants to talk to me again? What if, right now, she's snuggling up with Juan and Brent and ignoring anyone who would disturb her family so early?

I hang up before she answers, without leaving a message. I dial Kathleen's office, but she's not at work yet. I take a bite of the pancakes, but they've grown cold.

At 9 a.m., I think about heading in to the center. Today, we're supposed to be working on spelling with the kids. We've got the group therapy session for kids with absent dads in the afternoon. Around this time of year, Will usually gives the kids a talk about staying away from gangs. Don't deliver any packages for people you don't know, he tells them. Not even if they promise you a Playstation. Don't wear bandanas in your pockets. I wonder if he'll give the gang talk today, or if he'll be too distracted by Val and our issues. I wonder if Val and I are distracting to him at all, as he's removed from us at his mom's house. I hope so. I should check on him at his mom's, to make sure he's doing okay. Or, maybe I should call the center first.

At 3 p.m., I call the center. Will should be just getting all the kids off the bus from school. He doesn't answer the landline at the center. I picture it ringing in the empty office,

surrounded by half-filled out incident reports and an open calendar for the school district. Will doesn't answer his cell, either.

At 8 p.m., I get into the car to drive to Will's mom's house. I turn the key in the ignition. Silence. I get out and start walking, even though it's rainy and cold.

The quickest way to get to Will's mom's house is to walk on along a busy road through the middle of downtown. (She lives in a condo off one of the side streets near the history museum.) I walk down the sidewalk, rain soaking my shirt and my jeans. I should have grabbed a jacket or an umbrella. The stores downtown are mostly closed—I'm not walking through the bar and restaurant section, but the section with antique shops, and consignment stores, and tourist traps selling tie dye T-shirts. Rain hits the front window of an antique shop I pass. I stop and look at my reflection.

I don't recognize myself. I look older than I did nine months ago, before the accident. New wrinkles appear when I squint my eyes to look closer. It's come true then—the theory that I've been changed irrevocably, that grief has made me a new person. Maybe this new Emily can fix the problems that the old Emily caused. I keep walking.

I hear Valerie's voice, faintly. It's that song she used to sing through the sunroof, "making love to his tonic and gin." A driver speeds by, sending spray up from his tires that soaks my shoes. Now, I squish as I walk.

I turn down Will's mom's street—there are fewer cars, but more neighbors who look out their windows.

On the other side of the road, I see Hallucination Valerie. She waves. She's holding hands with my grandmother, who passed three years ago (Valerie's first funeral.) My grandmother

waves. They both smile. Or, wait. It's not my grandmother at all. It is Valerie, old and wrinkled and almost toothless. The old woman Valerie wears a brooch, and I squint across the road to see it. In a flash of light from the headlights of a passing car, I see it: A golden covered wagon. This old woman Valerie holds hands with the Valerie I know, in a tutu, and some more Valeries I do not know—a Valerie with braces, a Valerie with way too much make-up, a Valerie in a wedding dress. There is a Valerie who looks like me. A Valerie in a business suit, a Valerie wearing a safari hat, a firefighter outfit. I try to speak but I can only say things that don't make any sense.

“Clean water protects you from cholera!” I yell.

By which, I mean, of course, I mean to tell her that I was always listening, that she was important to me.

The Valeries, in unison, cock their heads at me and frown. The littlest Valerie, the one I know, holds a finger to her lips.

I step into the road and a car speeds by. I jump back. All of the Valeries walk away, and I watch their retreating backs in the darkness.

I arrive at Will's mom's condo complex. It's quiet. A couple of the streetlights are burned out.

Will's mom and I get along fine, or, we did, but now it's awkward. She thinks Will and I should go to church with her, especially since Val has died. We don't go; it seems false. Her church has no life: people sit, stand, speak in unison, sit, stand, leave. I don't want to go to a church where people don't see the joy of God—what are they worshipping for? The fear of what would happen if they don't? God is not an insurance policy. God doesn't work for State Farm.

And the problem is, I love Will's mom, but then things got weird, and we stopped talking.

