

SUNSET VIEW

by

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ABSTRACT

Sunset View is a linked collection of short fiction that explores the dynamics of dysfunctional families. Characters in this collection have been affected by the neglect, absence, or death of their family members and friends. They search for recognition and love as they try to find their place in life. Some turn to animals or fleeting relationships to fill this void. Others attempt suicide or simply disappear.

The characters are in denial, unsure how to deal with grief, and often make decisions that alienate them from the friends and family they do have. Set in northeast Tennessee and named after a local trailer park, the collection creates a portrait of Candace Annette, a young woman who struggles to come of age and distance herself from the only life she's ever known.

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CLOUDS IN THE SKY

Aunt Maggie removed her shorts and tee shirt. She pulled her curly, red hair into a ponytail with a pink scrunchy, highlighting her deep widow's peak. She was two, maybe three hundred pounds, like *The Little Mermaid's* Ursula, with puffy arms and shoulders. Flabs of puckered skin hung down, covering the opening between her legs.

I remember thinking there was nothing wrong with her changing in front of me, yet it felt wrong anyhow. I was still young enough, at seven, that I remembered bathing with my own mother, so I wasn't unfamiliar with the female form, but I still looked away. Aunt Maggie's body was so different from my mother's, from my own.

She pulled a gray nightgown from the chipped, particleboard dresser by her side and slipped it on without underwear. The room behind her was mostly bare with thinning carpet, the bed a jumbled nest of blankets and pillows. A crochet hook and partially assembled granny square afghan lay across the nightstand.

"It's your fault he walked in on you, Candace," she said. "He did it to teach you a lesson." Her voice was soft even as she spoke with authority, and the cheap plastic glasses she wore magnified her pale blue eyes.

I wasn't sure what I'd done wrong. My uncle had walked into the bathroom without knocking first. The door didn't have a knob, only an empty round hole and a latch I couldn't reach.

I don't know what he was trying to teach me, but I know the lesson I learned that weekend: never trust men, not even those you call family.

"It was your fault," she repeated as she dug through the dresser for a pair of socks.

I didn't know where to look, and my eyes kept darting between our feet. Yellow half-moons decorated the tips of her toenails. Dirt ringed my ankles. My hands were in fists at my waist, and I curled my toes under my feet to match.

"Someone's in here," I'd yelled. I sat on the toilet, pink shorts around my ankles, and I leaned forward, hugging my legs until I could almost pretend I was a hermit crab. He could see my arms, nothing else. My dirty blond hair tickled my knees. I looked to see if he'd gone, and his brown eyes met mine. The light reflected from Uncle Stan's bald spot like the white linoleum of the floor as he backed out, his head down.

He told my aunt to tell me to be more careful next time, to be more aware of others.

"You need to apologize to your uncle," she said. "He feels uncomfortable now."

Uncle Stan wasn't used to having a little girl around. My brother and I had only stayed over a few times at this point, once a month when my mother worked the weekend night shift, the times my grandmother wasn't available. Grandma worked a booth at the flea market every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday during warm weather, a booth filled with a labyrinth of TVs and miscellaneous items picked off the side of streets, dug from dumpsters, or left at the back of department stores. Grandma had taken Jonathan and me along one weekend, but we upset Uncle Vernon by asking too many questions. He had cussed, spit flying from his mustache, and Mama didn't think it was a good idea for us to go back. She didn't trust her brother not to be violent.

I knew not to protest about the apology. At their house, I followed their rules. That's how it was back then, and Mama expected us to listen to whoever was left in charge. Aunt Maggie led the way into the small den at the front of the house where Uncle Stan sat at his computer desk.

"Candace has something to say to you, Stan," Aunt Maggie said. She stood behind me, blocking the doorway, and nudged me forward.

Uncle Stan spun around and his swivel chair let out a low groan as he moved, the flat, gray seat bowing beneath his weight. He was leaner than my aunt, his arm muscles more defined, but his stomach sagged over the waistband of his maroon sweatpants. His big, round head made me think of a bowling ball, the hair clinging to the back of his skull, a horseshoe.

I chewed on the side of my lip and mumbled an apology as I looked at the computer screen to his game of spider solitaire. I didn't want to be near him. He smelled like sweat and Irish Spring soap, and I felt sick.

"You know, I'd believe you more if you looked at me." He tilted my chin up with his hand. I tried not to flinch.

"I'm sorry," I said, looking at the small hairs on his left earlobe.

"You can do better than that," Aunt Maggie said. "Use the formula." She pointed to a poster on a wall behind Uncle Stan, where she'd written how to give an apology in large block letters with a permanent, black marker. This poster had something to do with my cousin's homeschooling, but I'd never seen her teach him anything when we were over, even though she'd tacked hand-printed awards to the wall that honored his reading and science abilities. She often told Jonathan and me how much smarter Donnie was than us.

Uncle Stan grinned. Most of his teeth were spotted yellow and chalky, and I would think of him as I brushed three times a day when I wore braces as a teenager.

"I'm sorry for," I read off the poster, finishing each sentence, "not letting you know I was in the bathroom. This was wrong because I didn't think about others. In the future, I will find a way to lock the door, or," I looked to Aunt Maggie, "I will tell you before I go in. Will you forgive me?" It felt weird to recite an apology this way, like I was filling in blanks using words that echoed off the walls with no clear meaning.

"Please." My aunt raised her eyebrows.

"Please," I said.

I know now I should have been the one to get an apology, and I sensed it then on some level. I had never felt comfortable around Uncle Stan, because he was so often aloof—he was on his computer or at work or sleeping, and Aunt Maggie encouraged us children never to upset him, never to act out or wake him up early, or we would be punished.

"Now, give your uncle a kiss good night," Aunt Maggie said.

I could tell from her expression that there was no way I could get out of it, so I pecked my mouth against his scraggly cheek and ran off, yelling goodnight. She sighed behind me, and Uncle Stan said something to her, but I didn't hear what. In some way, maybe they thought they were preparing me to be a proper young lady and not the wild little tree-climber who ran around with the boys, barefoot and dirty.

I lay next to my brother on the extra twin mattress Uncle Stan had put on the floor of my cousin Donnie's room. He had already told the boys to go to bed. Aunt Maggie came in to turn off the light, but she didn't read us a story or tuck us in. She wasn't that type of aunt.

"Where were you?" Jonathan whispered, his back to me.

"I had to apologize to Stan," I said. The windowless room was so dark I imagined we were in the deepest, coldest pit of the ocean.

Jonathan scooted closer and placed his feet against mine, our soles together.

#

Mama knew we didn't like going to my aunt's house, so she took us to get Happy Meals before dropping us off that weekend. My brother and I ate in the back seat. We compared the

length of our French fries while Mama drove past the Lay's potato chip factory. The smell of frying potatoes and grease made me hungrier, and I thought the ocean might smell salty like that.

The ocean, the moon's affect on the tides, fascinated me, and I felt drawn to water. I dreamt of being a marine biologist, a dream that even then had roots in wanting to get out of our land-locked state. I had borrowed library books on sea creatures and marine life and begged Mama to take us to the aquarium in Gatlinburg, but we couldn't afford it.

My aunt and uncle lived in an old, white farmhouse with two stories, except that the top floor was blocked off. Large sheets of plastic covered the windows and hung in front of the staircase. I never knew why. I assume it must have been to conserve on heating and cooling bills. Aunt Maggie liked to tell me ghosts lived upstairs, but I didn't believe her stories. She laughed too much in the telling.

Mismatched folding lounge chairs sat discarded on the concrete porch. Right before we parked in the gravel driveway, I poured the last of my grape soda out the window. I felt sick to my stomach at the thought of my mother leaving us. Streams of sticky, purple liquid splashed across the back of the car like swirling tentacles. I knew it would make Mama mad. But I didn't care what happened. Jonathan laughed and pointed at me, mouthing that I was going to get in trouble. I ignored him.

She sighed when she saw the soda on her car and swatted the back of my leg. It didn't hurt. I rubbed the spot on my thigh as I followed her onto the porch, and I wished I'd drunk less of the soda than I had, because I already needed to use the bathroom.

#

The first fat raindrops fell down as I stuck my feet through the center of the tire swing where Donnie, Jonathan, and I had been playing for most of the morning. A braided yellow rope

lashed the old Goodyear to the largest branch on the oak tree by the front porch. Summer heat made the scent of rubber stick to my hands, and I breathed in the smell of tar.

Aunt Maggie sat on the front porch in a sagging lounge chair with a tabloid magazine still not open. I thought she'd fallen asleep.

"Hurry up, Donnie!" she yelled and stood up.

The raindrops grew more frequent as they entered the house, and I followed Jonathan onto the porch.

Their shower had stopped working—I'm not sure if it was ever fixed while they lived there—so they'd been "showering" any time it rained that summer. They paid a neighbor who lived miles down the road to let them fill up old plastic milk jugs with water from the hose. They were like soldier crabs keeping water in their shells.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of an animal in the high grasses bordering the front yard. The small brown bushy thing waddled, exposing a thick, dark tail, and I thought for sure it was a beaver, though I'd never seen one outside of a book or cartoon. I mostly saw the back end as it scurried away, and I wondered if there was a river nearby somewhere. Maybe we could play there and catch crawfish when the rain stopped.

"Did you see it?" I asked Jonathan.

"See what?" He looked up from Aunt Maggie's discarded magazine. He'd grabbed it and lay on his stomach in her empty chair flipping through the glossy pages. His wavy brown hair hung over his forehead, and he kept pushing his bangs out of his eyes to read.

"There was a beaver." I pointed to the grass.

"No, there wasn't. You probably saw a rat or something." He looked back down and lifted his feet into the air over his backside.

"I didn't see no rat," I said and frowned.

Aunt Maggie and Donnie came back outside in their bathing suits: a blue one-piece and black-and-white checkered swimming trunks. She dropped a handful of towels on the edge of the porch. Then she walked into the yard without shoes. Donnie ran around her in circles, his arms spread out like he was a toddler pretending to be an airplane. He was two years older than me and a year younger than Jonathan. I don't know why he acted younger at times, but I suspect he wasn't socialized enough. Once they were wet, Aunt Maggie pulled a shampoo bottle from the pile. They washed their hair quickly and soaped their bodies, swimsuits and all. It took them less than ten minutes from start to finish.

When I remember their method of showering, I think of the stories my mother told me about her father. When he wasn't drinking and lying around the house, Grandpa worked as a brick mason. He'd come home from a job site covered in pink brick dust, the powder coating his dark hair and eyebrows, a fine layer on top of his clothes. This was when they lived in New York, before most of the family had migrated south to Tennessee. Mama had shown me photos of a grocery store my grandfather helped build near their hometown. Gramma wouldn't let him enter the house like that. So, one day, he'd come home with an extra hose and a truck-bed full of two-by-fours, and he rigged an outdoor shower right at the edge of their house.

My family knew how to make do.

#

The summer shower lasted about half an hour and the sun returned, but before we could run back to the tire swing, Uncle Stan came out on the porch wearing his bathing suit: a bare, hairy chest and green swim trunks.

"We're going to a cook out," he said. "Get in the car."

This was news to me, but I was excited to go somewhere else. I climbed into the beige station wagon with the boys where stiff cigarette burns dotted the backseat, and the dash was cracked and dusty. Donnie and Jonathan kept leaning over me to pinch each other. We knew the first to cry out would get in trouble. It was a game they liked to play with me.

"They have a big pool," Aunt Maggie said. "You'll have fun."

"We didn't bring bathing suits," I said. And we didn't have our life jackets. Mama wasn't going to like this. We always wore them when she took us to Boone Lake.

"She can swim in her underwear," Uncle Stan said to Aunt Maggie. "She doesn't have any reason to cover up anyway. She looks like a boy. "

"Next time, have your mother leave a suit for you at my house," Aunt Maggie said, turning to look at me. She let her gaze linger on the boys whose arms were pockmarked with red half-circles.

They quit pinching each other and stared as we passed field after field of spotted cows. The wind blew through the cracked window like someone crying, and I practiced my whistling.

#

No one bothered with sunscreen that day. When we got to the party and took the stairs to the deck around the aboveground five-foot deep pool, Jonathan quickly stripped down to his boxers and jumped in the pool with Donnie. Jonathan had left his clothes and our towel in a pile on one of the plastic chairs on the deck. I walked around the pool as he and Donnie fought over an alligator float, splashing and knocking each other under the water.

"Get in!" Jonathan said, his feet pushing Donnie's head away.

If I didn't jump in, he'd likely pull me in anyway. I undressed, folded my tee shirt and shorts, set them off to the side, and climbed down the ladder. There were a few people there

when we first arrived, and I doubt they were paying attention to me. Swimming without my shirt feels more wrong now than I could have known then. My plain white panties were practically see-through when wet. Mama had dozens of photos of Jonathan and me playing around the house or outdoors dressed in nothing but our underwear. I thought nothing of taking my shirt off. It was a different time back then.

The water was warm from the sun. I stayed under as much as possible, my nose and eyes peeking above the surface, like the shy turtles I'd seen at Steele Creek Park who dipped back under any time someone walked by. If I had a hard shell, I'd have somewhere cool to retreat, away from the noise of the party. The pool didn't have a shallow end, and I stayed by the edge as I moved around, one hand always on the plastic liner.

Uncle Stan took turns carrying us on his back as he swam underwater. He insisted I go first, since I was a girl. The chlorine burned my open eyes as we sped down the length of the pool like dolphins, sun shimmering on the blue bottom, my hands around his neck. The boys squeaked with laughter above us, creating an underwater song. The thick, black hair on Uncle Stan's back and chest contradicted my image of sleek, gray flippers. I wished we could leap into a single arc, creating a shadow on the surface. Instead, I held on as he swam to the opposite end. I thought my lungs might crack open and let the whole pool inside if he didn't come up soon enough. When he played with us like this, he was a different person, not the uncle I distrusted.

After our dolphin tour, Uncle Stan catapulted Donnie and Jonathan into the other end, one after the other after the other. The boys practiced their cannonballs, including Uncle Stan when he wasn't tossing them in. He'd push himself up onto the deck and make a big show of running up to the edge before jumping in, his stomach bouncing with each step. There wasn't a

diving board, but he still managed to land toward the center of the rectangular pool. He smacked against the surface, showering anyone within his radius.

Aunt Maggie didn't swim at all, and I suspect that she didn't know how. She said she wanted to keep her hair clean. She had sat by the side with her feet in the water until Uncle Stan started throwing the boys into the water.

"You'll splash me," she said, pushing up her dark red sunglasses and moved to a deck chair by the railing. I giggled, splashing my brother, and we left her alone to sunbathe. Later that afternoon her skin would darken to a dry red.

None of the other guests brought children, except for one couple with a baby who sat in a plastic inflatable the entire time it was in the water, which wasn't long. He wore a too-big yellow hat, and his parents had slathered on so much sunblock the grease was visible on the water.

The other men grilled hamburgers and hotdogs on a red charcoal grill set on the largest section of deck. They sipped beers from bottles in cozies. Uncle Stan, tired of playing, stayed in a corner of the pool with his arms up around the edge. My brother and I practiced our underwater flips. I pinched my nose and went sideways each time I tried to flip backward, no matter how Jonathan tried to direct me. Donnie dived to the bottom to hold his breath while Uncle Stan counted. Some birds can hold their breath for four or five minutes while they hunt for fish below the surface, but they have to dry their wings before they can soar into flight again. Donnie never lasted more than a few seconds.

"Come on. Your lips are turning blue, and you need to eat," Aunt Maggie said, gesturing for us to get out.

Uncle Stan and Aunt Maggie had brought a couple of two-liters of store-brand cola to the party, but that was it. Knowing her, she had probably wanted us to take advantage of the free

food there, so we wouldn't want to eat at her house again later. The swim had me ravenous, and my stomach growled as I climbed up the silver ladder. Hugging my arms around myself, I looked around for my towel, the one Aunt Maggie had packed for Jonathan and me to share. I zigzagged around the people on the deck: men and women with drinks in plastic cups and paper plates full of hamburgers and macaroni salad and corn on the cob. I passed the grill, a pile of flattened pool toys, and one lady reading a book off to the side, not talking to anyone. I knew where Jonathan had left the towel, but it wasn't there.

He climbed out after me and stood dripping on the deck. He looked just as confused as I was about the towel, and he shook himself like a dog, his hair in starfish points, until Aunt Maggie told him to stop. On the other side of the pool deck, I spotted a skinny lady wearing burgundy terrycloth wrapped around her swimsuit.

"I think she has our towel," I said to Aunt Maggie, who was sitting on the edge of her chair, putting her sandals on.

Goose bumps popped up on my arms and legs. Before Aunt Maggie could respond, a guy knocked the lady into the pool, wrap and all. The adults laughed, some cheering and clapping their hands. She was soaking wet and coughing when she climbed up the ladder and pulled off the sopping fabric.

Aunt Maggie shrugged her shoulders, stood, and went to get another cup of soda. I put on my shirt and shorts over my wet underwear. This was the closest equivalent to a shell I could fashion.

The boys still hadn't dressed when we fixed our plates of food. We sat to eat with our backs against the wooden railing of the deck, wet hair stuck to our faces.

The wet lady passed by on her way to the food table, still carrying the towel. She had on a pink bikini that barely covered her boobs.

"You took our towel," I said. She stopped walking and looked at us. She was in her early twenties and smelled like tanning oil. Water dripped from her blond ponytail.

"Bless your heart," she said. "You're almost as wet as I am."

I blushed, and she laughed.

"Stan told me to use it," she said. She hung it over the deck behind the food table and busied herself with scooping messy chunks of potato salad onto her plate.

I still had half a hamburger left to eat when Uncle Stan said it was time to go. I took one more bite, filling my mouth, before I threw away my paper plate. I picked up my shoes and our wet wrap, and followed Aunt Maggie and Uncle Stan down the stairs from the pool deck and over to the car. It was cold in the shade. There were drops of water on my legs and knees, and I could feel my wet hair making a dark circle on the back of my tee shirt. I shivered.

I didn't understand why Uncle Stan made us leave before everyone else. Mama usually slept all day before picking us up. She knew we'd bother her for ice cream truck money if she left us home while she slept after work. We couldn't be going home to meet her yet.

Aunt Maggie told me to put our wet things at our feet. The boys and Uncle Stan had dried while sitting on the deck, so I was the only one still wet. Before I had my seat belt on, Uncle Stan was pulling out of the gravel driveway and onto the highway.

"I heard you cussing about your wet towel, " he said, looking at me through the rearview mirror. "I bet you heard that language from your damn mother."

I didn't think I'd said anything wrong, and I didn't like what he was saying about my mother. It wasn't true.

"I didn't," I said. "I was trying to find my towel to dry off, and I told Aunt Maggie that lady took it."

"She didn't cuss, Uncle," Jonathan said, his voice low.

"Don't lie to me," he said. "I heard what you said. There was nothing wrong with her borrowing your towel. She gave it back, didn't she?"

"Yes." Soaking wet, I thought.

"You could have sat in the sun and dried in your underwear that way, instead of getting my backseat wet," he said. "The boys did."

"Uncle Stan has a point," Aunt Maggie said. "We're going to have to leave the windows down to let it air out in here. You'd better hope it doesn't start raining again, or you'll be in trouble, missy. And I want to see you hang that towel to dry on the line when we get home." They jumped on any chance to punish Jonathan and me as if they thought my mother needed help with discipline.

#

They wouldn't allow me inside the house wet. Aunt Maggie had me take off my damp clothes in the backyard. She handed me a red-and-black plaid blanket to wrap up in.

"Cover up with this," she said. "You can get dressed after you hang up all these wet things."

She left me outside with a handful of clothespins and a laundry basket full of linens and my own wet clothes. As the boys stripped inside the house, she added bathing suits and my brother's damp boxers to the pile. I stood on a stepstool to reach the line, and the fleece blanket kept falling down so I used an extra clothespin to pin it around me.

There were no neighbors around that I ever saw. Still, I kept my back to the house. I didn't know where my uncle and cousin and brother were or what they were doing. I went as quickly as my cold fingers allowed. I hoped my mother would drive up and find me like this, but I knew without a clock that it still wasn't time for her to arrive. I wondered what she'd do if she found me half-naked in the backyard doing chores. I imagined she'd yell and shake her fist when she found out. Maybe she'd stop bringing us to my aunt's.

When I was done, I left the basket in the yard and walked through the back screen door into the kitchen. I wanted to get dressed before carrying the basket inside. I was cold, and I knew I couldn't carry it and keep myself covered.

Uncle Stan sat at the kitchen table within direct view of the clothesline. He had changed into a pair of long jean shorts with no shirt. The damp curls on his chest glistened, and he ran a hand over his scalp, smoothing the small wisps of hair he did have.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked. "You're not finished, young lady."

I clutched the blanket around me and said nothing.

"You forgot the basket," he said and pointed like I was a pet that needed reprimanding. His fingernails were cut short. They didn't scratch when he stood and brushed my skin, pulling me forward. His touch burned into me, and I couldn't move away.

My voice stuck in my throat like a conch shell. We were alone by the door, and the clouds in the sky morphed into fish that swam against the current, not knowing they were caught in the screeching wind.

I've forgotten the words he whispered, but I know their meaning: don't tell or you'll regret it.

#

I stared at the saltshaker, feeling the cracks and waves in my lips. I was sitting at the kitchen table next to Uncle Stan, the blanket draped over my shoulders, when Aunt Maggie walked back in.

"Let her go get dressed, Stan. She's cold," she said.

I grabbed a new shirt and shorts from our bag in Donnie's room and shut myself into the den to dress. I would have locked myself in if the door had a lock. Why didn't any of the doors have locks? Instead, I leaned against the door as I dressed, using my weight as an obstacle.

When I came out, Aunt Maggie let us watch television with her in the living room. She lay on the couch. The boys each had pillows on the floor, and I sat in the brown recliner in a corner of the room. I think she felt bad for leaving me alone with Uncle Stan. She didn't usually let us watch television. Aunt Maggie thought we should play outside, like she and my mother had as children.

The television show depicted a little girl who decided to cut her hair and live as a boy when doctors found out she'd been born with undescended testicles. It was some kind of documentary or *60 Minutes* type of show; I couldn't tell you which. I didn't know then what the word "testicles" meant, but I guessed correctly that it had something to do with a boy's private parts.

"I knew a little girl who did the same thing," Aunt Maggie said, from the couch. "One day she had long hair, and the next she came back to school with a boy's haircut." She squinted at me. "I wonder what you'd look like as a little boy," she said.

Donnie and my brother laughed. I ran my hands over the pink and red roses Aunt Maggie had crocheted into the throw blanket on the chair, and I covered myself in the thick fabric,

though I wasn't cold. I couldn't wait to go home. I didn't like her television shows. She didn't ever let us watch cartoons.

"Rub aloe on my back, Donnie," Aunt Maggie said when the show ended. She handed him a dark green bottle and lay on her stomach on the floor while he smoothed little circles into her sunburnt skin.

#

When my brother and I told Mama what Uncle Stan said about her in the car, she was angry. That I know for sure.

"I hate that man," she said. "I'm sorry, kids."

I know now that she didn't want them to watch us anymore, but at the time, she didn't have any other options. We were too young to stay home overnight alone. Jonathan told her about the pool and how we swam in our underwear, and she didn't act like there was anything wrong with that.

I didn't tell her about my punishment. About putting up the clothes. About Uncle Stan and the kitchen. I was afraid. He'd convinced me the authorities would take me away from Mama and Jonathan, and I believed his lies.

I told her Uncle Stan was mad about the car being wet.

"It will dry," Mama said. "Don't think about it. It will dry."

