

# **“IN THE DROWNING CITY” AND OTHER STORIES**

by

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## ABSTRACT

*“In the Drowning City” and Other Stories* is a collection of fiction written and revised during Malyn Segarra’s graduate studies at the University of Central Florida. Most of the collection examines the transient nature and fragility of identity and shifting roles within the family unit. All focus on a particular span of time, the transition into young adulthood. Each character is faced with an obstacle or event that tests his or her beliefs, integrity and sense of self. As each one struggles to make a unique and permanent impression in the world, he or she must come to terms with the past, in some cases, breaking away from it. Although the characters come from varying backgrounds, the themes that thread the collection are universal.

The three stories that serve as the backbone of the collection, “Slashing, Tripping and Other Offensive Plays,” “In the Drowning City,” and “This Is Just a Modern Love Song” find the protagonists striving to adapt to their newly transformed environments. As the situations they face become more complicated and the resolutions exceedingly compromised, the innocence and certainty associated with childhood is jeopardized.

This collection of short stories is dedicated to my parents, Manuel and Lynda Segarra.  
Thank you for the countless opportunities.

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## IN THE DROWNING CITY

At night, the noise coming from the Foresteria Valdesi breaks the silence of the small Venetian street. The patrons are mostly Italian from various other states, or from nearby Germany. They switch from one language to another seamlessly while conveying a single thought. Farah, the only American in the hostel, picks out bits of broken English that rise like buoys from the dense chatter. She and her friend, Addon, sit secluded by the bar.

Farah bounces a quarter off the bar counter into a shot of scotch she's set in front of Addon.

"That's bloody brilliant," he says. "You'll need to carry me home after this one. I'm legless." His grin is inviting. He slides a hand across his brow and pushes his shaggy brown hair back in place.

"In your dreams, Addon." She takes a sip of her beer. A hint of malt lingers on her thin lips. "Your turn."

"No, it's Erminio's." He calls Erminio, Farah's boss and the manager of the Foresteria, who sits at a table with several young girls. "Get over here, you sod."

Erminio scratches the black hair at the nape of his neck. "Un momento," he says and then waves them off, linen sleeve sliding up his arm.

The pair at the counter look at one another and laugh, knowing they've been deserted for the night. It's a giddy, content laugh. Farah takes pleasure in the moment as

if the laughter were adding to her feeling of intoxication. Addon stares at her with unabashed, adoring brown eyes. He is only a friend, although he's been more than that at times. She maintains eye contact, sure that the feeling will end as soon as she breaks away. For this moment, no one else is in the room. Farah knows it has to end eventually regardless of who initiates. Moments like this are fleeting.

Waving the quarter in front of Addon's face, she says, "You know you're almost impossible to understand when you're drunk."

"And Erminio is impossible to understand when he's sober," Addon says.

"I guess he's out of the game." She presses the quarter in his warm palm and pours another shot.

Addon closes one eye and takes aim. He misses.

"Aha." Farah points at him accusingly. "Drink."

"Bollocks." He takes the drink. "Tell me something, Love. Isn't this a holiday where you're from? No friends or family to visit?"

She hasn't talked to her mother in years, and her sister, Kelly, hasn't returned her emails the last few months. "Not for a few days," she says. "Thanksgiving is the third *Thursday* in November."

"Flying somewhere then?"

"Somewhere?" She raises an eyebrow.

"I don't know where you're from."

Addon wears a blue button-up and a chocolate-colored blazer. The shirt collar is flipped, but one side hangs down weakly. He straightens it out before speaking. “Don’t you think that’s bizarre? I have no bloody clue where you’re from. I mean, I can estimate you’re not from the northeast and you’re no Southern Belle.”

“I guess not,” she says. “I’m from Florida. Not exactly the Deep South but deep enough.” The small miserable town is just outside of Jacksonville, a place nothing like the postcards of Miami Beach. In fact, Farah had never seen a palm tree until she left.

“We’ve talked about this,” she says.

“Not once,” he says. “Though we should have.”

“Doesn’t matter anyway. I haven’t been back in years.”

Farah hasn’t been back since her senior year of high school. The same week they were dismissed from school, she packed two bags and snuck out. Farah spent graduation day in London. Kelly told her that the diploma had arrived a few weeks later. She kept it safe for Farah, along with some other things she had left behind. Their mother had ransacked Farah’s room after discovering she’d left, tearing through personal items and discarding them like garbage. Kelly went through the mess and saved things she thought Farah would want some day. She promised to keep them hidden until her big sister decided to come back. The two girls knew, however, that her return was unlikely.

Farah had spent her senior year planning and plotting her escape. She used every penny of the four thousand she made towards that goal. Farah grew up accustomed to

doing things on her own, caring for herself and her seven-year-old sister, and she knew just how far that money would get her before she had to stop somewhere and work again.

Farah understood the importance of money at a young age. They couldn't afford groceries or school supplies because her mother couldn't keep a job. When Farah had to wear clothing from the Good Will store, she became acutely aware of the situation and withdrew from classmates. In their eyes, Farah's environment was just an extension of who she really was. They defined her in those terms, poor and weak. Her classmates were right. Farah's environment did shape her, which is why she wanted to change it.

Farah was unwilling to spend her high school years in seclusion. So freshman year, when they moved to a new district, she took her chance. She joined the soccer team and took AP classes for college credit. She joined the Senate Class of the student government where she won the office of Treasurer. Her mother didn't spend much time at home, even when unemployed, and Farah took Kelly everywhere, including the library. While Farah studied, Kelly would sit in an oversized chair, legs curled under, reading books like *The Giving Tree*. Farah's friends soon adopted the girls, and they spent brief moments of happiness pretending to be members of other families.

The illusion was disturbed whenever Farah's mother went through what Farah had come to recognize as an episode. An episode was usually preceded by her mother being dumped or losing a job. Farah's mother would sleep on the couch for days, dressed in pajamas and a bathrobe she sometimes used as a blanket. It was the only time she wanted Farah around. She needed her around.

When Farah was younger, she engaged these episodes with hope, praying for a change in her mother's character. As she grew, Farah understood the episodes were too short to be motivated by love or concern. She wanted Farah home to wait on her regardless of the soccer game or test she had to study for. She objected to things a normal parent wouldn't be against. Farah understood her mother just wanted someone else to feel miserable.

Addon offers the quarter, pulling Farah back into the conversation. "Have a go." He's skilled at pulling her back into the moment. She takes the coin but doesn't shoot. The giddy feeling is gone.

"Your family must miss you," he says.

He's become preoccupied with this line of questioning, prying into her past. She scratches her collarbone.

"It's been a long time," she says.

Addon places his hand on hers. Fresh calluses cover his fingertips. He must be working on a song. When Addon isn't here, he's composing music in his apartment on Camp S. Maria Formosa Ave. At least, that's what he's told her. Although he's at the hostel almost every night, they rarely meet on the outside, which is ironic because they didn't meet at the Foresteria. They met near the Rialto Bridge. He came to the Foresteria eight months ago looking for Farah and now he's always here. It's funny how quickly they fell into this routine.

With his thumb, he traces the blue veins of her wrist. “Come back to my flat.”

“I’m working,” she says and pulls her hand away. His advances make her uncomfortable now that it’s clear he wants something more serious. His touch, his stare, his sudden interest in her past. Even the smallest gesture takes on the nuance of his growing affection despite her wish they transition from lovers to friends.

“This is work?”

“Every night it is.” She smiles.

“I’m sure it’s almost close. Erminio can handle afters.”

She takes a sip of the warm beer and resists swallowing immediately. She lets the liquid swirl in her mouth. The flavor is more distinct when it’s warmed, the influence of coffee and spicy hops more apparent.

Farah has taken the long walk with him from the Ponte di Rialto, followed Salizzado s. Lio and crossed the bridge to his apartment several times. It’s always been at night, which makes it difficult to recognize any of the streets until the lonely walk back at daybreak. The last time, for reasons unclear even to herself, she stayed for breakfast.

She regretted the decision almost immediately when Addon asked her about home. She didn’t understand why it mattered so much. She’d done so many more interesting things in her travels.

“Because you never bloody talk about it,” he said. “Straight away you change the topic.”

He didn't know that just thinking about her home brought back feelings she didn't want to deal with. She could step back into that skin just as clearly as if she'd never left. Whenever she thinks about her childhood, she loses confidence. She feels powerless. She feels like a loser. Those emotions stick to her skin, like the salty film after an ocean swim, for hours.

Back home, everyone eventually learned about Farah's mother at her new school. They'd react in one of two ways: pity or disgust.

"I just don't feel like rehashing the past," Farah said to Addon. She would've rather seen anger than pity on his face.

She'd seen pity too many times. She never wanted another person to feel sorry for her, especially someone she was romantic with.

Once, during soccer practice, Farah had collided with another girl and sprained her wrist. Her boyfriend, Michael, and his mother drove Farah to the emergency clinic when her mother wasn't reachable. Later, when Farah asked her mother to pick her up, she told Farah to ride the bus home. It was clear to everyone that she didn't care about Farah's injury at that point. Farah had lied and said her mother was at work when they took her to the hospital, but she had no excuse for her mother then. The embarrassment of having to explain her mother's behavior to Michael and his mom and the look of pity on their faces made Farah resent her mother more. Farah had been exposed.

The way Addon stared during their last breakfast left her feeling the same way, vulnerable. In a flash, she realized why she'd stayed. The idea of getting closer was

enticing, but she didn't know how to put that desire into practice. Farah didn't know how to be intimate without sex. She'd never really been close to someone, and she couldn't tell Addon what he wanted to know. The conversation dulled, and it never recovered. Farah stabbed at the mushroom caps and scrambled eggs on her plate for a while before she left feeling like a failure.

Farah hasn't gone home with Addon since.

Addon pulls out his wallet and sets it on the counter. "Well?"

She shakes her head no.

"I'll bugger off then."

"You don't have to go," she says.

When he stands, he almost knocks his stool over but catches it before it hits the ground. "Sometimes *you're* impossible." Addon's stride is unsteady. He leaves money on the counter and barely looks her direction.

Venetian roads are notoriously confusing. There are no lights and few names. This late, the lights coming from the hostel will be the only ones illuminating the block along the canal. The inhabitants of the rust and tawny painted buildings that neighbor have been sleeping for hours. In a drunken stupor, Addon could get lost on the foreign streets.

Farah was lost on those streets when they met. She had arrived only a few days prior and had a room at the Foresteria. She was looking for the Rialto Bridge and ran into him in a nearby passageway. The stone arch bridge was built over the narrowest point of

the Grand Canal. She had been wandering around in the neighborhood just outside it and felt stupid that she didn't see the giant structure. He approached Farah and then guided her to the bridge. Like they were meant to meet, she ran across him almost as soon as she got to Venice.

The surface of the bridge was covered in shops. Cramped shops selling jewelry, linens, and murano glass lined the walkway. They stood in the open arch at the center of the bridge.

"This is where the Chapel would have been," Farah said. "Earlier bridges of the same design usually had a Chapel in the center."

Addon seemed surprised. "You've been here before?"

"No," she said. "I looked up some information." She shrugged.

"You're interested in engineering?"

"Some, I guess. I'm mostly interested in buildings, but in a place like Venice bridges naturally take on a special importance."

He was several inches taller than she was, and, at the time, he wore a messy beard. His clothes were clean and pressed.

"How high up do you think we are?" she asked.

"About twenty feet. Enough space to accommodate traffic."

Traffic. The intricate design of waterways were the real roads of the city.

"Architects had a serious problem building on this land because it's mostly marsh. This bridge had to be rebuilt," he said.

“Because it collapsed?” It was hard to imagine the concrete could crack and fall to pieces. The air that crept in would have deteriorated the exposed material beneath.

“They drove 6,000 wooden piles under the abutments on each side. There and there.” Addon placed his hands on her shoulders. Keeping his right hand in place, he pointed with the other. His face was only inches from hers when he spoke. Being that close to him felt natural. “The stones were then bedded at right angles to the line of thrust of the arch. A lot of the structures were built in the same manner.”

If the marsh below were ever exposed in a critical place, it could cause devastation, undermining the integrity of the entire foundation. It’s a danger lurking under the city that everyone is aware of but continue about his or her business as if it weren’t there. What else could they do? She considered it an inevitability, making her time there all the more special.

“A whole city built on a deteriorating foundation,” he said as if he had heard her thoughts.

“We’d better enjoy it while we can.”

In a move that was so intimate, as if they were already lovers, he traced the line of her chin, maybe trying to learn its angles. She was wearing her mother’s old scarf as a headband. Farah had seen her mother wearing it, tied around the neck, in a photo taken years before life had prematurely aged her face. Her cheeks were smooth and radiant, her expression almost hopeful. Her mother never resembled that photo in real life. Addon

tugged on the tail, draping down Farah's shoulder and smiled, threatening to unravel the whole thing.

Situated on one of the busiest streets, the Santa Maria della Salute Cathedral is located on a sliver of land between the Grand Canal and the Canale della Giudecca. It's a highly visible and precarious location on the edge of the water. Built in 1630 as a response to Venice's release from the plague, it is dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Her image is prominent throughout the exterior décor. Inside, a sculpture of the Virgin sits above the high altar as the Queen of Heaven. A ghastly old woman who represents the plague is driven away. It is the main focus of the cathedral, representative of the beliefs of the people who built her. The Virgin's image is engrained in every aspect, even in the layout, built in the shape of an octagon meant to suggest the Virgin's crown.

Farah has studied architecture for years on her own and keeps notebooks with sketches and comments, pasted photos and clippings. She admires the way architecture serves a culture's needs and expresses their beliefs. Buildings such as the Santa Maria della Salute have purpose and provide meaning. Buildings such as the Santa Maria della Salute are more than physical manifestations of the past; they influence the descendants of those who built her, bequeathing something so inherent to the way Venetians still live that it's rarely consciously recognized.

Whether the people who walk through the cathedral's walls realize it, the cathedral was built to fulfill a promise. The Venetians believed that the Virgin would

save them from the plague that had already killed a third of their population. Farah is fascinated with knowing when and why buildings are created. Most people admire the frescoes and artistry but never question why. Farah knows better than most how an environment can shape a person. She's fascinated with the way major constructions affected the people who built them and to what extent people are aware of those effects.

Farah is drawn towards the high altar immediately. The image of the Virgin is intricately sculpted. Next to her is the sculpted representation of a pious woman kneeling. From the main entrance, all other altars are hidden in the recess of six shallow side chapels. An aisle blocks them from view until she moves in closer, and only then is the whole interior visible. Farah knows they are there, but it's still dramatic when the entire inside is laid bare.

She sits in a pew in one of the side chapels. The use of the Corinthian Order throughout, with dark grey columns against white walls, gives unity to the main elements. She takes out her sketchbook and flips through pictures of other churches and buildings. The cathedrals of Western Europe remain her favorite places to visit. There is an added profundity to these places of worship that's absent in other structures. She's not very religious, but she'd like to be sometimes. She envies those who sit in the pews around her and their unwavering faith in something. She thinks people who can maintain a belief fueled purely by faith and will are lucky to an extent. She imagines they rarely feel the kind of loneliness she does.

Addon once told her he didn't believe this life was his last stop. He said the reason people couldn't find happiness is because they aren't meant for this life ultimately. They would experience moments of happiness, even feel mostly content, but the human soul will always want something more and will always feel loneliness. Farah isn't certain there's an afterlife, but she can't deny that Addon finds comfort in his belief.

Farah is retracing the lines of an old drawing when a man in a backwards Ohio State baseball cap slides into the pew before her. She recognizes him immediately. A group of Americans just arrived at the Foresteria, two boys and two girls. At first, she'd thought they were couples because they acted very familiar with one another. But something in the way that he watched as Farah handed the shorter girl two keys made her doubt the initial judgment. If she tried to catch him staring, he wouldn't look away.

He kneels down and bows his head. She feels an instant connection to him. There haven't been a lot of Americans staying at the Foresteria in the past month. Still, there's something unnerving about his presence at the cathedral. She considers leaving but stays to watch.

His arms are crossed and eyes are shut tight. He seems deep in thought. She doodles in the margin of her book. After a little while, he raises his head and sits back on the bench. The blonde flecks of his hair poke out from under the red of his cap. He doesn't say anything but twists towards Farah's direction, seemingly admiring the wall.

He looks younger than she thought, maybe still in college. His large blue eyes jut out slightly. It doesn't make him unattractive, just distinct. She's only seen eyes like his

before in Michael. He could be Michael grown up. He looks very familiar. Farah fidgets in her seat. She averts her eyes towards the ceiling, staring at the large handsome dome over the high altar. Ultimately, he grabs the bag on the floor next to him, slings it over his shoulder, and leaves without saying a word.

Farah hasn't talked to Michael since ninth grade. He broke up with her after Farah's mother had her jailed. He couldn't handle the pressure of dealing with Farah's mother, which she always thought was strange. After all, the pressure wasn't really on *him*.

They had only dated a few months when Farah's mother had one of her episodes. The episode lasted for a particularly long time, but Farah had a life then. More than halfway through freshman year, she wasn't willing to stop everything and nurse her mother through another failure. She would help her when she could, but Farah wouldn't turn herself inside out for the woman. When her mother saw that Farah had other obligations, she became more controlling. In response, Farah became more rebellious. The power struggle continued, culminating in her mother banning Farah from a banquet for honor students. It seemed like the most ludicrous rule ever. Only *her* mother would forbid a daughter from attending a function celebrating good grades. The woman had lost her mind. Farah's friends would be there, as well as Michael. She wanted to see them. Farah snuck out anyway. When her mother realized she was gone, she lost control.

She waited on Farah's bed. "Where you been?"

"School."

“I tell you to stay home and you go off, do whatever you want?”

“Why didn’t you just come?” It would’ve been nice to have someone there. The other parents clapped for their children, some took photos.

“You think you’re so smart.”

Farah dropped her bag by the door. She *was* smart. Smarter than her mother.

“You’re just a little too big for your britches now, aren’t you?” she said.

On the nightstand by the bed sat a half empty glass. “Been drinking?” Farah said.

“Don’t you worry about what I been doing.”

“Okay, I won’t.”

Her mother stood. Her foot tangled in the comforter, fallen halfway off the mattress, and looped at the base like the excess cable of an unseen anchor. She almost fell to her side but braced against the nightstand, knocking her glass to the floor. The ice rested on the surface as a puddle of diluted brown liquid sank into the beige carpet.

“I told you not to go,” she said and kicked an ice cube across the room. Farah’s mother usually went out to bars to drink unless she didn’t have cash or friends. She came home long after Farah had gone to bed. Farah had rarely seen her that way.

“Where’s Kelly?” Farah called out for her.

“You think you’re too pretty, too smart, too good for this family.”

“Kelly?”

“Don’t you walk away from your mother.”

*Mother.* She was never there. Farah cracked open Kelly's bedroom door. "You okay?" She felt bad waking her, but Farah needed to hear Kelly's voice. Their mother came barreling in.

"You're grounded. Do you hear me? You think you're above what I tell you to do?"

"Shouldn't you be happy for me? I'm not doing anything wrong. I take care of everything around here."

"I tell you to stay put, you do it."

Her mother wanted Farah to be just like her but Farah wouldn't do it, and that's what really pissed her off. Farah rejected her life. She couldn't be fooled any longer. Her mother was jealous because she knew that Farah had something more in her than her mother had given. She tried her best to squash that in Farah, but Farah had built up her life without her mother, or in spite of her. That's what sent her into a rage. Farah, who was young when her mother had aged. Strong when her mother was weak. Farah would not end up like that woman. Sometimes she wondered if they were truly related.

"You're worthless and ungrateful," her mother said. "Nobody will ever want me because of you."

Farah hated her then.

"Nobody wants you because you're a pathetic old bitch," she said.

Her mother slapped Farah across the face, hard and flat against the cheek. Farah stood erect, stunned. She'd never been hit like that before. At least, she could say that about her mother. Even though, she sometimes thought hitting would be better.

Her mother slapped her again. That time it stung more. She tried again but, before she could, Farah pushed her back onto the floor and ran into her room.

Life would've been so much easier if Farah's mother went away once and for all.

Instead, she sent Farah to jail overnight for assault. She left Farah in prison that next school day and picked her up in the evening.

When Farah returns to the Foresteria, she searches through the registry in the office. She makes a copy of every guest's passport for their records. His name is Scott Auger, age twenty-three years, and his address is in Columbus, Ohio.

Farah sits at one of the tables reading when he walks in. She recognizes him immediately, and her breathing becomes labored. She feels guilty about rifling through his personal information. He stands by the counter but doesn't say anything.

Finally, Farah says, "Need some help?"

He smiles widely, flashing a row of perfectly straight teeth. "Actually, I was looking for pamphlets. You know, info on all the tourist traps."

"We don't have many of those here. You may find some along that wall." She points towards the entrance where what looks like a small magazine rack holds a variety of traveling brochures, mostly outdated.

He walks over and picks up the closest pamphlet. "I know you, right?" he says.

"Not really," she says.

"I do. Not just from the hostel." He extends his hand. "I'm Scott. I saw you earlier today."

She pretends she doesn't know his name or recognize him, but her cheeks are burning. Her skin is probably bright red, and there's nothing she can do about it. She read somewhere blushing is triggered by a nerve in the chest. If only she could sever it. No one would know when she is embarrassed or angry. All the while, he must be wondering why she's flushed. She shakes his hand. It's smooth and envelops her slender fingers.

"You're American right?" he says.

"Right. You too." She points at his hat. Judging from his build, he's probably more than a fan. He must be a ball player. "It's unusual to see Americans staying around this area."

"That's odd," he says, "considering this is the only hostel in Venice with a bar downstairs from the dorms."

"It's a little removed from the main attractions."

He nods and ambles over to the table, taking the seat next to her.

"Not that Venice is that big," she says. She doesn't know what else to talk to him about. He didn't have to sit down.

"Still, I can see what might attract someone to the hostel." He leans in closer.

Farah closes her book and clutches it against her chest. She is waiting for an opportunity to leave the table without appearing completely awkward. She may always be hesitant around new people. Building relationships is draining.

“You were at the Santa Maria today right? That’s where I saw you.” His eyes are bluer than Michael’s and his eyelashes a lighter brown.

“Della Salute,” she says. “Dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Salute is supposed to have a double meaning.”

“Health and Salvation.”

“Right,” she says and smiles. He knows his history.