I knock on the door at his mom's house.

What if he's not there? What if he saw me coming and he already left?

Brenda has a flower pot on the ground in front of her door, heavy and terracotta and full of cigarette butts half-buried between the flowers. Val's death was hard on her, too. What an asshole I am, for not even calling. I mean, we live in the same fucking town.

The door swings open. His mom stands there, in thin pajamas and a bathrobe, and I feel like even more of an asshole because it's late, because my tunnel vision propelled me here without regard for other people. Maybe the scene on the road was the end of the Valeries. Maybe I should just go home and try to fix my marriage on Monday between Reading and Recess, while tossing a Nerf ball.

"Honey," Brenda says. I push past her into the house, because I don't want her to see that I'm about to start blubbing. Brenda once bought me an Easter present—lime green shorts that I've never worn—and it was such a nice thought, and now the shorts are wadded up in the back of a dresser drawer. Beatriz and I made fun of those shorts, at Brenda and her attempt at connection. I was a colossal shithead.

Will sits on the couch in the living room, which, because of the open floor plan of the condo, I can see from where I stand just inside the front door. He's watching TV, some cooking show that he's never been a fan of, to my knowledge.

"Shake and Bake," I say-sing, or, chant, really, like I'm in an infomercial. He looks at me, alarmed. Then, he looks at his mother.

“I told you not to let her in.”

This is harsh. And direct. And very hostile. He doesn't talk to me like this. He doesn't even talk about me like this when I'm not there and he's angry at me. If anything, I've always known Will to be a very respectful person.

“I wouldn't want to interrupt this Master of the Frying Pan, Iron Foodie, whatever this is,” I say.

Will looks back at the television. On screen, someone slices a green pepper. I sit on the couch beside him and his mother goes into the bedroom. A few minutes later, I hear her laptop boot up.

“Mexican food?” I ask.

“Italian,” he says. More chopping. More dicing. Vegetables sizzle in a skillet.

“I came here because I thought I would think about her less here.”

I touch his arm so he'll look at me. Did he really think that moving houses would make Valerie disappear? Does he really think that ignoring her memory would make it fade? But then, I guess that was exactly what I have been doing since Will came to Brenda's house—I ignored Hallucination Val, hoping she'd go away. Will and I are both inept, it seems, at living without her. All I do is think, turn ideas over and over, weighing actions and consequences.

Too much reflection, I realize, is immobilizing. Self-immolating, too. My memories have burned me alive. When I think of her, a part of me flakes off, charred black and irreplaceable.

“I went to the play,” I say. He smiles.

Apologize about Anna. Do it now. This is a transgression you can fix.

I open my mouth to apologize, and he gets up off the couch. Did I miss my chance?

“I’m sorry I gave you reason to worry. With Anna,” he says from the kitchen.

“I shouldn’t have accused you.”

He grabs a jar of jellybeans from the kitchen cabinet. I’d forgotten until right now that Val first tried jellybeans here at Brenda’s house. She taught Val about the flavors and the colors. Will brings the jar of jellybeans into the living room and sits on the floor. I join him.

We build her name out of beans. I lean forward to finish the V and Will puts his hand on my back. We make the letters together. We sit and look at the beans on the carpet. I touch his knee, he plays with the hair at the end of my ponytail. We move closer to hold each other. It feels nice—different than I remember, but maybe more comfortable, in a “That was the worst version of me. You still in?” kind of way. We watch, holding our breath. We wait for one of the beans to move.



## JENNA WHO DIED IN THE FIRE

One day, for preschool show-and-tell, Lily and Jenna brought in their previous lives. Lily wore an old-timey newsboy cap and brought one of those black and white clappers. She pointed to a picture of a scowling old man: “Me before I had heart failure.”

Jenna brought in pictures of a burned house: black wood charred, a porcelain toilet in the rubble. The kids at the preschool thought Lily and Jenna were hilarious. The kids stumbled over the word reincarnation: at parent-pick-up they divulged Lily and Jenna had been recarinated, like old Hondas. The girls got extra snacks at lunch and a joint first turn on the tire swing. They claimed their stomachaches came from spinning.