JUMP ROPE

Ellen peeked through the lace curtain on the back door to the stoop where Mommy sat. Overgrown planters hung from the rafters, green leaves and moss trailing down, and flower boxes perched on the porch railings, dry, dirt-caked, and dusty. Rusted chairs sat forgotten by the kitchen windows. It was nearly dinnertime. Mommy had been there in the shade of the porch since three o'clock.

Ellen sighed. She didn't want to be a nurse or take care of babies all day. She wanted to plan her ninth birthday party.

Mommy picked at the blue chips of paint that speckled the posts while she looked out toward the yard. It was the type of movement one might make while unconsciously petting an animal. Her hand moved on its own while her mind was probably somewhere else entirely. Ellen couldn't see Mommy's lap from where she stood with her face against the glass window of the door, but she imagined the flower cotton dress Mommy wore was covered with pieces of the sticky paint. A rough circle wound from thick vines lay by Mommy's side. She had been walking in the woods again, gathering vines, pinecones, and flowers for the wreaths she liked to make.

Besides Mommy, Ellen didn't see anything out there worth staring at; the backyard had the same old birch trees and river in the distance as always, the same rusted swing set, a clothesline between two posts, and now the setting sun gave the backyard a red tint like the inside of their chicken eggs when the chick had already started to grow. It would be dark soon.

Whenever Mommy went for a walk or sat by herself, Ellen was left to take care of the twins that her mother babysat while their parents worked. She didn't want to stay at the house all

summer. She didn't want to take care of someone else's kids, let alone her mother and her little brother.

Vernon had been sick since winter with some kind of infection in his mouth and throat. Mommy wouldn't let him stay at the hospital, but she had left Ellen there alone overnight when Ellen had her tonsils taken out last year. Mommy babied Vernon. She fed him soft, scrambled eggs and dribbled water down his throat when he couldn't swallow. He got over the infection, but he still couldn't get out of bed for long. Mommy made Ellen entertain him. Ellen made puppets and string art and forts out of sticks from the backyard. She wanted to walk to the convenience store for popsicles with her friends, and she wanted to play and jump rope and do other things little girls that were almost nine years old—two weeks left to be exact—did in the summer.

She needed to go out to the garden and collect tomatoes to boil and simmer for pasta sauce, but that would mean walking past Mommy. Daddy would be upset if he got home and supper wasn't ready. Ellen hoped he was in a good mood. He might bring home some watermelon or ice cream for dessert. He'd help Ellen set the table while smoking a cigar, the thick, sweet smoke clouding the room. If not, he'd stumble inside and fall into his chair in the sitting room. If that happened, he wouldn't want Ellen to bother him, and if he didn't eat, he'd still be angry if supper wasn't ready on time. He liked routine.

Mommy turned her head toward the side yard. Strands of ashy brown hair hung loose from her messy bun, and her face was pale. She hadn't fixed her hair yet today, wasn't wearing shoes. Her bare feet must have been cold against the hard-packed soil. Birds chattered and the crickets chirped their evening song and dogs barked as cars passed on the road out of sight. Traffic had picked up, yet Mommy sat there.

The glass door made the tip of Ellen's nose cold, and her breath fogged her view of the back yard. She shifted to one side in order to better see, still listening for the babies, their breaths no longer deep and regular, the padding of little feet. She had taught them to climb down from the bed—backward, not head first—and she would hear two soft thumps and laughter as they came in search of her.

Mommy walked into the yard. She picked up Ellen's faded yellow jump rope from where Ellen had left it tied to one side of the clothesline, leaving a snake-like indentation in slimy grass. The tied end frayed beneath the white plastic handle. Mommy undid the knot. Maybe she was going to call Ellen out to play. They didn't do things just the two of them anymore, not like they had before Vernon was born. When Mommy was pregnant with him, she'd take Ellen to eat cherry pie at the diner in town every Friday morning. But that was a long time ago.

Ellen had tried to teach the twins how to jump rope, but they didn't understand how to jump yet. They bent their dimpled, chubby knees and straightened up again with big grins, their arms in the air, their feet never actually leaving the ground. They wouldn't spin the rope for her. They'd rather she push them on the swing set. "Push, Elly," they'd say in their garbled baby language.

Vernon hadn't been able to swing the rope for her since last summer, before he got sick. Even then, he usually did it for a few minutes before running off to do something else. There were so many boys around: Father, Vernon, the twins, and the Stokes family next door had four little boys of their own. They never wanted to play the same games Ellen did. And Mommy didn't play at all.

Ellen wiggled her toes. There was dirt on the bottom of her feet, because she didn't like wearing shoes either. She needed to pee. She needed to check on the sleeping babies. She needed

to cook dinner. But Ellen wanted to watch Mommy. She'd been taking walks and sitting alone much more than usual lately. Maybe she was going to have another baby. She'd acted strange before Vernon was born. If this one were a girl, Ellen would be happy. She would have someone to dress up and play with.

Mommy walked over to the swing set, still facing the trees at the back of the yard. She wrapped the jump rope around the top of the aluminum frame.

She couldn't jump like that. It was the wrong way. She fiddled with the end of the rope. Ellen couldn't see what she was doing.

Mommy climbed onto one of the swings, her bare feet rocking her body awkwardly as she held onto the frame above her head. She'd always told Ellen not to swing like that.

She didn't ask Ellen to play. She didn't hang clothes on the line or listen for the twins' parents' car to arrive. She didn't look back at the house or check to see if Ellen was watching.

Mommy looped the rope around her neck with one hand.

The wind teased, pulling at the loose hem of Mommy's dress, and if Ellen hadn't been scared by the strangeness of her actions, she would have thought how beautiful her mother looked with the wind dragging curls from her bun, the dress billowing around her knees, buds from the neighbor's crape myrtle skittering through the grass.

Ellen knocked her head against the glass door in her haste to open it. The boys began to cry, calling out for her, but she continued outside, ignoring them. Ellen didn't know what Mommy was doing.

But she knew it was wrong.

"Mom," Ellen said. "Mommy."

Mommy held onto the chains of the swing with both hands now, the jump rope loose around her neck.

"The twins' mom is here. You need to come inside." Ellen hadn't really heard their car, but she knew the lady would be there soon. Another adult would make Mommy act all right. She only ever got like this when she was home alone with Ellen and the boys. Those were the times when Ellen knew to watch her. Those were the times when Ellen was left in charge.

Seconds passed, and Mommy took the loop from her neck and stepped down, untying the knot carefully. She put the coiled jump rope in the pocket of her dress and smoothed the flyaway hairs around her face. She turned and walked toward the house determinedly, and the look in her eyes told Ellen that Mommy wouldn't talk about what had happened, not if asked, not at all.

"We'd better go in," Mommy said.

They walked back toward the house, Ellen first, Mommy's hand gripping Ellen's shoulder.

FALL FAR FROM HERE

Ellen pouted into her mirror. She outlined her mouth with lip liner and applied lipstick, a red that might be too dark for a night drinking with friends, but it matched her bra, the color of Bordeaux, so she wore it anyway. She examined the crow's feet at the corner of each eye, the thin lines barely visible to the left and right of her lips. Lines she hadn't expected to come in her thirties. The makeup had become a habit; it hid the dark circles, drew attention from her bloodshot eyes. She pursed her lips and kissed a folded square of toilet paper that fell like snow into a trashcan overflowing with tissues. The house was a wreck.

The walls of her bedroom were pocked with holes from previous tenants. Pale watermark rings decorated the top of her chipped dresser. A white doily, tangled acrylic yarn, various sizes of plastic knitting needles, and picture frames took up most of the small space in front of her mirror. She had gold and silver frames, some wallet size photos, others as large as an eight by ten portrait. One oval-shaped frame matted with a piece of lace fabric showed the tiny pale face of a child dressed in a large, billowing christening gown. The frames were full of people, but they weren't all related to Ellen. Most of them had been found at the Salvation Army thrift store, for ten, twenty, or thirty cents each. She would never understand how people could give away family portraits. These weren't the fake, staged pictures that came in a frame bought from the store. They were old pictures of babies and women with brooches at their throats and groups of people in old-fashioned clothing. Forgotten heirlooms.

The phone rang and the gas station showed on the caller I.D., but Ellen didn't answer. It was her night off, and they were probably calling for her to pick up a shift. They always called

her first. She was the one single parent on staff. Ellen had plans for the night; Barbara had invited her to come over and party, and Ellen needed a night out.

Piles of laundry sat beside the washing machine, stacks of dishes in the sink. She didn't want to know what the kids' room looked like, since she had let them play unsupervised after their nap. The next night she was off, she told herself she would stay up cleaning until everything was back in order. The landlord wouldn't reimburse her for painting, not that she really wanted to paint by herself, but she could at least wash the walls to brighten up the place. Maybe she could hang some photos of her and the kids.

Ellen curled her bangs and the rest of her shoulder-length brown hair, meticulous about the thickness and direction of each lock. These tasks kept her hands busy, kept her mind busy.

"Kids, we're leaving soon," she said, though she knew they wouldn't budge from their movie in the living room.

If Thomas were there, he'd be trying to kiss Ellen's neck, brushing her hair out of the way, not caring if it was curled or not. He liked to tease her and brush his lips up and down her spine. But Thomas was not there, and Ellen hoped she could forget about him for the night.

She pulled on leather, calf-length boots. Her mother had shown her how to make this skirt from an old pair of jeans by slitting the pant legs and sewing them together again, zigzagged on purpose, the rough edges put back together like the pieces of a mismatched puzzle. It was her favorite skirt, an outfit that made her feel fun, full of life. As if those jagged cuts somehow made her more outgoing than her normal self.

#

She stopped at the video place inside Food City, the grocery store in their one red-light town. While Jonathan and Candace each chose a movie, Ellen tried not to make eye contact with

the man stocking the chip aisle. He looked familiar, but she couldn't place him, and she didn't like the way his eyes traveled down her body. Under the harsh fluorescent lights, his skin looked sickly and pale, his stomach bulging over the belt he'd tightened around his waist. Except for when she'd been pregnant, Ellen had always been thin, and she appreciated this feature in men.

"Want some popcorn?" she asked the kids.

"Yeah!" said Jonathan. Candace nodded her head.

"Well, go pick out a box." Ellen headed toward the beer aisle, away from the chip man.

"Stay together, and meet me at checkout."

#

Trees covered the hills on either side of the road, casting flickering shadows across the cracked asphalt still pitted from last winter's salt. Barbara's steep driveway looked like it led straight down into the water below. But it carved to the left above a doublewide set into the hill. Dogs in chain-link kennels yapped when they saw the car pull in. They ran back and forth along the length of their enclosures, barking as the children climbed out. The smell of feces hit Ellen in the face, making her gag. She held her breath as they walked to the front door.

"Hello," Barbara called out from the kitchen. She sat at the laminate table, smoking, looking through a newspaper, a beer already opened by her side—and it was a little after six. Barbara took off her orange wire-framed glasses, smiled at the kids. An inch of dark brown stood out from the roots of her broom-yellow hair like the streaks of dirt that tracked the tiled floor.

Ellen put her beer in the fridge and a bag of popcorn in the microwave. Soft tones of music played from a room down the hall, but she couldn't make out the words, only the melody of a country ballad and a soprano crooning along to a song with a title she couldn't recall.

Barbara's black, shaggy-haired schnauzer, Ruby, had puppies a few weeks old, and the kids

stood over her cage. It was in a corner of the kitchen with fresh newspaper, surprisingly, lining the bottom.

"Let me get one out for you, guys," Barbara said with a pronounced drawl. "She might snap 'cause she don't know you." She set her cigarette down in the ashtray on the table and lifted out a small black bundle, whose tongue darted out of its mouth as it squirmed and squeaked against being picked up.

"I want to hold it first." Candace stretched her hands out toward the puppy.

"You can each hold one." Barbara handed the puppy to Candace and picked up another one for Jonathan.

On nights like this, when Barbara was semi-sweet to Ellen's children and let them play with her puppies and watch her big-screen TV, Ellen didn't hate herself quite as much as she maybe should for bringing her kids to a dirty puppy mill where Barbara's teenage daughters were allowed unsupervised online chat rooms and overnight guests. Instead, Ellen remembered how Barbara's youngest, Kim, took honors classes at the high school and spun baton for the band, and Ellen hoped maybe her kids could do better than that, get out of this town and not get stuck alone with children, a dead spouse, debt, and a job as a convenience store clerk that was leading nowhere.

"You're going to sell these, too?" Jonathan asked.

"As soon as I've got a buyer. You don't want one, do you?" Barbara winked at Ellen who shook her head at the kids.

"We do want one," Candace said, looking at the floor.

"I want one." Jonathan backed away, the puppy held to his chest.

"All right," Barbara said after a few minutes. "Let's put them back. Ruby's getting worried about her babies." Ruby hadn't looked up from her nap the entire time. She lay on her side, puppies kneading her breasts, one pup chewing on her ear.

Ellen handed Candace's puppy to Barbara and herded the kids into the living room. She left them with the television and their new Disney movies and went outside to sit around the wrought iron patio table. Barbara's two daughters followed behind Ellen. Barbara let them drink with the adults, and they smoked, too, and they were likely hoping to bum a cigarette.

Rick, Barbara's boyfriend, had invited a few men over—no one Ellen knew, though she half-expected the grocery stock boy to show up on the back patio. She had to have met him there. Or at the Rocking Horse, a bar she frequented with Barbara when she had both the night off and a babysitter. He could have sat on the lid of the cooler, the one remaining seat unless Ellen counted the empty laps of the men Rick had invited, men who might or might not have wives to greet them when they returned home smelling of Marlboros and beer long after the sun went down.

Rick sat in a sun-bleached, green plastic chair, his long silver hair pulled back from his face with an elastic tie. He was laughing over some joke he had told his friends right before Ellen sat down, but she only heard the last half, something about the Hardy Boys and the clit, and she laughed along even though she didn't get it, and the others had to have known. They drank Michelob Light and smoked in the dusk, hoping the smoke would keep the mosquitoes at bay. Ellen wanted to go for a swim but the three-foot deep, aboveground pool had a thick layer of green slime. She wanted more than this life, these weekends drinking like teenagers around a table.

"You two go inside and keep an eye on Ellen's kids," Barbara said. Her daughters skulked back inside. Maybe they would play hide and seek or teach them the lyrics to their favorite songs. The last time she'd brought her kids to Barbara's house, Kim, the younger one, had given Ellen's kids construction paper and a large container of pens, markers, colored pencils, crayons, and glitter glue and let them color for hours. She knew they might also return to their rooms or the computer at the back of the living room and ignore her children completely.

Ellen turned up the volume on the stereo outside, danced to Eric Clapton, and hummed along, her eyes closed, trying to remember independence, whether it felt anything like this. She didn't want to sing along, not here in front of these men, but she knew all the words, remembered driving in the car with Thomas when they first met, still nervous holding hands, stumbling through lyrics. He loved this song, and Ellen loved Thomas.

A breeze rose goose bumps crop up on Ellen's arms. She opened her eyes and caught sight of one of the men staring at her. She took a drag and finished her cigarette, looking to Barbara instead. Her ex-husband, Billy, had played the fiddle some nights when Thomas and Ellen came over with the kids. Billy stuck the instrument under his chin and drew the bow faster and faster, filling the living room with the shrill tones. Everyone laughed and clapped. Barbara's girls liked the music, too. They smiled and smacked their little hands out of beat and rocked from side to side, looking at each other, excited by the music and the attention and the laughter, which made Ellen smile and shake her head to the music as well.

#

Kim came outside crying, holding a hand to her face. Someone turned down the stereo. She had shot herself with pepper spray, she said, the one in the little red pleather case left in the

kitchen attached to Ellen's key ring. Ellen felt awful. She helped Kim to the bathroom. The pale skin around Kim's eyes was red as she squinted against the overhead light.

"You have to open your eyes, " Ellen said. Kim knelt down, and Ellen pushed Kim's hair out of the way and splashed her face with cool water from the tap. Tears spilled down the girl's face, but Ellen didn't persuade her to stop crying. She knew the tears would help to flush the chemical out. Instead, she patted the girl's back and wet a washcloth for her to hold against her sore eyes. When they went back outside, Barbara was finishing her beer.

"You know, I've heard milk can be good for this sort of thing," said the man who'd stared at Ellen earlier. Rick and his friends laughed. Kim stood by her mother's side, leaned her head onto Barbara's shoulder even though Barbara was sitting in a low folding chair and had lit a fresh cigarette. Barbara rolled her eyes and exhaled.

"Oh, cut it out, Keith," she said. Her eyebrows pinched inward, and she seemed more annoyed by than concerned about her daughter's behavior.

Kim appeared to tire of trying to get her mother's sympathy and went back inside while the men continued to laugh at her. Ellen glared at Rick's friend, Keith, who smiled and patted his lap for Ellen to sit down. No one had offered her a seat yet. She'd been trying not to look in his direction for too long, unsure if it would make him look away.

She drank the last swallow in her bottle and lined it up on the table with the others that had accumulated over the past few hours. They had a bowl in the center filling with dented bottle caps.

Why not? He didn't look half bad. His front teeth crowded together, giving him a childish look, but he had thick brown hair and his shirt pulled taut across his chest and arms. Ellen imagined rubbing her hands over those biceps as he flexed above her, and a chill of excitement

ran through her body, but it was Thomas's face she saw. She sat on Keith's lap and let him rub her back, kneading his fist into her muscles. He ran his warm hand over the chilled skin exposed to the night air, and she felt his thick thighs beneath her skirt.

"Oh, you're full of knots, baby," Keith said against her neck and gripped her hand hard as he kissed her shoulder in the dark.

#

"Mom, Kim poured out my milk!" said Crystal, Barbara's other girl. The screen door slammed as she ran out onto the patio. Kim followed her sister outside, wet hair hanging down her shirt, a washcloth still held to her eye.

Keith grazed the inside of Ellen's knee with the back of his hand. She tried to follow the conversation over the music, instead of thinking about where she actually wanted Keith's hand.

"I thought it was the glass I used on my eye." Kim peeked out from under her washcloth, blushing.

"That was the last of the milk." Crystal frowned in the way Ellen would expect to see on one of her kids, not a girl about to graduate high school.

"Oh, well. I guess you'll have to drink some water," Barbara said. She leaned forward to deposit her bottle on the table and stubbed her cigarette in a full ashtray near her foot. "I'm not going to the store now. Make some Kool-Aid."

Ellen went inside to use the bathroom and get another beer. She turned off the television. After shaking off most of the dog hair onto the floor, she covered Candace and Jonathan in the throw blanket that had been draped across the back of the couch. She made her way over to the fridge, laying her hands on the wooden side table and then the counters for balance.

"Stumbling already?" Barbara laughed.

Ellen hadn't heard her come inside. She was thinking of Keith, how she wanted to hold onto this feeling, something like happiness, and something like arousal. The rough calluses on Keith's hands reminded her of Thomas, and she hoped in the dark that it might be like having him there with her again. It wouldn't be the same. She knew that, but she hoped anyway.

Barbara lowered her voice, even though they were still in the kitchen and the music continued outside.

"You better watch Keith now. He likes to get grabby with those hands." Barbara, her back to Ellen, chose a bag of chips from the cabinet by the refrigerator.

"I've noticed." She gulped in a breath of air. "I'll let him know when I've had enough for the night." If she kept drinking, she knew she wouldn't tell him to stop. She'd beg him to go further.

"You can sleep in my bed tonight, if you want," Barbara said as she opened the chip bag. Ellen grabbed a handful of the Doritos. She offered one to the skinny tabby that came up to her side, meowing, and listened to the animal delicately crunch the food between pointy teeth.

#

Ellen woke in one of the rooms off the hallway. She extracted her arm from beneath the snoring man beside her. Keith's hair stuck up in crazy angles, and he had some tattoo of a naked lady on his bicep. She sort of remembered him making her dance when they first stumbled into this room and fell onto the bed. Scrambling around on the floor, she found her clothes by touch and dressed in the dark, feeling for the tag on the back of her panties to let her know which side was the front. She picked up her boots and exited the room through the tiniest of cracks. In the bathroom, she used some toothpaste and her finger to clean her teeth. Her head hurt. She had packed a toothbrush in the kids' bag, but she couldn't wait to find it. She felt like vomiting. She

needed to get the taste of Keith's beer breath from her mouth. In the bathroom light, she saw that her shirt was on backwards. Her pulse throbbed at her temple, and she remembered the beers, the shots, and the liquor.

Rain pounded hard against the aluminum roof as Ellen made her way from the back of the doublewide into the living room. She wasn't normally in favor of one-night stands, of bailing before morning. It was something she'd done after Thomas died. She knew she needed to get out of there. She had called out for Thomas in her sleep. She might have yelled his name before that, but she couldn't remember. She stifled a yawn and tried to make her brain work. If she left, she could get back on track. Somehow.

The room smelled like ammonia, the carpet stained from all the damn puppies Barbara raised. Ellen tried not to breathe through her nose. That shit opened sinuses. She winced as her foot sunk into a spongy spot of damp carpet, and Candace coughed in her sleep. An overhead fan circulated the humid air in the room, spreading the lingering scent of cigarette smoke. The kids slept on the lumpy couch covered in a pilled brown throw blanket, their heads at either end, feet touching in the middle. Candace shifted in her sleep but didn't wake. Ellen hated to make them leave so early in the morning.

Ruby growled in her cage in the kitchen, mistaking Ellen for an intruder. The dog barked several times.

"Shh," Ellen whispered. She held her hand to the cage to let the black schnauzer remember her scent. Ruby released a final guttural growl before she lay back down on top of her puppies, sniffing loudly as she rubbed her nose over each dark bundle. She licked the bottom of the one closest to her when it stirred. Ruby kept her head down, but Ellen still felt the dog's eyes on her. She could see the barest glint where they picked up light from the next room.

The rain came down sideways, pinging against the large window behind the living room furniture. Ellen couldn't see anything outside but a reflection of the shabby room.

"Jonathan, Candace, wake up. It's time to go home." Ellen shook them and put on Candace's Velcro sneakers; her curls formed a matted halo around her head.

"Jonathan, eject the movie. Find the other one, too."

"I didn't finish it," he said, his voice rising in pitch, still lying on the couch.

"Shh. You can watch them at home tomorrow, then." Ellen sighed. "We're not coming back here."

The movies were a bribe. She knew it. Jonathan knew it, on some level. Candace might have thought it was a special treat, that Ellen had been in a good mood, or had extra money for once. At home, Ellen usually tried to keep them on a strict bedtime ritual, at least when they weren't with her mother, who babysat the three nights Ellen worked second shift at the gas station. Ellen usually read them a story and put them to bed at nine o'clock, though Candace often found her way into Ellen's bed, anyway. They were easier to manage on a schedule.

The machine whirred as it spit the video out, and Jonathan snapped it inside the rental case. He had always been a good little helper. He watched over Candace when they played outside, brought her in if she was hurt. He handed Ellen the videos, and Ellen put them inside her purse.

"Okay. Are you ready to go? Got everything?" she whispered.

The overhead light clicked on, illuminating the room. The kids blinked, and Barbara appeared out of the darkened hallway, her own clothes ruffled from sleep. She looked different out of jeans, in a large shirt—smaller, her bare legs skinnier. Barbara rubbed her palms against

her face, yellow and papery from the tanning bed. Her dyed hair hung down in a tangled mess like the hair of a misused Barbie doll.

"Let those children sleep, Ellen." Barbara approached and laid a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry I let you two go off together. You should stay. Sleep out here with the kids or in my room, if you want. You can drive home in the morning."