She sets the book down on the table. They talk for some time about the cathedral and other buildings. He’s impressed with how much she knows. He calls the cathedral a time capsule and tells her that buildings created to last could only be possible when people were ready to settle down in one place. He thinks it was an exciting struggle to grow with an area of land. He’s smart and thoughtful and passionate about something she really cares about. It’s surprising and intriguing. The conversation leaves her exhilarated.

It’s early evening. Farah wipes the counter at the bar with a checkered washcloth so thin the coarse sections of the damaged wood scrape her skin. Her fingers poke through the loose threading; she scratches at the bottle rings and cigarette burns that cut across the counter’s glossy finish. Addon sits on a stool reading the paper.

“Sometimes it still surprises me,” she says.

“What’s that, Love?” Addon says without looking up from his paper.

She opens her arms in a grand gesture towards the back window. “I forget where I am. Then I look out that window and boom, there’s a canal. Gondolas gliding by like in the movies.”

“How long has it been now?”

“Almost nine months.” She smiles. “You know that.”

Addon looks up from his paper. “And you’re not bored of the chips with everything regime yet? Isn’t that atypical for you?”

“Venice is different from the other places. It’s interesting.” Farah won’t be goaded into an argument.

“It’s bloody aggravating. I can’t get a pint without rubbing elbows with some Euro trash or barmy American.”

Farah scrunches her nose and rests her hip against the counter top. “Well, I don’t see you packing your bags.”

“I have my reasons.” Neither of them intended to stay here for more than a few months. She can’t imagine he’ll stay much longer now.

“Still, you can’t get that much done.” She rinses the washcloth in the sink and hangs it on the nozzle to dry. “You’re always here.”

He sets his paper down. “A regular?”

“The only one.” She leans forward.

“You know why I’m here.” He produces a sly grin.

“You’re wasting your time.” She walks to the window nearest the canal. A family of four sits in a gondola floating up the canal. The mom and dad are heavysset, pale with wavy blond hair. They could be siblings, older versions of the boy and girl that occupy the front of the boat. Farah waves from the tiny window. The way the girl’s golden ringlets dangle just above her shoulders reminds Farah of Kelly. Her curls were tighter but almost the same length when Farah left home seven years ago. It’s naïve to think she’d look the same. She hasn’t checked her email today; maybe there’s a message.

“It sinks every year, you know. Into the marsh,” Addon says. “The whole city is sinking.”

Erminio walks in through the back door that joins the bar and the dormitory hallway. His black hair is combed back. He’s carrying a money pouch with receipts from the night before. “The dam will fix it,” he says. He has a habit of joining conversations midway. “They say it.”

“A temporary fix,” Addon says.

Farah ignores them both, staring at the water, though she knows Addon is right. Just a few years ago, winds from the Sahara caused Venice to flood. The water rose enough to cover Santa Maria della Salute with up to three feet of water. She tries to imagine how buildings that seemingly float on the surface could flood.

The gondola is lost in the shade of two tall dwellings where a line of laundry hangs limply between them. Shadows cover them as they float by like silhouettes.

They continue on without ever waving back, and Farah turns away disappointed.

Addon says, "I doubt she gives a monkey anyway, Erminio. I bet she still thinks it's beautiful. Tragic and beautiful, if the city sinks." He finishes the last bit of his pint and drops ten Euros on the counter.

He walks over to her. "I still like that about you," he says.

"That I still have hope for a city bound to collapse?"

He nods.

"What a loss."

"You'd better enjoy it while you can," Addon says. He sweeps the hair away from his forehead. "Come to my flat tomorrow night." His expression is unexpectedly resolute.

"I have to run the bar."

"Before then," he says. "For supper."

He could be planning a romantic dinner, an excuse to get her over. She takes a deep breath. He must notice because he says, "It's just supper. There's no harm in that."

"Friends eat dinner," she says.

He kisses her on the cheek. "Six o'clock. It's a date."

The next day, Farah wakes early. She spends the morning cleaning the bar and kitchen. Her stomach is queasy, and she has a lot of nervous energy. She's feeling apprehensive about the dinner tonight. She's convinced she is incapable of deepening her connection with Addon if it means telling him everything about her past. Still, she's not sure that Addon has given up on a relationship with her.

It's close to lunchtime before she's finished. She checks her email on the office computer. Still no word from Kelly. This has gone on far too long. She's tried calling home, but the line was disconnected. Her mother probably hasn't paid the bill. Kelly mentioned the house was tight on money. She'd been working a lot. Farah worried she might drop out before graduating. Kelly had a rough time in school as it was and had to repeat several credits. She encouraged her little sister to graduate at least.

Farah grabs a cigarette from the pack she keeps behind the bar. She lights it and takes a long drag hoping it will calm her. There aren't many guests checked in right now. It makes the days move so slowly. Scott hasn't been down yet, though she's seen his roommates pass through. The two girls came down first. They asked for directions to the San Marco Cathedral. Around noon, the other guy in their group passed through. Farah checks the registry. Scott could be in his room. She doesn't have a plan. She just wants to see him. Farah reaches H3 and knocks. She stares absently at the door as it opens. Scott smiles. He seems pleased and somewhat surprised to see her.

"I was just thinking about you," he says.

"You were?"

"Well, yeah." He waves her in. The room is equipped with two bunk beds. He sits on one of the stiff mattresses boxed in the red metal bed frames. The group is backpacking across several destinations in Europe. Their packs are scattered on the floor, the jumbled clothing inside spilling out like loose tongues.

"Did you need something?" he says.

Farah doesn't need anything. She just wants to talk to someone, but that seems like a curious request to give a stranger. He has no idea Farah can claim very few friends. She scrambles for a cover. "I don't think I have a copy of your passport." It's a terrible lie. Of course she has a copy.

"I'm pretty sure you made it with the others."

"You're probably right. I thought the same thing, but I just didn't see. I'll check. It's probably down there."

This is a bad idea. She's drawn to Scott, but he isn't a friend. He isn't Michael. He's barely an acquaintance. Still, he said he has been thinking about her.

Slow and deliberate, he pats the hard mattress three times. "Want to sit?"

When she doesn't move, he continues. "Thanksgiving is this week. I guess there's a slim chance of finding some turkey and stuffing around here?"

"Thanksgiving?" She's been bouncing around Europe for years and this is the first time she's heard people talk about it so much. "You may have to go without."

"No way. Someone somewhere must be celebrating. We're planning a dinner. "

"I see."

"Point is, you should come. I mean, I'm inviting you, if you don't have anywhere to be."

She tries to think of the last time she had to be anywhere. It's strange that she has options. Her dinner with Addon is tonight.

"Actually, I have plans."

“If those plans fall through--,” he says.

“I know where to find you.”

“I hope you do,” Scott says.

“I’ll check on that passport copy. Thanks for the invitation.” She pulls the heavy door of the dorm room open. She daydreams that Scott’s dinner will be more like a feast than a traditional Thanksgiving meal. If anyone could find the ingredients needed in Venice, it would be him.

Addon has dinner waiting for Farah when she arrives. His guitar rests against the couch in the living room. Everything in the apartment is rented. The couch itself is covered in a yellow and green floral pattern, hardly Addon’s taste.

“I was afraid you might not show,” he says.

“I’m here.”

He leads her onto the terrace. “It’s a good thing. I don’t know what I would’ve done with this food.”

A long wooden table with embossed tiling on the surface takes up most of the space on the terrace. There is a small arrangement of food on white enamel dishes: corn on the cob, potatoes, cranberry sauce and a small turkey in the center.

“What’s all this?” she says.

“It’s all I could muster up.”

“You made this for me?”

“It’s Thanksgiving, Love. Third Thursday of the month, right?”

In Farah’s experience a man doesn’t go through this much work for just a friend. He must be in love with her. She probably shouldn’t have come.

For dessert, he brings out a more traditional British pastry, chocolate sponge pudding.

“Don’t get too excited,” he says. “I bought it.”

“I make a great pumpkin pie. I’ll have to make it for you one day.”

She doesn’t tell him that they rarely celebrated holidays at her house.

Farah tried her best to do something with Kelly, even if it wasn’t exactly right. She never had it right. That’s something she regrets. For Thanksgiving, they never could make the entire meal, but Farah’s pumpkin pie was always a staple of their makeshift dinner.

She insists on walking back to the hostel alone, and he barely objects. Farah waited the whole dinner for him to say something about them getting back together. He wasn’t cold towards her, but he didn’t bring it up and he didn’t try to touch her or ask her about personal matters.

Maybe he has accepted the break up. It instantly feels quite final, and Farah is sad to see it end. Her feelings run deeper than she wants to acknowledge. Addon’s dinner is probably the best meal she’s had in years, despite the dry turkey. Farah decides to call home again. It’s an unpleasant task; there is always the chance her mother could pick up. She’ll have to risk it; she wants to know that Kelly is celebrating somewhere.

It takes her a while to wind through the cobblestone streets. Terra cotta shingles top the roofs of the closed shops; their windows are covered with khaki tarp. Farah stops at a payphone. She flips through the contents of her wallet and pulls out an old calling card with a picture of a man in a suit and tie driving a scooter. A woman on a cell phone holds him tight. They are driving past a field of grapes. They look happy together but posed. They have large fake smiles. No one looks like this in real life. Farah calls home. The number has been disconnected for over two months, but this time someone picks up. It isn't her mother or Kelly. The voice on the line is the new tenant. No, he doesn't have a forwarding number for the previous tenants.

Kelly was still living with their mother as far as Farah knows. Maybe they just moved. Her mother is an unstable personality. She goes from man to man and job to job. Maybe she's exhausted all of the resources of the town. She never has tried to improve her situation, and she doesn't see the point in her girls doing so either.

She had beat that into Farah the night she had her arrested for assault. Farah stood up to her, and she knocked her down. After that, Farah slowly lost what was important to her. The people she thought were friends made fun of her. She lost her office in student government because a role model couldn't go to jail. Farah broke away from all of it. The foundation she prided herself on building proved tenuous and crumbled.

As soon as she was old enough, Farah got a job. The more hours she worked, the less time she had for school, and she eventually dropped the AP courses and settled for

scraping by on a regular track. She felt trapped. Although she still looked out for Kelly, the only thing she cared about was leaving.

Kelly was always more pleasing. She was younger; she looked like their mother, although she wasn't like her. Farah looked more like her father, and her mother may have resented the attention she received. Their mother never picked on Kelly the way she came after Farah. It was a strange paradox, deciding whether to stay with Kelly or go. Sitting in that detention cell for juvenile criminals, Farah convinced herself Kelly would be all right without her sister. Kelly was only eleven when she finally did leave. Almost every day, Farah can't help feeling guilty about abandoning her little sister to fend for herself.

Now, she can't find Kelly. Farah deserted her little sister years ago. No wonder Kelly won't return her emails. She actually hopes it's that she won't, and it's not that something has happened to Kelly. Farah always blamed her mother because she couldn't deal with her chaotic ways. That's what started Farah running, but why hasn't she stopped? She goes from person to person, place to place looking for something she can't recognize. Sometimes she thinks she's come close to finding what she's missing in Addon, but that seems like a lot to rest on the shoulders of one person. Investing so much in him seems like a risk she can't afford to take. She's not strong enough to build a new life with someone and survive it collapsing in on her again. She's not brave enough to stop moving and grow in one place.

This evening, the bar empties slowly. Farah sits around until it is only she and Erminio at the table with the girls staying in H2. It's early morning. She's been drinking

all night, and its effects slowly weigh her down. The girls are Australian and plan to stay in Venice for only one more night. When the table clears, they all head upstairs except for Farah. She locks the front doors. Anyone coming in after will have to enter through the back with his or her key. She walks around the room, picking up empty bottles and glasses and places them behind the counter. She turns out all the lights but one lamp near the back door that leads towards the dorm. She's dreading going to bed alone. She's thinking about knocking on Scott's door again when she runs into him in the corridor.

"Hey," he says. "Closing down?"

Farah holds her breath. It probably smells like scotch. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't see you come in."

He scans the dark hallway behind her. "Looks like I got back just in time," he says.

She smiles widely, more than she'd intended to anyway. She wants to stand in the dim corridor with him. The small space is forcing them to stand in close proximity. The air is warm. The faint lighting makes the meeting more intimate. His pupils are dilated.

"You heading up?" Scott says.

"What room are you in again?" She says as they near the kitchen door. It's there that the corridor forks, either straight ahead to the stairwell or right, towards her room.

Scott stops at the kitchen entryway.

“I have something for you,” he says. He flips on the lights and walks to the refrigerator. He takes out something wrapped in tin foil. “Here,” he says as he opens it. “I saved you a piece.”

The crumpled up tin foil holds an oversized slice of pie. She feels this surge of affection towards him. She doesn't want to leave the corridor. The only thing that waits for her at the end is an empty room.

Scott leans in for a kiss. His breath smells like beer, but Farah doesn't want to be alone. And he thought about her. It was a small gesture but kind. More than that, he's everything Addon isn't, simple and unthreatening. She can handle Scott. She isn't thrown into emotional upheaval every time she sees Scott. He won't ask her questions she doesn't want to answer. She can pretend at intimacy without making herself vulnerable. She can't pretend anymore with Addon.

“You want to come back to my room?” she says.

The two walk out, leaving the tin foil on one of the tables and the lights on. They take the stairs to the second floor, and Farah unlocks one of the private rooms. There's a full-sized bed, a wooden desk and a window that looks straight out to one of the canals. She pulls him in the room by his shirt, and he kicks the door closed. The two land on the bed kissing passionately. Scott lies on top of Farah. He runs a hand up her thigh and under her denim skirt. Farah pushes his hand away.

“Wait.”

Scott pulls away and rolls onto the bed, next to her. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just a second.” She swings a leg over him and sits on his lap. She fumbles with his belt buckle as she presses her lips against his again. She kisses him hard with her eyes shut tight, too tight to see. She shifts her weight forward a little into his, and the pair sinks further into the soft mattress.

Farah wakes with a nasty headache. She stares at the white wall, her eyes adjusting to the light, and doesn't recognize the room or Scott at first. Then she remembers vague impressions of their meeting, him kissing her, walking into the room. Her stomach churns and gurgles. She gets up slowly, not wanting to wake him or jolt whatever it is that's swirling in her stomach. She salivates. She tries to swallow repeatedly and control the gagging that's become more repetitive.

She kneels in front of the toilet. There's no will power left in her; it'll be easier to purge whatever it is that's sending her stomach into contractions. When it's over, she showers. The cold water brings a short relief from the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. She's not sure if it's coming from her hangover or shame. The way she feels is especially detestable, so it's safe to assume the two are one in the same.

She hasn't slept with anyone other than Addon in months. Having been with Scott feels wrong. Even with Scott in the other room, Farah feels alone. She's made a mistake in pushing Addon away. Really committing to Addon and losing him couldn't possibly feel more isolating than how she feels now.

She goes looking for Addon, but he's not at his flat. She leaves him a note asking that he meet her at a restaurant near the Rialto Bridge. The sun has set before he shows.

Addon rests the note on the table but doesn't sit immediately. "You look like shit," he says and pulls a metal chair across from her. The metal legs scrape against the concrete.

"I know." She shakes her head. All afternoon she's planned on telling him everything, even about Scott. She was certain that keeping anything from him would sabotage her chance at a relationship. Now, she's having a hard time finding the courage.

"What's so important?" he says. He crosses his arms. Although they are covered by shadows, he doesn't take off his sunglasses. If he's already mad, this may not be the time to tell him. Scott is leaving, and Addon might never know. She could pretend like nothing has changed.

She drinks from her water. "Is everything all right?" she says.

"Right as rain."

Farah's stomach contracts again. Her bowels stir. She is tired of pretending. Pretending all of her life has never solved a problem; it's left her in search of new illusions and, at the same time, with nowhere to go. It's left her with no one.

It's better to do it quickly, like tearing off a Band-Aid, before she loses her nerve.

"I slept with someone last night," she says.

"I know. I went by this morning. The bloke was still asleep in your bed."

"Why didn't you say something right away?"

“Should I have? I must’ve just missed you. I went back and got your note. I’ve just been wandering around for a bit.”

“I’m sorry.” She’s sorry she wasn’t there. She’s sorry about Scott. She’s sorry she’s just now learned how to change.

“I suppose I’m not surprised.” He doesn’t say it in a hurtful way. It’s more like a fact.

“Here I thought I was mysterious.”

“I just guessed there was something more desirable on the horizon,” he says.

“That wasn’t it.”

“Then what was it?”

“I just met him. It’s not like I love him,” she says.

Addon’s necklace is twisted to the front; he pulls the large knot to the back. His brother gave it to him. Made of hemp, the little knots symbolize struggle and the red thread that ties around, life. He never takes it off. Addon is surprisingly sentimental at times.

She reaches for his hand, and he doesn’t pull it away but continues to stare at his lap. “I think it’s time I go,” he says.

“Go where?”

“I don’t know. I might go to my mum’s for a while. In Germany.” His brown eyes close.

“Would you come back?” Farah says.

She swears she can hear cracking and breaking. She can feel the marshy land beneath them crumbling, the wood splintering and collapsing into a compact pile, the dirt above shifting and seeping through the cracked foundation. Addon opens his eyes, lets go of her hand and traces the line of her chin like he's done countless times before. Except this time, he's taking one last look. Farah has grown accustomed to goodbyes. She keeps eye contact because she knows when Addon breaks it this will be the end.

## PAGEANT OF LIGHT

Hannah's mom cuts off another parent in the Carter High School parking lot as she pulls into the student pick-up area. The parent, in the black Kia Sorento, lays on the horn while Hannah races to the car door. She slinks down in the passenger seat as they drive off. Her mother seems oblivious to the scene she just caused. She picks a spec of flint from her hunter-green button-up blouse. The fit is too tight across her back.

They go to Bloomingdales searching for a dress Hannah can wear in three weeks. She is a princess on the royal court of the imaginary realm known as Edisonia. The Edison Pageant of Light is held every year to honor Fort Myer's most prominent citizen, Thomas Alva Edison. Hannah should've bought the dress much earlier but put it off so she could lose some vanity pounds. Then there was her friend Josie's fatal car accident, and they forgot about buying a dress. With less than a month left, purchasing a dress is the last task on Hannah's to do list.

Dresses dominate the misses section of the sales floor in preparation for prom. Hannah follows her mom through the aisles until a strapless ball gown catches her eye, and she veers off on her own. The bodice of the sky-blue gown has a sweetheart neckline, and it's peppered with beads along the top and where it meets the skirt. The tulle skirt is layered and split tiered.

“Look at this one,” she calls out to her mother. She holds the dress up for her to see.

“It has to be white.” Her mom shakes her head; her wavy, black bob swishes above her shoulders.

“I know. I don’t see it in white,” Hannah says. “Maybe we could order it.”

Hannah walks over to her mother who is sifting through a clump of white dresses. She pulls one out of the group. “Let’s try this one.”

“Mom, did you hear me? Maybe they have this in white?”

“We don’t have time for this, Hannah. You need to find something that is in stock.” She holds the dress in her hand up. “Maybe,” she says. “Well, keep looking.”

Hannah lowers her arm and walks back to where she found her dress.

“Don’t drag it, Honey. You’ll get it all dirty.”

“Yes, Mom.” She puts the dress back and continues searching.

“Grab a few. And let’s start trying them on,” her mother says.

Hannah grabs a couple of white dresses. Both are satin. Her mother shows her a few. They are all fairly similar and empire cuts. They look more like wedding dresses. She says no to all of them, but her mom holds onto one anyway. “Just *try* this one on,” she says.

Hannah shows her two choices. The first is actually a silk, spaghetti strap. The top, and down through the waist, hugs the body. The back is open, stopping at the small of the back. Only a strap that closes in a similar fashion to a regular bra cuts across under

the shoulder blades. Hannah likes it more than the first because she believes the dress will make her look sexier. After all, she's sixteen now. She should start dressing more grown up.

“How are you supposed to wear a bra with that?”

“I'll have to get a special kind or maybe get the type you paste to your nipples,” she says.

“Hannah.” Her mother grimaces. She's embarrassed. “I don't think so.”

In the dressing room, the choices have been narrowed down to two. The dress Hannah chose is the required white. The satin is tailored into a V-neck front with an equally low cut backside. A shameful slit rides up the left side of the dress. She tries on her mother's pick first to get it out of the way. The empire cut leads into a long, A-line shaped skirt with tulle layering underneath that causes the skirt to fluff out like a bell. It looks like Cinderella's ball gown.

“It's perfect. The perfect dress for the new Queen of Edisonia,” Hannah's mom says. Her certainty is unfounded. Her mother had been Queen and often talks about Hannah winning. She often tells Hannah that she plans on putting the matching pictures of them wearing the twenty-five foot green velvet robe and crown side by side in the entryway. Hannah wants to be in the pageant, but she doesn't expect to win. That's not why she's still doing it. The pageant and the events that surround it have been a part of her life for as long as she can remember. Both she and Josie participated in some capacity

every year since they were little girls, starting as banner bearers. Hannah still keeps the picture of them in almost indistinguishable white dresses on her nightstand.

“Can you unzip me? I’d like to try the other one.”

As she unzips the dress her mother says, “The newsletter came today. They’ve found someone to replace Josie.”

“Replace Josie?”

Josie was also nominated as a princess on the royal court last year. It was her second nomination. Hannah was usually involved in some aspect but hadn’t been invited into court until last summer, the summer before ninth grade.

Although Josie had been nominated the year before, she worked with Hannah on the Union Middle School athletic department float for the Grand Parade. Both girls were on the school’s dance team. Josie was a captain. She deserved to be. Both daring and graceful, Josie was an excellent dancer. The girls joined the parade committee of the athletic department. The committee was comprised of various members from the different athletic programs. Union was a small school, and most of the students knew each other. They spent many late nights building the float and grew close.

Hannah’s mother fumbles with the dress hanger. “To fill the open spot.”

“But it’s too late,” Hannah says. “The pageant is in three weeks; what about all the stuff they require contestants to do?”

“It’s a special circumstance.”

Hannah puts on her dress. Her mother zips up the back. The satin stretches across her body. It's slinky, less formal than the princess dress, but it looks good. She just needs to stay at this weight, and it will be okay. She's been training for the Edisonia marathon with her boyfriend, Cameron, after school everyday. Almost every day. She's stood him up a couple times now, being too tired to run.

They met last year during the pageant. Cameron's father is a minister and moved his family to Ft. Myer's. Cameron enrolled at Union. He was a sprinter and joined the athletic department committee to make friends. He liked Hannah right away. When they worked late nights building the float, he would bring her coffee or lend her his sweater. Hannah had never received attention like that before.