The kids asked if the old man Lily used to be also like swinging. She said yes, of course, I made moving pictures, after all.

“You’re a doll,” Lily said when she got first dibs on the swing. The kids didn’t see that Lily was using the words she knew to express the mystery she felt. They didn’t see Jenna leave the playground and move to the teacher’s bench, ice packs draped over her forearms.

The kids didn’t take the previous lives seriously, didn’t know that Lily woke up in the middle of the night screaming: *Paramount won’t return my calls!*, or that at bath time Jenna would claim she had red burns on her skin and refuse to be touched. The classmates thought it was like having an imaginary friend. They didn’t understand the difference, in actual physical weight, of an extra friend versus an extra life; one builds you up, one breaks you apart.

## WHAT THEY LEFT

What they left varied. Clothes, obviously, and socks and shoes. But also unexpected things. Contact lenses, nicotine patches, catheters. The contents of their pockets: change, movie stubs, shopping lists. The Biology teacher, who no one thought would get called up, left Invisalign braces. A homeless vet guy who sleeps outside of the library left his prosthetic leg. Sometimes, the things they left were embarrassing. Notes to true loves that never got delivered. Photographs of ex-husbands still warm from being held in pockets against hips. Wallets with condom rings pressed into the leather. Breast implants, hair plugs. Notes that began, "I think we should just be friends."

All jewelry was left behind. Wedding rings, toe rings, purity rings. Star of David necklaces, too, which threw people. Earrings, lip rings, gauges.

Not long after it happened, #piles became a thing on Twitter. It seemed like exploitation of grief. Some of the pictures looked staged: I found it hard to believe that even the most devout Christians actually had Bibles in their pockets when they were called up. An LGBTQ group staged a #piles with one of those yellow and navy equality stickers. The group that pickets funerals had a field day with that one. Planned Parenthood staged a #piles with a pair of jeans containing pocketfuls of condoms. They wanted to send the message that God doesn't support abstinence-only education. They added another hashtag to their #piles picture: #Jesus<3MaryMagdelene. The worst #piles: a thwarted school shooter had left a hit list, black x's over school pictures. It caused a whole hashtag war. It also made me think, though, of the Old Testament God, and vengeance, and how the meek shall inherit the earth.

Mostly, I gave the #piles people the benefit of the doubt. We'd been through a trauma. School closed for three weeks after it happened; flights got cancelled. The President had declared a National Emergency based on the state of the highways: abandoned cars, downed power lines. It was deadly, the possibility of eternal life. I was driving around a couple days after the people disappeared and I came across this gas station: nozzles overflowing with gas, because no one turned the pumps off.

Lissa's sister left her phone, with the camera app open, with a picture of what she saw. Lissa wouldn't look at it. I did. It was beautiful.

Those old WWJD bracelets became popular again at school. In case another disappearance happened, kids wanted other kids to think they were saved.

I started carrying things I wouldn't be embarrassed to be caught with, if another wave of disappearances began. I wore cuter underwear than I had previously—pink lace instead of blue cotton. I carried a small book of poetry by John Dunne. My friend Mark carried a silver-plated guitar pick and a set-list for our band, Spidermouth. It's like, if we weren't living for Twitter already, now we definitely were.

My mom did not leave a note. Here's what my mom left: one pair of jeans, one pair of underwear, one bra, and one shirt. Me, with a million questions.

## WE COULD HAVE BEEN BIONIC

I want to tell this story because I'm scared to keep it to myself. I want to tell it, and I want you to record it—that way you'll have it for the program's records, if anybody ever has questions about why all the sad people keep disappearing. If you've got records, you and your boss, Horatio, don't seem like quite the suicide encouragers that you actually are. The records will help you cover your ass.

I am not afraid to time travel. It does make a tad nervous that we can't pick where we're going, though. How's the program supposed to work as a cure for depression if there's a possibility we won't get back to the time we need to? How am I supposed to feel better if I end up getting impaled by a triceratops?