Ellen shrugged out of Barbara's grasp. She threw her purse over her shoulder, and picked up Candace. She staggered to the door, Jonathan following behind her.

"I'm fine. We're going home."

The rain's staccato notes increased when she opened the screen and front door. A crack of lightning illuminated the asphalt driveway that snaked up the hill to the highway above Barbara's doublewide, making Jonathan jump. They didn't have an umbrella. Ellen hadn't expected rain.

She followed behind Candace to make sure she didn't slip on the wet steps, and Jonathan walked behind them. Barbara was no doubt already on her way back to bed. She didn't try to take Ellen's keys or wrangle her inside. She could have woken the men or called the police or grabbed the children's hands, but Ellen knew she wouldn't go that far. Barbara didn't care. She wanted another woman to drink with. She felt outnumbered by Rick's friends.

The grass to the side of the driveway had turned to mud overnight. The rain made little mudslides that intersected the s-shaped driveway and covered the tin roof like chocolate icing, and Ellen thought of how she'd helped the kids make a gingerbread house at Christmas. They'd run out of the thick, white icing that glued the walls together because Candace kept eating it when Ellen wasn't looking, and she had yelled at both children. She tried mixing up icing with

the milk and powdered sugar she had at home, but it wouldn't thicken. The roofless walls fell in, and she threw the mess away once the kids had eaten all the candy off the plate.

"Mommy, I'm cold," Candace cried as she stood in the rain by the car.

Jonathan held a plastic Wal-Mart bag over their heads to shield some of the rain. Ellen dropped her keys in a puddle, cursed, and picked them up to unlock the doors. She backed up the driveway and onto the deserted highway lit by streetlights. The rain changed to a slightly less annoying drizzle as she shifted the car into higher and higher gears.

Rolling the window down, she lit another cigarette. Its tip glowed alongside the dashboard. The rain sprayed a mist through the crack. Her wet bangs stuck to her forehead, while the rest of her hair curled, shrinking up around her chin. Ellen switched on the heat to help dry out their clothes. Through the rear-view mirror, she watched as Candace fell back asleep in her seat, her head against the glass, and Jonathan opened his own window. The tires hissed at the slick asphalt, and Ellen looked at Jonathan sitting behind her, his oval face and blue eyes so much like his father's, like Thomas's.

She couldn't believe she'd gone over to Barbara's house again. The last time she had told herself she didn't need friends like Barbara, women who gossiped and sat at home all day. The kids deserved better. It was easier than being alone. She couldn't sleep in a bed that seemed so empty without him. She still sensed the loss of his body next to hers, even when she stretched out diagonally, taking up the entire bed. Ellen enjoyed the nights when she and the kids lay together. Thomas had been gone for years, but it felt like she'd seen him last week. He was so good with the children, always knew what to say after Candace had a nightmare and came to their room crying.

Tired of the silence in the car, Ellen put in a cassette and turned the volume down low so Aerosmith wouldn't wake Candace. She sang along with the words, trying not to think, pretending her favorite color was also pink. The kids loved this song. She tapped her cigarette against the window, and the ashes fell away.

"Mom, you got your ashes on me again!" Jonathan said.

"Sorry. Roll up your window. I'm going to toss it out." She took the back way home instead of driving through town. She didn't want to hit the stoplight, not now, this late, when the streets were empty. The thick trees on either side of the road made it seem even darker now that they'd abandoned the streetlights.

Ellen didn't like the person she let herself become at Barbara's house. Last night was the last time, she told herself.

The car continued around the curves, past squat little houses stuck in tree-lined valleys that hardly saw the sun, past the Marauders' Gem Mine where tourists could pan for "gold and jewels," and past dilapidated single-wide trailers. She wasn't stuck here, in this place. The kids could change schools, start over in the fall. They could move. They'd done it before. They could all have a fresh start. She could search for job openings in the paper. Maybe Mom would move in permanently.

"You're on the wrong side of the road!" Jonathan yelled.

Ellen jerked. She steered the car back into the right lane. She turned off the heat and cranked her window all the way down.

"I'm cold," Jonathan said after a few minutes.

She grabbed her worn, brown leather jacket—a gift from Thomas—from the passenger side seat and handed back it to him.

"Here, we'll be home in a few minutes."

Candace still slept in her seat, her head on her shoulder. Jonathan met Ellen's gaze. It felt like Thomas stared at her through those eight-year-old eyes, like he could see all the mistakes she'd made without him. She remembered pleading for God to bring Thomas back to her, to make him wake up in that hospital bed, but he never did. She'd held his hand and prayed. She promised she'd return to church and spend more time playing with the kids. She hadn't said goodbye. She had whispered it after he was gone. A car passed in the opposite lane, the headlights like two spotlights exposing Ellen's guilt. She thanked God that the other lane had been empty when she swerved.

The rain started again as she lifted Candace's sleeping form out of her booster seat, drumming against the roof of the wooden carport.

#

Lightning illuminated the sky outside her bedroom window, and Ellen felt deafened by the sound that followed. Her door opened.

"Can I sleep with you, Mommy?" Jonathan asked. "I'm scared."

"Come here." She stood and flipped the blanket down next to Candace to make room for him. "There's nothing to be afraid of," Ellen said. "Everything's fine. I love you." She hugged him and kissed the top of his head.

They stared through the window in silence, listening to the storm. Through the blinds, Ellen saw how their oak tree had split nearly in half, pieces of the trunk and branches stretching over the grass along the front of the house. She would have to call the landlord in the morning, but at least they hadn't lost power. The alarm clock still glowed red on her bedside table. She climbed into bed next to Jonathan. She shifted around, trying to get comfortable. A framed

photograph of her mother and father on their wedding day sat on the dresser among all the other frames. Most of the pictures were faded or torn beneath the glass. The wedding photo was one of the biggest, the one picture she had of them both, her father in his Army uniform, her mother so young, smiling at the photographer. Ellen didn't keep all these pictures on her dresser because she wanted it to look like she had a bigger family. She couldn't stand to leave those photos to be thrown away or replaced. She didn't want her own pictures to end up forgotten and discarded one day like she'd never existed. She wanted her kids to want her around once they were grown, and not only when they needed her, the way she went to her mother for help with the kids.

The children's breathing deepened, and she knew they were sleeping again, but Ellen's headache hadn't subsided. She rummaged around on her dresser for the blanket she'd been working on. She was new to knitting, but the garter stitch pattern was easy to remember. She knit every stitch on the right and wrong sides. It was a project she could do at work when there was a lull in business, and it was something she often worked on in the dark when the kids were sleeping. It wasn't very soft; she'd bought the largest skeins of acrylic yarn the store sold. It was machine-washable, and she hoped it would hold up for a long time, maybe get softer with each wash. Ellen listened to the storm and the click of her needles and felt the warmth of her children next to her as she felt for each stitch.

THE SOUNDS ANIMALS MAKE

The fuzzy-haired kitten was spindly on her short legs. Creamsicle's belly protruded like a firm, round tangerine when she'd eaten. I played in my backyard—I was eight years old. I teased her with blades of grass and watched as she lunged and pounced and fell over. She was a gift, one of many pets to sweeten yet another move after my father's death. My mother's new fiancé let our five dogs loose from their chains. He hadn't seen me. I wasn't supposed to have the kitten outdoors. I picked her up when I saw the dogs running my way, their contrasting coats ruffled in the hot wind, their mouths grinning. The frenzied pack was between the back porch and me.

Creamsicle climbed up my arms, tearing tee shirt and skin, and anchored herself to my shoulder. The dogs circled. I tried to shield her. Of course they could smell her, could smell my fear for her. They wanted a chase. She jumped and ran underneath the wooden porch, but not fast enough. Toby, our half-wolf mix, went in after and grabbed her, his teeth wrapping around her little tummy. I screamed. The dogs barked and snapped at each other. I could hardly see her in the mess of fur. They fought over the prize while I stood watching. I thought I'd get my hand bitten if I tried to reach in for her. They tossed her around like a plaything from one mouth to the next. It was like my feet were stuck in concrete, not summer grass. If only I had run for the porch sooner.

I wanted to knock them out of the way and pry open Toby's jaws, place my hand around Creamsicle's small body, her tail, anything I could reach, and run for the door. I wanted to hurt them for hurting her. I wanted to kick and punch and break her free. She didn't do anything wrong. It was my fault. I had brought her outside. She was so young, and Mama had said to keep

her in the house. And yet, I stood there. Did nothing. She reacted. She hissed and scratched Toby's face. She was outnumbered, but she still left marks, still fought for her life.

My brother heard the dogs, heard me screaming, and stuck his head out a second floor window. He climbed out, half-ran half-slid down the sloping, tiled roof, and jumped the short distance to the back yard. He never hesitated. He kicked and grabbed collars and finally pulled my kitten from their grasp. If he'd been outside, she'd have been fine. He would have protected her.

Later when she was sleeping, I watched her chest quickly rise and fall. Only Toby's bright blood had washed from her stiff fur. I willed her to be okay, to wake up the next morning. I just had to wait. I would have slept next to her in the laundry room if Mama had let me.

No one suggested a vet because we couldn't have afforded one. I didn't think to ask that we take her. She died in her sleep that night, and Mama had my brother bury her in the backyard the next morning.

Despite the sounds I knew the animals made, this horror unfolded like a silent film, reel after reel of muted gestures, my first experience witnessing death. At three I hadn't understood how death could be so absolute. I didn't remember my father's funeral. At eight, I learned how one mistake could change everything.

BORN IN JULY

Madison didn't answer Karen's repeated knocks, which wasn't entirely unusual. The curtains were drawn on the front bay window and the door left unlocked, so Karen let herself inside her older sister's home. The living room was dark. Piles of dirty laundry lay across the hardwood floor and sectional couch, and ashes and half-burnt sheets of newsprint spread around the empty wood-burning stove set into one brick wall. She stepped on a plastic action figure, which snapped painfully beneath her sandaled foot, and cursed under her breath as she hopped toward the couch.

Her sister wasn't exactly a hoarder, but she'd grown lazy since passing forty. The once clean freak who insisted Karen not forget to dust the lintels and picture frames had disappeared, and Karen sometimes felt like she didn't know her sister at all. She wanted the real Madison back, the girl who'd taught Karen how to draw evergreen trees for homemade Christmas cards and took her to buy her first bra, the sister she used to admire.

Karen left her new dog Puppup and the groceries she'd brought over out on the screened-in porch. She slipped past a dresser set oddly in the center of the narrow hallway and peeked into Madison's bedroom. Madison lay in a nest of sheets and blankets with a black sleep mask covering her eyes and an arm over one ear. She could sleep through anything. When they were younger, the girls had shared a bedroom. Once a board on Karen's top bunk had loosened, and she and the mattress spilled onto the floor in the middle of the night, barely missing Madison who slept in a fetal position, knees drawn up, elbows in. Madison didn't wake as their mother entered the room, turned on the lights, and hammered the board back into place.

By the look of things, Madison had either forgotten she'd offered to host their annual Fourth of July/Birthday celebration at her house that night, or she hadn't meant the offer in the first place. Karen shook her head as she stood in the dark hallway. She huffed, angry with herself for accepting Madison's offer.

All of the girls in their family were born in July, which made the Fourth a big celebration. For the past three years, Karen and her husband, Frank, had hosted a potluck get-together for family and neighbors and ended the evening with a round of fireworks in their large backyard. That wouldn't be happening this year because of the car wreck, not at their house anyway, and Madison had seemed upset when Karen called to tell her the news.

"Don't cancel. You can have it at my place," she had said, speaking fast. "I've got the back patio. There are plenty of chairs. Please. You can do it here."

Karen was surprised and happy at Madison's offer. Madison often showed up late and hadn't come to last year's party at all. This way she'd have to be on time. It was Madison's fiftieth birthday. She had to be there.

"I don't know," Karen said. "The party's a lot of work. I was looking forward to the break," she'd said, which was a lie, but she wanted to give Madison an out, if she wasn't sincere about the offer. Karen wanted the distraction. She needed it. She liked playing the part of hostess. And, it was her birthday, too.

"Please. It will be fun. Different."

Karen couldn't remember the last time Madison had been so excited, so polite. She didn't want to take that away from her sister no matter how hesitant she might feel.

"All right, if you're sure, then let's do it. I can come over that morning and help you finish getting ready," she said.

Karen had almost told Madison not to worry about it, almost, and now she wished she had. It was too late to cancel. She'd sent invitations with Madison's address, only to family, but still. She couldn't let anyone see this mess. They'd both be embarrassed, and as much as it angered her to clean and cook on her own, Karen would rather not have others see this side of Madison. Madison had turned things around before, when the boys were little. She'd gone back to work when they started school, cooked dinner each night. She could do it again. Madison needed a little help this time. That's all. Karen would clean up by herself, before Madison woke, and they'd both enjoy the party later.

#

Almost a month had passed since a car had plowed through Karen's front porch and into her sewing room, and the repairs still weren't finished. Caution tape wrapped around the porch columns, bits and pieces of the vehicle still glinted on the front lawn like broken glass, and piles of new lumber lay scattered about her small backyard. The stairs to their bedroom weren't yet secure, and Karen and Frank had been sharing the small couch-bed in the living room, a sleeping arrangement that left them both grumpy in the mornings, sticky from sweat.

Without the room where she quilted and sewed her own clothing, Karen felt lost, as if a part of her was missing, as if the stitches in a wound had been removed too soon and she could fall apart at any moment. She had nowhere to craft, nowhere to breathe, to be by herself. The cedar table where she had done most of her drafting had splintered into jagged teeth, and the sewing machine's plastic bits no longer fit together. Bobbins and ribbon and lace had unraveled, tangled and torn from the wreck. She'd cried while cleaning up, trashing the remnants, salvaging what she could, which wasn't much. She filled two large, plastic bins with fabric and spent nearly half an hour picking up spilled buttons in various colors.

The projects along the back of the room had been untouched, baby dresses and pant suits she'd sewn from vintage patterns. She had removed the hangers and folded each carefully as she packed them into a box. Those she had sold off one by one at Liberty Baptist's summer yard sale, and she planned to put the money toward a new, better sewing machine, perhaps an electronic one that could also do embroidery.

#

Despite her anger, Karen still couldn't wait until that night when she gave Madison the quilt. *Madison's birthday present was safe*, Karen reminded herself whenever she grieved over the sewing machine. The machine could be replaced. Karen had put more work into this quilt than any other project. The farmer's wife patterned blanket was meant as a surprise gift for her older sister. Blue was Madison's favorite, and Karen had chosen a light blue, close to turquoise, for the main background fabric because it reminded her of Madison's eyes. Karen was so excited about the project that she'd almost told Madison about it numerous times, but she'd managed to keep it a surprise so far.

She thought maybe the present could help Madison out of her current funk. There'd been no official diagnosis, not since the label of Bipolar Disorder offered up when Madison attempted suicide twenty years previously. But that didn't stop her from visiting doctors; in fact, it fueled her almost desperate desire to be labeled with something else, something tangible, something others might be able to see. Her legs hurt her. Neuropathy. She'd been born with drop foot. Multiple Sclerosis. Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Anything visibly different that might qualify her for disability services, though Madison had been denied twice already as far as Karen knew.

Karen hated that she saw Madison's issues as a list of unconfirmed diagnoses; she felt like shit, really, a hot mass of pain below her ribs that made it difficult for her to breathe when

she thought about her relationship with Madison. Karen knew she should care more. She loved Madison. She did. Karen tried not to be angry with her sister about the state of her house. Madison had never hosted a party there that Karen could remember. Maybe she had thought everyone could stay outside, could avoid entering the house if the party stayed on the patio. Maybe she thought she only had to help cook. Karen sighed.

She left the hallway and turned on the lights to survey the clutter. The mess was better than the layer of sawdust that had seeped into what felt like every inch of Karen's home since the construction began. She liked the smell of woodwork, but didn't like the crunch of wood shavings between her teeth. None of the food in Madison's fridge looked edible. A swarm of gnats hovered above a mountain of dishes in cloudy water and a bowl with black bananas on the counter. Of course, the trash needed to go out, Karen's least favorite chore, the one thing Frank did at home to help around the house.

She filled a bowl with water for the dog and left him on the porch. She could do this. She liked cleaning, organizing, putting everything in its place. She opened a new trash bag and tossed the expired food in the fridge before putting the groceries she'd bought away. She'd wipe down the inside of the refrigerator later, if she had time. She looked for a box of baking soda to place inside, on the off chance there might be one, but didn't see anything in the overcrowded cabinets beneath the sink, besides a stack of used dishtowels and a dwindling package of trash bags. She loaded the dishwasher, somehow tetris-ing all of the porcelain cups and plates and silverware, and listened to its humming as she wiped down the counters and boiled a pot of potatoes. The floors could be cleaned last. A quick sweeping would do if she ran out of time. In the living room, she bagged trash and sorted mail and bundled clothes into piles for Madison to decipher later. They could always hide the clothes in one of Madison's spare bedrooms, the rooms where her two sons

used to live, when Madison and their father were still a couple. He'd left her the house and taken the boys.

Karen rummaged through two different closets and the pantry before she found a broom and dustpan behind a vacuum cleaner that still looked brand new. She gave the kitchen, dining room, and living room a quick once over with the broom, feeling satisfied. The walls could use a new paint job and there were stains on the couch fabric, but she'd made the place look okay, certainly better than it looked before.

#

It had taken over four hours to straighten up and sweep the floors while Madison slept. Karen diced the cooked potatoes into chunks and chopped onions, carrots, and celery for potato salad. Puppup whined from the back porch, scratched at the aluminum of the screen door. She tucked a bowl filled with the vegetables inside the refrigerator and walked the dog down the curvy street to the corner store. There she bought more trash bags and floor cleaner, and, on a whim, an apple spice scented candle. She knew Madison liked that scent.

Madison's house sat on a hill above a field where she'd once kept goats and a yellow pony. On her way back up the driveway, Karen stopped to catch her breath and found a tennis ball in the ditch by the road. She sat down her bag and tested the ball on the asphalt drive, bouncing it low to the ground, and scrambled to catch it before it rolled past her. She kept the stained ball, climbed the rest of the hill, and removed Puppup's leash to play fetch in the sloping yard. Karen tossed the ball horizontally, parallel to the house, afraid the ball would fall down into the field and Puppup would run after it. The little terrier barked and ran about the yard, but he brought the ball back twice before quitting to lie in the grass in the shade, panting. Karen let him back onto the screened porch where he could doze.

In the clean kitchen, she lit the candle and prepared a strawberry cake. She'd bought the box mix at the last minute that morning before coming over. She preferred to bake from scratch, but there wouldn't have been time, she knew now. She dumped the contents into a silver bowl, cracked in two eggs she'd also brought, and added the oil and water, mixing with a whisk. She was putting the cake in the oven when the toilet roll holder rattled against the bathroom wall. Karen shut the oven and met her sister in the back hallway.

"Hey, sorry, I didn't want to wake you. Are you sure you want to have the party tonight?" Karen asked. "Frank should be getting the fireworks now, and I think Ellen said she'd be here with the kids by seven."

Madison yawned and then sneezed.

"Bless you," Karen said.

Madison had never been a morning person, and now in the evening, she didn't seem any happier upon waking. Tangled curls hung down around her face and freckled shoulders. She wore a black camisole without a bra, which let her small breasts sag, and a wrinkled pair of yellow pajama pants with a butterfly print that Karen had sewn a few Christmases back.

"What the hell have you been doing around here?" Madison walked past Karen and into the living room. "What is that smell?" She sniffed and wiped at her nose. "Those clothes were for the yard sale I'm having next weekend." She pointed to a pile Karen had washed and folded. "I didn't want to waste the water and power to wash them. I was going to sell them as is." She let her arms fall next to her waist. "And I was keeping that paper by the wood-stove for when I lit it. That wasn't trash."

Seriously? Karen couldn't believe Madison. She wanted to leave, not say anything, just leave and let Madison handle the party on her own. Karen had thought her sister would be happy

to wake to a clean, nice-smelling house. The new candle and the baking cake smelled better than the moldy fruit and stagnant dishwater Karen had encountered that morning. She'd fought the urge to vomit when cleaning the sink, the clogged garbage disposal. Karen should have known better. She had learned years ago not to try to predict Madison's behavior. She did better to expect mood swings, sullen anger over trivial matters, which didn't mean Madison couldn't be sweet. She always bought Karen chocolates for Valentine's Day. She lacked a filter.

Once, when they still lived together, Karen had found Madison in the backyard, completely naked. Madison had pieces of bread balled up and squeezed between her fists. She had bought something like ten loaves of bread and toasted every slice on their two-rack toaster. Since she couldn't eat them all, she had decorated the kitchen counters. She lined them edge-to-edge, and when she'd run out of room, stacked them precariously among the other appliances. Karen had herded Madison inside to shower, and that's when she saw the kitchen, the bread slices on every surface, and she thought of dominoes, the way they cascade, one against the next, in beautiful, elaborate patterns. It hurt Karen to see Madison this way, but a small part of her envied how Madison had a certain freedom within each manic episode. She didn't consider consequences and cast off all expectations. Karen had to clean the kitchen that day, too, before their mother came home and complained of wastefulness. Karen collected the toast in plastic grocery bags, put them away for birds at the park, and the next day Madison seemed surprised by the contents, as if she didn't remember anything she'd done.

Karen wanted to be that free, to not care what people thought, but she feared her life would spin out of control. She didn't have the nerve to defend herself. She worried too much about hurting Madison's feelings, about being unnecessarily cruel. She couldn't leave.

"I'm sorry. I thought you'd want to clean up for the party," Karen said. She sat down on a corner of the sectional, which still had several large stains on the white microfiber fabric.

"Next time, don't. It's not your responsibility." Madison grabbed a stack of mail and other pieces of paper Karen had placed on the coffee table. "You probably lost my Big Lots coupon, too. I had it right on top." She flipped through the stack and then sat it back down in order to close the window curtains Karen had opened. "I keep these closed for a reason," she said. "The neighbors are always on my property looking in my windows. I've seen Nancy's face pressed against the door more than once."

"I don't think I saw that coupon, Madison, but I'll help you look for it." Karen sifted through the rest of the mailers. She hoped Madison wouldn't tell her that whole story again. Madison loved complaining about her neighbors. She always thought they were calling to report her to the Department of Children and Family (when the kids were little) or animal control (she'd had six dogs at one point).

But Karen didn't see the coupon either. If the date was no longer good, she would have thrown it away. She didn't think Madison liked that store. When she shopped, Madison ordered off the Internet. She didn't leave her house often.

"Do you want to see my new dog?" Karen asked, thinking she could distract her sister. "I've been keeping him inside the porch since I got here. I didn't know if you'd want him in the house or not. I've been walking him. I got lucky: already house-trained." She smiled. She knew Madison liked animals. "We might have to shut him inside during the fireworks later. He gets scared around loud noises."

"I didn't know you had a new dog," Madison said. She faced the wall, still adjusting the curtains.

"It's only been a few weeks," Karen said. "Someone could still claim him." She told Madison how the dog had shown up on their property the day of the car wreck, with small, black eyes and a mud-encrusted muzzle that made him look like a tired old man. Like Karen's father-in-law, or at least that's who she'd thought of when she drew the animal to her with a piece of cheese, but she didn't mention that to Madison. She thought her sister would laugh or tease. Frank grew to look more and more like his father each day, and Karen loved how the little dog followed her around and paid attention to her in a way Frank hadn't done in years.

"I can tell Frank's not happy about the idea, but he's been quiet about the dog because of the wreck," she said. "I think he knows I could have been killed if I'd been inside the sewing room that day, and the insurance company has him jumping through all sorts of hoops. You know I'm no help with any of that."