During the Grand Parade, when the crowd exceeded 200, 000 guests, he made her feel special. The two-hour extravaganza is the largest evening parade in the South East, starting at Edwards Dr. and Hendry St. in downtown Ft. Myers and ending at Ft. Myer's High School Stadium. A procession of marching bands, floats, dance troupes and drill teams passed through, but Hannah really only remembers the way Cameron held her hand as he led through the crowd of spectators for a clear spot to view the parade.

"They couldn't leave the spot open," Hannah says to her mother.

Her mother puts her hands on Hannah's shoulders. "It's a little too tight, don't you think? Satin shows all the imperfections."

Hannah sees the bulges around her tummy and thighs as the satin sticks to her skin in those places. She didn't see it before. She is upset with the reflection in the mirror

and cries. The stupid dress *does* feel tight. Josie was a staple of the festival, like Hannah and her family. Hannah can barely breathe without imagining the seams stretching apart, the zipper pulling at the fabric and tearing. “Replacing Josie seems really disrespectful.”

Her mother locks the dressing room door and reaches for a tissue from her purse. She hands it to Hannah who wipes her nose. She’s embarrassed her mother again. She unzips Hannah’s dress halfway.

“On second thought,” her mother says, “the dress looks okay. Is this the one you want, Honey?” She finishes unzipping it all the way. “Let’s get this one.” She drapes it over her arm. She hangs the princess dress on a hook in the stall and smooths down the fabric.

The sound of tires screeching blasts through speakers at Carter High’s football stadium. Hannah winces as the cars on the football field simulate a collision, and the cry of metal grinding on metal reverberates off the bleachers. Cameron grazes her clenched hand with his. “Are you okay?”

“It’s so realistic.” The presentation, a reenactment of a fatal drunk driving accident, took months to orchestrate. Four months exactly. It’s been four months since Homecoming. That night, Josie went to a party instead of the dance. She tried to drive home drunk but took a curve too fast and crashed the Camry into a pole less than a mile from her house. She lost control while trying to put her beautiful beaded gown back on.

Sirens ring as a real ambulance and cop car drive onto the field.

“Unbelievable,” Cameron says.

Stagehands pull apart curtains that hang on metal tubing and frame the makeshift stage in the center of the field to reveal the mangled cars.

“This is too much,” Hannah says. She moves down the aisle and down the stairs. Emergency personnel move urgently about the scene carrying a stretcher. The gate is closed where they entered the stadium. Hannah looks for an open exit. She walks behind the bleachers towards a hallway that leads to the locker rooms. A ringing phone echoes through the speakers; a woman picks up the call. “Ma’am, this is officer Wall.”

Mrs. Shuplane, Josie’s mom, received a similar call from the police Homecoming night. Early the next morning, Mrs. Shuplane called Hannah. *Had she seen Josie at the dance?* Her voice was low and strained. Later, Hannah realized it was altered by grief and exhaustion. *Was she with you, Hannah? Didn’t she go to the dance?* No, she hadn’t. Hannah went to the dance with her boyfriend, and Josie drove off in the other direction.

Hannah finds an open exit and runs out. Sitting in the stadium, it felt like everyone was watching to see if she’d react. Everyone else is ready to move on, but Hannah isn’t. It’s only been four months. Josie and she had been friends all of their lives. They were close friends up until the start of the current school year.

They had spent a normal summer going to the beach and creating new dance routines. They didn’t have much else to do. When they received their pageant nominations, they spent their time daydreaming about this year’s pageant. Both agreed Josie would probably win. Hannah wasn’t the Queen type, but she took consolation in her

new correspondence with Cameron. He had gone away on a mission trip last summer but wrote frequently. Hannah looked forward to those letters, postmarked in a town somewhere deep in the Colombian countryside. The letters described his mission work and the people he was helping, mostly. In some, he talked about the new school year and what classes they should take together. He ended each message by letting Hannah know that he missed her.

Their first date had been at the festival's block party. On every other block, a wide array of different sized stages were set up for bands ranging from regional to national recognition to perform. They walked along the Caloosahatchee sharing snacks from local vendor stands.

Cameron calls Hannah's name. He followed her out using the same exit. He runs over in perfect form as if he were on the track. "You all right?"

"It was all pretty intense," she says.

"That's perfectly normal. Sometimes, we don't know how things might affect us."

"I've been okay." He doesn't smile. It's hard to tell what he's thinking when he doesn't react.

"God will only give you what you can handle." Cameron spends a lot of his time working as a member of Student Journey, a religious organization on campus some students, like Josie, jokingly refer to as a cult. He's never had any personal experience with tragedy. He's visited impoverished countries and seen devastation, but, at the end of

his visit, he goes back home to his normal life. He has a tendency of treating all situations in a similar fashion, with a detached concern.

Hannah doesn't say anything. She knows he's trying to be empathetic about Josie and the situation, but the two hated each other for a long time. They made Hannah's life quite difficult. It's hard not to see him as a hypocrite when he says nice things about her or tries to console Hannah with these generic affirmations. That's the kind of stuff he should save for strangers.

"Maybe with the pageant coming up, it'll help you to focus on something new."

"Three weeks," she says. "I don't know what I'll do once it's over."

Buying the dress was the last real preparation she had left. Hannah and Josie had planned to go shopping together, but Josie bought her dress on her own, having grown tired of waiting on Hannah. When she died, Mrs. Shuplane gave Hannah the dress. Hannah didn't want anything to do with that dress but took it to make Mrs. Shuplane happy.

"I'm glad you are still involved with the pageant," Cameron says.

Josie threatened to quit before her death. She didn't want to be involved. Josie was not exactly the debutant anymore. The pageant was just another thing the girls disagreed on. Ironically, the pageant was all that kept them together the months before the accident, and so Hannah tried to convince Josie to stick through it.

Josie quit the dance team. Hannah started attending Student Journey with Cameron. *Thumper* is what Josie called him, short for *Bible-Thumper*. Hannah still goes

with him to Student Journey events sometimes but hasn't joined. She's not as enthusiastic as he is. They meet early Friday mornings, discuss scripture and form prayer circles. Some of the members are more zealous than Hannah, which scares her a little. Hannah believes religion is something more private, and she's not ready to share her immortal soul with strangers. Their zeal may be why Josie considered them fanatics, but Hannah didn't agree with Josie's mocking attitude. Hannah sees them as generally nice people. They spent a lot of their free time volunteering and orchestrating charitable events. They aren't bad people to be around.

Cameron kicks a rock on the sidewalk. "Do you want to talk about what happened on the field?"

"I'm okay now," she says. She doesn't want to tell him that she felt an overwhelming panic while watching the scene. It's the same panicked feeling she gets when she can't sleep at night. She suffered from a bout of insomnia for a couple of weeks when the accident happened. The insomnia seems to have returned. This time, instead of lying in bed or watching television, she's been getting up and exercising until she's worn out. Eventually, she'll be so exhausted, she can't move anymore. It's why she's so tired all the time.

"Good." Cameron's shoulders relax; he seems relieved. He checks the time. "Do you want to hang out for a little while? It should be over soon."

She shakes her head. "I just want to go home."

"Let me give you a ride."

In the car, Cameron tells Hannah about his world history class. They've had a substitute teacher all year because the school couldn't find a full time teacher. Hannah lets him talk. She's tired and wants to sleep. She'd like to crawl onto her bed fully dressed and pull the quilt over her head. It's a short ride home. Hannah gets out of the car and says goodbye.

"Hannah?" Cameron says before she turns around.

She leans in the car window.

"I'll wait to run today. In case you want to go with me tonight."

She adjusts her bag. Running is the last thing she wants to do.

"You haven't been to practice in a few days. You need to rededicate yourself to the training schedule before the marathon. People know you; you want to do well."

Hannah rolls her eyes. He always says things like that.

Hannah's home is located on the busy intersection of Maple and Grey Street. Tonight, the headlights of several passing cars disturb the darkness in her room by casting light and shadows across the walls. The headlights glide across the house's exterior like searchlights looking for her window, a place to penetrate the inside. They keep Hannah awake. She gets out of bed and starts a set of crunches. Sometimes, the lights in the window seem so close she thinks a car could lose control and crash, not into a telephone pole, but straight into her house, her window.

Josie's accident occurred so soon after the biggest fight they'd ever had that Hannah has a hard time distinguishing between the two events. Almost imperceptible at first, Josie and Hannah started liking different things, like a music album or movies. They made new friends. Until high school, however, Hannah had always followed her friend's lead.

The summer before freshman year, Josie ran down to the kitchen and grabbed a container of Kool-Aid, a pitcher and stirring spoon. She'd always wanted to try this she'd said, and so Hannah had to as well. They'd look like twins that summer. They slicked their hair down and wrapped lavender towels around their shoulders. Josie poured all that was left in the container into the pitcher filled with water and stirred until the contents turned bright orange. She covered both their heads with the mixture. After some time, they rinsed it out. Hannah leaned toward her reflection in the bathroom mirror, and then unraveled the turban on her head.

Orange. Her hair was Kool-Aid Orange. Splotchy in places and not dyed close to the scalp where the blonde remained, but mostly Orange. She was surprised at how much she liked the hair. It made her stand out and drew the gaze of others as she passed. It's the way Josie must have felt all the time.

Hannah told her mom that it was only temporary. "It will wash out in a couple of weeks," she said.

Her mom's face turned as red as the *cha-ching cherry* shade of lipstick she always wore. She was furious. Hannah felt more rebellious.

“But why dye your hair orange?” she said.

“I’ve always wanted to,” Hannah said. She didn’t, of course, but she should’ve wanted to and didn’t know it until Josie brought it up.

It’s one of Hannah’s favorite memories of the two girls. Such a small act of rebellion really. After the summer, however, Josie became more and more rebellious. She acted out in ways that Hannah couldn’t follow, skipping school and partying with older kids. They disagreed constantly, and Hannah distanced herself at school. It was easy because they were in different classes and had different schedules. Hannah didn’t want to end the friendship, but starting high school was a weird time, full of peer pressure and cliques.

Josie seemed hurt when Hannah dyed her hair blond again before the start of the new school year. By that time, Hannah’s hair was blonde, near the scalp, where her roots had grown back. She liked it most pulled up and resting loosely on the top of her head. She would gather the loose strands, tilt forward, then swing her mane back before gathering it all in a bunch on top, like a flame in the cradle of a torch. But as the summer came to an end, Hannah liked her hair color less. She wanted it dyed back before Cameron returned from Colombia. Josie added red streaks to hers.

One sleepless week passes, and Hannah has fallen into the habit of leaving her lamp on all night. The last time she did that she was ten and afraid of the dark. She feared an unknown menace hiding under her bed and the cover of night. Hannah can’t seem to

fall asleep before midnight. Even if she is tired, she lies awake. She rearranges the pillows and uncovers her feet to cool down. Her mouth and throat dry out, and she worries she won't be able to swallow. The sound of the fan spinning bothers her. The closet door must be shut, keeping Josie's white gown, which haunts the space like a specter, out of sight.

Hannah tries to fall asleep, but, when she can't, she starts exercising. She wants to wear herself out. If she can just wear herself out, eventually she'll be so tired she can't move anymore. This night, she does a hundred crunches and fifty push-ups, showers and goes to bed with her hair wet.

In the hallway before first period, Hannah meets Cameron. He's wearing a team track and field shirt and shorts. He holds her book bag open as she arranges her notebooks for class. She fidgets with the lock, but it doesn't close completely at first.

"Here." Cameron disrupts her attempt, opens the door and slams it shut before locking it.

"Careful," she says. "It'll get stuck if you slam it like that."

"It's fine."

Hannah pulls out a toaster pastry from her bag as they walk towards class. Cameron walks half a step behind.

"Didn't you eat breakfast today?" Cameron says.

"Yes."

“And you’re still hungry?”

“Yes,” she says. Here he goes again. She never should have let him coach her. He takes the race much too seriously.

As he opens the door to homeroom he says, “Aren’t you training?”

“I’m hungry, okay?”

“Yeah. But the race is soon. There’s a lot of sugar in those.”

He’s mad because she hasn’t gone running with him in a week. She hates when he acts like he knows better than she does. She ignores his comment, at first, but then throws the remaining half away. “Fine.”

“It’s all you’ve talked about for months.” He sits. “You haven’t shown up to practice. You could at least tell me you’re not coming.”

She should call and tell him she’s not coming. She pictures him sitting in the bleachers at school waiting for her to show. After a little while, he tires and goes on a run by himself. She pictures it every time she doesn’t show, but she never seriously considers calling him. She’d have to explain she’s too tired, and, because of Cameron’s nature, he’d pry into why that is. She doesn’t want to admit to him she isn’t sleeping or that something is wrong. “I’ve been busy okay.”

“Stop being oversensitive,” he says.

“I’m not being oversensitive.”

“You’re being lazy.”

Sometimes, Hannah thinks being the minister's son somehow gives Cameron the right to pass judgment on those around him. Still, his observations can be too harsh. On the drive to the Homecoming dance, he asked Hannah why she didn't tell Mrs. Shuplane Josie wasn't going to Homecoming. Hannah helped Josie lie to her mother, and the lie made Hannah an accomplice to her death. Hannah told Cameron she couldn't tell on her very best friend. After they received the news of Josie's death, Cameron just said, "You didn't tell her mom." Although he never said Hannah killed Josie outright, it seemed that way.

They'd gone through the argument Homecoming night as Cameron drove over to Hannah's house. It felt like part of him wanted to pit Hannah against Josie, and the other part was looking to satisfy his own sense of morality. He'd never admit it.

Hannah threw the phone on the bed near Josie. "Cameron is mad you aren't going to Homecoming," she said. She'd just spent twenty minutes defending Josie, and then had to fight the urge to throw the phone at her.

Josie, who had busied herself with lining her lips a medium mauve tint, shrugged.

"What does he care? I'm not his date."

Josie had gone from tolerating Cameron to open disdain. Hannah ignored the snide remarks from both parties. After almost a year together, it got harder as Cameron and she became more serious. In fact, the girls were still sore from the latest argument.

“I don’t know. He’s starting this huge fight with me about letting you go. He thinks I should tell your parents that you’re sneaking off to a party instead of going to the dance with us,” Hannah said.

Josie stopped lining her lips. “How could you do that? We’re supposed to be friends. You can’t tell on me,” Josie said. Hannah shoved her eye shadow and lipstick in a make up bag and stuffed the bag into a dresser drawer. Josie shouldn’t have made Hannah lie to Mrs. Shuplane. A part of her *did* agree with Cameron. She secretly wished Josie would get caught. She was using Hannah as a cover.

“I wouldn’t,” Hannah said. “But are you sure you don’t want to come? You can go to a party any time.”

Josie put the cap back on the lip liner. “School dances are lame.”

Hannah threw a pillow at her. “You’d better not get me in trouble.”

She couldn’t have told on Josie when their friendship seemed to be hanging on by a thread those days.

Downstairs, the trio posed for photos together. Pictures of Josie in her dress and Hannah with her blonde hair pulled up in a bun. Pictures of Hannah and Cameron. Pictures of the three posing together for Josie’s parents before they went separate ways.

At the breakfast table, a plate of egg white omelets is set out for her. Half a grapefruit is neatly positioned in a bowl to the right of the eggs and a glass of skim milk

to their left. Her mother is wearing a blueberry pantsuit that matches her blue eyes, the only physical feature Hannah shares with her.

“Good morning,” her mother says as she scrapes bits of egg white off the pan into the sink.

Hannah takes a bite from the omelet. Bland. Her mother used fat-free cheese again. Hannah sprinkles the egg whites with pepper.

Her mother rinses the pan and places it in the dishwasher. “You look tired,” she says when she finally turns towards Hannah. “Did you stay awake all night again?”

She lies. “No. I just need a pick-me-up. Is there any coffee?”

“Coffee is not good for you. I’ll get you some orange juice.”

Hannah picks at the white mass on her plate. She pretends to eat but really mashes it around.

Her mother pours a glass of orange juice and sets it down before taking the seat across the table from Hannah.

“You have bags under your eyes. That’ll never do.” She takes a sip from her coffee cup. The bright red imprint her lipstick leaves on the mug is partially visible.

“The ceremonies are this weekend,” her mother continues.

“Okay,” Hannah says in a monotone voice.

Her mother’s forehead wrinkles momentarily. When she relaxes, the deep crevice that cuts across never fully smoothes back out, leaving her looking perpetually annoyed with Hannah. “You aren’t excited?”

Hannah swallows a spoonful of grapefruit and winces at the bittersweet taste. There's no sugar on it. She pushes the plate away. The pageant is Hannah's last link to Josie and those childhood memories. She probably won't get nominated again, and there'd be no point in doing it alone.

Her mom stands up. "You've done the pageant every year for as long as I can remember." She wipes down the kitchen counter tops. "Participating is about being a part of history and tradition."

Hannah's mother means her history and traditions. She is a former beauty queen, which includes a stint as Queen of this particular pageant many, many years ago. Hannah knows her mother still believes the pageant is important. She regrets saying anything.

"Yeah, I see what you mean."

When Hannah was nominated a year ago, she was flattered. Josie was expected. Hannah's nomination was a surprise. Hannah finally planned for the pageant with Josie instead of for her. They set appointments together and went browsing for dresses. Although Hannah had always considered pageantry her mother's realm, she enjoyed being included. When the girls grew apart, the pageant remained the one thing they had in common.

Once Josie was gone, Hannah kept planning and preparing for it with her mom. Everyone said keeping her mind preoccupied would be good for Hannah. Maybe she should have let the whole thing go when her friend died too. Now, going to the pageant

and coronation ball feels like attending another funeral. It may have been easier to bury everything five months ago.

“The reason I brought it up is because you haven’t been yourself lately. You’re always locked up in your room,” her mother says.

“I’ve been tired.”

“I thought you might cheer up.”

“I guess so,” Hannah says.

Her mom sits in the chair to Hannah’s left. “I know you miss Josie, Honey. And the pageant was something you girls did together for a very long time.”

The mention of Josie’s name immediately makes Hannah’s eyes water. She can’t control the reaction but tries to stop from tearing any more. Her mom seems to think they were still as close as ever when Josie died, and Hannah doesn’t see the point in correcting her. She wouldn’t know how to explain what wedged them apart. It all seems like petty squabbling now. To Hannah’s mom, they should always remain five years old like the picture on Hannah’s nightstand.

Wednesday, after school, Hannah meets Cameron by the bleachers of the track. The heat is stifling. She rolls up her sleeves, and the sweat collects in the bunched up fabric. It’s hard to run in the humidity. Her skin is slick. Her chest burns for the first mile. She focuses on breathing through her nose and exhaling through her mouth but finds it difficult to regulate her breathing.

When they've finished, she sits on a bench to rub her sore knees.

"Stretch it out," Cameron says.

She is still breathing heavily and waves him off. He stretches his quads by pressing against the bench and shakes his head.

Hannah pulls her knees to her chest. "What?"

"You're not going to accomplish anything that way."

"Jesus Christ," she says.

He lowers his leg. "Don't talk like that, Hannah."

She rolls her eyes.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." She doesn't want to hear if her technique is improper. She wants to finish and go.

"You've barely talked to me since you got here."

"We were running. You want me to talk and run now?"

"You know what I'm saying."

She does. He's right.

"I didn't even know you were coming today," he says.

She gets up. It's the start of the same argument they've been having for weeks.

He grabs her arm as she starts to walk away. "I know you're busy but you never talk to me about it." He's squinting in the sunlight.

She tucks a sweaty strand behind her ear.

“I don’t know why we keep fighting.” His voice cracks.

She does. Poor Cameron. She resents him unjustifiably.

“I’m sorry,” she says and wipes her face roughly. “I’m sorry.”

She sits down on the bench and hides her face in a towel.

“It’s okay, Hannah.” Cameron sits next to her and puts an arm around her. She places the towel on his lap and rests her head with eyes shut tight. She thought she was mad because he made her constantly choose between Josie and himself. He was hypocritical and judgmental about the whole thing, but Hannah never put up much of a fight. The thing she’ll never tell him is that she has been taking her anger out on him because he facilitated what Hannah had secretly wanted.

She wanted to leave her childhood friend behind because she was tired of being invisible, and Cameron was part of that. Having him made it easier to push Josie away. Her relationship with Cameron is the one thing in Hannah’s life that is solely hers. On top of that, he didn’t like Josie. That had never happened before. Everyone wanted to be friends with Josie.

The week of the homecoming dance Josie came over with her pageant dress. Hannah was halfway through her Tae Bo tape when Josie walked in the room. Holding five-pound weights in each hand, Hannah punched the air with her right fist. Then eight times with the left.

Josie hung the princess dress on the hook behind Hannah's bedroom door. She swatted at it. "It's yours," she said. The hanger fell off the hook but the skirt, pinched in the hinge of the door, merely hung down refusing to give up its coveted new spot.

Hannah took eight more right hooks. "I don't get it."

"I'm not going."

"Come on." She jabbed with her right elbow.

"Try it on," she said. "Let's see it."

"How can you not go?" Hannah jabbed with her left.

"It's stupid and nobody will miss me anyway."

The pageant was their thing. It's where they became friends, and the last thing they shared in common. They both had to do it for the sake of their friendship.

"I care if you're there." Hannah was having a hard time managing her breathing. She tried to focus on the instructor, but she could see the dress hanging on the hook to her left, its presence as strong as a person's.

"Yeah, right. Use it or not. I don't care." She turned around and headed for the door.

She knew what Josie was suggesting. At the time, Hannah thought it was the way Josie said it, another snide remark, which made her sick and angry.

In fact, Hannah was annoyed with Josie's attitude. So Hannah refused to follow Josie around anymore. That didn't mean they couldn't be friends. They wouldn't be as

close but it was something. Hannah had her issues with Josie too, but she wouldn't bail on the pageant. *Never* that.

Hannah swung through the air with a right uppercut.

"Does this mean we're breaking up?" Hannah said trying to antagonize, but Josie ignored it.

Josie opened the door, pulled the pinched skirt out and dropped it onto the floor.

"Did you hear me?" Hannah said.

Josie looked back. She knew they were talking about more than a pageant too. Being on the royal court was their tradition. Hannah had stayed. The dress rested on the floor like a ball of taffeta. *Stupid dress*. Josie had come over with the intention of starting something but chickened out. If she had something to say then she should've spoken up. Hannah considered throwing the dress out the window when she saw Josie crossing the lawn.