For years I was afraid. Terrified. Of living here alone. So obliterated by my emotions that I would think I was fine and then I would find a late electric bill in a pile on my desk and my palms would get hot. Prickly. Fear nauseated me.

These records, then, this choice, this time travel: this is me forgiving myself. I can't walk around like this anymore, hiding from her in crowded public spaces. Yesterday, I thought I saw her waiting for a bus outside the art museum whose garden I like to sit in. It wasn't her. It was a girl who looked like her, who had her same habit of standing with all her weight on one leg, her bony hip jutting out like a heroin-chic supermodel.

This phantom had me hiding behind a topiary, by the way. That's another reason I'm not afraid to time travel—it beats hiding behind topiaries from women who look like my sister Esther, who's been dead since 1925.

I'm scared that the people I loved were indifferent to me.

Are you ready for my story? Turn on the camera.

#

I am 115 years old, and everyone I knew is dead. One of my last friends to die—Evangeline, from ovarian cancer—told it to me like this: “Even the friends you made to replace the friends who died are dead.” No one tells you this, but all of the benefits of old age: wisdom, security in who you are as a person, confidence that you can contribute something to the people around you, stop at eighty. I’m thirty-five years past casual acknowledgement.

The rules of time don’t really mean much to me anymore. I feel suspended—not really here but not really there either, if there *exists*. Yesterday, for example, I sat in the art museum garden and told stories to people. (I had to swat away the monarch butterflies who flitted around, trying to get at the melted candy in my purse.) I messed up the tenses—“Yesterday I saw Esther. She laughs.”—and the listeners got confused. Wait, they asked, but what happened when? I thought, you’re missing the point. Maybe all of my stories are false. Maybe they’re all true. Read my face. *That’s* the story.

Maybe I’m expecting too much of people, for them to be emotionally present. Maybe spending a lot of time alone has made me put too much pressure on the social interactions I do have.

Sometimes my apartment gets so quiet that I turn on the TV for noise. I go out and drink coffee (bad for my pacemaker) so I can talk to the barista, who always compliments my clothes. Though I’m not sure if the barista genuinely cares, much. Last week I started to tell her about a dream I had—not a sad one, Esther and I were eating licorice—and the barista’s eyes glazed

over. She set my coffee on the table and stepped back, eyes darting toward the counter to see if new customers had arrived.

Anyway, I sipped my coffee, alone in a back corner. I thought about moving my sleeping bag and a tea kettle to a ballet studio and setting up shop. For the mirrors.

Yes, mirrors. You want me to speak up? *Mirrors*. Because I am afraid of being alone. Don't stop rolling.

I'm afraid that my funeral will be full of cardboard cut-outs of people that can't be there. On the internet, I saw a story about people who did that for weddings—they made cut-outs of themselves for the bride and groom to take photos with, because they knew they were going to be away at basic training or doing missionary work in Peru. It was supposed to be a funny story.

In in my apartment after I got back from the coffee shop, I rinsed dishes to put in the dishwasher that never got full, and a flyer got pushed under my door. A half an hour later, when I reached my front door, I bent and picked it up. I read it in a voice like the Oxy-Clean guy from those commercials, because I could:

Belinda! (That's me.)

Is everyone you know dead? (Yes.)

Do you feel bad about it? (Yes.)

I stood up on my tip-toes and looked through the peephole. No one was there. Coming back down, I put my hand on the doorknob to steady myself. (I also have to balance when I step off curbs into streets, when I step over the metal thing that separates the tile from the carpet between my kitchen and living room.)

The only letters I got are from my psychiatrist, because I forgot to check my email. Also sometimes I got take-out menus that I memorized, so I could order without looking for my magnifying glass. If I had to find my magnifying glass every time I ordered food, I would starve to death.

It's weird, then, that I've gotten snail mail at all. I looked back down at the flyer.

Do you want to go on an adventure?