"You'd actually give him back?" Madison followed Karen down the hall.

"If I have to. I wouldn't keep some kid's dog. The vet said he didn't have a chip, and he hadn't been neutered, so I'm hoping he's a stray." Karen waved her hands back and forth in front of her chest as she spoke. "Frank keeps saying I need to put up posters with his picture, but I'd hate to see him go." Karen had focused much of her time on the dog in the few weeks since his arrival. The school where she assisted Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Program students was out for summer vacation and besides letting in repairmen and working on Madison's quilt by hand, she hadn't done much with her break.

Puppup had chewed through part of the siding in an attempt to get something, some type of rodent, Karen guessed. She stopped and blocked the doorway to the porch when she saw the mess Puppup had made. *Think of an excuse, a distraction*, she told herself. She couldn't think of anything to say. She didn't want Madison to see the pieces of drywall and screen that now

littered the entrance, but Madison was right behind her and Karen didn't know what to do. She wasn't sure how Madison might react.

Puppup had managed to scratch the lime paint all around the area he'd torn down. He hadn't gone completely through the porch, but he'd done enough. Karen thought of the time her daughter's hamster had once chewed a hole in a throw blanket when she had left the cage sitting on the couch. Shredded fleece-fluff in shades of black, red, and gold mixed with aspen shavings in the bigger nest he'd painstakingly put together. No doubt he was immensely proud of his bed. Likewise, Puppup wagged his tail as if to tell Karen all about his hard work scaring off the animal. With his hair cut and groomed, Puppup looked like the eighteen-month-old the vet gauged him to be, a puppy, a young animal who didn't know any better.

"What are we waiting for?" Madison asked from behind Karen. "Is he out there or not?"

Karen stepped out onto the porch and held the screen door open, so Madison could see past her.

"It's not as bad as it looks," she said. "I'll pay for it. I promise. He didn't do anything like this at my house. I've been checking on him all day. It must have happened while I was making the cake." Karen could hear the whine in her voice and stopped speaking. She didn't want to fight anymore.

"Damn straight you'll pay for it. Do you know how much that porch cost me to put in? It didn't come with the house when I bought it. I added that."

Karen bit her cheek, trying not to cry. She knew Madison had a right to be angry. Madison had never said Karen could bring the dog, and now Karen had something else to fix.

Puppup knew he'd done wrong. He crouched in one corner, away from the door, short tail tucked down. Karen clicked her tongue, but he didn't come.

"I'm sorry," Karen said. "He must have smelled an animal inside the wall." She knelt next to Puppup. She wanted to pet him, so he wouldn't be frightened, but she didn't want to encourage his bad behavior.

"An animal outside, you mean. I don't have rats, Karen. You might, but I don't. I've never had to use those traps."

"Bad dog, bad," Karen said to Puppup and shoved his nose in the mess. "Should I tie him out back?" she asked, quietly. She didn't know what else she could do but apologize and clean up. Their cousins and Frank would arrive soon. If only Madison would tell her what she wanted, what Karen could do to make this all right. She wanted Madison to tell her what to do, to give her the instructions on how to be the older sister, the responsible one, now that Madison was not. Karen felt lost, like she was winging it every moment of every day, as a sister and wife and mother.

"Leave him there. I'd like to keep the destruction to one area, if possible." Madison left and turned on the television after slamming her bedroom door, and Karen couldn't help but think of the dirty words she could have called her sister, words that wouldn't have helped, words she swallowed down like the dessert you didn't like but ate anyway to please the cook.

Karen was once again alone. She mixed the mayonnaise-based potato salad, iced the cake with strawberry buttercream frosting, and rearranged the two-liters, hamburger buns, and chip bags on the counters. She wanted everything to look okay, to make sense. Should the cups be next to the refrigerator and ice dispenser? Or near the plates at the front of the assembly line? Not able to commit, she ended up setting half by the fridge and half by the plates. She lightly cleaned the guest bathroom and went through the house shutting all the doors to the rooms she hadn't cleaned. She was tired. Tired and angry and hurt. Her chest and head ached, and she

wished more than anything that she could leave, take the dog, and drive, not toward home, but away from everyone she knew.

Karen swept the porch, scraping most of Puppup's mess into a trash bag, and left him there. She didn't want to deal with him. She wanted to sew in silence. Soon the guests would arrive, and Karen would have to act the part of gracious host, though it wasn't her house. If she was going to make it through the night without tears, she needed time to herself. She needed a break. Sewing gave her a chance to rest, to relax, and the thought of her work caused her to draw a deep breath into her lungs.

She brought her sewing bag in from the car and closed herself in an empty bedroom. Unpacking, she laid the sandwiched quilt top out on the bed. She had spent hours picking out the fabric in Madison's favorite colors. She chose the pattern from a library book, cut sixteen triangles and sixteen squares for each quilt block, and pressed the finished squares one at a time before basting the layers together. The designs on the twelve different fabrics made it look both random and planned, each block a star placed inside a diamond. The entire quilt contained twenty-five of these diamonds. There was one step left: hand tying.

She picked up a needle already threaded with blue embroidery floss, but she didn't stab through the fabric. Instead, she buried her face in the quilt and sobbed, her shoulders shaking. The fabric smelled new, almost artificial, like it had permanently picked up the smell of the fluorescent-lit craft store where she'd shopped. The blanket wouldn't solve anything. Madison was plain mean, and that wasn't about to change.

Karen tore at the quilt top with her hands until the squares popped apart, ripping the hand-sewn seams. The earliest squares were the hardest, the ones she'd done on the machine before the wreck. But that didn't stop her. She used her seam ripper to dismantle them and let the

different-sized triangles and squares fall onto the bed like snowflakes. They littered the store-bought comforter. Madison wouldn't have appreciated the quilt, Karen told herself, as she cut into the fabric with her scissors. She had never done this to her work before, and the resulting pieces didn't look anything like the quilt it had been originally. She'd give Madison the card she'd bought and that was all she'd give her.

The pieces went back into her sewing bag. They weren't for Madison now.

#

Karen answered the front door when Frank kicked, his hands full with bags of fireworks, the sun setting behind him. He'd had to drive to the next county where they were legal to buy. She took a bag and set it down on the coffee table while he went back outside for their charcoal grill.

"The place looks nice. Madison help?" he asked when he entered the second time and sat on the sectional.

Madison turned the volume on her television louder, blaring the theme music to *Seinfeld*.

Karen nodded. She didn't trust her voice.

Frank ripped the plastic off the different boxes. He'd bought enough to last an hour if they timed it right.

"Cake smells good. I'm starving," he said.

"Strawberry." Karen picked up the plastic bags and the clear wrappers from the fireworks and threw them away in the kitchen trashcan. The back door opened and Puppup barked.

"Hello," Ellen called out.

"In the kitchen," Karen said. She opened the dishwasher and made a pile of plates and utensils on the counter.

Her cousin Ellen and Ellen's two teenaged children walked inside, letting Puppup run past them. Karen walked over and hugged Jonathan around the neck and kissed his cheek. The hair on his face was still patchy and light.

"Get that thing back outside before it scratches the clean floor," Frank said.

Ellen picked up Puppup, but she didn't put him outside. He licked her face while Candace scratched under the dog's throat.

"He's so cute," Candace said, flicking her braid over her shoulder. "Is he yours, Frank?"

"Not if I can help it," Frank said.

"He's mine for now," Karen said.

Frank grinned and winked at Candace, who laughed and took Puppup from her mother.

"Good thing he destroyed my back porch before they arrived," Madison said, walking into the kitchen. She'd changed into jean shorts and a purple shirt, and her hair was combed.

"Destroyed? I didn't see any mess. The place looks great," Frank said.

Madison poured a glass of water and didn't answer.

"We brought the hamburgers." Jonathan held up a box of raw patties and shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"Take them out to the grill," Frank said. "I'm coming." He snatched up the fireworks and followed Jonathan to the front porch.

Candace whispered to Puppup, "It's not your fault you were left alone." She set the dog on the floor and scratched his belly.

"Who else is coming?" Ellen asked.

"Maggie and Stan said they didn't know if they could make it." Karen carried the plates to

the round kitchen table in the dining room. "I didn't invite Vernon, which made your Mom mad, I guess, since she's not coming either.

"What about Jessica?"

"She's staying at school over the summer. She's got some job there in the dorms. You know she doesn't want to be at home with us now that her brother's moved out."

"Happy birthday, Karen," Ellen said, giving her a tight hug. "How can I help?"

"You're a week early."

"I know, but I think you deserve to hear it now." She took the plates from Karen and set the table.

#

They sang after eating, ending with "Happy birthday, dear Karen, Madison, Ellen, and Candace," and Ellen passed around the plates. She popped broken bits of cake and icing into her mouth between slicing. Strawberry cake was Ellen's favorite, and Karen had mostly made the cake for her and Candace. Madison wasn't likely to say thank you, especially not after the afternoon they'd had.

"Let's eat outside," Frank said, and they followed him to the porch. He set his plate on a railing and lit one of the fuses in the yard. Silver and pink sparks rained down from the three-foot tall fountain that sizzled in the grass. Karen liked Roman Candles best, and Frank let Jonathan light those next. Red and green lights shot into the sky, whistling.

Madison hadn't spoke much during dinner, but she stood close to Karen, their backs against the house, their eyes looking up, waiting for the smoke to clear.

THAT'S WHAT LOVE MEANT

Candace plumped the pillows and stacked up the pile of dirty clothes she'd placed on her bed. She threw her green plaid comforter over everything. In the dark, at a glance, she hoped it would look as if she were under there. She knew the body-shaped blob wouldn't pass inspection, but banked on the fact that her mom would be passed out after a twelve-hour shift. *Saturday Night Live* played low from the thirteen-inch box television on Candace's dresser while she dressed in black—leggings, sleeveless tank top, and a three-quarter-length-sleeve tee over that. Dark clothes made sneaking out seem a little more dangerous. Sometimes she wore a black beanie to complete the outfit, but not tonight. It wasn't cold enough for a hat.

She opened her bedroom door and listened. The dog, Puppup, slept in her mother's room. If he woke and wanted to go out, he'd lick her mom's hand until she woke up. But Candace wouldn't be able to hear that from her room. Her mother's snores mixed with the cricket chirps that came from the grass and gravel by the foot of Candace's window, and the light was out in her brother's room. She'd have to count on the fact that everyone, including the dog, was sleeping.

Leaving the television on to mask noises, Candace pushed her window screen up. She climbed out, and lightly dropped to the driveway outside, leaving a gap open in the window behind her. The night wind blew her hair, knocking it into her mouth, as she crouched behind her mother's Kia. Her boyfriend, Marty, would drive past her mailbox and turn around in the empty parking lot of the Children's Advocacy Center at the street corner. Then he'd pick her up on his way back through. That gave her maybe a minute or two to run down the hill through dew-wet grass past the neighbors' trailers, hoping none of them were awake either, to where his new

Honda Civic idled in front of the sign for Sunset View Mobile Home Park. They'd done this a handful of times, but each night always felt like the first to Candace. Exciting and scary.

The moon hung like a clock above her while she tried to listen to everything at once, prepared for any glitch in the plan. She knew she was louder because she was trying to be quiet, and that made her worry. Marty's car passed, slow. Candace ran down the hill, hunched over and careful to stay in the grass; she didn't want her shoes on gravel to wake Puppup. She went about halfway down. Then she crouched in the tall weeds near the neighbor's shed until Marty stopped the car, and she climbed inside.

"Hey, baby." He patted her head as he turned away from her place, and then let his hand glide over her chest. A twelve-ounce Red Bull sat in the console. Candace relocated his hand to her lap and chugged some of his energy drink. She knew that he knew she'd not worn a bra, and she liked his attention, she did, but right now she really wanted to sleep more than anything else. She hoped the sugar would kick in soon.

"What took you so long?" she asked. "I thought you were going to be here an hour ago."

"You want me to take you back?" Marty turned his head to Candace, grinned. He looked back at the road, and said, "Dad was up till eleven-thirty watching reruns of *M*A*S*H* in the living room."

Candace didn't return his smile, but she did kiss his neck.

"What do you want to watch tonight?" she asked, leaning her head against his shoulder. She'd told Marty on the phone that she didn't feel well, but he wanted her to come over anyway. If that's what he wanted, she wanted to be with him, too. She wanted to make Marty happy despite how tiring that could sometimes be. She liked the comfort of a steady boyfriend.

Marty turned his lights off as they approached his house and coasted into the driveway. They got out of the car quietly. He pulled the garage door up halfway and Candace ducked in after him. They had the next three or four hours to themselves. Some nights, when they hadn't been able to sneak away like this in a while, the garage was as far as they got. The adrenaline from sneaking out and driving on deserted streets had Candace excited long before they pulled into his driveway. On those nights, they'd climb in to the backseat of Marty's mom's car, tear off each other's clothes, and rush as they tried to consume each other.

That night, Candace followed behind Marty as he put in the security code and opened the door to the basement den. If his parents thought it was strange that in the last few months he'd decided to sleep on the sofa bed downstairs, instead of on the queen-size pillow-top in his bedroom, Candace hadn't heard anything about it from Marty.

He already had the mattress set up with light blue sheets and a fleece blanket. On his television, in the wooden entertainment center at the foot of the bed, *The 700 Club* played. He tiptoed up the carpeted staircase to listen for his parents, while Candace sat in a recliner by the couch and took off her shoes. It was a chilly night, and she climbed underneath the blankets to wait for him.

They cuddled there in the sheets after the first time, their limbs like octopus tentacles around each other, and then he let her sleep for a while, but he didn't sleep along with her. Candace knew he worried that they wouldn't wake up, and his parents would finally catch them. She'd asked him about it before.

Around three a.m., Marty kissed her, and when she didn't open her eyes immediately, he shook her shoulder, his face pressed close to her cheek. She got up and dressed, not caring when she pulled her shirt on inside out. As if the reverse button had been pressed, she followed him

back outside, back under the half-open garage, back into his car where she could close her eyes until he made her get out at the entrance to the trailer park.

One day, she wanted to be able to sleep next to him the whole night, Candace told herself. The couch bed was better than his car in the school parking lot, his car outside the movie theater, his car in her driveway, but she knew that wasn't real. A relationship couldn't be based on sex. Candace wanted them to still be together this time next year when he'd moved into his dormitory, but she'd never had much luck with getting what she wanted.

#

Mama simultaneously knocked and opened Candace's bedroom door.

"Wake up, girlie. Get your butt out of bed. It's almost noon. You're going to stop staying up all night on the phone." Mama picked up Candace's cell phone from the floor and put it on her dresser. "Come on. We've got to go see the old lady." She kicked at a pile of clothes. "And you should clean this room when we get back." She sniffed the air. "Do laundry, too." She smiled at Candace, who groaned and sat up.

Candace showered quickly. Then she followed her mother to the car to visit her Gramma who lived in a nursing home across town.

"If you don't start sleeping regular hours, I'm going to make you take the bus over here and visit with her after school every day." Mama pulled onto the highway. "No more band practice for you."

Candace shielded her eyes from the bright sunlight. "What's Jonathan doing?" she asked. "Why doesn't he have to come?" Candace knew her mother wouldn't go through with her threats. For all her fooling around, Candace was still second chair on flute, and she knew her mom hoped extracurricular activities would help Candace get college scholarships. Anyway, Candace was

the only one who liked visiting Gramma. She was meaner now that she'd lived in a nursing home for the past six months, but Candace didn't mind. Gramma was always nice to her.

"Your brother went over to Mr. Milliard's house to work on his science project with Simon."

Candace fiddled with the tuner on the radio, scrolling through stations as they drove past brick houses, a small synagogue shrouded in trees, and endless fields of two-foot-high green corn stalks. Mama preferred the *Jon Boy and Billy* show on weekday mornings. She'd bought their brand of barbecue sauce and used it anytime she made hamburgers or baked chicken. Candace liked classic rock. She couldn't wait to graduate and get out of this small town.

"Can we stop by the store, too?" Candace asked. "My throat's sore. I don't feel good. I need some cough drops." Her throat felt like it had been scrubbed with a bristle pad, and her lips were chapped. She sneezed. She hadn't felt this bad at Marty's last night.

"I guess we'll make this a short visit," Mama said. "I need to pick up her laundry. I told her you were coming by, so you're still going to have to come in, but don't cough on her."

Mama slowed down for a rabbit on the highway. Instead of crossing safely, it zigzagged back in to traffic, and Candace shut her eyes, gritting her teeth, as the front passenger-side tire bumped over the little animal. It had been less than a foot away from the adjacent field of horses.

#

The nursing home had alarms on the main entrance and on each floor. Visitors had to enter a code to come and go and to use the elevators. Hand sanitizer stations were set up at the entrance, outside the elevators, and inside each hallway. The place reeked of shit and antiseptic. The smell of lemon cleaner never could mask the scent of elderly residents who no longer had control of their bowels. At least Gramma never smelled that way. She could still go to the

bathroom on her own if you helped her walk there, and her hair always smelled like strawberry shampoo.

Candace and Mama took the elevator to the third floor and walked down the hall to where Gramma shared a room with a stroke victim named Vella. Someone had decorated the walls of the hallway with kids' drawings on white butcher paper. Santa and fat reindeer galloped along in one scene that had been up on the wall since last Christmas. They sidestepped the elderly who sat in wheelchairs like abandoned cars in some type of post-apocalyptic destroyed street. The people in the chairs didn't move or talk, but some of them gurgled as their eyes watched Candace walk by. Sometimes they'd call out, yelling for someone to fix a blanket or pillow or get them a washcloth. Their hands shook, and more than a few of them had bruises and scrapes on their faces from falling. Candace pretended she couldn't hear them, not because she was afraid or didn't want to help, but because the elderly seemed so fragile, already half out of this world. What if she hurt them? Or gave something that wasn't allowed? She hoped they didn't hate her for ignoring them. One day she'd act the same way if she found herself living in an understaffed nursing home with few visitors.

Inside Gramma's room two televisions showed reruns of *The Golden Girls*. Gramma's box TV, which was smaller, lagged a little behind Vella's. This made the theme song seem more like a round of music. Candace hummed along and mouthed the words she knew from heart. Sophia told Dorothy to get a life and criticized her for being boring on dates; it was the usual episode. Gramma had watched this show nearly every day when she babysat Candace and Jonathan when they were still little.

"Did you bring any clean clothes with you?" Gramma asked from her wheelchair next to the bed. She slowly pulled the plastic from a Little Debbie snack cake. She had the remains of

her dinner meal on a rolling tray in front of her, partially eaten, except for the pudding cup that had been emptied so completely only the clear plastic of the container remained. Brown stains, probably chocolate, streaked the front of her lilac sweatshirt.

Television audience laughter played in the background. A thick, suspended curtain separated Vella's side of the room, the side next to the window, from Gramma's. This day it was extended all along Vella's bed. She was either being fed or changed. Candace hoped it wasn't the latter, but with her congestion she wouldn't be able to smell it anyway.

"No, I had to work all day yesterday, and Candace isn't feeling well, so we haven't washed them yet." Mama looked at Candace, who'd forgotten she was supposed to do the laundry.

Mama dumped the container of dirty clothes into a trash bag from the bathroom, tied a knot, and sat this by the door. Candace sat at the end of Gramma's bed by her wheelchair, trying not to breathe in her grandmother's direction. At least being sick meant she couldn't smell the food on Gramma's plate. It looked worse than the food her school cafeteria served.

"I'm out of nightgowns," Gramma said.

Mama ruffled through a drawer of clothes.

"There are two right here, Mommy." Mama spoke to Gramma like she was Gramma's parent, not the opposite. "They need to look harder. And if they kept everything folded, like I put it in, they'd probably be able to find your clothes."

Gramma looked past Mama to the television, her mouth slightly parted, her snack cake hanging in one hand while the other sat in her lap trembling. She wouldn't argue with Mama in front of Candace, or so Mama had always told Candace. If Mama said something that upset Gramma, Gramma acted as if Mama wasn't there. Yet when Mama visited on her own, she'd

come home angry and complain to Candace about how Gramma must think Mama a thief. She'd tell her how Gramma didn't seem to understand that Medicaid paid more than ninety percent of her bill to live in the nursing home, with little left over to cover clothes and toiletries. Mama said Gramma didn't appreciate her.

"We hit a bunny on our way here," Candace said to change the conversation. "Mama tried to let it cross the road, but it came back in front of us." She blinked her itchy eyes.

Vella said something unintelligible from behind her curtain.

"Oh." Gramma turned to look at Candace. "Did I tell you the bunny story?" she asked.

Candace shook her head and tried to ignore the need to swallow while she listened. She shifted her weight, and the alarm on the bed shrieked. Gramma was a fall risk, so she wasn't allowed up without help. Mama pressed the button on the wall that turned off the alarm.

"I was sitting on the porch with Grampa one day when this bunny came up the hill," Gramma said. "It was moving real slow." She moved her arms in slow motion like she was dragging herself up some invisible mountain. Papery thin skin hung from the back of her forearms. She'd lost weight, Candace thought.

"Falling," Vella said, softly. Gramma kept talking.

"Then right behind this bunny came your mother's cat. Buster was moving just as slow." She moved her arms again, and Candace couldn't help but laugh. Her breath caught and she coughed into her sleeve.

"I didn't want the cat to get that bunny. He must have been chasing the poor thing for miles. Do you know what an old milk can looks like?" Gramma asked.

Candace, unsure, looked at her mother who finished re-folding the clothes in the dresser.

"I do," Mama said. "You remember the ten-gallon one I had, Candace. I used to keep those fake flowers in it by the fireplace in our old house on the highway." She made a gesture with her hands that indicated it would have been about two feet high with a width of about half that.

"I'm falling," Vella said.

Mama disappeared behind the curtain, and Gramma paused to cough into a tissue. An Old Spice commercial played on the television.

Gramma picked up a glass cup with a plastic lid and straw from her tray and fumbled for the straw with her lips. Candace resisted the urge to help her get a drink. She knew Gramma needed to do things for herself in order to stay strong. Gramma had to prove she was independent if she wanted to get out of this place. She used to want out. Now, Candace wasn't sure what Gramma wanted.

When Gramma first came to the nursing home, after her fall, she'd been placed on the second floor, for those who stayed temporarily. She met a physical therapist each day who let her practice walking with a walker and made her try to put on her own socks and feed herself. She'd have to master all of these, the therapist had told her, in order to go back home. Gramma's arthritis made it difficult for her to dress herself, but she still tried each day. Ever since she was moved to the third floor, where the permanent nursing home residents lived, she'd been angry with Mama.

"So I picked up this bunny and I wiped dirt off him and put him at the bottom of an empty milk can with a few pieces of lettuce," Gramma said. "Grampa wouldn't let me bring it in the house, so I left it out on the porch with a piece of cardboard on the top. The next morning I went outside and moved the cardboard, and the little bunny jumped right out and ran away. I

didn't think it could jump that high!" Gramma smiled, revealing toothless gums, and Candace smiled back.

She thought of how often she'd stayed with Gramma as a child. One time when Candace was crying—maybe she was sick or hurt or she missed her Dad; she didn't remember—Gramma told her a story about a huge farmhouse with a wraparound porch where several sisters and brothers lived together. There was always someone outside on the porch no matter which direction you approached, and they were always doing something fun. In the story, two of the sisters were trying to learn how to yo-yo. Candace loved that story, because it almost seemed like her own memory since she'd asked Gramma to tell it so many times. Even now, she could picture the two women in light blue gingham dresses laughing, their fingers tangled in string. It was a story that made her feel safe and warm, even if it didn't quite make sense.