Instead, she swung the five-pound weight in her right hand back like a bowling ball then chucked it forward. The weight crashed into the drywall next to the doorframe, plaster flew from the impact.

Josie screamed. Hannah dropped the other weight to the floor and wiped the sweat soaked hair from her face. The tape was still running. The instructor did a combination of punches and kicks at a quicker pace. Right hook, left elbow, right uppercut, and roundhouse left. A sequence of wasted blows that never connected with anything more than air unlike the purple weight that hung halfway out of the hole in the wall.

“What are you doing?” Josie’s cheeks were red and splotchy and her voice high pitched.

“What are *you* doing?”

“Were you trying to hit me?” she said.

“No.” Hannah was still standing in the same spot. The other weight had rolled up against her foot.

Josie paced back and forth. She looked at the weight in the wall. “Seriously, Hannah. Were you trying to hit me?”

“It went nowhere near you.” If she’d wanted to hit her, she would’ve thrown it at the back of her head.

“You threw a fucking weight at me.” Hannah was startled by Josie’s use of the profanity. Hannah would never use that word and only recently understood the emotions that might drive someone to.

“I wouldn’t have hit you.” She just wanted Josie to stay and talk to her. She’d grown tired of talking around the problem.

“I don’t get why it’s so important to you,” Josie said. “You ditched me for Cameron a while ago.”

“Don’t blame Cameron. We’re just different now. You have *your* friends. I don’t ever complain about that.”

“It’s not the same.” Josie sat on the bed.

Hannah couldn't admit to her friend that she wanted to change the rules of their friendship. She didn't know how to explain that she wanted to shine on her own merit. Next to Josie, she always felt dim. It was unfair to Josie, but Hannah didn't know how to change and remain close to her. She didn't trust that Josie could treat her any differently.

Hannah picked the princess dress up off the floor and handed it to Josie. "It might be worth saving," she said.

Josie stood up. "Trash it," she said and dropped it on the floor on her way out.

Hannah rubbed her eyes and her contacts slid across, blurring her vision before settling back in place. When her eyes refocused, she saw the purple weight, half-hidden, half dangling from the wall. Hannah laughed. She had given Josie a jolt, but no one was more surprised than Hannah.

Hannah clutched the dress to her body. She'd thought that they'd find a way to remain friends despite the fight, but she doubted Josie would agree to the pageant again. Hannah felt a pang of sadness as she hung the dress in her closet. She grieved for what was lost as she slid the door shut.

## THIS IS JUST A MODERN LOVE SONG

It's almost midnight, and Wil has just returned to Orlando from a two-week promotional tour with his band *Plastic Cities*. His wife Starla sits, legs crossed, on the couch wearing Wil's old Mercer College T-shirt. It's several sizes too large and hides her swelling belly. The only light comes from their television, and it casts a neon blue tint across the living room of their one bedroom apartment. He drops a backpack, filled with promotional CD's and flyers, on the floor next to the couch and puts his arms around her.

"You didn't have to wait up," he says.

"I couldn't sleep." In fact, she hates sleeping, and when she calls it a waste of time Wil feels lazy. She gives him a soft kiss. "So I'm putting together a guest list for the baby shower."

He touches her belly. It seems to have grown overnight.

The coffee table is covered with slips of paper and an open address book. "It's July fifteenth," she says. "Don't book any gigs for that weekend, okay? We'll have to drive to Atlanta that Friday night."

"I won't." Wil hopes he can keep the promise. *Plastic Cities* just signed with an independent label, and they will be touring a lot in the upcoming months.

Starla stands. "You coming to bed?"

"Hold on a minute."

He hasn't told her they've been signed. She doesn't even know they were close. Maybe Wil didn't want to jinx it. Now it feels too late. He wants to tell Starla all about the deal and that he's talked it over with the band and has decided to quit his job teaching high school Chemistry.

She tucks a golden strand back into her loose ponytail. "Is something wrong?" She scrunches up her nose and makes a face he can't quite make out.

Wil can't read all of her looks yet. Some, he's never seen in their four years of dating, half of which were spent commuting between cities. They were married without ever having lived together, and there's another side to her that he hasn't known before. He decides to hold off on telling Starla because he's not sure how she'll react.

"Did anyone call?" Wil says.

"Mrs. Haynes. She hasn't received your *intent to return* form."

He's been a teacher at Pine Creek High School for three years but has avoided turning in an *intent to return* form until he knew the outcome of his trip.

"You'd better get that in right away," she says. "You don't want the county to fire you."

Without his form, the county will fire Wil automatically. If he decides to teach again, he'll be shuffled to the bottom of the pile for placement next year.

"I could still teach without the form."

"If you want to start all over again," she says. "That would be stupid."

“Only if teaching is your career.” This being his fourth year, he’ll be placed on annual contract at its end. His spot guaranteed. Great news, if he cared to return.

Starla picks up the scattered scraps of paper and stacks them. She makes the face again. This time, more clearly, a sort of restrained frown. “I told Mrs. Haynes you’d stop by tomorrow morning, okay?”

She leans over and whispers in his ear. “I missed you.”

“Me too.”

Wil knows Starla wants him to stay in education. She’s even mentioned the idea of Wil returning for a Masters in curriculum. Since the pregnancy, the conversations have become more serious and her resolve stronger.

He picks up the address book from the coffee table. She keeps a copy of the baby shower invitation in its pages, a children’s version of Noah’s ark with baby elephants and giraffes. *Please join us July 15<sup>th</sup> to celebrate Starla and Wil’s baby boy.* He throws it down on the table and runs a hand across the top of his head. Getting pregnant so soon after the wedding was not planned.

On tour, he suddenly felt an urgency to make something happen with *Plastic Cities*, spurred on by his band mates and manager, Bret. The only one with a steady job that might interfere with touring, Wil had to prove his commitment to the new members. It’s not that he was all that hard to convince. As Wil seriously entertained the prospect of a life ruled by diapers and mortgages, the less likely his dreams seemed. He considers

exchanging gigs that keep him out until three a.m. for three a.m. feedings an uneven trade.

Starla is curled under a patchwork quilt on their bed. It's new. One of many small changes he'll find after being away. She's in the middle of the bed and seems sound asleep. He slides into the space left on his side.

The ceiling fan is running at full speed. It sways and creaks in the wake of its own motion. The fan never did that before. Every time Wil comes home from an away gig, he takes stock of what's changed, weary of surprises. Wil can't help but remember he'd come home from an away gig, like the one he's just returned from, when he learned his entire life had changed.

He expected to find Starla sitting on the couch like he did tonight, but she wasn't home. Wil stood in the bedroom after having found the used pregnancy test on the bathroom counter. The hinge of the front door made a screeching sound like feedback on an amp. He tripped on the carpet as he walked into the living room. She closed the door quickly. Her thin, straight hair was windblown. She looked startled. She carried a plastic shopping bag that shook as she spoke. "Had to grab something at the store."

Wil held the instructions in hand, absentmindedly, creasing them in his grip.

"So this means what I think it means," he said.

"Not sure." She was careful with her words. She stopped at the threshold of the bathroom. "I thought I should get a second opinion." She gave a tenuous smile, semi-

crooked and slightly upturned. She emptied the contents of the bag onto the counter.

There were three types. They tried all of them.

They waited on the bed, staring at the ceiling fan as it spun at top speed. Wil squeezed Starla's hand. Their palms were clasped together in heat, his sweating profusely. He wondered when she'd pull her hand away in disgust, but she never did.

The tests were lined up neatly along the counter. She called out the results, while he read the instructions.

All positive.

"Do you want to read the instructions?" he said.

"Wil, they all say the same thing."

"I know. I know," he said.

"Aren't you happy?"

"Yes, of course. I just wasn't expecting this." He put his arms on her shoulders and pulled her close. He wanted kids with her someday. They'd only been married three months. It was not what he'd planned, but they would figure it out.

*Plastic Cities* lead guitarist, Jon, picks Wil up for practice a few mornings later. Wil changes the radio station to Orlando Rock. Starla tells him they've been playing their first single all week. *Plastic Cities* has found a following on college campuses. They've sold over 20,000 albums on their own but never had a single out on the radio until recently.

“Don’t forget I have to stop by the school,” Wil says. His *intent to return* form is folded in the backpack at his feet. He’s committed to returning the form, at least. He’s not sure what to do, but he doesn’t want to lie to Starla.

“We have to do that now?” Jon says.

“I told Starla I would go today.” Wil shifts his weight against the passenger side door and relaxes the seat. “The sooner I get it over with the better.”

“You’re quitting today.”

“I’m turning in my form.”

“What does that mean?” Jon straightens up a little.

Wil can’t lie to him. Jon has known him for a long time. Anyway, Jon has to understand things are changing. “What’s the big deal? I’m just covering my ass,” Wil says.

“In case what? The band breaks up or something? How do you plan to teach and tour at the same time?” Jon lights a cigarette from a pack stored in his shirt pocket.

“It’s summertime. You’re overreacting,” Wil says.

But, Jon shakes his head. “Not really.”

The two, friends since college, have gone from band to band together, while *Plastic Cities* was formed fairly recently. The new members, a drummer and bass player, are brothers and maintain a natural allegiance. More experienced and driven for success, they tend to share the same opinion. Everyone in the band should be completely devoted to the band. No outside distractions.

Wil feels less confident in this group. His place less secure because he's the only one who has a life outside of the band.

"I'm going to reek of smoke." Wil rolls down the window. He quit a few weeks after Starla got pregnant and misses it. Sometimes he'll sneak one during a show, when she's not around, but she can smell it on his breath when he comes home.

"Relax. She'll never know," Jon says.

"She always knows."

"Christ," he says.

Jon doesn't get it. He's doesn't understand the changes occurring, Wil barely does. Wearing the same rank clothes for days and living out of a van *is* Jon's life. The band is Jon's sole priority. Sometimes that seems like Wil's life still, and then he'll come home to a whole new set of responsibilities.

When Wil wanted to replace the drummer and bass player of their previous band, Jon backed his decision, trusting Wil's judgment. While Jon is an extremely talented guitarist, he's not a lyricist. Wil writes most of the songs. He sings, books the gigs and prints up fliers. But if the band decided to fire Wil, he's not sure what Jon would do these days. The new members are capable of doing Wil's job and have even taken the initiative to book some shows. The idea of being cut out of his dream threatens to unhinge Wil.

"It's not Starla's fault," Wil says to Jon as they pull into Pine Creek's parking lot. "I've got a kid coming too."

Jon exhales a cloud of smoke. Wil wishes he had a cigarette.

Walking through the halls of Pine Creek, he tries to convince himself that returning to school is the best thing he can do for both of them. Wil has to make changes, not be so self-centered. He has to mean it when he returns the form, not just do it to avoid a fight. He will return next year and justify Starla's belief that he can be more selfless.

He has tried to be a better person and think of her first. Wil pushed the band to the side when he needed to step up and help with the wedding. He worked very hard to do what he could to make Starla happy, teaching and working as a barback at night for almost a year. He thought that after the wedding they could get back to normal, and he could get back to his career. Wil never thought the changes would be permanent.

Even as he feels good about returning the form, he can't shake his craving for a cigarette. Not the nicotine, exactly, or the feeling of calmness that comes with the high. It is the habit of smoking, especially if everyone else is, that he misses. As smoke escaped Jon's mouth, Wil wanted a drag and realized he'd never be able to smoke another cigarette. It's a small thing. Stupid really. And Wil would have liked to give it up one day. Eventually, he would've on his own when he was ready.

Mrs. Haynes is sitting at her desk writing when he knocks on the door. The school secretary, she runs the school and taught English for a long time before that. She's spent a lifetime teaching.

"Hey, Hun," she says. "How's your summer been?"

"Good, good," he says. "Starla told me you called."

"That's right. I need your form."

The form, signed and dated, is in the outer pocket of his bag. “I lost it,” he says. “Can I get another?”

He thinks of Jon, smoking in the car, as Mrs. Haynes searches through a filing cabinet against the wall. In Wil’s head, Jon is flicking the ash out the window. Wil can’t understand the strength of his craving.

“Here it is.” She smiles and holds the form out in front of him.

He doesn’t take it immediately. Signing that form is the first of an endless string of compromises in store until he’s compromised himself so much that he won’t be the same person anymore.

The smile fades from her face. “You all right, Hun?”

If they can’t make it happen soon, it probably won’t happen for *Plastic Cities*. Maybe they’ll go on and do other things, but bands only have so long a lifespan, like people. Some make it to old age but some die young. It was one thing when they didn’t have any prospects, just plowing through bar gigs. The idea of throwing away something with potential is a lot to ask.

“I won’t be coming back next year. Do I still need to fill one out?” Wil says.

“I’ll still need it. Why don’t you take the form and think about it? Turn it in by the end of the week.”

He doesn’t want to take it home and think about it. He’ll never quit if he doesn’t take a stand right now. “I’m pretty sure. If I have to turn it in anyway, I’d rather save the trip,” he says and fills out the form.

“Wil,” she says. “I hope you reconsider. We’d hate to lose you.”

“Till the end of the week, I know. Thanks, Mrs. Haynes.”

She is a sweet lady who has made a difference in people’s lives in her own way. Mrs. Haynes is a good teacher because she treats her students with a mother’s care. Really, she treats most people that way. Wil is never nurturing. He treats his students more like friends, though they aren’t. He never considers himself very different from them, although he is. He is glad to be on the other side of the desk. At the end of the day, he doubts that anything he’s said affected them.

Starla’s stomach has stretched the waist of every pant she owns. They walk around the maternity section of a department store in the mall scanning the racks for something she’d like.

“I hate buying maternity clothes,” she says finally. “They’re always so ugly.”

“These aren’t bad,” he says, holding up a pair of jeans with the denim cut out around the belly and replaced by spandex. He laughs.

She raises a sandy eyebrow. Wil shrugs. “I don’t know. Who cares? You look good in anything.” He means it. Starla will always be the prettiest girl he has ever known.

They met as servers in a restaurant in Atlanta. He wasn’t looking for a girlfriend. He wasn’t expecting to find her there. At first, she didn’t like him. She told him that she’d thought he was self-centered. He wasn’t surprised. He could be self-centered.

Something had changed her mind. She called it his capacity for empathy. It was apparent in the way he viewed the world, in the music he made.

“I can’t believe I’m hungry again.” She talks to her swollen belly. “Aren’t you ever satisfied?”

“Listen, why don’t you just get these jeans, and then we’ll get some food?”

“But they’re so expensive. They’re ugly anyway. If I’m going to buy something ugly, it should at least be cheap.” She smiles widely at her own wisdom, and he can tell she’s had her fill of shopping. She’ll be stretching out his sweat pants for another few weeks; he’s sure of it.

They sit at a circular table with a peach umbrella for shade outside of an ice cream parlor. Starla licks the scoops of her chocolate cone, and Wil is eating a cup of vanilla ice cream.

It feels normal between them, and he’s comfortable in this role today. He supposes it’s common for most people to feel apprehensive about parenthood. Even Starla must feel that way from time to time, although she doesn’t say anything. Wil decides he’ll tell her about the deal and school today. Getting pregnant doesn’t have to derail their plans. He could be a full time musician and a dad without failing his responsibilities to either.

“I talked to my mom last night,” she says. “They’re still planning on going to Honduras in the fall.” Her parents are missionaries. They’re opening an orphanage somewhere in Honduras these upcoming months. Starla grew up on mission trips.

Wil went to one in Belize. One night he found a giant iguana had crawled into his bed. Without hesitation, Starla grabbed the reptile by its tail and flung it outside of the tent; he was amazed at how brave she was. Growing up in that environment made her different, compassionate and generous.

“Your parents are crazy,” he says.

“The thing is,” she pauses to lick a stream of ice cream dripping down the cone.

“They want to give us the house.”

“Move back?”

“They want us to have a home with the baby and everything. A house of our own.”

That house is paid for. It had been a home base for Starla and her siblings who live near Atlanta still. Older than she, they have their own families and homes. They spend a lot of time together. Starla probably misses them.

“We have lives here,” Wil says.

“Wil, when I moved down here, you promised me one more year with the band. I’m not saying give up music, but if it’s not working go out on your own. Write your own music. Plus you can teach anywhere.”

“But it *is* working.” Wil had promised her a year, but the year was filled with wedding plans. He taught and worked as a server last year just to make money to pay for it all, working gigs on the side. The year mark had come and gone without her saying anything until now, just when he’s gotten back on track.

“You know what I mean,” Starla says.

But Wil doesn't. “That's not really fair. I promised a year but all that's changed.”

Starla's expression is stoic. He can't tell what she's thinking.

“It's a smaller, independent label,” he says. “But they've offered us a deal and we're taking it.” He gives an affected smile.

“There's a chance we'll get the guy who produced Incubus' last album,” he says in a last ditch effort to sound nonchalant.

She sips from her water, staring into the clear liquid. “Good for you.”

“Good for us,” he says.

There is a long pause before she speaks again. She presses a closed fist against her mouth. The area is slightly flushed when she removes it. “You should've told me,” she says. “You must have known for a while.”

He finds he's been holding his breath. “I'm sorry.”

She rubs her hand across her lips once more. “Don't leave me out of the loop again, okay?” Her expression softens, although her lips remain a pale pink.

He would never be this calm if the circumstances were reversed. He's been sneaky and cowardly. A lie of omission still feels like a lie. His stomach churns.

Melting ice cream trails down her hand. She wipes it off and balls the napkin up. “At least you have your job at Pine Creek,” she says.

The last statement makes the ice cream stall in the base of his throat. He lied to her about returning to school next year and instead of correcting her he nods. It's only a matter of time before her patience runs out.

*Plastic Cities* books consecutive gigs for the upcoming weekend at the Beach Club Restaurant and Bar in Daytona. The band starts playing around 9 p.m. Saturday night to a scattered crowd. Located on the pier, the venue is mostly open-air seating. Giant fans hang above the bench-like tables circulating salty winds and sand. The bar is indoors next to the stage.

Wil is still tired from the night before. He didn't talk much all day, trying to conserve his voice, but he still strains to hit some of the higher notes. Playing in Daytona means that he won't get back home before four in the morning. He'll end up sleeping most of Sunday away, like he did Saturday, unless Starla wakes him. She'll be up early like always.

*Plastic Cities'* manager, Bret, sits at the bar. He is talking to a brunette wearing skintight black shorts and black patent leather heels. Her two friends are watching the stage. Starla won't be coming tonight. She hasn't been to a gig in weeks. She hasn't cheered for Wil in a long time.

After playing a few covers, they transition into an original. A traditionalist, Wil's lyrics carry an air of reverence for the past. Still, the dissonant, drifting strums suggest a flirtation with shaking convention. At it's best, the music builds up heat and momentum,

flowing naturally to an inevitable and revelatory conclusion. At its worst, the cords seem a little glazed and the lyrics timeworn.

There's a decent-sized crowd in attendance by the time they break. The Bob Marley shirt sticks to Wil's sweaty back and chest. Bret is here to discuss business. *Plastic Cities* has a promo spot scheduled with a local DJ in the upcoming week. He rushes over to Wil, eyebrows raised, his face red in the humid climate. The brunette rejoins her two friends in the meantime.

Bret tells him that they plan to reissue the album under the label with the new cuts. Right now it sounds more like a demo reel. There are seven tracks that need to be remastered. They also need to pitch some new material. When he mentions that they'll be doing major touring the next few months and then hitting the studio, Wil sees a way to juggle teaching too.

"Work around your school schedule?" Bret says. "I thought you took care of that."

"It's just seems that I can do both. We could work the sessions in after school. I'll get subs for extended gigs."

Bret scratches his head, near the hairline of what, one day, will be a widow's peak. "And the guys are going for this?"

He knows what Bret is thinking and what the guys will say. He grabs the rim of his shirt and flaps it against his skin, trying to dry some of the sweat. "It was just a thought," he says.

“We’re all on the same page?” Bret looks back at the bar. Jon is at the counter talking to the girls from before. Bret raises his eyebrows. “I’d better head back.”

Wil doesn’t join them tonight. He doesn’t measure success in the way Jon does: money, girls and fame. Especially now that he’s married. He grabs a water and heads back to the stage where he spends the break talking to some bar patrons.

When Wil returns to the stage, he finds it difficult to focus on his performance. He feels disconnected from the crowd. He’s unable to hold his voice together. Performing was a refuge when he was younger. A way to wash away the dirt and dust of everyday life. But being a musician is really more than a release. Wil doesn’t think of what he does as just a job but as part of who he is. A part that’s slipping away. It’s like trying to live two separate lives and losing grip on both. Like committing to one requires sacrificing another. He just wants to pause.

Wil knows pauses are just as important as the notes. He needs more time to think, but he doesn’t have it. There’s no time to reflect, no time to take in the note that just passed or wait for the next one to come.

When Wil returns from practice Tuesday, Starla is in the kitchen. The apartment is filled with the smell of mixed spices and Mariachi music. They both love Mexican food. The CD is a bargain purchase from a random yard sale. Track five skips, but Starla says it was a steal for only a dollar.

Wil drops his bag next to the door. She is cutting a cheddar block into smaller cubes. He kisses her on the cheek and pops a cube into his mouth.

“Mrs. Haynes left a message for you.” She puts the knife down and faces him.

“Mrs. Haynes?” he says calmly. Mrs. Haynes should have called his cell instead of the house phone. “What did she say?”

“You quit your job?”

“I can still go back.”

“Why didn’t you return the form when you said you would?”

“It’s just, with the band doing so well, I really need to focus my attention on that. We’ll be okay with money.” Wil grabs a glass of water and leans against the counter. He knows she’s upset he lied but thinks she’ll get over it. He feels relieved the secret is out. He should have told her sooner.

“It’s not about the money,” Starla says.

“I can always sub in the fall.”

“Do you know how long it takes to process that?” She takes a few steps back.

“Are you going to take care of the baby while I’m at work? I can’t even trust you.”

“If we need it, I’ll teach in the fall.”

Starla grabs the cordless phone from the wall hook and holds it up to his face. “So teach in the fall. Mrs. Haynes said she’d discuss your options.”

He doesn't take the phone from her. It's too late. Maybe quitting is a decision he shouldn't have made on his own, but he can't take it back. He doesn't want to return. Starla's eyes are wide; her stare cuts into him.

Starla slams the phone down. "Your annual contract is out the window."

"I thought you were ready to pack us up and move to Georgia anyway," Wil says.

"It's an option, Wil. I presented it to you like I would with any other major decision that affects us both."

"You're telling me you don't want to move to Georgia?" he says.