It's what my sister used to say to me, in 1905, when we would play pirates—we made bandanas from our mother's striped sheets, and eye patches from our father's pocket squares. Esther drowned in 1925, after a night on a bridge with her beau and a bottle of bootlegged gin. (My memories, at this stage, come out as country music scenarios.) When I used to be able to remember song lyrics, there was a song that goes “the first cut is the sharpest,” or something like that.

Do you want to go on an adventure?

I thought about tearing the flyer to bits and eating the pieces so that I could carry her words around in my stomach. It would be weird, but I've heard weirder—like that woman who swore she lived to 103 because she ate her eye boogers.

I thought about the barista, my mirror-plan. I thought about Esther. She would have wanted me to do this. She said I spent too much time in my head that night in '25, when I wouldn't go on to the bridge with her because I was worried about curfew. Here I am, Esther, I said to her now, like she was sitting in the plaid chair in my living room. I live in my body because it hurts me now and it hurts me not to.

I'd heard crime went up in the section of the city to which all the travelers got relocated. The travelers treated their time in the neighborhood as temporary. As there weren't background checks before you traveled, there was no guarantee that the travelers were upstanding citizens. On the news, the reports from that neighborhood were unsettling—muggings and murders. When the government made people move, a conservative politician said, "Every traveler should live in the same neighborhood so they won't infect our children. Sadness is a sickness, people. Protect yourself."

Really, the conservative politicians knew the travelers had nothing to lose, but still didn't want to hear all the travelers' post-homicide sobbing or the pre-kidnapping rationalizations. Criminals with faces were easier to forgive.

Yes, that's what I said. No, we're not re-taping.

I avoided that section of town, in the week I mulled over the flyer's invitation to time travel. Not for the expected reasons: that at 115 I am frail and can hardly hope to fight off attackers. I didn't want to see the attackers coming at me and recognize my face in theirs—sadness is a sickness, people. Perhaps it is even contagious. I wanted to think I could make a rational choice even now, that there was a part of me, after those long seven minutes when I stared at my boots on the wooden bridge, that could still make choices that weren't emotionally compromised. I wanted to hope that my after-bridge life still mattered, that I hadn't fucked over my entire future at twenty-five.

In the week I mulled it over, I sat in crowds and yelled at strangers. Not aggressive things, or mean things, I wanted to tell them stories about what I remember, so that someone else might remember, too. Once, when I was telling the story of the first dance I'd gone to in 1915



(we listened to Irving Berlin on the victrola,) a couple stopped in the art museum garden to listen. Another time, when I was telling a story about some lesson I'd learned, (give people the benefit of the doubt,) a kid whispered to his mom,

“That lady's like Jesus.”

I would have preferred a Dalai Lama comparison—that *robe*.

Before I made the decision to travel, I woke up in the middle of the night sometimes and thought, “No one after me is going to remember what my mom's voice sounded like.” I'd watch the minutes tick as I tried to remember if she sounded more like Julia Child or Janice from *Friends*. I'd fall asleep convinced that she sounded like sandpaper, which didn't make sense.

It made me angry, and it made me wish my head had a USB port, just below my ear, that I could plug a flash drive into and download their voices. So that after me people would be able to know my dad's laugh, or the way that Esther's voice twinkled at the edges when she teased you.

In the night, I almost stayed, knowing they'd be lost. In the morning, I remembered that no one would remember, that it was just me, bearing the weight of their light.

On Wednesday, I decided to go. I unstuck the flyer from the front of the fridge. Forty-five minutes later, I made it back to the kitchen counter where I'd left my purse. I picked it up and switched off the kitchen lights. The apartment looked like a black-and-white photo now—not a color photo with an “old-fashioned” filter, but the kind of black-and-white photos they made when they didn't know how to make the other kinds. I headed out the door. An hour later, I was in the hall, locking up.

I took out my magnifying glass as I stood on the corner outside my apartment, so I could read the flyer's fine print. I hailed a taxi and told the driver the address. The ride passed. The taxi dropped me off at a shabby house like the one I shared with my first husband. The house kind of smelled like my second husband. The old man sitting on the porch in a rocking chair reminded me of neither of them, Thank God.