Mama came out from Vella's curtain when an orderly arrived. Mama raised her eyebrows and exchanged a glance with Candace, who knew her mother thought Gramma was confused again. The last time they'd visited, Gramma had complained of bugs crawling on her skin and a baby in the room that wouldn't stop crying. Gramma had said she sat on this baby, a little girl with pigtails, in order to shut her up. The nurses had Gramma tested for a urinary tract infection and ruled the confusion as a complication. Candace thought this bunny story was different, something that had actually happened. At least that bunny got away.

The orderly opened Vella's curtain, and Gramma placed her hand on his arm.

"Steve, have you met my granddaughter?" she asked.

"I don't think I have, Miss Gladys," he said.

"It's nice to meet you," said Candace.

He teased Gramma about combing her hair later, and she patted his hand before he left.

It had been a good day. Sometimes they visited, and Gramma couldn't wake up enough to speak to them, let alone to tell stories.

#

Candace and Marty were play fighting after school over who got to stand under the hot water in the shower. Marty's short blond hair stuck close to his scalp when wet. Candace pretended not to notice his receding hairline, the thinning that had started before she'd met him even though he was seventeen. If Marty spiked his hair with gel, as he'd done today, his scalp peeked through like the crisp flesh of a peeled apple. On afternoons when they sat in the school parking lot in his car and listened to the radio, he changed the station when commercials for hair loss treatment came on. They'd heard the guy talking about lasers so often, Marty could pinpoint the commercial from the first spoken syllable. When this happened, Candace suggested they listen to a burnt CD instead. As far as she was concerned, his small imperfections didn't exist. That's what love meant: omission.

Marty was almost half a foot taller than Candace, and he could easily block her from the stream of water in the white-tiled shower. She couldn't get past him. He faced her, his back to the water. There were goose bumps on her arms and legs and warm water droplets along the love handles above his hips. Marty brushed strands of hair from her face and kissed her forehead as she looked down. She didn't like his chaste, grandfather kisses, not that she knew what it would be like to be kissed by a father or grandfather. They'd both died when she was still a toddler. It felt weird to have his lips there. Candace tickled the inside of Marty's thighs with her fingernails. He jumped and knocked his head against the frosted shower doors, making them rattle, as he tried to get away from her. She moved into the stream of water, her back to Marty.

He was an only child, and they often spent their days at his house for the few short hours that his parents were not home. Candace still had two more years of high school, and she didn't know when she'd see Marty once he moved to a college four hours away. Her mother would never allow her to visit him there unsupervised, if she'd known they were dating, which she didn't. He said he would visit Candace, but he said this when they were cuddling, right before or after sex, tangled in each other and the sheets.

"I went to see my Gramma yesterday," Candace said.

"Oh yeah." Marty shampooed his hair and soaped his face, eyes closed.

"She told me a story about a bunny."

"Can I rinse off?" he asked, already edging past her.

"She trapped it inside a milk can to save it from the cat."

"Uh huh." He picked up a bar of soap.

A car door slammed in the driveway, and the garage opened, groaning below them. Candace stared at Marty, sure she had caricature eyes too large for her face, like Rei Ayanami from *Evangelion*, Marty's favorite anime. He froze shots of Rei on his TV and drew her white-banded body in a skin-tight one piece, her short blue hair always in her eyes. Candace imagined her own naked body bandaged after Marty's mother, Sharon, caught them together. Candace had a long thick braid that was much prettier than Rei's cropped haircut, which would serve as a handle for Sharon as she pulled Candace away from Marty. Candace didn't think Sharon would actually hurt her, but that would have been better than what she would do: call Candace's mother.

"It's going to be fine. Sit down," Marty said. He stepped out and hung a towel on the rack outside of the shower door, so it hid Candace's silhouette, and then he got back into the shower.

"She gets an hour, and she probably already used some of that time. She might not come back here. Just stay there," he said. Marty kissed her forehead again. Candace frowned at the smudged pen marks on her hand: she had a test tomorrow in Chem.

"It's okay. And be quiet."

She scrunched up her knees, her back against the cold tile of his shower and looked at Marty. She wanted to tell him about how she couldn't remember where she'd left her clothes in his room as they undressed, that they could be in the hallway leading to his room for all she knew, about how she felt like she might be sick, not sure what she'd say to Marty's mother if caught. She hated sneaking around. Marty's parents didn't want him dating anyone, not so close to graduation. Marty had told Candace how his mother wanted him to focus on bringing his first period English grade up, since he was so often late to school. She didn't know he was late because he stayed up half the night with Candace, sleeping three or four out of eight hours.

Candace pressed her thumbs into the flesh of her upper arm and watched as she left a faint red outline. Marty pissed toward the drain, and Candace looked away, ignoring the sharp scent, and studied the scant three feet between the shower and the door, a thin barrier between her and Sharon. Candace was afraid to relax, afraid to let the tension from her body, as if breathing naturally would make too much noise.

She listened for Sharon, wishing that she had some kind of super power, at the very least invisibility. Candace knew the layout of this house as well as she knew her own trailer, and though she couldn't see Sharon, Candace knew where and what she might do. She imagined she could see Sharon enter the basement downstairs through the garage and walk up the carpeted stairs and into the kitchen, one room over from Marty's bathroom. Keys and plastic rattled as Sharon set her lunchbox and purse on the counter and emptied her dirty dishes into the sink. She

might put uneaten food back into the refrigerator. She would call out to Marty, hear the shower, and knock on the bathroom door when he didn't answer.

As if on cue, Sharon said something Candace couldn't quite hear over the water. The door cracked open. Candace fought the urge to cough. Her mother didn't open the door when she was showering.

"Did you remember to turn in the payment for your senior page?" Sharon asked.

"I dropped it off before school started, Mom." Marty looked at Candace as he spoke, held a finger to his mouth. She put her head on her knees and breathed in through her nose.

"Okay, I wanted to check. What do you want for dinner tonight?"

Marty opened the frosted doors partway and stuck his head out of the shower. Candace stroked his ankle with one finger. He moved his foot out of her reach.

"Umm, chicken and dumplings?"

Mama cooked most nights, too. She wouldn't be home for another two hours. If Sharon found her, Candace would have to give Sharon the work phone number. Mama worked as a security guard for an insurance company downtown. She'd told Candace how every thirty minutes she made her rounds through the building alternating up and down the stairs, walking through the hallways, her footsteps drowned out by the drone of typing and phone calls. Candace didn't know what Mama would do if interrupted at work, but knew it would involve not seeing Marty, not staying after school, riding the bus, checking in by calling from the house phone. She might have Candace's brother keep an eye on her. Jonathan didn't know that Candace was dating Marty. Mama and Jonathan knew she had daily after-school band practice and Marty drove her home afterward. That was all they knew. There would have been too many questions if they

knew about Marty. They wouldn't have understood why Marty didn't want to tell his parents about their relationship. Candace didn't understand it herself.

"I'll have to run to the store after work. We're out of carrots," Sharon said.

Candace hoped Sharon would stay out of Marty's room. She knew her backpack wouldn't give her away. Her phone was still on vibrate, inside her purse, wherever she'd left it earlier. He could always say he'd given her a ride and she'd forgotten her bag. And if Sharon had noticed, she would have said something by then. Sharon already thought Candace took advantage of Marty, asking for rides after band practice, at least that's what Marty had said. Sharon didn't seem to understand that Mama worked and without a ride, Candace couldn't have participated in band at all. Candace had never actually spoken with Sharon before, but they'd seen each other at band functions when other parents came before the competitions.

Marty let the water run for as long as he could, but Sharon still didn't leave the house. He got out, grabbed an extra towel from the linen closet in the bathroom, and left Candace there, exposed except for the towel he'd left on the outside of the shower door. He shut the bathroom behind him and turned on the overhead fan, so Candace had no idea where Sharon was in the house, but she would have heard the door to the garage shut, or so she told herself. The steam from the bathroom kept her warm for a little while, but her goose bumps soon came back. Candace wanted to stretch her legs out, but she kept her knees to her chest so her body stayed behind the towel Marty had hung. The back of her throat itched. She wanted Sharon to finish her break and go back to work. Sharon had to have been home for forty-five minutes, and the State Farm office where she worked was at least a ten-minute drive away. Why hadn't she left yet?

If they hadn't been in the shower, Marty would have made Candace hide between the wall and his bed, which is where she imagined he threw all of her things once he got into his

bedroom. He'd done it before. She'd hid there along with her clothes until he could sneak her out of the house. Candace loved Marty, and she knew how strict his parents were; she never would have hidden like this for someone else. She did it for him. For them.

What felt like hours later, Marty came into the bathroom and helped Candace out of the shower. He rubbed her back as she coughed.

"Have you had to do that this whole time?" he asked.

Candace nodded, and he apologized.

"What were you saying about your grandmother? She was having a good day?"

"It's nothing. Never mind."

Marty's back rub turned into caresses and kissing in his bed, and they had sex again. Now that Sharon had come and gone, they had more time. Marty's father never came home from work early. From within her purse, Candace's cell phone vibrated loudly. She knew Marty liked to answer his phone and speak to his mother while continuing to have sex with her.

"Ignore it," he said. Marty kissed the side of her neck.

The phone vibrated again, either to indicate a text message or voicemail. Candace wondered who'd be calling. Mama thought she was still at band practice. Maybe Jonathan had missed the bus? She was distracted. Marty groaned loudly and rolled off her. Candace used a towel to finish drying off and grabbed her things from behind the bed.

She didn't have a chance to look at her phone until they were back in Marty's car. The screen indicated she had a missed call from her mother and one new voicemail. She didn't want to listen to it in case Mama had figured out what she was really doing after school. That wasn't something she'd want Marty to overhear. She cleared the updates and put the phone back in her purse. Marty rubbed her neck, then held onto her hand.

"I hope you start feeling better soon, babe," he said. "I don't like seeing you like this."

Candace laid her head on his shoulder until he turned the car onto her road. They couldn't kiss when he dropped her off in case someone saw, so she grabbed her bag, smiled, and told him thanks for the ride.

"Text me later or something," he called out as she walked up the stairs.

Mama was on her cell phone pacing the living room when Candace walked inside. She seemed upset, but Candace couldn't figure out who Mama was talking to. She kept saying yes and nodding her head.

"Did you get my message?" Mama asked after she hung up. She grabbed Candace's hand. "Honey, your Gramma went to the emergency room this afternoon."

Candace didn't know what to think or say. She couldn't imagine not visiting her Gramma every weekend, though she dreaded going into that smelly brick building. She missed Gramma's basement apartment. She hoped it was something small and Gramma would be okay.

"What happened? Is she all right?" Candace asked.

"She had a stroke. I tried calling you, but I guess you were still at practice."

Candace dropped her bag, guilt choking her like vomit at the back of her throat. She covered her mouth and blinked against the tears that threatened. Candace was having sex while her grandmother rode alone in an ambulance. Who knew how long Gramma had been suffering before a nurse had realized? She couldn't have been able to reach the call button. Vella wasn't loud enough to call for help, and with her curtain closed, it was unlikely she'd noticed. If Candace had actually been visiting the old lady, maybe she'd still be okay—still unhappy, but okay. Candace would have at least made sure the nurses took care of Gramma quickly.

Mama let go of Candace's hand to feel her forehead.

"Are you feeling any better today?"

"No. But." Candace didn't know what she wanted to ask. She hadn't known anyone who had had a stroke except for Gramma's roommate, Vella, who lived behind a curtain, her only excitement stemming from a McDonald's cheeseburger smashed up enough for someone to feed her little pieces. Candace had never known Vella any other way. She didn't want to know how Gramma would change. She liked the stories Gramma told, even if she was confused most of the time.

"They don't know yet how much damage occurred," Mama said. "I've got to go back to the hospital in an hour. I came home to change and to tell you to get into bed."

Candace sat down on the edge of the couch. She felt so very tired.

"Can I see her?" she asked.

"You need to get better first. I made you a doctor's appointment for tomorrow morning. Jonathan is staying with Simon tonight. If you're not contagious, I'll take you both to see Gramma tomorrow."

Puppup lay next to Candace's feet and licked her toes. Candace rubbed her hand through the dog's fur. Mama hugged Candace tightly and kissed the top of her head before leaving.

"You can stay out of school tomorrow, honey," she said. "Go get some rest. I'll be home later."

#

Candace crawled into her bed and listened to her mother's car pull away. She wondered if Gramma was going to die. Candace couldn't remember ever going to a funeral, though she had pictures of herself and Jonathan next to their father's tombstone in Maryland. They were still pretty young when he'd drowned in a fishing accident. Mama didn't like talking about him, and

because Candace had never known what it was like to have a father, she didn't miss the man she couldn't remember. In that way, she'd been lucky. She already missed Gramma, who had taught her how to make doughnuts and played baseball in her little backyard. They had walked to the ice cream store near her house and floated paper boats on the creek they passed. But it had been years since they'd done any of those things together. Gramma's arthritis had worsened until she could hardly walk from the front door to the car without getting winded.

Candace texted Marty, still not sure what to think.

"Tht was Mama calling. Gramma had a stroke."

"☹"

"Prolly won't be at school tmrw. Doc apt. Then visit Gramma." She typed quickly, hoping he could understand through the short, succinct text messages that she was not at all doing well with the news.

"So..... You won't be coming over tomorrow afternoon?" he texted.

She didn't understand how Marty could still be thinking about sex after all she had told him. She wanted him to be different, but she wasn't sure what he could do that would make her feel better at this point. She let her head hit the wall behind her. She cried for Gramma and for Marty, too. Things could never be the same, not anymore.

Candace stared at the ceiling above her bed while she wondered if Gramma would still be able to talk. She knew a stroke victim could permanently lose control over one side of their body. Candace had taken a CPR and First Aid class at school a few years ago, and a section in the workbook had covered strokes. That's how she knew the acronym FAST, but she couldn't remember what the letters stood for. She'd missed that question on the quiz. She couldn't

remember the medical term for stroke, either, but she did remember how the CPR dummy had an upper torso and was covered in a large, grey tee shirt knotted at the end.

Sometimes Candace woke from a nightmare to find herself unable to move, certain someone was in the room with her. She would tell herself to sit up, to yell, anything, but her body wouldn't listen. She was trapped, still asleep. Sometime later, what felt like forever, she would wake, for real, drenched in sweat and catch herself before screaming.

If Gramma never talked again, Candace suspected the words would still be there, caught behind a tongue that couldn't shape the sounds, with a brain that had forgotten how to work, and Candace couldn't always be there to listen.

TWIN CITY DOUBLE FEATURE

Last fall my best friend, Christy, told our group of friends she was being stalked, that one night she'd been kidnapped from her bedroom and raped inside a barn, and we all believed her. The details were so specific: she told us how she'd been drugged and woke up on a mattress on a dirt floor with her arms zip-tied behind her back. We tried to find the guy. Christy's boyfriend drove around the neighborhood looking for him and the barn. She lived two blocks from our high school, and it was this hilly neighborhood that he drove through after school. Adam couldn't find the place, not where she'd said it would be, at least.

Adam, Christy, and I were sitting on the concrete stairs that exited the gym when he told us this. From my perch at the top of the steps, I could see the brown, dead grass of the football field, the side of the white-washed stadium, and beyond the chain-link fence that bordered the edge of the school property: the tops of houses and one red barn in her neighborhood. I was wondering if Adam had really checked inside that barn, if that was where she had been attacked, when Christy's cell phone rang. She stared at the screen as the ringing continued.

"It's him," she said in a low voice. She stood up and leaned against the metal stair railing. The wind tugged at her wavy, blond hair. She pushed the phone at me and pulled her hands inside the sleeves of her blue winter coat. I expected her to cry or shiver or do something other than stand there. I didn't know anything about rape or the after-effects, and I hadn't actually considered her point of view, but she was my best friend, and I believed her absolutely when she said this had happened to her.

"Hello?" I answered. "We're calling the police. You won't get away with this," I said, and I waited, but no one replied. When I looked back at the screen, the call had ended, so I handed

the phone back to her. I didn't think to ask why the rapist had her cell phone number. Or how he had gotten her out of her house at night without waking her three brothers or parents. And I didn't ask why she didn't tell her parents, but instead waited until Monday to tell her friends. I sort of knew about rape kits from watching *Law and Order*, but I knew it was too late to suggest one this far after the event.

"I think we should call the police right now," Adam said. "Isn't there a time limit on this sort of thing?" He wrapped his arms around Christy and lay his head against her shoulder. "They'll know what to do," he said.

"You'll scare him off. Let's wait." Christy said. "We might still be able to find him. Wait," she said, so we did.

I drove home that afternoon, my chest tight. I wondered if we'd made the right choice. Maybe I should have told Mama, but I didn't want to upset Christy. I thought I was helping by respecting her wishes.

The next day, in the cafeteria before school started, she said it was over.

"What do you mean it's over?" I asked.

Christy took a drink from the travel mug of chamomile tea she brought to school with her each morning. She explained how she'd poisoned the guy. Poisoned him with dried spider legs. She'd dropped them into his drink or injected it into his I.V. (I forget which). He was in a coma at Indian Path Medical Center, not expected to recover, she said. We could check. We could confirm her story. She felt so bad about what she'd done that she didn't want us to call the police anymore. It was over, she said. Let him die in peace.

Adam and I exchanged looks. Neither of us questioned her. Adam didn't believe her; I think he actually did call the hospital, and they broke up not long after this happened.

Until then, I had never thought to wonder about her mental health, but afterwards I felt sure the rape was made up. I didn't tell her this, of course. We never spoke about the rape again. If it was true, and she'd made up the part about spider legs, how could I tell? I couldn't ask. I didn't want to admit to her that I doubted her story. Still, I wondered how many times she had lied to me. Christy was my friend, a friend with two parents and a house where I could almost forget I had only a mom at home and no dad in sight. Sometimes it was like I was a part of her family, too, and I loved her for this, so I pretended like I had believed her, and I tried not to worry about how these lies were destroying our friendship.

Christy was always dragging me into something. Back then I thought the purpose of Christy's story with the supposed rape was to find out how much Adam cared about her. Her summer plans involved me and James, the new guy she liked. The guy she didn't want to like me. It was June, the summer after our high school graduation, the last summer before I went away to college on scholarship and Christy stayed in Bristol. She'd received the same academic scholarship offer as me. I was still a little mad that she'd decided not to come, after I'd filled out all the paperwork and basically applied for her. I couldn't get her to visit the campus. I knew I was being selfish, but her not going sort of felt like I didn't mean anything to her. I wanted to try to cement our relationship into a friendship that would last. I wanted to always be a part of her family. I would have done anything for us to stay close.

#

James drove Christy and me downtown to show off the house his parents had recently put up for sale. It was past eight, and Christy and I had both got off work early from Big Top, the restaurant by the Interstate where we'd worked for the past year. The bowling alley *was* still open, but none of us wanted to keep score by hand that night, and there was nothing else to do in

our small town besides drive around. The sun went down, and I stared at the red and pink sunset from my seat in the back of his SUV.

Most of the guys Christy knew wore belts and bracelets with spikes and had long stringy hair that covered their eyes while they slept in class. James was tall, close to six foot and had thick, black hair that didn't look like it would ever thin. He was a little on the skinny side, which was okay in my opinion, and he dressed like he was about to go out on the putting green. He was in college already. He wore thin, wire glasses that made him look more intellectual than the boys we were used to hanging out with. He was certainly more attractive than the boyfriend I had broken up with six months before. He drove with one hand and propped his other arm along the open window.

"How long have you two been friends?" I asked.

Christy answered from the passenger seat, turning around to look over her shoulder, the gap between her front teeth accentuated by the darkness inside the car.

"We went to church together at Higher Ground in Kingsport for years until James's family moved to another church," she said.

"Yeah, I hadn't seen Christy until a few weeks ago when we came back to Higher Ground. We picked up right where we left off, didn't we?" he asked, looking at her.

I wanted to ask where exactly they had left off, but imagined it couldn't have been too serious in middle school. They laughed, and I forced a smile.

James drove around what my mother always referred to as "dead man's curve." The side of the road dropped off, and there was nothing but trees and other foliage down the steep embankment. It felt like peering down into some dark hole. I couldn't see where the trees ended and the shadows began. I was glad we were on the inside lane against the hill. James was going

faster than the twenty-five mph speed limit. I didn't say anything to him about that, but I did hold onto the bar above my head and double-check that my seat belt locked correctly.

"We used to hang out every Wednesday and Sunday night," Christy said. Later, she'd tell me they had been dating up until he moved, and for some reason, he had never called to let her know why he wasn't at church anymore. But Christy didn't say this until after he had left that night, after there was no chance of him confirming or denying her story.

For the rest of the ride, Christy and James reminisced and talked about people I'd never met, mostly church members. How Morgan's sister had died from some combination of strep and the flu. How the Kirks divorced and Ronnie married some girl named Michelle. I hadn't been to church with Christy in at least two years, I didn't know any of these people, and I had no idea what to say. It was hard for me to talk to someone I didn't know well. I'd analyze the conversation in my head over and over, worrying whether or not I'd said the wrong thing or given the wrong impression, and then I sometimes lost track of what we'd been talking about in the first place.

When we arrived at James's parents' place, I let them walk alone through the empty house first. I stood outside in the damp grass under a pair of willow trees while the mosquitoes nibbled on my exposed arms and legs. There was nowhere to sit. Christy had grabbed James's hand and run ahead. I knew that meant she wanted me to stay behind, and I had a feeling we weren't supposed to be there, so I tried to stay out of sight under the trees in the backyard. It was a nice subdivision with carefully manicured lawns and two-car garages. This house had the longest driveway off the dead-end road.

Fireflies lit up the dark sky. If it weren't for the mosquitoes, it might not have been that bad to stand there alone, at least not at first. It was kind of pretty; I could see the stars and I

searched the sky for the big and little dipper, the North Star, but my feet were cold, and I soon exhausted the extent of my astronomy knowledge, which, truthfully, was limited. After about fifteen minutes, I walked around to the back of the brick house to look for them.

Christy and James were making out inside the doorway, and I watched for a few seconds, sure that they couldn't see me. Their eyes were closed, Christy's arms around his neck, her back against the wall. I missed my ex. I'd known three of Christy's previous boyfriends, but I didn't usually see them physically connected like this. I had seen them holding hands in the hallways at school, and later she told me about how they had sex under her skirt with the bedroom door open and the whole family home. It was weird seeing this aspect of Christy's life right before me, a part of my own life that had been missing recently.

I rapped against the glass of the screen door with my knuckles, and they jumped apart.

Christy wiped at her mouth and pulled at the ends of her shirt.

"Ready for your tour?" James asked.

He quickly walked Christy and me through the one-story, four-bedroom house. He didn't turn on any of the inside lights. It felt cool, despite the lack of air conditioning.

#

"And this is the kitchen," he said. He waved his arms like Vanna White.

We had come all the way through the house. It was completely empty, except for the black kitchen appliances. Only the scent of lemon cleaner and a blue sponge by the sink remained. It was hard to get a sense of what the house had looked like with people living there. I thought of how this would make a good spot to sneak away to with your girlfriend, and I questioned, not for the first time that night, why I had been invited along.

In the car on the way back, we listened to Delilah's radio show, and I hummed along to Van Halen's "Hot For Teacher." They didn't speak, and I didn't know where to start a new conversation. I felt like they were mad at me, but I didn't know what else I could have done. It had been cold and dark and boring outside alone.

Right before he left Big Top's parking lot, James asked for my cell number.

"You can text me while this one's busy," he said, pointing at Christy. I guess he wanted someone else to message. Maybe he was lonely. I didn't think it was a big deal.

She nodded, and I read my number out to him as he punched it into his phone.