"That's not the point. We made a decision together and you go do whatever you want."

Starla purses her lips and picks up the knife. She continues cutting the cheddar into small cubes. Her motions are less calculated, and the squares are more irregular in shape.

"We've made other decisions before and now that's all changed too."

"This is about the band, right? That's all you care about. I can't believe you're throwing away your career." Starla scrapes the cheddar into a large ceramic bowl with evergreen lines painted on its surface and continues cutting the rest of the block.

"Teaching high school Chemistry has never been my career, Starla."

"I wish you'd get your head out of the clouds."

"We're supposed to stop being people because we're parents?"

"We're not even parents yet!"

“That’s my point,” he screams back.

She nicks her index finger with the knife. Blood seeps from a thin flap of skin. She rinses the knife under the faucet and drops it in the sink. Starla stopped being his wife almost as soon as she became a mom. She withdrew from everything they once were. He didn’t tell her he wasn’t going back to school because Wil feared she would say no. At one point in their relationship, he wouldn’t have hesitated to tell her. Now, he’s not sure what she’s thinking half the time.

Wil guides her wrist under the running water then wraps her finger in a napkin.

“If I don’t have my music, then what do I have?” he says.

She lowers her gaze, the corners of her mouth bending downward. He can’t tell what she’s thinking. She picks up two plump tomatoes and a bushel of cilantro from the counter and places them in the fridge. “I don’t know.” She walks briskly to the bedroom and slams the door behind her, leaving him alone with the unfinished meal.

Wil sleeps on the couch for days. They’re never together, and when they are they fight. She spends the days running errands. At first, he’s angry too. He doesn’t want to talk to her either. She doesn’t understand him, and he thought she knew him better than that. He thought they had the same goals once. Somehow, over the past few months, they stopped talking about anything that really mattered. Even things that aren’t really important, but strengthened their connection, seem lost. Wil and Starla used to debate for

hours about shifts in the music industry and who the best girl guitarist is. Although those conversations seem insignificant, Wil misses them the most.

Will is not really ready to make peace, but he learns he has to leave soon, for another week. He leaves her a reminder on the refrigerator about a radio promo he has tonight and a solo show right after. They have to start talking again.

Starla misses the radio promo. Wil goes to his solo show. He's playing to a mostly college crowd. After ten, the lights are turned down, and they stop serving food. Students from the private school a couple blocks away fill the place. He plays but hardly anyone really pays attention over the noise from the bar scene. They only stop to look when they recognize a song they like or know. This is a usual gig for him. He plays alone for the practice and extra money. He enjoys the idea of a successful outing relying solely on his efforts. It gives him a chance to work out melodies and lyrics. A time to pause and reach places he wouldn't on stage with the others. There's something about playing acoustic once in a while. Stripping the songs down makes them more intimate.

Tonight, he's going through the motions. Starla isn't here, and he feels even more disconnected from her. Maybe things had changed between them even before they were married. Maybe they should've lived together during the engagement. Their whole relationship was poorly planned. They just assumed that they'd be able to work things out as they came, but it's been harder than expected.

Even Wil's proposal spilled out of him during a show at the Beach Club, in between their covers of Dylan's, "Maggie's Farm" and The Eagles, "Victim of Love." He didn't have a ring.

The original songs bombed the night he proposed. His throat was strained and the sound terrible. When a string broke on his guitar, he played the best he could and called a break.

Everything was going wrong, and Starla hadn't arrived yet. She was living in Atlanta at the time and driving in for the weekend. She drove the extra hour to Daytona beach just to see him play the same songs she'd heard a hundred times before. He was worn out, defeated, and so grateful to have her there that he blurted out the proposal.

It was so exciting to think that he'd found someone who understood him and wanted to go in the same direction. He felt like they connected in a way he'd only experience through song, in theory really. Amazingly enough, she said yes. They kissed after the next song. He still regrets not kissing her right away.

Starla is in the shower when Wil arrives from his solo gig. He sits on the bed pretending to tinker with the melody of a song. When she comes out of the shower, her eyes are all red. The towel barely covers her side.

"Have you been crying?"

"A little." He sets the guitar on the floor and leans it against the bed. She walks over and sits next to him.

“Why are you crying?”

“I don’t want to argue,” she says.

“You’re upset about the fight?” It’s comforting to see she’s upset too, although he feels responsible. He hopes they can figure it out and move on. They can’t go on the way they’ve been living. It’s clear they have been heading down separate roads the past few months.

“I miss home,” she says. “And now my parents are moving away.”

“But your parents are always away.”

“I know. It just doesn’t feel the same.” She pushes a wet strand of hair off her cheek. “With the baby, I wish they were around. My mom especially. I don’t know what I’m doing. Now they’re moving again.”

She’s never admitted having doubts to him. They were both surprised about the pregnancy, but she assumed her maternal role right away. She’s always seemed certain, the exact opposite of Wil. He feels like he can identify with Starla for the first time in months.

“Don’t cry, Starla. We’ll see them soon, and they aren’t leaving until after the baby’s born right? We’ll be okay.”

She rests her forehead against his shoulder. Her eyelashes graze his skin. “I just feel like I’m losing my back-up. I can always rely on them.”

Wil understands what she’s saying. She feels abandoned even if she’s never confessed to it. There is so much he doesn’t understand about her.

“Maybe I should go to Atlanta,” she says.

“You want to leave?” He sets his guitar on the floor. He’s dumbstruck.

“For a little while.”

“You think that’s the right thing to do?”

She moves away from him. “It’s hard being alone all the time.”

His arm feels cool now where her face had been resting. He’s made a mess of his life and hers. Wil realizes he isn’t shocked because he’s surprised she wants to go, but because he agrees.

“How long would you stay?” he says.

“Until the baby is born.”

“Until I can follow?”

“If you want.”

Maybe they can talk about moving back to Georgia. Though he’d probably have to go out on his own. He won’t ask her if she’ll come back. He doesn’t want to know the answer right now.

He tries to take her hand. When he reaches out, she strokes his gently. They lie back on the bed, their hands fixed together. As Wil stares at the noisy, wobbling ceiling fan, he is acutely aware they’ve reached a turning point, a moment in their life together where everything has changed and will never be the same as it was again. It’s taken him nearly nine months to understand.

## A GHOST STORY

In the bottom of the ninth inning, as twilight shadows lengthened and shrouded the diamond, a line drive turned foul and struck Paul Canovan in the left temple. The batter, Brandon Redman, had accidentally killed the new first base coach of the minor league Jacksonville Suns.

Monday morning, various news articles detailing the accident covered the surface of the thin wooden table Brandon used as a desk. The table was situated against the wall in the exact center of the window frame. On opposite ends sat a small printer and desk lamp. Set in the middle was a closed laptop. All items were organized for maximum symmetry. The arrangement appealed to Brandon's meticulous nature.

Brandon rummaged through the paperwork in search of his ringing cell phone. Reporters called his house phone until he disconnected it sometime before midnight. The only son of hall of fame pitcher, Tim Redman, Brandon's name was mentioned in every article. *Every one.*

Brandon considered letting the cellular go to voicemail but recognized his father's number. He spent the whole night reliving the accident, circling bits of information from the news articles in thick black ink. Brandon's bat made contact, a sharp crack. Thinking the ball foul tipped, he turned to the catcher whose glove was empty. Mask in hand, the catcher faced right field. A crowd had gathered around first base where the legs of a person were sprawled across the grass. It wasn't until he had explained that to his father

that he felt like weeping. When Brandon stepped up to home plate, his actions seemed benign and every day, but they turned out to be damning and foreign.

Brandon zipped up his hooded sweatshirt. In the early hours, winter stole through the gaps in the caulking of the window's edge.

"That's a damn shame," his father said.

"He died almost instantly," Brandon said. Paul's cap had flown off, the embossed JS crushed under the emergency personnel's feet.

"Now what?"

"I guess the ball club will handle all the press releases." Brandon pulled on the left hood string that dangled against his chest, trying to even its length with the right side.

"He had a family. I'd like to set up a fund. Send some flowers," Brandon said.

"You're going to the funeral right?"

"I don't think his widow has made plans." Brandon let the string fall limp. He wasn't sure he should go. He was scared to face what he'd done.

"But you're going?"

Brandon hesitated at times Tim Redman never would. His dad didn't need a long time to interpret a situation. He assessed accurately, made a decision and took action. Clearly the more talented athlete, he went straight from Double AA class to the majors several years before Brandon was born. At the age of twenty-one, he was a rookie in the big leagues. His second game out, his father pitched a no hitter, which exemplified what type of player and man he was.

Brandon was not that type of man. At twenty-three, he was still kicking up dirt on minor league fields, already making him less successful than his father. There was no doubt that baseball was Brandon's life, however. Brandon watched almost all of his father's home games as a boy, studying the greats. He kept notebooks of statistics and detailed accounts of outstanding plays. Brandon's nature cultivated an interest in the sport. The game embodied his desire to find order in the world. Unlike other sports, there were no trick plays in baseball. A team couldn't sit on a lead by keeping the ball out of play. The rules forced the pitch and offered another chance at redemption. The rules were clear and definitive. Three strikes were *always* an out. It was a game of cause and effect, action and consequence. Unlike life, which had no rules and punishments rarely fit the crime, baseball was orderly and fair.

"You think I should?" Brandon said.

"He was your friend, wasn't he?"

Brandon picked up an article from the pile on his desk and skimmed over a section he had marked. *Paul Canovan was new to the organization. Players say he was fairly quiet and observant, giving them space to improve and adjust.* That seemed accurate. Paul seemed like a good guy, but Brandon didn't know him.

"Sure, Dad," he said.

"Sometimes things happen in life that you don't intend to, but there are still consequences to those actions," he told Brandon. "It ain't your fault but it is. Get it?"

*Consequences.*

Brandon folded the paper in half. A professional picture used in each article of Paul Canovan in his baseball cap portrayed him as an all-American clean-cut athlete. He had a strong square chin and was tall with equal broad shoulders and short brown hair. Brandon set the article down. Going to the funeral didn't seem like much of a consequence. The punishment was disproportionate to the crime.

“Whether you think you can or can't, you're probably right,” his father said.

It's what he always said when he thought Brandon was dragging his feet. He must have said the same thing to Brandon almost every day growing up. During the off-season, his father would find time to weight train and practice with him. Brandon became a catcher because his father was a pitcher. It was part of his inheritance.

With such a busy schedule, playing ball was a way for the two to bond. Those days were more laid back, just a mask and a glove. As his training became more serious, Brandon grew to hate the gear: an oppressive steamy mask, chest protector and shin guards. Crouching down for hours at a time killed his knees. His father pushed harder when he complained.

Brandon would never quit though. It was through practice that they reached a symbiotic relationship on the field as pitcher and catcher, if not fully as father and son. Since a pitcher and catcher were the only two players that had contact with the batter, it was important that the battery have a clear understanding, a secret language. They grew to read one another's signals, the subtleties of a hand gesture or look, a foot shifting, a modified stance.

“Do you want me to fly down for the funeral, Brandon?”

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll take care of it.” It was a nice offer but having his dad there would only bring more attention to Brandon. He knew it was something he had to do alone. Brandon set his cell phone down on the desk. Paul Canovan played baseball for over twenty years. Those blurbs couldn’t possibly encompass the man’s life.

With the engine running and his foot pressed against the brake pedal, Brandon waited in his car for the procession of mourners to enter Shady Oaks Funeral home. He had worked on an apology for Mrs. Canovan in the days prior. Like prepping for a game, he took notes on scrap paper. He wanted to have the words readily available when the time came.

A mother walked past with her two children. Maybe puzzled by the man with the brake lights on, she looked into the car. She gave an accusatory look. The smaller boy had brown short hair. In his khaki shorts and polo, he could have been a younger version of Paul. Brandon froze, thinking that the boy was Paul Canovan’s son and that she was Mrs. Canovan. She wasn’t. Those boys were too old to be Mr. Canovan’s sons. As if Brandon were a danger, the woman grabbed her children’s hands and ushered them ahead of her.

Brandon felt unprepared to leave the comfort of an easy escape. At any moment, he might’ve switched gears into reverse and left. He wished his dad were there, after all, to draw the attention away. Brandon dreaded the low resonance of whispers as he passed,

the careful attempts to avoid eye contact. Tuesday's game had started with a moment of silence. Brandon was riddled with anxiety before stepping onto the field. He wondered if the crowd would boo when his name was called. No one did, of course. No one mentioned Sunday's game to him at all. Pats on the back and solemn nods were the only indication that his teammates knew Brandon was a different man. Sitting in the car, he felt like he was stepping onto that field again.

Brandon kept a safe distance from the group, trailing behind just far enough to avoid most recognition. Mrs. Canovan sat in the front row, her two boys on either side. The older one was around seven years old. He would become the man of the house. Regardless of whether it was intentional or not, Paul's Canovan's death was Brandon's fault.

He wished he knew Paul better. Searching through the articles for scraps of information, he was disappointed with the indifferent reports. When the field manager of the Jacksonville Suns, Jerry, delivered the eulogy, Brandon took in every word. Jerry wore a black suit and tie. The seams of the jacket hung loose, a size too big. He read from a paper resting on the podium.

"Paul Canovan was born and raised in Charleston. His childhood was spent playing various sports and collecting baseball cards. He started in the minors right out of high school. After a few years, he moved to San Antonio where he met his wife, Sandy, and pitched in the majors with the Tumbleweeds. He spent two years on that team. And that's where I first met Paul. I was coaching; he was a rookie. He was a strong athlete. He

was also successful at anything he tried. Not the first time maybe, but he would achieve it eventually. Whenever he wasn't on the diamond, Paul spent his free time with his family. He lived a good life and had a strong moral center.

Paul was a solid asset to the team in San Antonio and again when he joined the Suns to coach. I remember meeting with him. He was considering retirement after twenty plus years playing. But his boys loved that dad played baseball, and it made him reconsider. So I asked him what finally made him stay. If it was because of the boys, or he just couldn't quit. And he quoted a line from Bouton's *Ball Four*. I have it here." Jerry flipped through a couple of pages and cleared his throat. "Paul said it was the only way he could describe it. 'You spend a good piece of your life gripping a baseball, and in the end it turns out that it was the other way around all the time.'"

After the eulogy, a line of grey and black mourners formed, eager to console the widow and family. Brandon slouched down in the bench, crossing his arms. He strained to extract meaning from the eulogy, but he hadn't learned much more about Paul than he did from the news articles. In fact, it seemed that Paul lived an average life with no major accomplishments to note. Brandon wondered how people measured Paul's life. His success in life, like Brandon's, would undoubtedly be tied to his baseball accomplishments.

Brandon would be thirty-five in twelve years, the same age as Paul. He expected his career would unfold in a similar fashion to Paul's. He hoped to coach and one day manage before the onset of early arthritis. In twelve years, he assumed he'd be more like

the man he'd killed than his father, and he hoped people would forgive him for that. The great Tim Redman had a fixed place in the hall of fame and in baseball lore.

Brandon pulled a folded loose-leaf paper from his suit pocket. His apology was scribbled in fragmented bits and different colored ink across its lined surface. He refolded the paper and stored it away. The apology was useless. He would always feel guilty. Meeting Sandy Canovan and the subsequent journey this meeting would precipitate was not an act of trying to assuage his guilt. Paul was a father, son, husband and friend. Brandon knew he would always feel responsible for killing Paul.

Paul was not ready to speak to Sandy Canovan, but he got in line.

Sandy had pale red hair and rounded cheeks. When he reached her, Brandon extended a hand. His palm swallowed hers in a soft grip.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he said.

"Thank you." She nodded. Her eyes were bloodshot.

"Paul was a great guy," he said. "We're going to miss him." Brandon tried to speak with conviction, but he avoided her eyes. He found himself spewing out the same stock lines uttered in the eulogy. If it had been anyone else on the team, he would feel a deeper loss. Because Paul had only been there two weeks, there was no bond between them.

"I'm sorry; I don't know you," she said.

"I'm Brandon," he said. "Redman."

Sandy took a deep breath. “Thank you, Brandon.” A deep resounding grief pervaded her voice.

Brandon couldn’t share in that grief. He didn’t feel the personal loss. It seemed important to Brandon’s soul that Paul’s death mean something more to him than it did at that moment. He wanted to join the circle of mourners and feel their grief, not crouch in the back row like an outsider looking in. Brandon left determined to meet again with Sandy Canovan. Paul deserved to be remembered properly.

After his brief encounter with Sandy, Brandon asked Assistant Coach Miller to arrange a visit or call with her during the off-season and whenever she felt ready. Later that week, Brandon visited Assistant Coach Miller’s office for personal reasons. Ron Miller coached Paul in the Majors and could give Brandon information about him. Brandon wasn’t sure what kind of information he was looking for, or why it was so important to him yet. He almost stumbled onto a path he didn’t understand during his visit with Ron Miller.

Ron sat behind a stocky metallic desk with a wood surface that almost hid the growing paunch on his, otherwise, slim frame.

“Paul,” he said. “We hazed him a little. Like every rookie, he thought he was hot shit back then.” Ron scratched the top of his bald head as he spoke, “I remember one time, the guys had him *alter* a picture of the visiting team’s mascot.” Ron laughed. “I didn’t hear about it until the next day. Two uniformed police come into the clubhouse and

take him out in handcuffs for vandalizing private property. I've never seen someone go pale so quick," Coach Miller said. "Paul went quietly." Ron scribbled on a pocket-sized notepad.

"So what happened?" Brandon said.

"It was all a prank." He wagged his pencil like an extra finger, accentuating his speech. "The way Paul took it though, showed what kind of guy he was. Paul was just happy to be there."

Brandon smiled. He felt closer to Paul, and he liked that feeling. He wanted more of it.

Coach ripped a sheet from the pad and handed it to Brandon. It was a list of names.

"Willy Fien, Chuck Lemon, Alan Wright," Brandon read aloud. There were more on the page. They were old teammates and coaches of Paul. "You don't think they'll mind if I contact them?"

Ron shook his head no. "It's a nice thing you're doing."

Paul had played ball for a long time. Although Brandon knew there was more to the man than baseball, it was also the longest and most consistent influence in his life. Every aspect of his life was colored by the game. Paul had once said that it gripped him and wouldn't let go. Even in death, he was part of that greater tradition. The field was shared with the ghosts of former players. Paul was no exception.

Brandon called Willy Fien that weekend on his day off. He sat in his kitchen with a pen and paper. Brandon introduced himself as a current teammate of Paul's. "I'm collecting stories for a memorial."

"I haven't talked to Paul in a while," Willy said.

"You've heard about his death though, right?" Brandon hoped he didn't have to explain the accident to this man. He hadn't considered the possibility.

"I went to the funeral."

Brandon sighed. "Anything you can remember will be fine."

According to the research Brandon had done, Willy was traded to the Tumbleweeds Paul's last year with the team. Willy played second base.

"One of the last times I saw him, before he went back to the minors, we were playing an away game. I think we were in Milwaukee. We'd lost the series and had a long layover. So a bunch of guys hit the bar. Paul had too much, you know?"

"So what happened?" Brandon said.

"It was a long trip; a flight and then a bus back to the clubhouse. He said something smart to one of the guys, an outfielder who had missed a ground ball. Paul had a bad showing that night. Got pulled around the fifth or sixth inning for a relief pitcher."

"Was he a good pitcher?"

"Yeah. Good guy. The guy he mouthed off to didn't what he said seriously, but our field manager wanted to talk to Paul so he asks me to do it."

Brandon took notes as Willy spoke.

“Well, the thing is,” Willy said. “Paul was all riled up, and I was thinking how am I going to wrestle this gigantic guy into the clubhouse? Luckily, our good friend, Pat, came over and calmed him down. Pat was a big guy, almost seven feet, and 300 pounds. Tough guy. Well, it was just hilarious. It’s about the drunkest I’d ever seen old Paul, and we ragged on him for weeks.”

“Did that happen a lot with Paul?”

“He wasn’t like that. One to start trouble. It was funny to see him get lit up like that. He was still pretty young. Afterwards, he apologized, of course.”

It was a buddy story. Willy only had nice things to say about Paul. That’s what Brandon expected. He wasn’t looking for skeletons in the closet, but he wanted something more than drunk buddy stories. Something unique about Paul Canovan that might help explain who he was.

Brandon was disappointed by the conversation. He called a few more people on the list. The stories all sounded the same, and Brandon began to doubt the merit of his quest. He took notes on all the conversations he had. They were just bits and pieces of a bigger puzzle Brandon couldn’t put together. There was no rhyme or reason to the stories people told or what they remembered.

Brandon decided it wasn’t enough to just call. There was something impersonal about the process, and maybe if he met with some of the people they would be more willing to tell a variety of stories. It was too easy to give a standard response over the

phone. So when the season ended a few weeks later, Brandon booked a flight to San Antonio armed with the list of remaining names.

Chuck Lemon was the first name Brandon met in person. He was an older man, several years older than Paul, with deep crow's feet and olive skin that looked leather-like from constant sun exposure. He had been a promising pitcher, but a sore arm took him out of the game early. He hung out at a local bar and was known for telling old tales from the diamond.

The bar itself was a dive, a graveyard for dreams. Not much bigger than a garage, the space couldn't hold a large crowd. A regular sized countertop ran down one wall. Chuck and Brandon sat on stools along the counter's edge.

"Paul was a pitcher since he was a kid," Chuck said. "He had a strong arm but had a hard time maintaining the pace of the game. Commanding the different pitches. So I was kind of a mentor to him." He drank a mouthful of his beer and set the sweaty mug down in a ring of water that had gathered on the counter.

"This one time Paul started, he was pitching against Seth Holliday. He was big time then. Powerful hitter. And I tell Paul, 'you might get him with a fastball on the first pitch, maybe even the second but power hitters like Holliday, they'll eventually get a piece of the fastball.'"

"So, it's his first real test as a leader then?" Brandon said.

"You could say that."

“What’d he do?”

“What every rookie does.” He laughed. “He tried to strike him out with the fastball and prove he had what it takes.”

“Does he get the out?”

“Are you kidding? Holliday hits it out of the park.”

Brandon looked at the liquid swirling in his mug, the color of raw sienna. “A home run.”

“Hell yeah. I’m standing there waving at the kid like *I just told you not to do that*. He freezes up. So I have to go out to the mound. Paul says, ‘did you see that?’ and I said, kid, they saw that in space. It shook him up pretty bad. It was the first time he got the stuffing really kicked out of him like that on national television.”