"Belinda?" The old man asked.

He must have sent the flyer.

"I'm Horatio Horace Reginald."

He looked like a Horatio—the old man wore a top hat, and purple-and-gold striped capris.

I covered my laugh with a cough.

He came down the porch stairs and stuck his elbow out at me. I took his arm, and noticed he had a tattoo of the impossible triangle on the inside of his wrist. Also, I noticed the age spots on my hands that I forget are there sometimes. In my head, where I don't live anymore because my body won't let me, I'm forever twenty-five, standing on that bridge in the rain.

We walked into the house and into the front room, and I realized I wasn't not the only one who'd gotten the flyer. The group assembled on the brocade couch and the overstuffed chairs wouldn't look at each other, or at me. They held flyers with names across the top that I assume are their own—there's Caitlin, a young mother with too many wrinkles; Scarlett, a teenager with purple scars on her arms; George, an older man whose mouth won't stop smiling.

Horatio pointed me to a chair, and I sat. He spoke.

"Your psychiatrists recommended you for this program," he said.

George's smile widened. Caitlin looked out the window. Scarlett traced her scars. I wondered if their appointments with their psychiatrists sounded like mine had the last couple of months: *Anything you want to talk about? Silence. How do you feel when you sit in the coffee shop, Belinda? A chair scraping as I turn it away from the psychiatrist. Why don't you tell me about your sister? Footsteps, cane-thumps, as I hobble away.*

"It's time travel as a cure for depression," Horatio continued.

Scarlett Snapchatted a picture of Horatio Horace Reginald on her phone.

I'd heard rumors of this program. It was only for the most desperate, if I remembered correctly. The rumors said there was a basement, and in the basement there was a machine, and in the machine there was redemption. I wasn't sure if that was true, but I'd heard you couldn't choose where (when) you went, and you couldn't ever come back.

"You can't choose where—erm, *when*—you go and you can't ever come back," Horatio Horace Reginald confirmed.

No one got up and left, even though I'd expected them to. It depressed me, to think that all these people were as desperate as I was in a third of the lifespan I'd had. I thought then, of one time when Esther and I were playing pirates and we found some ants. We'd crushed them with the blunt end of our parasols that our mother had insisted we'd bring whenever we played outdoors. I hadn't felt bad afterwards.

When I looked at Horatio Horace Reginald, he was smiling. "You've got forty-five minutes to decide. We've got lots of potential customers."

I heard a car pull up in the driveway outside. Someone talked about cab fare.

I wondered then, what kind of world we were living in.

Horatio Horace Reginald left the room, and the three of us stared at each other. Caitlin kept looking out the window and twisting the bottom of her sweater in her hands. She'd probably say yes first.

"2013," she said.

But, I almost told her, you can't pick the year you go back to. I guess 2003 was just the year she would have chosen, if she could have.

"2009," Scarlett looked up from her phone.

"1987," said George.

And then they all started yelling out other years until I couldn't hear them distinctly.

"2008! 1964! 1993!"

I yelled mine in all one string, like they felt in my head, like a victrola, or a record player, or a CD that got stuck. "19251938195719251925!"

I was standing in the center of the room now, looking up at the ceiling, tears streaming as I spun slowly in a circle. They watched me. They *noticed* me. I kept spinning.

George decided first. He did it quickly, more quickly than I thought was healthy. But, at 115, and in my mind, and in my state, healthy, I suppose, is relative.

He said yes with a smile. We'd just finished talking about how, because you can't pick when you go, the traveling is not really about fixing your problems, or bringing back the people you'd lost. It was about getting away. He told this story:

George was born in 1937, in Cleveland. The streetcars, he said, rattled by his parents' apartment when he was getting ready for school in the mornings. When he came home, they were still rattling by the front door his family shared with five other families. It was this rattling,

he said, that settled into him as a young man, that changed the way he saw things, so that everything was always slightly off-kilter, or jiggling, or disjointed. He could feel the rattle in his back teeth, and it hurt. So, George married too fast and too young, to a girl who was too young and too fast. George, with the rattling, was a slow fellow. This fast girl was the only one he'd ever loved, the one, he said, who made the world stand still.