#

Christy had my phone with her on backline. I'd given it to her because hers was dead, and she needed to call her mom on break and explain that she'd picked up an extra shift to close that night. She kept my phone out of sight under the plastic counter on one of the stock shelves stacked high with foiled sandwich wrappers. She said she was waiting for her mom to call back, but she didn't tell me that James had texted and she was responding. I didn't find out until she told me she'd come up with a plan to teach James a lesson. She decided that I would go to the drive-in theater on the parkway, the old one that had a v-shaped tear on the upper right-hand side of the screen. I would go there with James, maybe *tell* him I'd have sex with him while the movie played, his black Ford Expedition backed into a gravel spot at the back of the lot. Yet I wouldn't really, she decided that night.

"It will be like standing him up, Candace," she said. "At the intermission between movies, tell him you're going to the bathroom. But instead text me, and I'll come pick you up by the exit. He should know better than to hit on you right after kissing me. He knows you're my best friend."

"Okay," I said, though I wasn't exactly agreeing. I couldn't believe she thought it was okay to pretend to be me, but I didn't want to get into a fight with her at work. I didn't know what to do. Maybe I could think of a way to get out of the plan.

I stood on a small footstool near the register at the front of the restaurant and took apart the shake machine while Christy talked to me from the backline. She was wearing metal-mesh gloves while she cleaned the slicer. We both wore matching black ball caps and black aprons with embroidered roosters over our green and black uniforms. Christy's hat barely contained her frizzy blonde curls, but she still looked sort of cute to me with her small round glasses and that gap between her teeth.

"So you think it's a good idea, too?" she asked.

Before I could figure out my answer, the drive-thru sensor beeped, and I spoke into my headset, "Welcome to Big Top! Would you like to try our signature cordon bleu?" I punched the order into the register and leaned against the counter while they drove around the building. I cashiered and filled drinks, and Christy made their food.

"Thank you. If you could pull ahead, we'll bring your order out to you as soon as it's ready," I told the lady with bright blue eye shadow.

Our night manager, Sherry, was out back for a third smoke break, and Lindy, another employee, was vacuuming the dining room. Christy was eighteen already, so she could work the slicer; she could work backline. She could text and get away with it. I couldn't. I wouldn't be eighteen for another month, and I had to be visible in case any customers came inside. I didn't like to be seen with splatters of shake mix down the front of my apron, but, hey, I had a job to do.

In her replies, Christy teased James and asked him to drive up, or at least that's what she told me she said. She let him know the drive-in double feature would be worth the money spent in gas for driving thirty minutes (from his new house) out of his way. Friday, she planned, the next night, my night off from the restaurant. James and I would see the new Fantastic Four movie, she told me, not that it mattered at all what played. I knew I'd be too worried to pay much attention, too conflicted about leaving him there, though I had been looking forward to the movie.

I laughed quietly, laid my head against the wall, and shut my eyes for a minute, my hands coated in a clumpy mixture of suds and thick vanilla shake mix. This was yet another situation I'd let Christy get me into.

When I was little, my brother taught me to laugh whenever I was hurt. He said it took the pain away. When our daddy died, I laughed and laughed but I still felt empty.

I definitely didn't think Christy's plan was a good idea. I shouldn't have let her borrow my phone. I could have insisted she use the office phone, but I didn't think it would be a big deal at the time. I should have known she'd snoop.

I finished wiping out the shake machine and mentally listed all the things I still had to finish before closing time: re-stock the shelves and freezers, clean the fry station, wash the dishes, sweep, scrub, and mop the floors. At least I didn't have to vacuum. I hated vacuuming.

Christy cleaned out the heat chute while I took the metal parts of the fry station to the sink to be washed. She followed me with a handful of empty sauce bottles.

"James deserves it," she said. "He's not a nice guy."

I nodded and helped her wash and sanitize the bottles. I could tell Christy I was mad and that what she'd done was shitty, but she'd had more nerve in a few hours to set up a date with

James than I had in days. We'd talked about shopping and our favorite stores in the texts I'd sent. I had to admire her for that.

"Nice guys don't act like that," she said.

#

At eleven, I closed Big Top's drive-thru window, latching the crossbar, and locked the dining room. Sherry was still nowhere in sight. If she wasn't out back chain-smoking or smoking a joint, my bet was that she had to refill her vodka-Sprite from the flask she kept in her truck. We didn't worry about her. The regular store manager watched all the security tapes; if anyone was going to get in trouble, it would be Sherry.

Christy wrapped up the last of the sandwich meat, and I finished the dishes. At this point, we were both too tired to talk, and I kind of hoped she'd drop the whole idea. I didn't want her to ignore me for three days like the last time we fought. I had told her to act on her acceptance letter, but she hadn't and I had to choose a dorm-mate. She wasn't going to college with me, but she was still angry with me for choosing Stefanie, a girl I knew from art class. She wouldn't acknowledge me at the lunch table or in class, and she didn't answer when I called. Then one morning, she acted as if nothing had changed and we were back to being friends.

We went through the motions of cleaning up. The grease and oil seeped into our pores and the cotton uniforms we wore. It always seemed to make Christy's face break out, too. It felt like we'd always be working there, but I knew we didn't have much time left together.

The parking lot was dark outside; a bulb in the restaurant sign had blown. Christy handed back my phone after clearing the message history. She climbed into her Nissan Altima, lit a cigarette, and pulled out with her windows down. Usually we sat and talked in the parking lot for a few minutes. She seemed in a rush, and I waved as she left.

I locked my doors and flipped through my phone. I had the newest message from James, a smiley emoticon. I wondered what she'd said to make him smile, wondered if she'd promised things I couldn't give.

Maybe I should do this. For us. Even though the idea made my stomach feel like I'd eaten a bag of gummy bears instead of dinner, a sickly sweet feeling coating the inside of my mouth. James had been nice to me in the little time we'd spent together, and he had always responded to my texts. I didn't want to be mean because she thought he was being unfair.

#

James met me in the parking lot outside the restaurant. Christy, who was on her break, smiled and hugged him as usual, like she didn't care that he and I had a date, though it had been a week since I'd seen them kissing each other at James's parents' house. I gave her a hug, too. Her break was almost over. She whispered in my ear, reminding me to text her halfway through the movie when I'd successfully left James behind.

It was hard to climb into his Ford in my outfit. I hadn't known what to wear, so I dressed up like I would normally for a date. Christy told me to wear my new—short—red and black plaid skirt from the clearance rack at Belk. I liked feeling his eyes follow me around. Christy was right when she said that he'd like it.

I barely knew this guy. How was I supposed to ditch him after he drove up here? I wanted to go on this date. I knew what I was supposed to do. I was supposed to get away at the break between movies and text Christy, but it didn't seem like it would be that easy. I didn't know that I could pull myself away. I thought James liked me better than Christy, and that was why he'd wanted my phone number.

James didn't know how to get to the drive-in, so at first we talked about the directions. I tried not to look around his vehicle or at him too much, but I did see the blankets he'd stashed in the back. He'd cleaned the car since the last time I rode in it. There wasn't any trash, and he'd taken out his golf clubs and the tennis balls that had cluttered the SUV the week before. It smelled like him, or what I imagined he must smell like, some cologne. His black hair was wet, and I could tell he'd tried to look nice. His polo matched the blue in the plaid shorts he wore.

"So you said you're transferring to a school back up here?" I asked.

"Yeah, my parents want me close by." James took his eyes off the wheel to look at me. I wiped my hands against the seat.

"Okay, you're going to drive straight for a while. This takes you out past the speedway. You ever been out this way before?" I asked. I wanted to ask if he randomly hooked up with chicks he didn't know. I wanted him to like me, to want this for the same reasons—not so I could teach him a lesson, but because he actually liked me.

"To the races a couple years ago," he said. "I didn't drive. Too far."

I wasn't sure I could go through with this. He drove all the way from his parents' new house, picked me up, and now had to drive to the Twin City Drive-In on the parkway. Christy still expected me to leave him there, to ditch him, but then what? What would I say when he realized I hadn't come back? What if he called the police? What about the next day? Wouldn't that be too mean, worse than he deserved for being a teenaged guy, and how could I let him waste his gas when I knew how it was to work hard and never make enough money?

I figured I'd know if this was a date when he paid for my ticket. If he made me pay, I could leave him. But if he paid, maybe he wanted more out of this than Christy said he did.

James scratched at his scalp like a dog trying to hit that sweet spot, the itch right out of reach.

"What is wrong with you?" I asked, laughing.

"My scar itches. Feel it." James took my hand and guided my fingers over the large ropy scar that curved along the side and back of his head like a hook. "I had brain surgery as a baby," he said.

It felt gross, but I was impressed. He'd told me, through text, that he was studying accounting. I was surprised he'd always enjoyed school, considering the surgery. For the rest of the car ride we talked about his family and how his grandparents had adopted him soon after birth. His mother didn't have the money to cover his medical bills, so he was raised thinking she was his sister and his uncle his brother.

Once, I'd had two cats give birth within weeks of each other. The mothers didn't care whose babies they fed. But I always wondered if the kittens knew which was their real mother. Maybe it had been something like that for James. I couldn't imagine finding out the woman who raised me wasn't who I thought she was.

We joined the queue of cars waiting in line to turn in to the theater. The drive-in had been there as far back as I could remember and was family-owned. It had one window, cash only, in the little drive-through box office, and usually opened Thursday through Saturday. If not for the double feature, it wouldn't have been worth most people's money.

When it was our turn, James paid for both of us. I didn't have time to offer my own money. Maybe that meant he considered this a date, or maybe he thought he should put forth an effort on the off chance I would sleep with him. I had no idea. I reminded myself that maybe he came because of the teasing promises Christy had made. He was nineteen, and I didn't know

what she'd said to him in those texts she'd deleted. I hoped she hadn't said anything untrue. I really wanted to have a normal date, my first date in months.

James backed into a spot in the highest tier, and he hung the speaker on his window and spread out the blankets he'd brought. I cuddled up to this tall, dark-haired guy, a guy I'd only met twice before, and one of those times he'd been kissing my best friend in a doorway. We didn't talk. I was aware of everywhere our bodies touched. I sat between his legs and leaned back against him, and he breathed close to my ear as we watched the first movie in silence. He stroked my arm and my neck. The movie ended, and I hardly remembered what we watched, and then James kissed me, and he shut the back of the vehicle, and I kissed him.

Christy was waiting on me to text. She'd want to talk, want to hang out at our cars back at the restaurant. She wanted to go to Dollywood on our next weekend off from work. We needed to decide who'd drive. I told myself she'd forgive me for staying with James, she'd understand that I actually liked him and he liked me instead of her. That he couldn't help it. That I couldn't help it. That he really was a nice guy.

James played with the end of my shirt, kissed across my stomach and pulled down my panties. He pushed up my skirt beneath the blankets and squeezed my breasts in his palms. I arched beneath him trying to enjoy this, kissing back, panting into his mouth, though I knew it was wrong to move this fast. I stared at the loose, gray cloth covering the ceiling of his Ford while he put on a condom. Then James pushed into me with his eyes closed, his face pressed against me. He'd missed some spots when shaving. The bristly hairs tickled my chin.

"See, I told you I was bad at this," he said, but we'd never had that conversation.

"Shh."

We didn't look up until cars started driving out and the credits played on the screen. I pulled away from him and straightened my clothes, and then I climbed into the front seat to find my phone: two missed calls from Christy, but no voicemails. I dreaded the drive back to the parking lot, though I knew she didn't close at Big Top that night. She had an earlier shift. She wouldn't be there.

#

James stopped in the back of Big Top's parking lot. Someone had written in the condensation covering my car windows: SLUT. It appeared over and over next to outlines of penises. I wanted to think it wasn't Christy, but I knew better.

"Maybe I'll text you around sometime," James said.

I wiped off my car and dried my wet hands on my skirt. He pulled off after I started the engine.

Once I was home, I sat on the front steps of the trailer instead of going inside. Freshman year, when I still hadn't had a boyfriend, or first kiss, Christy and I had hung out here after school sometimes. She always sat on the porch railing, a small white scar visible on the underside of one foot. I preferred the top step, where I could extend my legs across the stair, and look up at her. I had always looked up to her. We cared about boys then, too, I knew, but I didn't remember those conversations. I remembered us being together.

I didn't want to admit that I had gone too far, but I wanted to know what Christy was thinking.

"How was work?" I texted.

"Slow."

"Do you know who closed tonight?" I wondered if they'd seen anyone by my car.

"Don't be like that," I texted when she didn't answer. "Don't be mad at me. This was your idea, remember?"

"You're the slut, remember?" she texted.

That hurt. Christy had never mocked me and while she might stop talking to me, she had never called me names before. I bit my lip and took a scalding shower.

"And you planned our date." I replied. I shut my phone off and set my alarm for work.

RELATIVITY

Jackson looked in through a broken window from the small concrete porch. The abandoned house reminded him of the government housing projects down the road, but this house was alone on a hill of brownish grass. He didn't think Clovis would have gone inside the house, but he and his brother, David, had looked for their mom's tomcat all over their new neighborhood and hadn't found him anywhere. Summer wind blew hot on the back of their necks. It wasn't Jackson's idea to look here. David had dared him to go inside this house, and Jackson wasn't about to let his nine-year-old brother show him up by admitting that he thought it was a bad idea.

The walls of the living room had been painted a pale yellow like the soft light that flickered on their own front porch. This yellow had started to turn a moldy green underneath peeling wallpaper that lined the room. Jackson rapped his knuckles against the remaining pieces of glass in the broken windowsill. Then he picked out the biggest and easiest ones and threw them into the grass off the side of the porch. Clovis was new to this neighborhood, too. He could have become confused, could have thought this house had his people. The orange and white tabby was a fighter, used to hunting in the fields around their father's farmland, not a housecat. Maybe he'd left them on purpose in search of another farm.

Once Jackson was fairly certain that he had pulled out all the jagged pieces he could, he climbed through the window, careful to keep his hands away from any remaining glass, and into the front room, half amazed when he didn't cut himself. He helped David in next. They were used to avoiding sharp spokes while climbing through barbed wire fences on the farm, not breaking and entering houses that should be condemned. The room smelled sort of like

Grandma's apartment, musty and shut up, and it was hot, much hotter than outside. Jackson wondered about the family who had lived here. Wondered if they'd had to leave after their father decided to find a new wife, have a new family, in another city. Wondered if those children were as confused, angry that they missed their father anyway.

It was summer vacation, and Jackson and David had been searching around their new house all afternoon. They had gone through the trees at the back of the house, past Sunset View Mobile Home Park, and across a field of thick orange clay next to a lot where tractor-trailers parked their hitches. A cat, possibly Clovis, had tracked paw prints like tiny flower stamps across the dirt, so they'd followed these until they stopped not far from the abandoned house.

The boys hadn't seen anyone near the hitches, but they snuck through anyway—didn't stand up completely, as if hunching could make them less visible from the highway when there was nothing to hide behind. They knew Mama would be upset if she knew they were near those tractor-trailer hitches, even if she missed Clovis as much as they did. She always said tractor-trailers weren't safe to drive near, but being by one on foot was worse, more dangerous somehow. They'd heard her gripe about the hulking machines when driving down the interstate. The hitches reminded Jackson of the elephant graveyard in *The Lion King*, David's current favorite movie. They were like empty husks with rusted ribs left to bake in the sun till someone could find a use for them. The boys had lived near this lot for almost a week now, and they'd never seen any of the hitches in use. It might have been the heat and the boys' thirst, but some days it felt like they'd moved into a place that had dried up at its core. The leaves on the trees didn't seem quite as bright; everything was old and stagnant.

The empty living room seemed smaller on the inside than it had from the porch. The kitchen was a fraction of the one they'd had in the farmhouse, and it wasn't much bigger than the

one they had in their rented trailer now. It was so narrow that Jackson could stretch out his arms and touch opposite walls. David looked inside all of the particleboard cabinets and drawers, and when he opened the refrigerator he found a pink carton of eggs. Jackson grabbed a few, and they threw them against the wall instinctively, expecting them to burst into orange slime. Instead, the contents were more solid and once cracked, released a sulfur smell that chased the boys upstairs. There were two bedrooms, a few plastic hangers—the cheap opaque kind—in one of the closets and a bathroom with no water in the toilet bowl.

No cat.

Before the boys were born, their Mama had found Clovis in the woods, left for dead in a feral animal trap someone had forgotten to check. She'd cried then because some damn man (*excuse my words*, she always said) set the traps and caught a kitten, an orange kitten, reminding her of one she'd lost as a child.

"He's not here. Let's get out of this place. It stinks, and I'm hot," said David.

Jackson regretted throwing the eggs. This might have been a good place to escape to and play. But it was too hot most of the year anyway. It wasn't anything like the tree house Dad had started building for them: the plywood base where Clovis used to sleep in the sun, taunting the dogs. The tree house Dad had never finished. Jackson shook his head to get the image of rain-damp boards half-covered in blue tarp, the last he'd seen of the project, from his mind.

"You want to try another house?" he asked.

David followed Jackson uphill through a small meadow used for hayseed to the next house, a few hundred yards away, carefully moving through the tall grass to avoid the foam left by spittlebugs. Until Dad had told the boys that insects purposefully covered themselves in these

bubbles, Jackson had always thought someone was out spitting in the fields they had kept for seed.

The boys found a side door open to the basement: a damp, empty room with cement walls and a central wooden staircase that led up into the house. This place was bigger than the last house, definitely bigger than their trailer. The staircase reminded Jackson of artwork he'd seen at an art museum with his mother while on a field trip a few years ago. The drawing was black and white with multiple staircases. He hadn't been able to tell which direction was up. Human-like figures walked up and down and sideways in impossible configurations.

Jackson thought about all of the people that had ever lived in this house or would live here, all climbing and descending, stopping and starting on these stairs. Jackson and David were now a part of that image, superimposed on it.

They went up the plywood stairs without speaking. The occasional creak interrupted the silence of the basement room that was barely illuminated from outside. The door at the top was unlocked. Jackson went in first. He didn't see anyone or hear anything, so they walked into the first room on the left. Everything was covered in sheets—the furniture and what looked like tables piled with stuff—and dust covered the sheets, which likely started out as white. There was only enough room to walk between these dusty, sheet monsters, and the whole place reeked of cigarette smoke and something else, a sweet, spoiled smell like rotting fruit. David was lifting the nearest cover when Jackson stopped him.

"Do you hear that?" he whispered.

"What? I don't hear anything." David kept hold of the hem, unwilling to let go.

Jackson shushed him with a raised hand and listened to the music that played in the background. He couldn't hear any words, just the soft melody, and it wasn't until then that

Jackson worried this house might not be abandoned like the other, the first house, the one that they'd known was empty because of the boards nailed onto the door and the NO TRESPASSING signs that had been posted haphazardly around the property. Here there was no broken window for a cat to get inside, only someone or something behind shut doors. They would have been better off searching a crawl space for Clovis.

Jackson motioned for David to back up and head for the staircase. He tried to be quiet. His breathing and beating heart seemed too loud. He hoped the sound he heard would cover what little noise they made. Jackson didn't want to take the time to be quiet and slow. He wanted to run, but he didn't want to scare David. If someone came out before they reached the bottom of the stairs, he'd explain that their cat had run inside through the open door. They hadn't meant to trespass and were leaving as soon as they realized the cat had run off again in another direction. That or maybe they'd run. They shouldn't be there. They shouldn't have gone in.

Once down the stairs and outside, the boys ran for their house, the sun on their backs. Jackson hadn't realized how cold it had been inside that basement, inside the house, until they were back out in the heat. He didn't think then about how close they had been to a possible kidnapper or a radio left on or simply another empty house, abandoned. Instead, Jackson and David laughed at their own fright, slowing their run the closer they got to home, doubled over, hands on knees, lungs aching for breath.

Later that evening, they found Clovis taking a nap on the hood of a red Pinto in lot eight, a few trailers down from their trailer.

BLACK ICE

After walking up and down the cold street three times looking for a sandwich shop, Kelsey gave in and opened the blue door of Earl's Corner Pocket, a bell ringing over her head. Christmas lights dangled from the low ceiling inside. It was late February. An older black man played solitaire behind the bar. At least, that was what it looked like he was doing. He was the only other person, on the far side of the room, and he didn't take any notice of Kelsey, just kept turning over cards.

The ropes of green and red lights draped over a couple of old, red-felted pool tables, and bundles of multi-colored balloons floated around the lone yellow glow of the overhead light. The whole room had a festive air, yet he sat there all alone. Scratched table legs and stained carpeting made the place look dilapidated even with the bright decorations, and the windows to the street had been painted over so they didn't let in any light. A chalkboard menu behind the bar advertised beer and sandwiches in neon print and a row of red-cushioned bar stools huddled underneath the linoleum bar, empty.

The bartender wore a black fedora with a gold band and a blue button-up with vertical white stripes. Kelsey stood in the doorway, a stubby, little penguin in a puffy black jacket, yesterday's jeans, and her oversized sleep shirt. Right after waking, she had pulled her long tangled hair in to a ponytail and run out the door, hoping she might actually get to see Daddy today. Mama had said he called while Kelsey was still asleep. She said Kelsey was supposed to meet him at the Pita Pocket. Mama had yelled this from the bedroom, where she was binging on Netflix in a nest of quilts, and hardly looked away later to give Kelsey some cash for the bus fare. If there was a Pita Pocket, it wasn't on this street.

The bartender flipped over one last card and stared up at her through black-rimmed glasses. Stubble crept across his upper lip and jaw like cookie crumbs stuck to damp skin. Kelsey was still standing in front of the door, unsure if she was in the right place, trying to decide if she should leave.

"Can I help you, honey?" he asked. "We don't normally get busy this early, but I'm sure I could find someone in the kitchen to fix you a sandwich or something." His voice was deep and loud and carried across the room, unlike the weak, wavering voice she'd expected from the old man.

"Is there a Pita Pocket around here? My father said he was going to meet me there at one, and—" Kelsey looked around for a clock, though she knew he was already late. Again. She used the toe of her shoe to scratch the back of her leg and hoped this man wouldn't think badly of her father, knowing that the bartender's expression—from this side of the room, with his face in shadows—had to be something like pity, the way visitors looked at caged cats and dogs at the animal shelter where Kelsey volunteered after school once a week. She tried not to think of the ones who didn't get a home, the ones who didn't make it, the ones abandoned by their owners.

"Uh, not that I know of, and we've been here for fifteen years. I'll tell you what. Why don't you sit down here with me?" He beckoned Kelsey forward. "We can play some cards, and I can get you a milkshake while you wait around for your daddy." He said it like "Diddy," and Kelsey couldn't tell if he was making fun of her. She walked toward the bar and placed her small purse on one of the stools.

"What flavor you like?" he asked.

Kelsey tapped her teeth together while she thought. She needed the rest of her cash to get back home.

"It's on the house," he assured her.

She wondered if he often gave milkshakes away to thirteen-year-olds, but then she reminded herself that he might be someone's grandfather, which made it slightly less weird. She'd never met her own grandfather. He'd died before she was born.

"Vanilla's fine, thank you. Daddy will pay when he gets here." If he ever got there. Otherwise Kelsey was going to feel like a mooch. All of the money she had came from her Mama or Daddy. She wasn't old enough to get paid for her work at the shelter. She hosed kennels and walked dogs and spread mulch around the property, all for free. In return, she could play with the kittens and puppies any time she wanted.

"Of course." He nodded, and she smiled back, her lips pressed into a thin line.