Brandon knew what it felt to freeze up on a big scale. The summer after his sophomore year, Brandon played with the Santa Barbara Forresters as part of a college league in California. That year they were invited to play Alaska’s Goldpanners during the Midnight Sun game. Every year during the midsummer solstice, the sun sets in the north and rises in the north. The daylight lasts through the night. Brandon flew to Fairbanks to play in front of a huge crowd, the same as other rookies like Terry Francona and Barry Bonds. His father flew out too.

The game started at 10:30 p.m., and, just as expected, the sun set in the north. Brandon thought they’d have to use artificial light or postpone play, but they never came close. In fact, the only shadow there was the one his father’s presence cast.

Brandon's team was down five runs with two outs at the top of the ninth inning. The game was practically a wash. Scoring five runs to tie in what was left of the inning seemed an unlikely end. Six to win required an amazing rally on their part. Brandon had seen some unbelievable plays in his life. Especially watching his father pitch. But his father, unlike Brandon, was a natural leader. Unfortunately, that's the type of performance the crowd expected.

Brandon ran the tip of his bat across home plate. He swung at what seemed like a fastball at release, but landed in the catcher's mitt with no more than 77 miles behind it. A change up. His count was 0 Balls, 1 Strike. He could wait for the perfect pitch.

The next one, a fastball, advanced past him just outside the strike zone. It was a close one, although Brandon had a sharp eye. He knew the umpire was wrong when he called it a strike.

0 Balls, 2 Strikes.

The pressure was on Brandon. He wasn't mad; it was a tough call. Yet, he'd hoped it would go in his favor. He stepped outside the batter's box to refocus. His father sat in the front row. A cameraman zoomed in on him, and his image dominated the jumbotron screen.

Since the count was to the pitcher's advantage, he had more freedom to risk a curve ball or pitch outside the strike zone, hoping to trick Brandon into swinging.

Brandon stepped back in the batter's box. He tapped the edges of the plate in search of his bearings before he took his stance, tapping his fingers against the wood bat

to keep from tensing up. He had to protect the plate by fouling off the next few pitches. He hoped the pitcher would tire out and send him the one he'd been looking for.

Brandon struck out swinging.

The Goldpanners fans cheered. Brandon wasn't sure if it was his internal clock fighting the unsolicited daylight or his mind. The simple subtleties of the game were stripped away. The players' actions had seemed harsher and more forceful in the strange light. The team lost. It was the only time anything seemed cut and dry, absolutely clear to Brandon.

He would never be great like his dad.

The San Antonio Tumbleweed's stadium was not as nice as the Jacksonville stadium, built in hopes of luring a major league team some day. The colorful southwest décor was fading in sections. The press box where Brandon met with Alan Wright was filled with long tables that cut across the room. Alan's area was very neat and tidy, just like his appearance. He wore a navy blue blazer and yellow tie. Except for a line of paperclips spanning the square space where he sat, everything was in perfect order.

Alan, a long time broadcaster with the San Antonio team, remembered Paul.

"He had a lot of promise," Alan said. "He was a confident guy when he first started."

"How long did you know Paul?" Brandon said.

“I knew him the whole time he was here and watched him for some time after. It’s a shame what happened really.”

“Paul was injured, right?”

“You can never tell. So many athletes have promise, and then they get injured or they just don’t pop.”

“Is that when he was sent back to the minors?”

“He was actually injured during a spring training game. I think it was his shoulder. He never quite recovered from it. After a few months of struggling, they sent him back to the minors. He moved to third base then.”

Brandon picked up a paperclip, not realizing they were all attached.

“So I don’t lose them,” Alan said.

Brandon couldn’t imagine being sent back. After getting a taste of the show. It must have been a big disappointment for Paul. He must have lost confidence. In baseball, confidence is everything.

The plane heading home hit a pocket of turbulence. A red seatbelt sign lit up. Brandon straightened his chair to the upright position like instructed. Outside, the sky was dark, and the clouds swirled and churned. The woman seated by the window lowered the cover and gripped her armrest. With the window shut, it felt as if they were in a car moving over a bumpy road. If it weren’t for his ears popping, Brandon could convince himself of that.

He wondered what would happen if the plane crashed, if he died in the fiery wreckage. As his loved ones mourned over a closed casket, the words they used to remember him wouldn't amount to much. He had no major achievements to speak of. When he was a young boy, he dreamed of being someone that other's looked up to, but he was not special. He was an average guy with an above average father. He couldn't help that he wanted to be more like his father. Brandon wanted to be remembered the way people would remember him. As the plane rocked and shook, Brandon recognized the disappointment he still felt with the adult he had become. Brandon failed to understand how he could be so different and unremarkable at the same time.

That night, he iced the elbow he'd injured in the last game of the season. Brandon sat at his desk. He'd scattered all of the notes and scraps of paper he had collected about Paul across the table. He didn't know what to do with all of the information, or if he knew Paul Canovan any better after all he'd done. His elbow ached, and he wondered if he'd seriously injured the muscles during play. Brandon's injury was a result of his lack of confidence. Since the accident, his performance became progressively worse.

Consistently, the first few signs Brandon threw out the night he was injured were waved off. In the second inning, he dropped the ball and then missed a catch in the fourth.

The crowd was primarily subdued until the ninth inning when the visiting team tried a clutch play. The Suns were ahead one run at the end of the eighth. The visiting team had one last chance to tie up, with two outs and one runner on third base.

Brandon flashed the sign.

His pitcher waved it off again.

Instead, he threw high and fast, counting on the hitter's impatience. However, being an experienced batter, the hitter recognized the strategy and checked his swing.

A tenth of a second is all it took, and, on the next swing, the hard leather ball grounded between second and third, where third base scooped it up and launched it to first. While the runner on third was nearly halfway to home plate, first base sent the ball to Brandon who, grateful to have made the catch, braced himself for the collision.

Although he was well padded, he dreaded the impact. He locked into position, completely blocking home plate. He was the last line of defense, literally and symbolically. He tried to imagine his thick legs were like lead weights; he tensed.

The runner slammed into him like a linebacker. His massive shoulder belted Brandon in the chest and knocked the mask off his face. Brandon fell back hard on his side, landing on his elbow. The runner landed on his pinched arm, knocking the ball out of his hand.

*Safe.*

The runner was safe, and the game was tied. It was the play of the game. Brandon had lost the battle of will power.

When something like that happens, it's demoralizing. Like an infection spreading, the team disintegrated. A ball bounced and landed against the shortstop's chest. The second baseman dove too late for a grounder that grazed his glove. Third base overthrew

to first. An outfielder raced to the wall, jumped and jammed his finger when the ball hit it and then bounced off the panel and out of bounds with the bases loaded. The batters failed to score, and when one made contact it shot directly back to the pitcher and into his glove. The Suns didn't score in the second half of the inning, and they lost in the tenth. Brandon's elbow hadn't been the same since.

Brandon changed his ice pack. Keeping the loose papers scattered across his desk seemed pointless, so Brandon stacked them in a neat pile. He opened the laptop and pulled up a blank document. He spent the night typing up all the pieces, and he had created a collection when he was done. He printed out a copy and bound it in a notebook. Then, he swept all the scraps into the trash bin.

The new season had started when Mrs. Canovan finally contacted Brandon. They met at the ballpark and talked about Paul and what type of man he was. Sandy told him that Paul had become frustrated with playing. He'd thought about trying something else. Even though he was only thirty-five, he'd spent twenty years in baseball. Starting over seemed like a lot of work. He had some rough times before being sent back to the minors. He'd called her drunk one night. They were playing an away series, and they'd spent the layover at an airport bar.

"Do you remember where he was?" Brandon said.

He had been in Milwaukee. It was the same drunken buddy story Brandon got from Willy in San Antonio. But they'd perceived it in a completely different way.

“He didn’t hate the game,” she said.

It was strange how they’d perceived the same story in different ways. Brandon thought maybe they were both right. People would remember Paul how they wanted to. Ron Miller would remember Paul as an enthusiastic rookie. Chuck Lemon would remember him as a hotshot pitcher, and Alan Wright would remember Paul as a struggling player.

Brandon chose to remember Paul as a normal guy. After all of the research he’d done, it occurred to Brandon that it didn’t really matter how Paul was remembered, just that he was. Brandon had the proof with him. He was glad that Paul turned out to be just a regular guy, and by immortalizing him through those interviews, Brandon felt some of his own fears regarding his legacy lifted. He handed the notebook to Sandy Canovan.

“I’m not a writer,” he said.

She took it from him and thumbed through the pages.

Brandon started to apologize, but she stopped him. “You don’t have to,” she said.

“I know you are.”

## **SLASHING, TRIPPING AND OTHER OFFENSIVE PLAYS**

Patrick is quick. He's one of the fastest runners on Oak Creek High's varsity lacrosse team and its captain. Although he's fast, Patrick is very conscious of his movements. He raises his stick high, a technique developed after years. He moves both his wrists in unison, inwards and out. This causes the net at the head of his long pole to sway crescent- moon like and cradle the ball. Some of his teammates shift the stick from side to side while doing the wrist movement. Patrick prefers his way; it's more sophisticated, tighter, and leaves less room for error. Some of the younger players forget to rotate their wrists, and the ball just flies out. That would never happen on varsity though; that's a J.V. thing.

As Horizon High School's team members 36 and 13 club at Patrick with long poles, he tries to remain calm. He knows the smallest mistake can cost the game and a spot at regionals so near the end of the season. Number 36, the bigger of the two, slams into Patrick's shoulder and grabs his arm. The padding he wears protects Patrick from the brunt of the attack, but he fumbles with the ball. Illegal contact. The referee should have called him on a slashing violation. Patrick fights off the urge to ram his long pole into number 36's gut and dispense his own warning.

Patrick throws with precision and force to his teammate, Tim Davy, further downfield. Number 36 jabs at the plastic tubing of Patrick's mask with the butt of his long pole, attempting to twist Patrick's helmet off. Patrick channels a sudden surge of

adrenalin. He gives 36 an extra hard shove that knocks the Horizon midfielder on his back. Patrick turns just in time to see Davy pelt the ball past their goalie. This is what Patrick loves.

The rules of lacrosse give Patrick permission to hit with unabated force. The game allows for a freedom he can only experience on the field. Most days, he feels restrained in all other aspects of his life. Especially at home, since his new step-dad, Greg, and stepbrother, Ben, moved in. After years of living in that house with just his mom, Patrick is expected to follow Greg's law.

Coach Bittner calls a time out. The game is close: 6:6. Horizon's team is as good as Patrick's Wolves. As he's running out to the sidelines, Patrick spots his mother and Greg in the stands. His mom never misses a game. His stepbrother, Ben, is nowhere in sight, though he's supposed to be watching like all the other J.V. players. The team huddles around Coach as he tells them which plays to run. Coach is over six feet tall and still fairly muscular. If it weren't for the beer gut, he'd blend in with the huddled group made up of mostly seniors.

"Okay, beehive formation," Coach says. "We'll run 3-2-1. Davy, you call 'Black' and work around to the opposite player." The beehive formation puts six players in a hexagon that encompasses the goal post. Patrick disagrees with the call. It's an amateurish play, and Horizon is too skilled for it to work.

"What if we sneak up for a quick stick?" Patrick says. It's just a slight alteration on the play, but it requires more skill.

Coach hesitates. “We won’t have enough time to recover from a botched play.”

“I know I can get it in.”

“If you’re blocked, feed the shot to Vargas behind the goal for a crease,” Coach says.

As the team hustles back onto the field, Ben takes the seat next to Patrick’s mom in the stands. Ben grabs a handful of fries from the basket she has in her lap. She passes him a napkin as Ben stuffs the wad into his mouth. Their relationship is completely unlike Patrick and Greg’s. Almost instantly, the two fell into a loving mother and son relationship. It’s the ease with which they were able to bond that is startling. Sometimes, Patrick can’t see any difference between his relationship with his mother and Ben’s relationship with her, but he believes that there should be. After all, she just met Ben. Patrick’s grip on the long pole tightens. He liked it better when Ben was out of sight, but he can’t worry about home now. When Patrick is on the field, the team is the only thing on his mind.

Once the ball is in play, the six boys race to beat the clock. The ball flies from net to net down the line: Hoffmann to Wells, Wells to Davy, Davy to Patrick. His shot is blocked, and he scrimmages from left to right.

Patrick rams number 29 with his shoulder and knocks him down. He spins around and sends the ball into the top right corner of the net, just grazing the goalie’s head.

A buzzer sounds.

The Wolves have won, and they are one game closer to regionals. His teammates huddle around Patrick, cheering and knocking one another on their helmets with the heads of their long poles. Patrick lives for this. His *senior* year. It's his year to leave a mark by leading the fledgling lacrosse team to regionals and the program's first shot at a championship.

After doing the sportsmanlike thing and shaking hands with the opposing team, Patrick runs towards the bleachers to greet his mom like he does after every game. Greg stands with her by the fence. His nails are perfectly trimmed, and his pants are pleated. Patrick wishes he didn't come to his games dressed like the principal, but Greg is all about appearances.

"Great game, Honey," his mom says.

"It was close." Patrick is still breathing hard from the rush.

"You pulled it through." She smiles.

"You really lucked out there at the end," Greg says. He wipes the lens of his black-rimmed glasses with her blouse sleeve.

"Well, Horizon's a pretty good team, Greg." Greg never gives Patrick his due credit.

"Ben won nine to eight," Greg says. The J.V. game was against Liberty; J.V. games are always before varsity. Nine to eight probably seems like a big deal to Greg. Athletic and smart, Ben is the perfect child from his previous failed marriage. Greg's pride in the moment doesn't have anything to do with how difficult of a game it was. Ben

stands a few feet from them with a group of freshman boys, talking loudly and shoving the smaller ones into girls as they pass. He's wearing a printed T-shirt with faded green letters that read: I'd rather be lucky than good.

"They played Liberty. They're barely ranked," Patrick says. Greg doesn't know the first thing about lacrosse.

"Ben made five goals in that game," Greg says. Patrick isn't surprised. Ben is ambidextrous, which is a hard thing to be. It definitely impresses Coach. Patrick isn't that great at switching hands, but he'd never admit it to Ben.

"I'd hope he would, against a team like *that*," Patrick says. "I'm going to hit the shower. I'll see you all later?"

"You'll be home for dinner right?" His mother asks.

Patrick tries to avoid dinner. The idea of sitting at the table with Greg and Ben is not something he can stomach every day. But, he's avoided it almost every night this week. When he eats his dinner late, and alone, he's also missing out on seeing his mom. Standing over the kitchen sink, eating reheated food, is the only time Patrick feels alone in the house. The kitchen lights are usually dim, and he'll eat on paper plates or right out of the Tupperware container so he's not disturbing the clean area much. Instead of feeling relieved that he has some time to himself, Patrick feels lonely. His mother is usually watching television or prepping for bed. Sometimes, she'll stop in to check on him, but it's not the same as sitting at the dinner table and talking. Patrick promises to join them for dinner tomorrow.

Until recently, Patrick and his mother took turns making dinner. She divorced his father when he was seven. They shared the workload ever since. Patrick isn't used to how crowded the house feels, and he's certainly not used to having other men in the house. His mom never even brought home dates before Greg came along. The transition has been difficult, and Patrick looks forward to college, although he'll miss his mom.

He worries about leaving Greg and Ben to take care of her. She's always depended on Patrick to help out. It makes him feel indispensable. In fact, Patrick mentioned going to school near home so he could stay close by and help her maintain the house and yard. To play professionally, however, he'd have to go to a university with a strong program and that means moving away. His mother told him that he had talent, and Patrick had to go wherever that talent led him. She said everyone should be so lucky

In truth, his mother has invested an equal share of time in realizing his goals. When Patrick's father left, his mom quit her job and took a less demanding one as a research assistant in a law firm. It allowed her to be home every afternoon when Patrick came home from school. She enrolled him in an intramural lacrosse league and chauffeured him and his friends to every game. She never missed one game he was playing in.

Patrick sits on a counter top in the athletic training room across from Coach Bittner's office taping his ankles before practice. He has a small scar on the left ankle from an old game injury. Coach Bittner's door is shut, but he's talking to someone and

Coach Bittner's impressive figure paces in front of the window. He has the body of the World's Strongest Man. He won that title years ago when he was still in prime physical shape.

He is something of a role model to Patrick, having coached him the past three years. He was an all-state athlete at Syracuse, which is Patrick's dream. Patrick has a strong work ethic and believes that hard work will pay off in due, a great part, to his coaching. Coach wants the best and expects it, even from himself. Patrick gage's what he thinks a man should be like by Coach's example and works hard to gain his respect. Besides his mom, Coach is the only other person who has an invested interest in whether Patrick fails or succeeds. Coach is tough on him but also helps him a lot. He is recommending Patrick for the Syracuse lacrosse program using the connections he still has at the school.

Coach makes eye contact with Patrick who immediately pretends to be engrossed with his ankle taping. Coach opens his office door and yells for Patrick down the hall.

Patrick hastily finishes wrapping his left ankle. It's a sloppy job that barely covers his surgery scar. He'll probably have to redo it. He grabs his jersey, with the navy blue C, for captain, on the front.

"What's up, Coach?" Patrick walks in. Sam, one of their best varsity midfielder's, or Middies, gets up from his seat; he nods at Patrick on his way out.

"Sam's transferring," Coach says. "We need to talk about a replacement."

Coach is asking him for advice? Patrick has been captain for two years. Coach listens to his opinion on a play, or how a teammate is doing from time to time, but this is an important decision that'll shape the team into regionals and next year. He runs through the names of 2nd string Middies on varsity in his head: Fields, Wells, Vargas. He tests out a few names.

Coach shakes his head. Although much older, he's still an intimidating guy. The rumor around Oak Creek is that he broke his neck in a car accident, but the muscles in his neck were so strong that they held up his head. Patrick asked Coach if it was true once. He just laughed it off, but Patrick's pretty sure it's a true story. Imagine being that strong, he'd thought.

Coach dismisses all of his suggestions. He doesn't think they would benefit the team in the long run.

"There's someone on J.V.," he says. "Ben. I think he'd be an asset to the varsity line up."

"He's just a freshman. He just joined the team in January."

"He's fast. Good control of the ball. He's got outstanding recs from his old school," Coach says.

Ben's old school, Burnsville High, is named after the small town in North Carolina it services. People don't lock doors there. In fact, Greg had new house keys made when they moved because he'd lost track of the originals years ago. Maybe Ben's

mom took them when she left to Tennessee. They don't have a lacrosse program at his old school; Ben is just a natural at the sport, and he knows it.

"But there are *no* freshman on varsity. You want to start him too?"

"He's an outstanding athlete." Coach chews on the tip of a mangled red pen cap. He seems lost in his own thoughts. He's strategizing. Planning offense. Running plays in his head.

Patrick stands. "He's barely fourteen. Immature. What about the guys already on the team?" Ben needs to earn that spot, not win it by default. Hard work should be rewarded.

"There's a lot of potential there. His age is a disadvantage. You and the other guys will have to train him."

"But Vargas and the other guys..."

"I'm calling a meeting before practice today. These choices aren't easy, Pat. But what's best for the team isn't always the easy call. As captain, the guys will follow you. They'll watch for your reaction. If you accept it as the best thing for the team, so will they."

This is why Coach called him into his office, not for his opinion but to keep the guys in line.

The timing of this decision couldn't be worse. The team will resent Ben because it is so close to winning a title. They've done all the work this season, boasting an almost undefeated record. Ben will join the last few games and share in the credit. At home,

Greg will pretend it was Ben's single-handed effort that earned them a championship.

Ben might be an asset to the team at some point but not now.

When Patrick walks into the guys' locker room, Ben is at his locker sifting through the mess. Ben grabs several articles of dirty workout clothes and drops them on the bench. Removing the clothes reveals a pile of crumpled and torn papers. His backpack is partially open and on its side, the giant zipper teeth clenching onto corners of binders and books.

"We need to talk," Patrick says.

Ben pulls his junior varsity jersey on. "Okay." He sits down on a bench.

"Sam's leaving and Coach wants you to take his spot."

"On varsity? That's like some kind of record. First freshman on varsity ever." He says the last part as if he's reading it off a plaque.

"You can't take it," Patrick says.

"I don't want it. Why would I want to warm the bench on varsity when I get all the playing time I want now?" He turns away from Patrick and closes his locker. The number 17 on the back of Ben's practice jersey is torn and faded.

"Don't be stupid. Sam's a starter."

Ben turns around. "*Starting?* Holy shit. Now, that *is* some kind of record." His voice cracks, a childlike excitement betraying his tough façade. Ben clears his throat, perhaps trying to recover from the embarrassing release. He scratches at a splotchy sideburn that trails down to his jaw line.

"Don't take it," Patrick says, knowing Ben will.

"Why not?" Ben's voice escalates.

"I can name any number of guys who deserve it more."

"It's Coach's decision, and you can't stop me."

"Coach isn't thinking about the team. As captain, I'm telling you no."

Ben's predictable response angers Patrick even more. It's selfish and typical of Ben. His inherited notions of fair and right are flexible. As long as it serves Greg in the end, he'll do what's most convenient. Nothing Patrick says is going to sway Ben. He knows this a good opportunity, and he is too self-important to say no. He's just like his dad.

"This isn't your decision," Brandon says.

"I'm captain." Ben doesn't know anything about this team. He doesn't know the guys at all. He definitely doesn't understand how important Patrick's role is, or how much pull he has with the guys.

"Looks like that don't mean shit," Ben says. He shrugs and laughs.

Patrick pushes him into the locker with the same intensity he shoved the Horizon midfielder to the ground. Patrick caves into an aggression within he knows, somewhere in his mind, is only acceptable within the game. He learned at an early age that people shrink back from such intense emotions, and angry displays aren't acceptable and need to be controlled. Patrick usually controls these emotions by saving them for the field.

It's what he's always done. Still, he can't help but slam Ben into the locker again.

"You son of a bitch," Patrick says.

They wrestle around, but Patrick is bigger and overpowers Ben. Patrick manages to put him in a headlock. Ben punches him in the stomach. His midsection feels like it's caving in around the fist. Doubled-over, he releases Ben. Patrick recoups with a fierce shoulder shove to the chest that sends Ben to the floor. The boys split apart just as Coach Bittner walks in.

"What's going on here?" Coach says.

"Nothing, Coach," Patrick says.

The locker room is quiet. The rest of the team has stopped changing and is looking at them. Coach probably doesn't believe Patrick and will probably lay into him later. Coach's opinion is important to Patrick. He slumps down on the bench feeling guilty over having lost control.