George and Too Fast settled in an apartment far from the streetcars in Cleveland, closer to the ocean than either of them had been before. They were happy.

At this point in the George's story, Scarlett dropped her phone to the wood floor.

"You were happy," she said this statement like a question, incredulous, like she couldn't believe anyone who was once happy would have ever ended up in this living room, above this basement. Scarlett was still young enough to believe that one emotion can define a person's world outlook, that one large mistake, and not many small ones, affect a person's spirit. Old people like George and me called this the accumulation of the pile of the guilt of the centuries. We were out of breath by the time we finished telling Scarlett the name. She'd lost interest anyway, turned her attention to Caitlin, who stared out the window at the malfunctioning sprinkler head that kept watering the sidewalk.

"Caitlin, right?" Scarlett nudged the poor woman with her foot. Caitlin curled into herself, away from Scarlett.

"We were happy," said George. "And then, that woman, she left me. The world started rattling again, not even kidding you. It's like she tripped a switch when she closed the door and I entered the fucking fun house."

"Woot," said Scarlett.

“I couldn’t figure out what I’d done. She left me a note, and it said, “‘You know.’ Fuck I didn’t know.” George’s smile hadn’t left his face the whole time. Scarlett scooted away from him.

“I never met anyone else,” George whispered. “The world won’t stand still anymore.” He got up off his chair and steadied himself, palsied, with his dry fingertips.

“Horatio Horace Humphrey!” George yelled out. The man with the top hat appeared in the doorway, hiding a smirk. I wanted to slug him.

“Let’s get the goddamn thing over with.” George walked toward the basement door. From the basement, if my hearing aids weren’t deceiving me, I could hear a whirring, faint and insistent like a cat’s purr. Then I was on the wet bridge, rain-soaked planks dark in the bright sun of the next morning, the one after.

Horatio Horace Reginald opened the basement door, put his hand on George’s back, and led him downstairs.

When did he go? Is that confidential? What was his exit interview like? You won’t tell me?

There were three. Or two and a half, since Caitlin wouldn’t speak. Her head nodded in beat with the broken sprinkler, and I wondered where she’d gone.

“Why?” I asked Scarlett.

She showed me her Facebook page.

I blinked into the bright blue-white light of the phone, and squinted to read the print: *How many pieces of celery did you eat today, fat ass? How big’s your thigh gap?*

I pushed the phone away and it fell between us, face up and glowing. Scarlett wiped her face. I would give her a Kleenex, but the only thing I have with me is Esther's handkerchief, and giving it to Scarlett would be like doing a strip tease.

"What if you fought back?"

Scarlett laughed at me, an ugly sound, like broken silverware in a dropped kitchen drawer.

I touched her. She seemed surprised.

"What if you fought back?" I said quieter.

She smiled at me in that infuriating young people way—like I was a clueless toddler, like I hadn't experienced what they had: a million little mini-heartbreaks. Look, I wanted to say to Scarlett, "Mini-heartbreak is my middle name. How do you think I got here?"

"When would you go?" Scarlett asked.

I used to show my photo albums to the neighborhood kids. They would pick their noses and run their fingers over the faces of the people in the photos. Scarlet's concern for me made up for that.

I picked up Scarlett's phone and pressed some buttons until it turned off. "1919."

It wasn't the moment on the bridge I would return to, even though it had returned to me most nights for seven decades. It was a couple of years before, when Esther was Esther, not EstherandNeville. I could have stopped the night on the bridge, I think, if I had somehow kept Esther and Neville apart. I could have told Esther that she shouldn't date Neville just because he was a flirt, and she had mistaken his advances to mean that he cared for her. If they were apart,

she wouldn't have been on that bridge, and she might have died an old, frail woman. We could have tallied our metal limbs.