The bartender shrugged and hollered over his shoulder for the milkshake. Kelsey tried calling her father on her cell phone, but couldn't get reception. The phone never rang. She hoped this was the place Daddy had meant. This was where she planned to stay. The room was warm, the bar situated beneath a hot air vent. The cold wind outside had chapped her face, carved her cheeks into a new shade of pink. She needed time to thaw. When the bartender heard the whir of a blender from within the closed door behind him, he turned back around.

"Well, have a seat, young lady," he said. "What do you prefer, spades or poker?"

"I don't really know how to play either," she said. She pulled off her jacket and climbed onto the bar stool by her side. "Sir," she added. He had been nice to her so far; she might as well be polite.

Daddy couldn't have been paying attention when he picked out this place. Maybe this was supposed to be some kind of party, belated, obviously, since he missed her birthday last month. That would explain the decorations. Mama had said Daddy got into town at six this morning. He

had finished his route early. He had said he'd make it up to her, but Kelsey didn't really believe him. He always said that stuff. When he drove a route through Alaska when she was ten, she didn't see him for a year and a half. Her birthday cards were always postmarked a month late. His absence didn't exactly make her feel sad, but she wasn't happy either. She wished he would still surprise her, instead of confirming her lowest expectations.

"You can call me Earl," the bartender said. "I'll show you some Texas hold'em. It's easy to pick up." Earl made a stack of the cards he was playing with and shuffled the deck. He passed out two each, and then laid the stack to his right.

"Okay," he said, "normally we would now buy into the game, and since I'm the dealer you would pay the little blind, but we're playing for fun right now. So go ahead and look at your cards."

Kelsey wanted to know what he meant by "pay the little blind," but she didn't ask. Maybe he thought she was older than she looked, or maybe he didn't want to play alone anymore. She stared at the plain checkered pattern on the back of the deck.

Earl pointed to her pair, so she picked up the cards: a three of hearts and the ace of spades. Three geometric men in shades of yellow, purple, and teal trumpeted from the three of hearts, and a lion with a mane of bright circles frowned from the ace. It was the strangest deck Kelsey had ever seen, not that she'd seen many. She and Daddy had played rummy with the Bicycle brand cards, and her Mama owned a copy of the Celtic Tree Oracle, a tarot deck based on different types of trees, but the bartender's cards were brighter, more modern. Earl's deep baritone voice, the cards, and the neon orange writing on the chalkboard seemed out of place, too young and hip for an old man who looked like he didn't know how to find the Internet browser from the desktop.

"This is what you're looking for." Earl talked with his hands pointing at imaginary cards. "The best is called the royal flush, then the straight flush, four of a kind, full house, flush, straight, three of a kind, two pair, one pair, and if you don't have any of those, the highest card you hold." He took a drink from a clear glass sitting under the bar. Alcohol? Or water? She couldn't be sure. Daddy kept vodka in a little silver flask, which he drank from whenever he thought she wasn't watching, basically the few times they saw a movie together at home or at the theater. She knew how the odorless liquid stung, because she'd sipped from the flask after Daddy fell asleep. Fifteen minutes into the film, and he'd be snoring. She'd screwed her face up after swallowing and tucked the flask back inside his pocket. It was awful. She didn't understand why anyone liked alcohol. She wished he'd stop drinking. She didn't remember the flask from when her parents still lived together, the way things used to be.

"Don't you get worried now," Earl said. "It's simple. Look and see if you have two cards that are the same number or suit. If you don't, that's okay, but you're usually going to want a face card and something a little better to keep playing at this point. In the real game, this is when the players decide if they want to bet again and wait for the flop—that's when I lay out three cards for both of us—to see what they've really got, or if they want to fold."

Maybe Kelsey could do something with the ace, if it didn't count as a one like it did in rummy. She didn't know how she'd remember the names of the different hands he'd listed. She didn't know what she had.

"Make sense?" he asked.

She nodded quickly, biting her lip, and tried to remember the last time she had played cards. It had to have been Go Fish when she was babysitting the neighbor's seven-year-old a couple of weeks ago. She and Daddy hadn't played rummy in years, not since he worked locally,

before the divorce, and she hadn't been sure she remembered the rules well enough to explain them.

The blender cut off. A spoon clanked against glass. Canned whipped cream whizzed and sputtered. Kelsey decided to wait for the flop, or whatever it was called. She had time, it seemed. Daddy might still arrive. A man in jeans and a white apron carried in a tall vanilla milkshake complete with whipped cream and a cherry in a chilled, glass mug. He set the dish in front of Kelsey and handed her a straw and one of those long spoons, and without comment, he disappeared back into the kitchen, as if he were too busy to stay longer than absolutely necessary. She dug in.

#

The bell over the door at Earl's Corner Pocket rang for the second time that day when Oscar pushed his way inside, wet hair dripping into his bangs. He carried a large box wrapped in blue wrapping paper, the words "Happy Birthday" written over and over in different sizes, colors, and types of font.

"Kelsey, bug, I'm sorry I'm late," he said. The box blocked his view until he set it down. He looked confused.

"I'm sorry. She's gone, man," Earl said, coming out from behind the bar. "Left about an hour ago, I'd say."

Oscar cursed. "I thought she'd stick around," he said. "I couldn't get service on my cell."

"I don't know what to tell you," Earl said. "She waited for about two hours. We gave her a milkshake, on the house."

Oscar pulled his wallet out from the back pocket of his jeans. "Let me pay you for your trouble," he said. "I didn't realize this place was a bar. I thought it was a sandwich shop. No wonder I couldn't find it."

Earl held his hands out over the wallet.

"It's no trouble, sir. She's a sweet girl. We played some cards. Maybe you can try her at home?" Earl asked.

"You sure?"

"It's on us, like I told her. Maybe you two can come back together sometime. During happy hour, you can play two games for the price of one. My grandsons are about her age. They love playing pool here."

Oscar thanked Earl and left, almost forgetting his phone and the present he'd bought that afternoon. He felt bad for oversleeping. He hadn't expected the line at the Apple store to be so long. He'd rushed over, couldn't wait to see Kelsey's expression when she saw the new computer. All the extra shifts he'd put in lately, the long nights and weeks of travel, had gone toward the laptop. She was a big girl now, almost in high school, and she needed the computer for her schoolwork. He wanted her to do well, to attend college one day.

#

Daddy didn't answer his phone when Kelsey called for the second time. She skipped past the nearest covered bus stop and walked farther downtown. She ducked her head to keep her face out of the wind, her hands in her pockets. If it was going to be this cold, it might as well have snowed. So far, they had only had flurries this winter, and freezing rain. She'd been out of school a few times, but hadn't made a snowman or angel or gone sledding on the hills of Steele Creek Park. Any snowflakes she saw melted on impact, or the rain washed them away. At night, the

temperature lowered, turning the cold rain to thin sheets of black ice that coated the roads. This ice closed the schools, put some businesses on two-hour delays. Winter weather was so depressing, everything the same bland color, a dirty blue-ish white.

If Daddy couldn't come to her when he said he would, then she would go to him. From the pool hall, it was a few blocks over to the house where they had all lived together, before everything changed, and walking was warmer than waiting twenty minutes for the bus to arrive. If Kelsey had ridden her bike that day, she wouldn't have had to spend the money Mama gave her, and she could have paid for the milkshake, which would have made her feel better about spending the afternoon with Earl. Mama had thought it would be easier that way, taking the bus, and safer on icy streets, if the weather did turn bad. That's what she said anyway. It would've taken Kelsey maybe ten minutes to ride to the house from the bar. She wondered why her Daddy didn't ask her to meet him at home in the first place.

Kelsey dodged past the homeless men camped out on street corners and ignored their cardboard signs and Styrofoam cups. There were more of them on this side of Bristol; they each had their own intersection, most of the men and women ranging between the businesses on State Street. None of the cars stopped at the light had their windows down. They probably didn't want to encourage the beggars.

"Honey, you got any change?" one man asked Kelsey as she waited to cross the street. He sat against a brick wall next to the First Tennessee ATM. His hands were wrapped in the remnants of fingerless gloves. She couldn't tell what color they used to be, but they were mostly black now, like the rest of his clothing and the beard on his face, like the ice that coated the streets at night and early in the mornings.

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't have any money," she said. From the look of him, he could use some new clothes. He was about Daddy's size, maybe a little shorter. It was hard to tell with him sitting down.

"Where you going?" he asked when she turned to see if the light had changed yet.

"To the library," she said, without thinking. "I've got to pick up some books for a school project." It was the first public place that came to mind.

He stood and breathed onto his hands. He was shorter than Daddy and not much taller than Kelsey.

"Sometimes they have free hot chocolate during the week. Do you like hot chocolate?" he asked. He coughed, a deep, wet rasping that sounded painful.

"It's Saturday." Kelsey looked around, but there was no one else on the street, no one she could go to for help if this guy decided to follow her.

"I'll take my chances," he said.

Great. Maybe Mama was right to ignore and not make eye contact with the homeless. The library was in the opposite direction, two blocks past Daddy's street. She crossed the road while the guy gathered his things into some type of backpack and was waiting for the go ahead to cross at the next intersection when he caught up to her.

"I do like hot chocolate, you know. I never said," Kelsey told him, feeling a little guilty for walking off. She felt weird talking to this man on the street corner, and she couldn't help but feel ashamed that it was because he was dirty and homeless and not just that he was also a stranger. She was sure that meant she wasn't a good person. She thought about giving him her bus money, but she might still need it to get back home.

"You in some kind of hurry?" he asked, as if it were completely normal for him to question her. "Expect the books to hop up and run away?" He smiled, stretching the skin away from his yellowed teeth.

"I'm not the only one researching the last Czar of Russia. Some other kids might get all the books I need, if I don't get there soon."

She really did have to write a report on Nicolas II. Last year. In seventh-grade History. She couldn't forget the stories she had read about Anastasia and her brother, little Alexei. It wasn't like the Disney movie. They were all executed in the end. One book had said acid was used to disfigure the bodies and bones of the Czar, his wife, all five children, a doctor, and three servants. Because of the movie and stories, Kelsey had always thought Anastasia survived. That she had escaped somehow, to somewhere safe. Likewise, Kelsey had heard about the missing Asian flights on the radio, the bodies never found, no evidence of a crash, even a whole year later. It made sense, how people could want to believe a loved one had survived after something like that, how they could somehow still be out there waiting to be found. That kind of hope could keep you believing everything would be all right.

Kelsey hoped she wouldn't always have to live with Mama. She doubted her parents would ever remarry, but if Daddy found a local job, she could live with him instead. She was going to talk to him about living at his house with her Abuela over summer. He might go for it. Abuela wasn't that old, and Kelsey could do the cooking and chores. Her Spanish might get better. Kelsey and Abuela would be together when he was out driving. Plus, Kelsey could add water to his liquor, could make sure he didn't drink too much, could take care of him.

"I had to write a report on Abraham Lincoln once," the man said. "I had to draw a picture of him and everything."

He wasn't so bad to talk to if Kelsey kept her eyes straight ahead. She could almost forget about his appearance while they walked.

"You in high school now?" he asked.

"Not yet."

She kept hoping someone would walk on to the street so she could get away from him, but there was no one around. She'd gone too far. There weren't any businesses she could duck into, no restaurants, just a closed furniture shop and some empty storefronts with FOR LEASE signs in the windows.

The white crosswalk guy appeared again, and they crossed the road and walked up the hill toward the library. If anybody driving past thought it was strange that Kelsey was walking next to a dirty man with leaves stuck in his beard, they didn't stop. It was like his invisibility was catching.

Last time Kelsey was at this library, Mama and Daddy were still married and fighting nearly every day. She was nine. After breakfast, she had lain down in the back hall right next to the vent on the wall. From there she could hear things throughout the house: the cartoons left on in the living room and everything said in her parents' bedroom. They knew Kelsey liked to lay out there. Usually, they'd come out and put her to bed or tell her to play outside before they started really fighting. That day was different. The carpet had felt stiff and cold under her hands and arms, the back of her legs. They divorced during the summer, but in Kelsey's memory, the house is always freezing inside on that day.

"Why do I have to get stranded with this?" Mama had said.

"This? She's a child, not a thing! She's our child."

"Then why am I always left alone while you're off gallivanting around the country?"

"You mean when I'm out working seventy-hour weeks to pay for the house and your credit card bills, and you're at the spa getting another pedi-whatever-it's-called on your hands. You think I like missing my little girl's birthday party every year?" Daddy had asked, quieter, but still sounding angry.

"You chose this job. You chose not to be around us."

"You want to talk about choices? You chose to have an affair, Maria. Not me. So, yeah, I'll leave you to take care of Kelsey. I choose not to be married anymore."

A door opened, and Kelsey could hear the hangers in the closet rustling as they hit against each other. She closed her eyes. Daddy came out into the hall and scooped her up.

"Let's go to the library, bug. We need to talk."

That was the day he explained that they wouldn't live together anymore, that Kelsey had to stay and take care of Mama. She needed her, he said. Kelsey didn't want to take care of her mother, who now spent more time with her television and tarot cards than she did with Kelsey. If Kelsey had been older, she might have recognized the symptoms of depression when her mother stopped working, stopped seeing friends, and barely left the house.

Kelsey needed Daddy more. Guidance counselors were coming to the middle school next week to make their schedules for freshman year, and she had no idea what to take. Kelsey didn't know if she should choose the university or vocational path or both. Mama was no help. When Kelsey asked her a question, Mama wanted to consult her deck, but she was still new to reading the cards, the language of trees, of ash and rowan and birch and willow. She stared at their layout and could read the instruction book for an hour and still not have an answer. Kelsey stopped asking.

One more crosswalk, and they were at the library. At least there were people inside, she thought. An older lady sat behind the circulation desk near the entrance, typing on a keyboard. Some kids played on a circular rug in the children's section while an old man read to them. Kelsey made out the tops of a few heads behind computer screens downstairs toward the back of the library, most of them wearing large, black earphones. There wasn't anyone offering hot chocolate where she could see.

She stayed near the entrance, flipped through a few of the paperback books for sale on a table by the circulation desk. The circulation clerk eyed the homeless man until he stopped hanging around Kelsey and walked downstairs into the stacks. When Kelsey could no longer see him, she went to the restroom and tried calling Daddy again on her cell.

#

Oscar paced up and down the front entrance of his house. He couldn't get Kelsey to answer. It went straight to voicemail each time: "Hey! It's Kelsey. I'm not here right now. Hmm. I'm not sure where I am right now. Weird. I'll get back to you soon. Leave a message!" Kelsey had called him earlier but when he listened to his message, nothing had been recorded. She must have hung up right as it went to his voicemail. They were playing phone tag most of the afternoon.

When she hadn't returned any of his phone calls by six p.m., he called his ex-wife. Maria picked up, and he could hear voices from the television, but she didn't say hello.

"Maria, is Kelsey mad at me?" Oscar asked. "Please put her on the phone."

"Isn't she with you?" She spoke over the TV.

"She's not home?" he asked and stopped pacing. He shuffled through his wallet. "She wasn't at the sandwich shop when I got there." The photographs of Kelsey he kept in the clear

section of his wallet were from elementary school. She giggled at the camera, her hair in pigtails, a small dimple below her right cheek.

"Were you late again?" The voices he'd heard in the background switched off. "What time did you get there? She left here around eleven for the bus stop. She should have had plenty of time to get there by one," Maria said.

"She was there by one, according to the bartender," he said. "I wasn't. Are you sure that's when she left? It might be important. She called me around three, but my phone never rang. I only have a blank voicemail." He knew they'd need to be as detailed as possible if they had to file a missing person's report. He'd seen the faces on flyers posted in truck stops and Wal-Mart's all over the country. He hoped Maria had something more recent, a school photo maybe.

"Bartender? I thought you said it was a sandwich shop," she said.

"You sure you haven't seen her?" he asked.

"She hasn't come back yet, but I'll go check her room." Her voice grew distant, like she had placed him on speakerphone. "I thought you'd have her home by eight as usual," she said.

"How could you have her meet you at some bar? What were you thinking?"

"Maria, would she have gone to a friend's house? To the animal shelter?" Oscar tried to be patient.

"You know Kelsey. She saves Saturdays for you. God, if something's happened to her, Oscar." She was quiet for a few minutes. He hoped Kelsey was in her room.

"She's nowhere in the apartment," Maria said. "Her black coat's still gone. She's not here."

"I'm sure nothing's happened," he said. "She's probably mad that I didn't show up on time. It's my fault."

"I'm calling the police," Maria said. Then she hung up.

#

Kelsey hadn't seen the homeless man where he lurked near the restroom, but she thought about asking the librarian for help anyway. The library had always been a safe place for Kelsey, who loved to read. She could have told the clerk he'd been following her, but no one was at the desk when she went back upstairs. A little sign said that someone would return in a few minutes, so Kelsey had decided to hang around inside for a while anyway.

She was in the young adult fiction section of the library when the first fat snowflakes began to fall. Her favorite author had recently released a prequel to the series she liked. She sat on a small, round stepstool between the shelves reading from the first chapter while the library grew quieter around her.

#

"Miss, you'll have to check that out, if you're taking it with you," the circulation clerk said. "We close at four today."

Kelsey, startled, looked around. The clerk was standing to her right, and there was already an inch of snow on the ground outside.

"Okay," Kelsey said, nodding her head. She followed the clerk to the circulation desk.

Once outside, she pulled her jacket tight, wishing she'd worn a hat. Then she set off in the direction of her father's house. She heard the door slam shut a second time behind her, followed by a quiet cough, but didn't think to look back. The flurries were thick, dampening her hair.

#

Kelsey's father didn't sleep that night. He paced the living room, stopping only to stare out the windows at the darkness outside. He was looking for the dimpled little girl who used to

run up their stone steps every day after school. He couldn't remember exactly what she looked like, or when that little girl had disappeared.

AUGURY

A little sparrow with sunflower seed feathers hopped around on the grey cement floor of our garage. I tried to shoo it out. I knew it would worry Mama, but it half-flew, half-fluttered behind a shelf of gardening tools. I wasn't sure if it was injured or new to flying. Its feathers were different lengths and stuck out in odd directions. I carefully cracked open the door that led back inside.

"Mama," I called, "There's a bird in the garage."

"Shut the door! I don't want that thing getting inside the house," she said.

I grabbed a broom from the corner and prodded the bird out onto the hot asphalt. It didn't seem to like being outside in the morning sunlight; it stared at me, blaming me for its eviction. After a few minutes, the bird danced away until it found itself under a purple butterfly bush in the yard. Problem solved, I quickly shut the rolling garage door.

Later that afternoon, I went out to the garage to start a load of laundry. I dropped a handful of dirty towels into a basket and turned to grab detergent when I heard it again: tiny feathers flapping like turned pages. I searched and located two more birds. One of them flew up into the air and landed behind the washer. I wondered how I could get it out. The washing machine was against the wall between the water heater and the deep freezer. I didn't want to hurt it, and I could tell it was agitated. I didn't want to touch it either; birds were dirty.

When I was younger, Mama yelled at me if I touched a bird feather. I had always been a little afraid of birds after a rooster bloodied my nose and busted my lip. I'd opened the chicken coop to feed our chickens, and the rooster glided into my face from his perch on a shelf above my head. I wasn't going to touch this bird either.

The bird's wings smacked the white metal machine. I cringed, hoping it wouldn't hurt itself. I tried using the broom handle again to gently prod the sparrow out. Nothing worked, and the other bird had hidden itself while I'd tried to get this one out. I decided to open the garage door and hope the birds would get themselves out without letting any more in. Or Mama could catch them later.

I knew she wasn't afraid to touch them. She'd rather get her hands dirty than let another bird inside her home.

#

Mama was convinced that a bird in the house signaled an upcoming death in the family, but for her there was a set of rules in order for this to happen. 1) It meant death if the bird got in through some undetectable, if not impossible, way. 2) The bird warned of a death between anywhere from three days to three weeks, but this time was always negotiable. 3) If you let the bird in by mistake or if it was a pet, then a death might not occur. But letting in a bird of any kind should be avoided, to be safe.

My mother found a sparrow in the kitchen one day. She was going to pack for our picnic, but instead found the distressed bird flying around the room. She covered her head with her hands, but didn't scream. Later, she'd tell me that putting her hands up was an automatic response. When she was a child, there were bats in her attic, and she was always scared they would fly into her hair, so scared she sometimes covered her head with a blanket while her father tried to get rid of them. My brother and I were in our bedrooms changing into our bathing suits and getting our stuff packed for the lake. We never saw the bird.

She ran over to the screen door that led onto the back porch, but she had to unlock the door first to let the bird out. Our trailer park was near railroad tracks, and she had always kept

the door locked when we were babies, so we wouldn't get hurt when a train passed. Locking this door had become habit. She held the screen door open and the bird finally found its way out. Once it had gone, she searched through the trailer for an open window, an open door, an opening of any kind. She found window after window shut and locked.

She still doesn't know how the bird came inside that day.

Mama almost decided to cancel our trip to Boone Lake. It was summer and finally hot enough to go swimming, and she had the day off from work, but the bird incident had made her feel weird. It seemed like a bad idea, like something bad would happen, she later told me.

"Why don't we do something else today?" Mama asked in the hallway. "We could ride bikes over at Steele Creek?"

Jonathan and I looked at each other from opposite doorways. I frowned. We had been cooped up in the house all summer without cable television. I craved the feeling of the warm sun after you've been swimming. I didn't want to spend another day at home or ride my bike for twelve miles. She wouldn't let us outside when she wasn't there, and there wasn't much to do around our house anyway, except ride a bike to the library.

"Why don't you want to go to the lake?" Jonathan asked.

"I didn't say I didn't want to go. If you want to go to the lake, then we'll go to the lake."

"I want to go to the lake," I said.

"Fine. We're going to the lake," she said and finished making the picnic lunch she'd gone into the kitchen to start.

#

During that summer without cable, I read a book from the library on English folklore. Some people believed that birds linked our world with that of the supernatural, to the worlds

beyond our grasp. A few origin stories credited birds as the first living beings to exist. Maybe the privilege of coming first let them retain this link to other worlds. Or maybe it was their ability to fly that made us believe they passed through invisible portals above our heads, seeing again those who had left us behind.

A German tale said that when we sleep our soul slipped out of our mouths in the form of a little bird. If a person woke us too soon, before our soul could return, we died.

Egyptian gods took the form of birds when they visited the earth. Some of their goddesses had wings that could be used to breathe life back into the dead. Ancient Egyptians believed the soul took the form of a part-human, part-bird being after it was no longer tied to a body. Certain spells could make this transformation into a bird complete, spells I was interested in learning. The soul might then take the form of a falcon, heron, swallow, or a phoenix. I wondered if the bird in our trailer contained a soul. I wondered if that soul chose to fly as a sparrow, or if there were no choices once you were lost and flying alone.

#

Whenever my mother took us swimming, she always made me wear a life jacket over my bathing suit. My brother and I both knew how to swim, but after my father's accidental drowning she had always been more worried about taking us near water, especially me since I wasn't as confident in my swimming as Jonathan. Dad fell out of his boat while on a fishing trip in Maryland. My bright red jacket covered up the Tweety Bird on my turquoise one-piece, something I was not happy about, as I loved the decoration on that suit. My brother watched over me while we were in the water, and Mama tanned on the hillside, occasionally snapping our pictures as we ran in and out. The one benefit of wearing a life jacket meant I could float when I grew tired of swimming, and sometimes Jonathan and I swam all the way out to the orange

buoys that separated the swimming area from the jet skis and boats on the rest of the lake. Out there, the water was over my head and Jonathan's, too.