"Gather round." As coach announces the changes on the team, Patrick can feel his teammates watching him.

"If we want to build players up, we've got to start them every game," Coach says.

"Give our new first string, Middie, Ben, a round of applause.

The guys applaud briefly, half-heartedly it seems. Coach leaves without saying anything about the incident before practice, and Patrick is grateful but confused. It's unlike him to tolerate bad behavior from Patrick. Still, with Coach gone, Patrick is the one who has to face the guys alone. He starts changing for practice. Vargas slams the locker door next to him.

"That's some bullshit. *Fucking* freshman."

"I told Coach that," Patrick says though he's not sure Vargas was looking for a response. He wants everyone to know he doesn't agree with it either.

Vargas sends Patrick a quick look; his upper lip curls as if from disgust. "I'm sure you did."

"I know it's not fair."

"He's *your* brother, man."

"Step-brother. I wouldn't start him before you or any other guy in here."

Vargas grabs his long pole and walks out.

Patrick is one of the last guys remaining in the locker room. He pulls his shin guards on but begins lowering the left again. Rewrapping his ankle will make him late for practice. "Fuck it," he says and pulls the shin pad back into place. Another second-rate job, but he'll have to leave it.

Ben isn't at dinner that night. He's at a friend's house. Patrick wouldn't be sitting at the dinner table either if he hadn't promised his mom he would be here yesterday. Greg usually chooses one of three things Patrick could care less about to discuss at dinner: the economy, golf or his job. He works at Florida Atlantic University, analyzing admissions information. He gathers the stats on the incoming freshmen.

"It's becoming more and more competitive to get into college. The average GPA for students coming in next fall is 3.8," Greg says. "Have you made a decision yet?"

“No,” Patrick says. “I haven’t decided where to go yet.”

“It’s kind of late in the game to be so picky, isn’t it?”

“It’s only March.” Patrick knows he needs to make a decision soon. He went to a lacrosse showcase early in the year and was offered a scholarship to a level 3 school right away. The schools with better programs are more competitive.

“The end of March,” Greg says.

“I’ve got a couple weeks.” Patrick is holding out for Syracuse. With Coach’s connections, he has a real shot.

“Don’t you think you’re relying a bit too much on Coach Bittner’s assistance? You don’t want to end up at Gulf Coast Community College around the corner.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t want me just around the corner, right?” Greg is just waiting to get rid of Patrick.

“That’s not what he means, Patrick,” his mom says.

“Your mother may not see harm in letting you procrastinate, but you’re dangerously close to losing any opportunity coming to you. All your time is spent on that lacrosse field. You don’t work. You’re going to end up with nothing.”

“He can make his own decisions,” she says. “If he doesn’t want to play for a D3 school, he can play in a ball club. And if he wants to stay and go to community college, he can do that too.”

“No, he can’t. He’s seventeen. You can rest assured we won’t have this problem with Ben. I just don’t understand how you let him run around without any direction.”

“He has goals, Greg.”

“Are you still planning on going to college, Patrick?” Greg says.

“Of course.” Patrick fully expects to get into Syracuse’s program. There’s no reason he shouldn’t. He’s an all-state athlete like Coach was. He’s in excellent shape, captain of his team, and he has decent grades.

“Well, I hope you’re really thinking about it. Before it becomes a problem.”

Patrick has thought it through from every possible angle. He’s excited to leave and start over, but he admits he’s scared to go too. Mostly because of what he’s leaving behind. It will be hard to leave home, where his mom is. It will be hard to start again on a new team.

“Then I guess it’s lucky I’m not *your* problem, Greg.” Patrick drops his fork on the table. “Excuse me.”

“Patrick,” his mom calls after. She catches up to him on the stairs.

“He’s just trying to guide you.”

“I know what he’s trying to do.” When Patrick leaves, he may not have a home to come back to.

“Why don’t you just come back down and finish dinner,” she says. “It’s not as bad as it seems. Make amends.”

“Mom, I’ll never get along with that guy.” He walks up the long staircase as she descends it.

She sits on the bottom stair in silence. Her shoulders are curved forward, her face in her hands. She looks small and distant, crouching in the shadows.

The team hasn't really warmed up to Ben after a week of practice, although they aren't openly disdainful. They include him in the plays; throw him the ball. They haven't hazed Ben at all. In fact, off the field, most of the guys ignore him.

It's spring, but it feels like a summer day. Patrick is covered in sweat just warming up. There are knots in his shoulders he tries to loosen up through stretching. Patrick pushes through, crushing grass under his heels as he races down the field. He is trying to lead them all by example. If he pushes himself on a hot day, they will too. He cradles the ball in the head of the long pole and runs down the middle of the field. He's trying his best to be a better leader when he spots Ben running right towards him.

There he is, charging at Patrick, trying to take the ball from him. Patrick feels an overwhelming resentment that Ben is even on his field. Varsity is Patrick's. Ben thinks it's that easy to take it over. He thinks that he can do what took Patrick years to do in one. He has no idea how many injuries Patrick's suffered: sprained ankles and wrists, broken fingers, concussions. The grueling training in the summer he had to go to.

Ben is charging at him. Patrick releases the ball and the momentum of the game, along with everyone's attention, follows it. Ben is still charging forward, though Patrick doesn't have the ball, driven by a force of his own. Patrick, still running, jabs him in the chest with the butt of his long pole. Ben stops abruptly. Patrick continues, running past

him a few more feet, until he feels something hit him from behind. It's Ben. And just like that, they are wrestling in the grass.

"I'm not wearing padding, asshole," Ben says.

Patrick rolls him off and gets up determined to kick Ben's ass.

A whistle blows.

"What the hell is going on here?" Coach says.

"It's not my fault you can't cut it with the big boys." Patrick pushes Ben in the chest. "Wear your padding to practice, moron."

"I said knock it off," Coach says. "Hit the bench, Patrick."

Patrick sits on the bench for the rest of practice. He's always had a hard time controlling his emotions when he feels something is unfair. He overreacts.

Ben shouldn't be on Varsity.

Even out of play, Patrick can't let go of his anger. Patrick is an aggressive player; he can be pretty brutal. Most of the guys are. Men's lacrosse is a full contact sport, anything above the waist. He has permission to do anything within the five meters around the ball, except butt someone in the face with his long pole or attack a player from behind. Even then, those two things are only illegal if the player gets caught. They aren't really supposed to make contact during practice though.

Until recently, Patrick had been able to distinguish the difference between competition and rage. He could use the bad things that made him angry off the field to

fuel him. He was able to channel that aggression constructively and leave it behind him after. He should've checked himself when Ben charged. He should've thought it through.

He had only been in a real fight once. About a month after Patrick's father left, he beat up another student at recess. After weeks of ridicule, the bully, Kurt DiDomenico, tripped him on the stairs leading to the playground. Patrick stumbled, almost recovered, only to fall, hitting his left knee against the last stair and head on the concrete. As he clutched his throbbing knee, Kurt walked over him and headed towards the swings.

Although Patrick was hurting, he was feeling something much more powerful. He'd never felt so humiliated and angry at the same time. He couldn't help but think if his father hadn't left, Kurt wouldn't have dared to pick on him. It was like Kurt could sense there was no one around to defend him. Patrick would have to defend himself. He didn't care if he got in trouble.

Granted, the boy was a bully and the pounding just, as evidenced by the cheers of his equally abused classmates. Still, his mother didn't agree. She simply told him she was disappointed and took him to the emergency clinic. She didn't have to yell. She'd cringed at the bloody sight of Patrick when she'd entered the Principal's office. She listened as the school punishment was doled out, suspension for ten days, and established her own sentence in the car. They would be the ten longest days of his life. She gave him a long list of chores as well as schoolwork the first few days. Patrick remained grounded for a month.

Although she talked to him, other than inspecting his wounds briefly, she didn't really look at him the rest of that first day. It was enough for Patrick to know he'd failed her in some way. Even if it were in defense, fighting wouldn't be tolerated. He had to find another way to deal with his anger.

When Patrick gets on the bus for the away game a week later, he can barely stay seated. There isn't a lot of legroom, and his shoulder pads press uncomfortably against his skin when he tries to lean back. This is Ben's first varsity game. Coach is counting on Patrick to help the team reach the playoffs. He is counting on Patrick to somehow get the team to accept Ben. Patrick's mom isn't coming. He can't remember a time she hasn't been in the bleachers. It's a long drive and the team won't get back until late, but Greg will definitely be there to see his son's first game.

On the field, Patrick can't focus. He is conscious of where most of his players are positioned in a typical game. He can often predict plays. This game, he is distracted. He is constantly looking for Ben, what he's doing, if he's in the right position. Patrick is cradling the ball when two players from the opposing team catch up to him. His legs tangle up with number 14's.

Patrick's stick lowers.

He finally trips and falls. The ball bounces out onto the field, briefly, before the other guy picks it up and runs down the field.

In the third quarter, Patrick throws a wild ball. It bounces off the goal post and rolls towards the out of bounds area. Patrick and the goalie race to keep the ball fair, but it's out on Patrick. This is probably the worst game he's ever played.

Causing more frustration, Ben makes a goal in the beginning of the fourth quarter. Cornered behind the goal post, Vargas looked for an opening. He swung his long pole, sending the ball flying in an arc above the players' heads to Ben almost halfway down the field. Ben immediately found an opening and gunned it into the net from midfield.

When offense comes back onto the field, there's not much time left in the game. Ben is behind the net with the ball. He throws it out to Davy who quickly sends it to midfield in front of the net. Fields, Vargas and Wells have formed a blockade of sorts there. Patrick should be able to cut around and pass the ball to Vargas, already in position to score.

As Patrick makes his charge towards the net, a member of the opposing team pushes him from behind. He falls, loses the ball in play, and probably the game. It's an illegal move. The referee doesn't do anything about it, although it was obviously intentional.

Patrick recovers, turns around and pummels the guy who knocked him down. He manages to yank the guy's mask off before his teammates are able to drag him away. He didn't get enough time to punch him in the face. Patrick is ejected from the game and has to sit on the bus the last few minutes.

The sun was still out when the game started. On the way home, it's dark and all the streetlights are on. It's past ten when Patrick gets home. He showers and goes to bed certain that he'll spend the entire night awake, dreading practice the next day.

That night, Patrick's mom knocks on his bedroom door. She's wearing an old black T-shirt and jeans. The shirt has a white bleach mark in the shape of an island on the sleeve from when Patrick tried to help with the laundry years ago. "Are you okay?" she says.

"Yes."

"Tough game?" She sits down. Greg must have told her.

"Not really," he says.

"What happened, Patrick?"

What happened is that he lost his cool again. He doesn't really want to talk about it though. Greg has probably told her everything she needs to know anyway. She must be disappointed. Her feelings regarding violence are clear. Patrick doesn't see how she could understand what happened because she'd be too concerned with teaching him a lesson. Regardless of the situation, whether Patrick is right or wrong, she will reprimand him for fighting.

Patrick's mother usually knows what's going on in his life. He's used to telling her almost everything, so he's surprised when she doesn't pry more.

"Okay."

It seems like the conversation is over, but she stays seated. Patrick turns onto his side. She gets up and walks to the door then pauses at the threshold and turns back around.

“How are you and Ben getting along?” she says.

He knew it was too easy. He stays on his side, hoping she’ll somehow pretend he fell asleep.

“He deserves a shot to prove himself, doesn’t he?” She waits for a response.

Patrick remains on his side.

“Ben’s your brother,” she says. “I’d like to see you support him in this.”

“Stepbrother.” He sits up. “I don’t see why everyone keeps trying to force him on me.”

“Look, Ben is your brother now.” Her tone is stern. “It’s not easy for anyone, and you’re not making things easier.”

“He’s an idiot,” Patrick says.

She puts her hands on her hips. “I don’t want you leaving without getting to know him.”

“No big loss.”

He’s leaving his mom, and his home, to Ben and Greg. That seems like enough. When Patrick graduates and moves away, the three of them will form this whole new family that Patrick won’t be a part of. He’s actually jealous. Everything already comes easily to Ben and, on top of that, he’s getting everything that belongs to Patrick.

“I would just like you to try.” She walks over and kisses him on the forehead.

“Your father and I will be at your game tomorrow.”

Patrick feels bad for her, trying to bring the three men together when there’s nothing to connect them. Sometimes, Patrick thinks Ben isn’t even that fond of his dad. Still, Ben does anything in his power to please Greg.

“I’ll try,” Patrick says.

He tries to guess the number of lacrosse games his mother will attend in upcoming years to watch Ben play, and how many months it will take for him to feel like a complete outsider when he visits home on holidays. He might not care as much when he returns to find Ben has moved into his larger room. Or the kitchen cabinets have been rearranged. At some point, Patrick will come back to a house that is no longer his home. He won’t know every story behind every scratch, or when the old sofa was replaced. He’ll be like the cousin who visits for the summer, just long enough to learn the layout but never be a part of it.

Before practice, Coach Bittner calls Patrick into his office. He goes straight into his lecture. How immature and irresponsible Patrick had been. What a terrible leader he’s been.

“What were you thinking?” Coach said.

“Nothing.”

Coach Bittner's face is red and he spits when he talks. "That's right. Nothing. Goddamn it. You ran after that guy half-cocked because he pushed you around a little bit? The captain of the goddamn team. Ejected for unsportsmanlike conduct. You could have cost us a spot at the playoffs. What if I needed you out there?"

He didn't need Patrick out there though. The guys were doing fine. Patrick was the one making mistakes.

"There's no room on this team for your ego, Pat. I don't know what's going on with you lately, but you aren't acting like the captain of this team. I shouldn't have to tell you what your role is."

His role is to lead by example, keep the team together.

"If you aren't a team player, captain or not, there's no place for you on my team."

Patrick is better off not saying anything and let Coach vent.

"You're suspended. Two games. Take the time to get your priorities straight."

Two games? Patrick's shoulders tense. His neck petrifies.

This is a crucial time, but Coach wants to send the team into regionals without its captain. Coach is delivering a clear message. Angry displays of emotions are not only unacceptable, but a sign of weakness.

"It's your fault that the team hasn't warmed up to Ben," Coach says. "They are unraveling right before regionals."

Patrick lives and breathes for this game and this is how Coach treats him. Patrick won't get into Syracuse if he's not playing. After all Patrick has done for the team, he's

going to be denied his share of the victory. Granted, Patrick lost control, but Coach didn't even ask for his side of the story. The hard work he's put in should count towards something. Coach has forgotten all about Patrick. He's in the way now. Patrick will leave an important position empty this year, but someone will fill it just as easily as Sam's spot was filled. No. Not just someone. Ben. Coach is grooming a replacement. Regardless of how well Patrick plays in college ball, he always believed he would be missed on *this* team until recently.

When he steps onto the field, Patrick is looking for a fight. He's mad at himself, mad at Coach, his mom for remarrying, and he wants to take it out on someone. No, not *someone*. On Ben. Patrick blames Ben for his problems. Leading the team to a championship is supposed to be Patrick's victory. He's not ready to lose it to his stepbrother. So, when Ben takes one of his usual jabs at Patrick's gut, he doesn't waste any time. Patrick erupts. He swings and lands the head of his stick across Ben's brow line. Patrick meant to hit him that forcefully. He means to punish him because Ben epitomizes everything that is wrong in Patrick's life. Ever since Ben moved into Patrick's house and on his field, Patrick's anger has intensified. The line between competition and rage completely erased.

Ben's head snaps back and his body follows after, completely airborne for a few seconds. The skin above his eye splits open, and Ben is knocked out cold. Patrick kneels next to him, his breath heavy. Blood drips across Ben's eyelid. Patrick pokes his side, trying to wake him with no success. Ben will need to go to the hospital. His teammates

surround the unconscious boy in silence, switching their gazes from him to Patrick. A medic rushes over. Patrick falls back onto the grass feeling dizzy. He digs his thick fingers into the dirt like spikes, painfully aware he's gone too far this time. Ben will need stitches over that eye.

Patrick takes about fifteen or so lacrosse balls with him to school. There, he practices throwing and catching with both hands. He is practicing on his own to keep his skills honed. Coach immediately put Patrick on suspension after giving Ben a concussion last week. Indefinitely. Patrick supposes the punishment is light; anyone else would be off the team. Kicking him off at this point wouldn't have mattered much. The team is out of the playoffs; they were eliminated at regionals when they played without two of their star players. Coach might let him play in the senior game. Patrick won't be going to Syracuse but instead to Tallahassee Community College and play in a league. He may try to walk on a team in the future. He hasn't decided.

Patrick collects the balls and practices shooting on the field from all different angles and distances. He practices shooting on the run and "still" shooting. He changes his speed to work on accuracy. Being on the field is a habit that won't die easily. He'd much rather be out here alone than at home. It's hard to look at Ben every day, stitched up and scowling, as he passes in the hall. Immediately after he'd struck Ben, Patrick felt that familiar onset of guilt. Only this time, it wasn't because he'd disappointed someone

else or surrendered to the weakness within him. He felt genuinely ashamed. He had made Ben bleed.

Patrick went to see him at the hospital. At first, Greg and Ben wouldn't even talk to him, but when Greg left the room Ben finally spoke.

"I can't believe you laid me out. You should've seen my dad." He almost whispered when he spoke and crossed his arms. His face was puffy and red from the injury, and he had stitches across his brow. "I know I've been kind of a jerk, but you don't know my dad." He was crying. He rubbed a hand across his nose roughly.

Patrick pretended not to notice his crying; it was obviously a source of embarrassment for Ben. Patrick would have felt disgraced if his own father had learned about Kurt DiDomenico bullying him around. He could understand how Ben felt. Patrick didn't think he was anything like Kurt, but maybe he was. He had never really considered how difficult this situation might have been for Ben. Coming from a small town, trying to make friends in a school of 4300 kids and, on top of that, somehow make himself seen, recognized, so that his asshole father would take some interest in him.

"When my parents divorced," Ben said. "My mom moved to Tennessee right away and started a new family. My dad's all I've got."

Ben lived and died on his father's opinion. He touched his brow, the skin underneath probably scarred already.

Patrick didn't know how to convey how sorry he was. Ben and he both knew that, whether right or wrong, there were honest and intense feelings that drove Patrick to attack. Patrick couldn't deny that.

"I was mad about the suspension. I shouldn't have taken it out on you," Patrick said.

Ben let out a deep heavy sigh. "I can be pretty intense like my old man, I guess."

Patrick supposed having Greg around wasn't any better than not having a father. Greg's love seemed fairly conditional. Perhaps, that's the reason Ben grew so close to Patrick's mom right away. It was the first time he saw Ben as a person worth knowing.

"Don't worry about your dad," Patrick said. "You'll bounce back."

Ben traced the stitching on his brow, shaped like a half circle. "Think it'll scar?"

"Probably," Patrick said.

"It feels like it will."

"Let's hope it doesn't."

The tension between them might not ever really disappear, just like it was impossible to tell whether the gash over Ben's right eye would scar or heal. Even if it did heal, Patrick knew he would always see the faint contour of the cut when looking at Ben. Patrick would seek the crescent-like mark out to remind him of that moment.

## ROTTING CANES AND SUGAR FIELDS

Isabelle's wedding dress had long sheer lace sleeves, a fitted bodice and a full lace skirt that draped over a mini-pleated underskirt. The lace itched against her skin, and Isabelle wished she'd had the forethought to wear a slip or undergarment. She prepared in front of a cherry-wood, framed mirror that stood in her parent's bedroom.

It was 1968. A decade of turmoil was coming to a close, but, living in Puerto Rico's countryside, the people of Fajardo scraped through without much harm. Perhaps, in a larger city, the effects of the war and American politics were felt more deeply, but Isabelle felt removed from those things in the small coastal town. Still, she was relieved to move on. That May, she'd had her birthday and graduated high school. Only eighteen, she was crossing a threshold into adulthood and leaving her ugly past behind. She smiled at herself in the mirror, exposing a dimple in her right cheek. She had not yet lost her baby fat.

Isabelle's best friend, Maritza, sifted through tissue paper in a box on the bed and pulled out the wedding veil. She helped Isabelle secure it in place with bobby pins. The giant floor fan next to the mirror blew Maritza's long, wispy hair around, and Isabelle wished her own hair were straight. In an era when it was fashionable to have long and lanky straight hair, hers was wavy and thick. She'd tried everything to straighten it, even having Maritza take an iron to it once.

The veil was in place, and they were done.

“Give me a minute, okay?” Isabelle said. They hugged, and Maritza left the room.

Isabelle leaned in close to the mirror and studied her face. Even caked in make up, she could see the pockmarks on her cheeks. She knew where to look. When she was in high school, her flaws made her a target of ridicule. Being the only daughter in a prominent family made her well known throughout the small town. Her father had one of the largest sugarcane fincas in Fajardo. When Isabelle’s mother was alive, she tried her best to shield Isabelle from the whispers and disappointed looks. She chauffeured Isabelle from one doctor appointment to another. With each visit to the dermatologist, nutritionist and optomologist, Isabelle grew more aware of her flaws.

Looking in the mirror on her wedding day, she could still see remnants of what she would’ve liked to consider her past. And, yet, she was not the same person she had been even a year before. Life and death had altered her in ways she wouldn’t fully understand for quite some time.

The wedding reception was held at Papi Querido’s, her grandfather’s, a house located on the highest hill in Fajardo. The family’s sugarcane crop grew just below the slope of the hill and out for miles. From the balcony, the unobstructed view stretched out to Puerto Rico’s nearby east coast line. Isabelle could almost make out their sister island, Vieques, in the horizon it was so clear out. The sun set, casting soft pinks and yellows on the reception. A live Trios band played music where the guests danced on a wooden platform in the back yard. The women’s skirts swayed in the wind as they moved with the men who had abandoned their jackets in a pile on the guest bed. Isabelle’s brother had

too much to drink and passed out by the mango tree after repeatedly telling everyone that his little sister was married. He hugged each person with a mixture of excitement and drunkenness.

Isabelle's husband, Carlos, walked out of the house onto the balcony where she was and put his arms around her waist.

“What were you thinking, Bella?”

She continued looking out in front of her. “I was watching everyone dance.” She looked down at the handrail and then into his honey colored eyes. “I wish Mami could be here.”

Carlos nodded solemnly and kissed her forehead. He let go, walked down the steps towards the Trios band and requested one of her favorite songs, motioning for her to come out as it began. Isabelle forced a smile and slowly walked out to Carlos, sliding her small hand across the wood railing with each paced step.