I dreamed of that tally sheet sometimes. Our names in Esther's fountain pen, a spidery line down the middle of the paper that faded at the bottom. Hip—there's a check under both our names. Knee—Esther. Shoulder—Belinda. We'd joke in the dream, and put Heart—Belinda, because I'd never met anybody or settled down. Then, I woke up and the metal heart was not a joke at all. It was heavy.

“Tell them how you feel.” I told Scarlett.

It was one of the lessons I'd learned: You needed to be clear about your feelings. You shouldn't expect people to read your mind.

“I tried,” she said.

Maybe I'd pushed too far. Scarlett covered her face with her hands, and I noticed the scars on her arms. They were words. Up and down her arms, a repeated phrase: Beautiful, I am. I wondered if the tattoo artist just got the spacing wrong and the phrase should really have read in the standard syntax. Maybe Scarlett loved Yoda.

You're a geek who probably likes Star Wars, right, video-man? Oh, you think I'm being nasty to you because of the choice I made? False. I'm being nasty to you because of the choice the world made, sir.

I thought that Horatio Horace Reginald was wrong about Scarlett. Maybe she didn't really want to kill herself. Her cuts were elaborate and artful—more like tattoos than cuts measured and made for their efficiency in blood-letting.



“You don’t need to be here.” I said to Scarlett. She looked toward the unlocked front door. Scarlett tugged at my hand.

“Come with me.”

I looked at Caitlin, who stared at the floor, at the marks made by the phone when Scarlett dropped it. I felt my face. As my sight has failed, I’ve started to try to read people by touch. Our mouths turned down at the same places. We both had permanent “v’s” between our eyebrows. I touched Caitlin’s neck—she jumped—but I kept my hand steady and felt her pulse there. I touched mine, felt my pulse, weaker than hers. I pulled Scarlett in and felt her pulse too, strongest, now, kind of hopeful. I closed my eyes. Listened to the percussion of us. Imagined the vibration when each of us, in our turn, rested.

Caitlin walked into the basement quickly, without speaking. The door clicked shut behind her, loud in the quiet.

Scarlett touched her own wet face, and then shoved her fingers in her pockets quickly. She hugged me, then was gone, and I followed her smell to the door and breathed her in.

I turned to the empty living room. I opened the basement door. The whirring pulled me down, down into the dark.

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There. Now I’m here. Satisfied? Do I meet your candidate specifications? Do I leave my ID card? Is someone going to tell the barista where I’ve gone? The red light’s still blinking.

## FRAYED

We couldn't look. We saw, but we couldn't *look*. We saw: the yellow police tape around the bridge, the frayed swinging rope, the abandoned white sock in the river below. We avoided each other; we'd done everything we could; we *thought* we'd done everything we could.

We wondered; he didn't fit the profile. Lacrosse team captain, rush chair for his fraternity. In our darkest minutes, we thought these things unpredictable, and we searched for signs in one another.

Those of us who prayed, prayed.

We continued to give campus tours; we answered questions. How many students attended this school, whether students were required to have meal plans. Around 10,000 students, we told parents. In our heads we thought: 9,999. No, we said. Students are not required to have a meal plan.

We would have crossed the bridge to go to the dining hall. We found alternate routes. We wandered the local Target's fluorescent linoleum, seeking twin XL sheets, bright plastic bath caddies. We stayed away longer than necessary. We invented reasons for our parents to stay, claimed we needed mini-fridges and couldn't carry them up the stairs by ourselves. We laughed at awkward moments with new roommates. We blushed at our laughter and stared at our shoes.

Those of us who could see the bridge from our dorms bought curtains. We told ourselves the curtains were for privacy. Actually, we didn't want to look at *his* last view. Actually, we just wanted to buy curtains so we could close them.

Those of us who couldn't sleep the first night, most of us, wrapped ourselves in our comforters and stood on dorm balconies. We hugged ourselves. Stood vigil. We felt the almost-fall breeze on our newly-dry faces. We watched the police tape flutter.

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