Most of her family had been there that day. Her mother was the exception, having passed from a stroke six months prior. Only a handful of Carlos' family could attend. Being from Chile, and seeing as the wedding was so rushed, not many people from Carlos' huge family could manage to obtain visiting visas in time. One of his brother's was already there, having traveled with Carlos to Puerto Rico to finish his studies. There were also a few friends he'd made on the island present. Isabelle would visit Chile some time after the wedding and meet his parents and siblings.

Carlos and his brother came to Puerto Rico alone to finish their education. Carlos was twenty-three at the time he met Isabelle. He waved at her while walking down Avenida Baralt with Maritza. When he first walked up to them and introduced himself, Isabelle assumed he wanted to meet Maritza. Men were always stopping or crossing the street to talk to her. But, he was interested in Isabelle and asked her out that day. Isabelle wore a navy blue summer dress with short sleeves and small white flowers scattered, like seashells on a beach, in the blue. She doesn't remember what they talked about, just the way he looked. The way the sun behind her hit him full on the face, causing him to squint his eyes. Handsome and tall with rich, black hair, he was unlike anything she was used to seeing in their small town.

Carlos became Isabelle's second and last boyfriend. Good looking and educated, her family welcomed him. He'd known Isabelle's mother and proposed a few weeks after she died suddenly, and only a couple of months before his visa expired. The government extended his stay three more months because of the impending ceremony.

In 1968, Pope Paul IV wrote the encyclical "Humanae Vitae," condemning the use of artificial means of contraception. And, so, after being married only one month, Isabelle became pregnant.

At nineteen, she had their first son, Jose.

At twenty, she was carrying their second. It was during this time, pregnant and nursing Jose that the rumors began. When Maritza called one day to share what she'd heard, Isabelle couldn't ignore them anymore.

“She was the sister of a friend of a friend,” Maritza said. “Every day after work. I’m so sorry, Mama.”

Carlos worked at El Conquistador Resort, which afforded him the opportunity. Isabelle had to know so she sent Jose to her brother’s house, next door, for the night. Then, she took the yellow station wagon into town and waited until Carlos’ shift was over. She felt guilty for sitting there and hoped she’d end up following Carlos to a local bar for a few drinks and nothing more. Intuition told Isabelle, however, not to leave until she knew for certain.

Sooner than anticipated, Carlos climbed into his pickup truck and drove off. She followed him into the next town over, Luquillo, wondering if he’d spot the yellow Volkswagen on the road. He pulled into the driveway of a house Isabelle had never been to before. A tall, fair-skinned woman opened the door and kissed him at the door’s threshold. The blood rushed to Isabelle’s face. She felt dizzy like the way she did after working in the sugarcane fields too long past the noon sun.

She got out of the car, not knowing exactly what to do or say. She walked up to the house and stood near the giant window in the front façade. Carlos leaned against the counter in the kitchen. Isabelle froze, staring blankly into the house until shapes were all she saw. She felt as if she’d floated outside of herself, into her memories from the past few years, wondering when and where the betrayal had started. Carlos had always been affectionate with her, never giving off signs that his feelings had changed. Isabelle

scrutinized every look, every word, in her head wondering where she'd missed the sign but couldn't find it.

Isabelle refocused. The two figures in the kitchen were gone. Isabelle caught a glimpse of her reflection in the window. Her pregnant stomach was barely covered by the thin cotton top. No, she was not a little girl anymore. And, still, in spite of being a mother and a wife, she thought the girl in the reflection looked very young and lonely.

Sitting at the dinner table that night, her eyes puffy and red, Isabelle asked him where he had been.

“Out with my brother.” He smiled and cut into a pork chop.

Isabelle could not eat, the pork and rice in front of her cold. In an attempt to keep it from trembling, Isabelle clenched her left fist. “Please don't lie.”

“Why would you say that, Bella?” He furrowed his eyebrows; a deep crinkle appeared in his forehead.

“I know where you were,” she said.

“I don't know what you mean? I thought you were home all afternoon?” He kept eating, looking at his plate.

“No,” she said, raising her voice. “I went to Luquillo.” At that point, she released the tears that she had been holding back all afternoon. “I saw you with her.”

Carlos reaction betrayed his previous attempts to remain cool and calm. He rushed over to her side of the table. Soft and quick, he spoke all in one breath. “It was a mistake, I'm so sorry; I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm so sorry.”

“How long has it been going on?” She tried to read his expression and determine if he was sincere, but his face was scrunched up, his eyes shaped like two frowning slits.

“A few weeks.”

“Do you want to be with her?”

“It’s impossible; she’s married.”

“So are you.”

“Listen, look at me. I’m sorry. I love you.”

Carlos hadn’t answered the question. “But, if not, you would?”

“No. I’m ending it. I promise, Bella. It’s over.” He took her trembling hands and kissed them feverishly, then he kissed her cheeks and forehead. Isabelle sat, slumped in a haze, not knowing what to do.

That night he slept on the couch. He hadn’t said he didn’t want to be with the other girl, only that it was impossible. He may have left if family didn’t tie him down. Isabelle was angry and scared to lose him at the same time. Carlos made her feel like the outcast she’d been growing up and she had been trying so hard to erase. Marrying him had brought with it the promise of a new life. He had failed that promise, and she hated him for that.

Isabelle kicked the covers off her clammy skin. She pulled her hair back with a checkered silk scarf and washed her face in the bathroom sink. Blotting her left cheek with the olive green towel, Isabelle knew she didn’t need him to remind her of who she was. The scars left by her dermatologist would never go away. The bumps themselves

had been viral infections, small swollen mounds scattered across her pale cheek.

Isabelle's parents meant well by taking her to the dermatologist who treated each bump by trying to expel the trapped liquid matter. With a tiny needle, he popped each one in a painful and disfiguring procedure. Isabelle's face was not completely mutilated, she knew that, but tiny scars populated her cheek. At fifteen, the scarring was another in a long list of things she hated about herself.

Early the next morning, Isabelle went to her father's hacienda by the sugarcane field. Zafra had started, however, and he'd left early that morning to harvest the crop. She headed toward the fields. As a little girl, she worked some days in the field bringing water to the men. The workers filled used tin Saltine cracker boxes with water. Next to the big square box, a cup hung from a branch driven into the ground. Sometimes the men would bring cups carved out of coconut halves that they stored in a back pocket of their pants.

As payment, her father would cut a stalk in half, shaving it down to its sweet straw-like middle. Isabelle chewed and sucked on the cane, extracting sweetness, the sugary liquid dripping down her chubby chin.

Isabelle followed the unpaved road along the field listening for voices. The sugarcane stalks grew taller than most men and thicker than a shower rod. The white flowers that grew at the peak were chopped off by the farmer's long sharp machete first. Then, the leaves, which were thin and narrowed to a fine point. The skin of a leaf was

fuzzy and itchy. Isabelle would not walk into the jungle whose blades could cut her bare skin. When she heard voices, she called out to her father.

He stepped out of the field holding a machete and a garrabato in his right hand, made from a guava tree and in the shape of a reaper's tool. All the men used garrabato's, snapped from a nearby tree, and fashioned with a hook at the end to pull the flexible stalk back and cut it at the root. Isabelle's father was an impressive figure, almost as tall as the sugarcane, at six feet tall.

"Mija, que tu haces aqui?" he said.

"Something's happened," she said.

He must have known it was important, for her to come down to the fields during harvest. "Let's have a drink."

They walked to a nearby tree and sat in its shade. He grabbed the drinking cup and filled it, offering her the first sip, which she declined. The long sleeve shirt, he wore for protection from the sun and the sharp leaves, was drenched in sweat. The workers would need the water more.

"Carlos has been cheating on me," she said.

"Ay, Mija. I'm sorry."

"Should I forgive him?"

"You have to forgive, Isabelle."

"I don't know if I can."

He looked down at his feet. The straw hat he wore cast shadows across his face.

“He is wrong to do this to you. But you have a family. Piensa en los niños.”

She did think about her children. By that line of reasoning Isabelle needed to forgive Carlos’ infidelity simply because they had children. Isabelle had expected a little bit more compassion from her father. Perhaps, more anger on his part.

“What if I can’t, Papi?”

“You have to try to forgive. If he wants to change, you have to give him a chance.”

Isabelle had chosen Carlos as her husband, and, if he wanted to stay in the marriage, she supposed her father was right and she had to give Carlos the opportunity to make amends. It was true that Isabelle didn’t want the dissolution of their marriage on her conscience, but pushing all of that anger aside seemed impossible. It seemed an unjust request.

“I don’t know how to forgive him,” she said.

“Go see Padre Ramirez so he can help you,” he said. “You’ll see how often this happens.”

Isabelle faintly recalled a similar situation between her parents when she was just a girl. The exact details remained just out of her reach, but a hazy impression of closed doors and muted, stony- faced conversations remained. For a while, her mother cried often at seemingly nothing. One day, it was forgotten. Isabelle wished her mother were around to explain how she managed to forgive.

Isabelle met with Padre Ramirez who confirmed that infidelity happened in many marriages. He asked her to think of her kids and the Lord's word. Catholicism didn't allow divorce. Marriage was for life. Isabelle respected the priest, and she knew he was right in saying that she had to really forgive in order to heal.

It was one indiscretion. Isabelle was made to realize she was not completely faultless.

Isabelle had found it difficult to deal with becoming pregnant right away. She took her frustrations with child rearing out on Carlos because it was the only direction she could vent. He never took responsibility for Jose, avoided helping in any way to maintain their home life. The stress of being the primary caretaker made her cranky and argumentative. Isabelle could accept culpability too. Arguing and screaming was no way to treat a husband.

Although she was young and inexperienced, she thought she could change. If Carlos tried, she could learn to forgive. Over time, she did. She fought off the urge to throw what he did in his face every time they fought. Not that she didn't think about it. She did. Often. But she didn't act on those emotions. It was hard work.

Her father taught her not to shy away from hard work. He was a wealthy farmer, but a farmer nonetheless, meaning he performed difficult manual labor for most of his life. Every year, during Zafra, he would leave around three in the morning, picking up the men on his way to the fields. The first thing they had to do was clean the stalks before cutting. Cane was flung onto the ox pulled carts made of wooden planks. The sides of the

carts were tall, created to hold a large amount. The carts full, the men walked the unpaved path alongside to the Centrale Azucadera de Fajardo for refining. The men never rode the carts; they held long tree branches they'd stick the oxen with to keep the animals in line. After all the crops were harvested, they set fire to the fields and burnt the scraps to ash. The men prepared the soil and replanted for Zafra, the next January. Year after year, they repeated this backbreaking work.

That method of farming was dying. Neighboring haciendas accepted the change quicker. The chopper harvester cut cane at the base of the stalk, separated it from its leaves and piled it on the truck minimizing the workload. All the while, the machine blew the cut leaves back onto the field. Choppers harvested over a 100 tons of cane in an hour. Isabelle's father refused to use it; the machine damaged the crop. As soon as it was cut, the cane started losing its sugar content. The machine made harvesting quicker but sacrificed quality.

It became harder to find men willing to do the manual labor. Isabelle's father had to burn the fields first to get rid of the leaves without harming the stalk. An entire field could go up in flames in an instant and required vigilance. Baguesse, the substance that remained after refining, was highly combustible. In fact, mills often used baguesse as fuel in the factories. It was a dangerous practice that forced Isabelle's family to move the fields far from the home.

Isabelle had seen the flames of a sugarcane fire close to her home once. It threatened to envelope the entire building. In the middle of the night, her mother woke

Isabelle and her brother. Two packed bags waited by the door. The field was an inferno of burning sugar, the flames cracking and popping. Hot air filled the area. Her father and the men fought to put it out and breath. Their faces were covered in soot. Isabelle's father stayed while the rest of her family was driven to a nearby hacienda. Isabelle thought they'd lose the house and maybe her father. The prospect was overwhelming to a little girl. She realized she had a lot to lose, and she was helpless.

It's hard for Isabelle to forget that fear. She knew her father hadn't either, and he understood the risks he was taking by burning the fields first. But, it made the process quicker without damaging the harvest, and they needed to cut labor somehow. It seemed the more work they put in, the more time they spent cleaning and cutting, the less crop they produced. In comparison to the surrounding fincas, they couldn't keep up. They put in the most work but received the least in return.

Isabelle felt the same way. At first, Carlos was willing to do anything. He quit El Conquistador and worked in the fields. After a few years, Isabelle's father sold the finca and got Carlos a job with a friend who owned the Ferreteria Pasca, a hardware store in Fajardo. Isabelle's life revolved around her children and the home. Carlos moved his way up at the Ferreteria until he was asked to join the owner, a man notoriously unfaithful to his wife, on business trips. The owner's wife was known for her candor, confronting many of his mistresses to assure them she was not going anywhere. To Isabelle, it seemed like little consolation. But, the woman had found some kind of satisfaction in reasserting her position.

Isabelle could not imagine living in a marriage where her husband was openly unfaithful. Isabelle didn't like associating with either of them and worried about the amount of time Carlos spent with the owner. Carlos was weak and he spent a lot of time working. Isabelle wasn't blind to the danger or his faults. She chose to ignore them.

The boys are now six and seven. The younger one's name is Antonio. Isabelle's long hair brushes against the small of her back as she walks. She is slim and tan. She is the prettiest she has ever been. Memories of her former self are distant, fading. It's a Sunday, and she prepares to take the boys to the beach. It's one of her favorite things to do, but she has to prepare before she lets them know or they'll want to leave right away.

She shaves her legs while sitting on the edge of the porcelain tub. She ties a black scarf like a hair band around her head to match the black one piece she wears. She pulls on a long, white flowing skirt. She's already packed sandwiches in the cooler, a blanket, some towels and sunscreen in the car, while the boys lurk around the living room.

Finally, she opens the bedroom door and says, "Well? Go get your bathing suits on, come on. Let's get to the beach early."

The two young boys set off, running to their rooms, stripping their shirts off in the living room and tripping over their shorts as they try to pull them off and run at the same time. They go almost every Sunday now. Only her and the boys, Carlos is now managing at the Ferreteria Pasca.

Isabelle sits on her blanket at Luquillo Beach watching the boys play-wrestle and swim in the ocean. The sun is very bright. She takes off her sunglasses and closes her eyes for a second to let the heat soak into her cheeks. She can see her eyelids lit a cherry red by the sun's rays. She opens them again; her boys play in the same place still. A breeze sways the palm tree fronds and lifts up the corners of her blanket. The beach setting gives her comfort.

Recently, Carlos' father has fallen ill, very ill, bringing back memories of her mother's death. Carlos talks about going home all the time now. The night before, the married couple laid in bed. His arms were wrapped around her. Their skin, sun kissed and bare against one another.

"I think I should go," he said.

The idea of him leaving scared her. She knew it was an irrational fear. Still, she hadn't been alone in eight years. "You should go," she said, finally. "I'll talk to Papi and see if he can help with a plane ticket to Chile. So, you, at least could go."

That night, Isabelle had a dream about her mother's death, remembering it like she was there again. She was back in the hospital room where emphysema had sent her mother after years of smoking. The walls and the machines were hidden in darkness, unseen specters Isabelle knew were there. The young girl sat next to her mother's bed in the private hospital room listening to the hum of the machinery helping her mother breathe. She had been conscious but groggy. She had told Isabelle that it felt like breathing through a straw, and Isabelle cried for her mother all that night.

Isabelle wakes still crying, remembering how she had sat with her mother a long time waiting for the episode to end, when they could return home. But, that never happened. Her mother took one deep breath and fell asleep. Isabelle naively thanked god, relieved at first, that her mother was getting some sleep.

The next Sunday, while preparing for the beach, Isabelle receives a phone call from Maritza.

“Are you on your way over? I don’t know how much longer I can keep these kids waiting,” Isabelle says.

“Isabelle, I’ve got to tell you something. It’s about Carlos.”

Isabelle tenses. “Is he okay? Is he hurt?” She asks, already understanding the nature of the call.

“No, Mama. I heard some stuff about him. I don’t know how true it is or anything but, you know. You should know what he’s up to.”

“Who is she?” Isabelle says.

“Eliana Duval.

“I know her family. They’re good people.”

“I don’t know for sure. But I hear he’s been telling her stuff, like he’s going to be with her. I don’t know the specifics.” Martiza trails off.

“It’s okay, Maritza.”

Isabelle knows it's true. She doesn't need verification this time, never having understood why Carlos liked her. His former girlfriends were Isabelle's complete antithesis, beautiful and slender with soft features. Isabelle had seen photos when they visited his home in Chile. They were pictures of his childhood. Until then, Isabelle was not aware of just how different she was from his past loves.

Isabelle's first boyfriend, though short-lived, was also very different from Carlos too. They were friends first, having built up a trust. In comparison, being friends first seems better. Isabelle has come to the conclusion that it is impossible to really see a person for who they are during the infatuation phase. She fell for Carlos when they were still strangers.

That night, she asks him where he was. "Don't lie to me," she says.

He stops and looks at her, and she knows he's cheating again. Before she can ask again, before she can yell and scream and cry, as all the anger and hurt builds up and is ready to crash like a wave on the shore, against her and him, he says, "I don't love you anymore."

Her knees buckle momentarily. Her anger is replaced with shock.

"Not for a long time now," he says.

She's left reevaluating their life again. This time, the signs are all there. Moments of true kindness and affection between them were few. "We have a family and responsibilities." She presses on out of habit, by now versed in the art of compromise.

"I don't know what to say. I want a divorce."

“To marry this girl? You’re in love with her?”

“No.”

“And the kids?”

“I can take Antonio,” he says.

“There’s no way you’re taking either of them. You’re the one leaving. You are.”

She points accusingly. She would never let him take either of them. They would remain a family. Trembling, she sits back in a chair. Carlos walks over but doesn’t seem to know where to touch her. He puts a hand on her head and pats it, then walks out the door. After all her sacrificing, he’s rejected her again.

He stays for a month while they prepare the divorce papers and make arrangements. Her father buys him that flight to Chile he wanted. All the while, stories about his indiscretions surface. One after another, cutting through Isabelle as sharp as sugarcane leaves. The life she buried herself in, clung to, since her mother’s death is disintegrating. When her mother died, Isabelle looked around her and grabbed onto whoever was around. Suddenly, she is alone again but with two young boys relying on her. This is not how she wanted her life to turn out. Her worst fear realized. She should have known she was prolonging the inevitable when she forgave Carlos years ago.

She was weak, having little else to hang onto then. Isabelle convinced herself to forgive because she felt she needed to try, for her conscience’s sake. But also, more importantly, because she was afraid of this day. His leaving her. Isabelle was desperate to

feel wanted again. There was an opportunity to recover then. She hadn't completely lost him; he had said he wanted forgiveness.

She remembers telling her father about Carlos' infidelity while sitting under the guava tree of the old finca and her father's insistence to forgive. He'd said she had to give Carlos a second chance if he wanted to change, not if he committed to changing or promised. It dawned on Isabelle that her father might have doubted her chances of finding someone else.

A centipede had crawled onto his shoe. The hem of his pants was tucked into his sock to protect him from such dangers. He let it crawl onto the machete and shook it to the ground where he cut the squirming bug in half. The action seemed so matter of fact, like his advice. As if he had no choice but to cut the venomous bug in half even though it posed no real danger, and Isabelle had no other recourse but to forgive. Her father thought Carlos was Isabelle's one chance at happiness. She saw it in his face, in the urgency behind his cool counsel.

Now, something has changed. The years have altered everyone, including her. Not even the sugarcane field remains the same. Her insecurity had led her to those conclusions. Isabelle's father hadn't meant she didn't have options. He just knew his daughter was not prepared to go it alone.

The stories blur into one huge lie that Isabelle learns to accept as truth. The girl, Eliana, is what keeps her up at night. Carlos continues to see her, even though he intends to leave. Although his belongings are still at their house, Carlos sleeps there less and less.

In the middle of the night, Isabelle's hand will forgetfully wander to the other side of the bed and find it empty. Touching nothing but the sheets, she remembers everything and gets up to see if he is sleeping on the couch again.

Isabelle imagines this woman, a siren hell bent on destroying her marriage, a beauty queen like his past conquests. Curiosity consumes Isabelle, and she decides she has to see Eliana, not knowing what to say and, at the same time, having so much to say.

Isabelle parks her station wagon in the driveway of the house. She opens the porch screen door and knocks on Eliana's door. She holds her breath. The door opens and there stands a young, pudgy girl with intensely tight curly hair. Isabelle is taken back by how young the girl looks. The girl's face is blank, perhaps from fear.

“Are you Eliana Duval?”

“Yes,” the girl says.

“Do you know who I am?”

The girl nods. Isabelle feels an overwhelming sense of pity for Eliana, in spite of her role. Isabelle has nothing to prove.

“Can we talk?” She motions to the patio furniture. She sits down in a chair, and the girl sits on a bench. They are both quiet. The girl fidgets with a string coming loose on one of the buttons of her dress.

Isabelle feels foolish for showing up here. She doesn't want Carlos or to cling to the life she had. Not now. She isn't willing to live that way again. Isabelle cannot forgive again, and she realizes she's relieved no one has asked her to try. During the first

betrayal, she was thankful he still wanted forgiveness because Isabelle understood Carlos had a connection with the girl. There was a real chance he could have wanted to leave. After all, he only stopped because Isabelle found out.

“I thought you should know,” Isabelle says. “He’s leaving this week. Alone. I’m not sure what he’s told you. And you seem like a nice girl. Whatever he’s promised you. He won’t follow through.”

The girl stays silent for a moment. “He’s leaving?” she asks, her voice quivering. “He said he’d take me with him.”

The scene seems so familiar.

“He’s booked a flight for Tuesday. One ticket. This man doesn’t care about anyone, not you or me or his kids.”

The girl’s sorrow overtakes any sense of propriety. She sobs. Between outbursts she says, “He told me he was going to ask for a divorce.”

“Well, he did.” Isabelle takes a tissue out of her purse and hands it to Eliana. She rests her hand on the girl’s knee. “I’m sorry,” she says and means it.

Isabelle will be free of Carlos one day soon, but she suspects that Eliana has a long road ahead of her. Isabelle has earned a second chance over the past eight years.

Each paced step she takes down the porch stairs leads her back to an old life newly made unfamiliar. Pulling out of the driveway, she watches the girl still sitting on the bench crying. Isabelle expels a deep breath she’s held in for years, as the image of that lonely girl shrinks in the rearview mirror.

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