Mama had made fried chicken and mashed potatoes and my favorite peach cobbler for us to eat. She always cooked like this for our picnics, and I loved the way swimming made it seem that you could eat and eat and still not be satisfied. That day the lake was overcrowded as usual. Bathing suits of all colors bobbed near the rocky shore. Children played with buckets and shovels, though there wasn't any real sand, only layered pieces of shale. Families barbecued on the grassy hillside dotted with picnic tables. All of these people talked, laughed, and occasionally shrieked, and the conversations hummed on and on like flies buzzing close to your ear.

I liked to hold my breath and duck under the water so I couldn't hear this noise, but the life jacket always brought me back up. If Jonathan was in a good mood, I could persuade him to pick me up and throw me out into the deeper water. Then I could hold my breath longer, get away from the people and feel the water temperature change about four or five feet under. Near the surface the lake was warm, heated from the overhead sun, but down below, where my feet brushed the silky mud along the bottom, the water felt ice cold. I imagined it was like squishing your feet into chilled chocolate pudding, but I shivered more from the thought of fish zipping past unseen than the cool water. I loved going to the lake, but I hated not being able to see into the water beneath me.

A lot of the families near us brought toys, floats, inner tubes, and foam footballs. We never brought anything like that. Going to the lake *was* our treat. We swam until we were hungry and then napped in the sun. I often made friends with these kids who had toys, those fleeting friendships that last through the afternoon and then you never see the kid again. I met a girl named Serendipity that trip. She was camping at the lake with her father, and we raced back and

forth through the water, swimming parallel to the bank, searching for pretty, smooth pieces of shale we could form into make-believe arrowheads. She had a purple inner tube, and we took turns pushing each other around in it when we took breaks from our search.

"Spin me," she said, and I spun her around on the float as quickly as I could, pushing faster and faster. I watched as she nearly hit some woman in the back of the head with her feet, and we giggled. Then it was my turn. Green lake, bathing-suited people, and hill revolved around me.

In the water near Jonathan, a man played catch with one of his sons. Sometimes the football flew past one or the other of them, and they had to dive out to grab it, laughing. Maybe Jonathan watched these two because he was jealous. Maybe he watched them because he was waiting for a moment to scoop up the ball and join in on their fun. Maybe he was annoyed that they kept throwing their neon green and black ball over his head. I don't know why he first noticed them, but I know why he's never forgotten this family.

While the man played catch with the older boy, his younger son, a boy of maybe seven or eight, played in the water unsupervised. Jonathan treaded water nearby. He kept an eye on Serendipity and me near the beach and this little boy next to him.

Serendipity and I soon grew tired of sharing the inner tube. We lay in the shallow water, letting subtle waves push us toward shore, waves created by the boats and other water vehicles farther out. I wished the waves would wash up something else, like driftwood or jewelry. I'd found a pair of black sunglasses in this lake, but they were missing one lens. I imagined small fish had swum through this opening like gold fish in a tank.

I rolled onto my back and looked up at the clouds in the sky. If I squinted, the cumulonimbus looked like a baby elephant and a kitten playing tug of war. I had pieces of mud and shale in my hair, and after showering later, I would still smell like this lake.

Jonathan thought the little boy next to him was playing around. We've all done it: floated face down, held our breath while we tried to stay still like a piece of driftwood pushed along by the waves. His face might have been in the water for several minutes. At first, Jonathan told me later, he thought the boy was pretending to play dead, that the kid was waiting for his dad to notice him, and Jonathan knew firsthand what it was like not to have a dad around. He wanted this guy to pay attention to both of his kids. The kid hadn't panicked or made any noise. Surely, he was fine.

What I didn't know then: When you hold your breath, carbon dioxide builds inside the lungs. Even if you don't want to, your body makes you take a breath anyway. And when you breathe in water instead of oxygen, the body sends this water into your stomach. You keep swallowing. The throat spasms. It tries to block access to the lungs. When you lose consciousness, the throat relaxes, allowing more water inside.

Jonathan touched the boy's ankle. He didn't react. Jonathan turned him over. The kid didn't open his eyes. His bare chest didn't move, and his skin was pale.

"Hey, he's not breathing!" Jonathan yelled at the man playing catch.

This is where my memory blurs: I know everyone got out of the water, and I know an ambulance was called, but I don't remember in what order. Were parents screaming? Did someone give CPR? Did Jonathan think about how our father had drowned? I did. A fisherman had pulled his body from the Chesapeake Bay. After it was too late.

I remember flashing lights in the parking lot at the top of the hill above the lake, and at this point the sound from the water and the waves and the people had died down. I don't remember hearing the sirens. I remember the way those lights flashed on such a pretty day. It seemed wrong, the way nature could be warm and inviting while a child stopped breathing.

I know the man and his sons disappeared inside the back of the white EMS vehicle, and I can still picture it driving down the gravel road away from the grassy parking lot. I wonder what he told his wife and family about that day. I don't know if Jonathan saved that boy's life or if he found his dead body, but I like to believe the paramedics were able to bring him back, were able to force the lake water from his lungs, making it possible for his soul to return. There were no birds in the air that day, but I still wondered if the bird in our trailer had been confused. Maybe he came inside by accident, looking for a different family.

A YELLOW PONY NAMED MOONDOG

Jackson hated that people showed up to funerals like they were long overdue family reunions, times to catch up and reminisce, to exclaim over newborn babies. He didn't understand why they couldn't do that before someone died, when things were still good. He hadn't understood that when he was twelve and the neighbor died, and he certainly didn't understand it now at twenty-seven.

He stood in the corner of his Aunt Madison's kitchen. Everyone had congregated there after the coffin had been lowered and covered with earth, after wishes and flowers and pieces of dirt had been dropped in, too. Several women he didn't know sat at the round wooden table that took up most of the room. The gray ladies drank coffee or liquor, or both, and talked, often one over the other. They didn't wait for someone to finish, but kept speaking louder and louder until the others listened, or didn't. They reminded Jackson of a wake of buzzards the way they leaned in toward each other around the table, all dressed in black. Birds or witches. But he doubted they could cast a spell to bring back the dead. The table held containers of food, coffee mugs, and soda cans in the center.

He stood against the wall while the voices hummed and bodies shifted in starched clothes, scrunching plastic bags, tinkling ice, slamming the aluminum screen door. This was Jackson's first time visiting his Aunt Madison at her house in years, since he'd been a boy and she'd given David and him the movie *Christmas on Zolonia*, a cartoon about a family's first Christmas stranded on a strange planet miles and miles from Earth. Some days he wished he could relocate to Zolonia, where large clear tubes blew you from home to work to the shopping mall, where a toy might turn out to be a prickly, alien pet and not a bouncy ball at all. Aunt

Madison had moved into a vacant house in their neighborhood, not far from the trailer park where Jackson had then lived with his mother and brother. She had grown lonely in her old age, he thought, and that's why she'd moved closer to her niece, Jackson's mother.

Jackson could never quite shake a cold feeling of dread when he entered this house. He'd never forgotten the soft music he'd heard playing inside when he was a kid, nor the sickly sweet smell. But now, those feelings were justified. His older cousin, Sam, had committed suicide, a handgun to the head. His son, Little Sammy, had been the one to find him in their garage across town.

The front screen door hung crooked in the frame as it banged over and over and kids ran in and out and more people arrived with platters of food and bottles of liquor. Jackson didn't know these men and women. Most were older than him or perhaps they were related to Sam's father, a man Jackson had never met. Every time he saw hordes of children he thought of the balloons they'd let off at his daughter's last birthday. Kids went nuts over balloons, especially little kids. His daughter Daisy had once let go of hers inside JCPenney, and Jackson had to have an employee get a ladder to retrieve it so she would stop crying for her "boon."

He tried not to look for Daisy among the kids who came in asking for popsicles, sweaty from the rusted trampoline, noses and freckles glistening. Jackson knew this was partly the reason he'd come alone, without his wife, Sarah, and baby Susie, and partly because funerals were too hard for parents who've lost a child. He ached for his daughter like an amputee aches for a missing limb. His dreams and memories made it feel like she was still around, but out of reach, around a corner, somewhere in the periphery of his life.

There was enough food to feed all of the people at Aunt Madison's twice. The tables, the counters, all of the fridge were full with casserole dishes and frozen lasagna. There was a cooler

filled with ice and drinks that someone's uncle had brought in. But Jackson couldn't eat. He hadn't been able to stomach anything but black coffee since he'd heard Little Sammy comparing his father's head to raw hamburger. He hoped the kid didn't end up a serial killer, and more than that, he hoped Aunt Madison hadn't heard. Any other day, and Jackson would have given the boy a stern talking about his language, but he didn't think he was justified, not now. People grieved in different ways.

The coffee pot had run nonstop for the past two hours. Jackson told himself he was in the way, unwanted. His brother hadn't come to the service, couldn't get off work or so he said, and his mother was outside helping to supervise children Jackson had never seen before. Those kids had no idea what had happened, had no idea how life could change in an instant. That's how it had been with Daisy, with his little girl. She'd been fine. Then one night she'd stepped off the ledge at the bowling alley, causing a hairline fracture in her leg—the byproduct of a bone tumor in her right hip. They'd always thought the way she crawled, as a baby—one leg dragged behind the other—was a cute affectation. Hindsight.

The last time Jackson had seen his cousin, Sam had stopped by their Gramma's house to borrow some red cloth to tie to the end of a ladder sticking out from his truck. Jackson had been eleven. Sam was there for maybe ten minutes. He hadn't said goodbye. Sam had always been Jackson's favorite cousin, for a reason Jackson couldn't recall. He didn't know much about the man. Sam had visited one summer when Jackson was three or four years old, and Sam had babysat Jackson and David. Mom said they'd followed Sam around like ducklings.

The screen door creaked open again and Jackson looked away this time, expecting more children.

"Jackie, come outside," Vince said, and Jackson turned toward the door. His old neighbor had stuck his head inside. His scalp was shaved, and thick, white hair grew from his ears to mix with his beard.

He followed Vince out to the yard. They had to step around the children sitting on the steps and dodge dog shit in the grass and gravel as they made their way to a pair of plastic chairs off in the side yard, far enough away from the trampoline that they could hear each other talk despite the children's screams and laughter.

"New suit?" Vince lit a cigar.

"Newish." He'd bought the outfit on clearance for Daisy's funeral. Jackson waved off Vince's offer of a second cigar.

Vince had worn a white shirt, black pants, and dirty work boots to the funeral earlier. Now his jacket was gone, and he pulled his shirttail from his waistband before sitting.

"Your mom said Sarah went back to work a couple of weeks ago," Vince said.

Jackson reached for his coffee and realized he'd left it inside the kitchen. He didn't want small talk. He didn't want to be there. He had felt obligated to come. He'd hoped he could hang out in the corner for another thirty minutes or so and then leave, unnoticed. He almost felt as if his presence there meant he'd be at another funeral for someone else he knew soon, though he realized that fear was ridiculous. He knew proximity to death couldn't kill you, but he still felt exposed in a way that he couldn't quite explain. Maybe those dark rain clouds you saw in cartoons really did follow people around. Jackson felt like one had been following him for years.

"Yeah, she's working at the post office now, close to Susie's daycare at the Y. She walks there sometimes on her break," he said. He didn't tell Vince that Sarah walked to the daycare every day on her break, often not eating her lunch, to make sure Susie was still there, still okay.

He didn't tell Vince how she kept looking for Daisy, the way Jackson looked for her in a room full of small children. They'd go out to the grocery store, and a kid would giggle, and Sarah's head would turn. She'd developed a twitch above her right eyebrow that started any time she realized the kid wasn't Daisy, and there were lines on her face where there weren't any before. Jackson tried to smooth them with his thumbs when she slept. He saw the same lines any time he looked at his own reflection in the mirror.

He picked at the pink nail polish that spotted one arm of his chair while Vince smoked. Jackson made kissing noises to a little dachshund running after the children, some neighborhood dog loose from its yard, but it didn't look his way.

"You ought to bring the girls over to the house someday." Vince coughed and corrected himself. "Sarah and little Susie. I've still got the old swing set out back."

"Sure, Vince. Suze would love that. She'll be walking soon. She'll pull all your flowers out." Jackson laughed, but he didn't recognize the sound he made.

"They'd have made a great pair," Vince said. "Your Daisy and Susan. I'm sure they would have got themselves into as much trouble as you and David always did."

Jackson smiled and made some excuse about going back in to the house for his coffee. Once inside, he veered away from the kitchen entrance and instead took the stairs down to the basement. He locked the door behind him. It was as cold as he remembered. Now the place at least looked lived in. Aunt Madison had cardboard boxes, some of which were labeled Christmas, haphazardly thrown into a corner, and an old couch and entertainment stand took up the largest area, behind the wooden staircase. After Aunt Madison had first rented the house, David and Jackson were too frightened to come into the basement, but they didn't want to tell anyone about the time they broke in, when the house was still occupied.

He sat on the bottom stair and put his head between his knees. The house was closing in on him, the concrete pulsating upward, the exposed ceiling slowly moving down. He felt he'd been looking for something for so long that he'd forgotten what it was to begin with. Only the yearning ache remained. He concentrated on breathing in and out regularly, trying to slow his pulse. Dust tickled his nose, and he sneezed.

Vince meant well; Jackson knew that. It had been his idea to spend Daisy's last birthday writing down wishes on small sheets of torn notebook paper. They were put inside red balloons filled with helium and released into the sky. For Daisy, it was like having an odd number of fairy godmothers, but instead of a guaranteed twenty-one years before the inevitable needle prick, she only had four. She had dressed like a fairy, with a pink tutu and wand. It had been her special day. But it didn't matter now if he told her wishes, because they weren't coming true:

a yellow pony named Moondog

all the candy in the world

don't forget me

Jackson paced around the room. He thought about lying on the couch. Maybe if he took a nap everyone would be gone when he woke up, and he wouldn't have to face the children and the pitying looks on the faces of those who knew him. He was sick of listening to crying people. He hadn't cried since Daisy's funeral. He wanted to go to sleep. That was the only way he could forget Daisy was gone. He still dreamt of her, but he didn't share his dreams with his wife anymore. He couldn't stand to make her cry. Because of the baby, Jackson worried less that Sarah might commit suicide, but he didn't want to put any more stress on her. He hoped going back to work would be a healthy distraction. She'd made the right call. This funeral would have been too much for her. It might have been too much for him.

In the dim light, Jackson overturned one of the cardboard boxes, spilling a collection of used art supplies: faded construction paper, dried finger paints, and pieces of fat colored sidewalk chalk in pastel shades of yellow, orange, and pink. Yellow had been Daisy's favorite color. She said yellow clothes made her feel warm, like the sun and smiles and hugs. She loved to pose for pictures, her teeth like rows of tiny white beads. Jackson twirled the yellow chalk between his fingers, smudging his knuckles and fingertips, the jacket of his funeral suit. Sarah and Jackson had let Daisy draw on the walls of her bedroom, with the condition that she only drew on those walls. They'd redone the room with chalkboard paint for her third birthday.

The cinderblock walls of the basement didn't hold the pigment well, but Jackson wrote on the walls anyway. He wrote Daisy's wishes first, those he remembered, and then he tried to draw Daisy and her pony. They came out like scribbles, the artwork of a child, but Jackson was happy in that moment, thinking of the dinosaurs and snow men and flowers Daisy had loved to draw.

She hadn't liked going to day care. "What if you forget what I look like?" she had said once. "You could take home the wrong kid."

"Never," Jackson had said, and he took a photograph of her every morning, next to that day's favorite drawing. The chalk might disintegrate over time, but he'd always have those memories, those photographs where she smiled up at him.

He stuck the yellow chalk stub in his breast pocket like a handkerchief and walked back up the stairs to his family.

FLUTTERED

Candace has begun to hiccup butterflies when he comes near her. At first they were skippers, small and brownish, feet tasting as they climbed: tickles against her throat. Air rushed into her lungs, and they burst into flight.

Two days ago there was a flutter of fritillaries. Candace coughed out the large insects whenever she tried to speak to the new guy at work. She decided to see a doctor, but she needed to bring him along, or else no one would believe her.

She imagines the ultrasound will show chrysalides, some just empty shells, and others with the new insects struggling out of brown and green casings, stretching their newly formed wings, ready for escape when he walks in the door.

When he moved into the office, earlier this month, nests of eggs must have strung themselves between her ribs. Candace stared at him from her cubicle in the corner. She thought the prickling in her abdomen came from nervousness alone.

Now, when she uses the copier by his desk, she hopes there aren't any veiny wings or legs between her teeth as she asks him what plans he has for after work.

He picks up his coat, smiling, and together they walk out.

STRAWBERRY SHAMPOO

Enter the third-floor hotel room and slip off your shoes by the corner of the bed. In the bathroom, unpack the bag the airport delivered to your room. Inside, find a bottle of Suave Fresh Mountain Strawberry shampoo. Snort.

Think: It probably isn't made with real strawberries.

Close your eyes and rub your temples. Sigh.

Undress for a shower: unbuckle your belt and let your pants fall to the floor. The guy sitting next to you on the plane had terrible body odor, like he'd eaten a salad of onions and cabbage and sardines before boarding. You can still smell it, even now.

Think: I have no choice. The funeral is in two hours. I have to use it.

Run cold water from the tap and splash your face.

Groan.

Try to think of some other way to do this.

Rifle through the rest of the bag. Among a few collared shirts, a pair of dress pants, and several jockey shorts, find a pair of black and white tie-dyed knee socks. You used to have socks like these when you played soccer and ran track in high school, and sometimes you wore them because you liked the design and not just on days you were required. Gramma was at every game, home and away. She used to wash your dirty grass-stained uniforms and those smelly blue and green striped socks. She practically raised you. There were more days with your brother at Gramma's than at home with your sleeping mother.

Ignore the buttons. Pull your shirt over your head. Toss it through the open door into a heap by your shoes.

At the very bottom of the bag, among some paperclips and crumbs, find a wad of brown paper taped up. Unwrap this to find a shot glass. On one side, there's a kangaroo, and on the other, a koala. Underneath both, read: "Australia."

Gramma always wanted to go to there. She would talk and talk about making a trip when you were kids. She would show you the picture next to *kangaroo* in the children's dictionary she kept next to the bed. The marsupial in her book liked jumping high above the ground. It ate mostly grasses and could live without water for long periods of time, like camels. It traveled with other kangaroos in a group called a mob. She read these facts to you both so often you still have them memorized. You used to ask to bring along your small trampoline on the trip. You wanted to jump alongside the new friends you'd make. She'd laugh and kiss your heads before turning out the light.

Hook your thumbs inside the elastic and push your shorts down to your feet. Turn on the shower. Grab the strawberry shampoo, and step under the scalding water. The airport lost your bag, the bag containing gentle, hypoallergenic toiletries and your funeral suit. Even though you're allergic to strawberries, take a chance, and pour a glop of the pink liquid into the palm of your hand. Rub until it suds, and massage your scalp. The hot water stings as your hands turn red and your head itches. Since you have no body wash, and you don't want to smell like the lily scented hotel hand soap, the other alternative, squeeze shampoo onto a washcloth and rub until your skin's raw.

Gramma always loved strawberries and tomatoes. She had to stop growing them—the strawberries—when she found out about your allergy. She kept her tomato plants. Grampa had died years ago, before you were born. She had kept the plants for him.

She told you, "When I die, burn me up. Cremate me. Plant a rosebush and tomato plants, and mix my ashes with Grampa's in the dark soil."

Rinse thoroughly. Use cold water. It might slow the reaction.

Get dressed in another man's clothes. They fit, though the waistband's tight; a muffin top spills out of your pants. The button and wrinkles will imprint on your skin like a brand. The sleeves are a little longer than you'd like. In the mirror, see the berry-red splotches on your skin.

Think: I should get a gym membership. Do something about the weight.

Feel guilty for thinking about your appearance when you're about to attend a funeral.

Think of how you smell like Gramma, how she would like the fragrance, while you open the door, descend three flights of stairs, and walk to the bus stop. Once there, stand by the curb waiting for the bus. There is no bench. The sky slowly darkens and fills with clouds. Check your watch and the bus schedule in your pocket several times. Think of how you should have bought flowers, an umbrella. Feel empty.

When the rain sprinkles your shoulders, decide to walk to the funeral home twenty blocks away. You remember the route.

Think: If I hurry, I can still make it.

Think: Damn, wet socks are the worst.

Wish you had brought a change from the hotel. That would have been a practical idea.

Don't call any of your estranged family members, especially not your mother, family who still live in town and could pick you up before the funeral, family you haven't spoken to in at least five years. The one person you'd like to see, the one you wish had met you at the airport, your little brother, the one who had committed suicide, had already left you behind.

Stubbornly, trudge on, chin tucked against your chest. Rain pelts down harder, stinging your already irritated skin.

Stop at an intersection a few blocks away from the funeral home. Wait for the light to change so you can cross. A car passes, completely soaking you with water. Shiver. Try not to think of the brown, mucus-like water coating your body. Peel away the second skin your shirt has become, and ignore the sharp chafing between your legs.

Think about turning around, about checking out of your room, leaving as if you never came to town. Let your bag arrive hours after you've gone. Everything's already ruined. Everything reminds you of Sam: the arcade across the street where you played hooky, the discount grocery store where your mother used the food stamps she lied to receive, the car wash where you worked together one summer.

Continue walking. Feel worse for wanting to leave. Want to pay your respects, whatever that means. You loved Gramma. You loved them both. Want to let her know you didn't leave because of her. You haven't seen Gramma in a long time. She might have forgiven you for leaving, in the end. Your girlfriend had told you about the funeral when she found the obituary online, by accident, she said.

It's completely dark and raining still when you do arrive. Try to open the locked doors. Your eyelashes are soaked, and there are drops on your glasses, and you look through this haze. There are no lights on inside. Either you missed the entire service, or the paper had the wrong information. You were in the wrong place at the wrong time, again, like with Sam. He'd called that day, and you turned off your phone.

Curse.

Curse.

Several times, loudly.

Punch the wooden doors, and then flinch. You aren't used to hitting things. Cradle your fist in your other hand. Sit on the steps, out of the rain, and watch traffic go by.

Realize you could have had the hotel call a cab.

Reach into your coat pocket for a pack of cigarettes that aren't there. At least you kept one promise to Gramma. You quit smoking cold turkey after you left town.

The water on your glasses smears the headlights on the road.

Think: Almost like fireflies.

She took you walking in the evening. You each had a Mason jar. You'd prepared by poking holes in the lid. You ran, your arms outstretched, the lid in one hand, jar in the other. Sam made it look effortless. Like they came to him. You were always reaching for more, never happy with what you had until it was gone.

ELLIOT GOODACRE SURVIVES THE FLOOD

My brother has gone inside himself, deep inside the cobwebby caves that make up his mind, and I don't think I can knock him out of his trance, not this time. We're sitting at the end of the boat dock, which juts into the lake at the top of the hill above the house where we live—well, where we used to live.

The water is rising.

The grayed boards beneath us have a warped, creaky look about them, a look that says they too will disappear soon. I've lost my shoes somewhere. I rub my callused heels against the wood, to make sure I can still feel something, even if it is pain.

Jeremy hasn't spoken to me since yesterday, and I can't remember the last time my skin wasn't cold and pruned from being wet. I keep checking his face. If his lips turn blue, then we're both under-oxygenated. Mother always used this word when she watched us swimming, and now I'm using Jeremy as a mirror, my silent twin.

The lake wishes to become a river, to wash away to new places, as I suppose we'll be forced to do soon. Rain slaps against the green water and objects appear from the world beneath like some sort of magic trick: discarded rubber tires, whole felled trees, driftwood and weeds, which together look to me eerily, at a distance, like a soggy woman with long strands of seaweed hair.

Jeremy doesn't comment when I look back and forth from this water show to his blank expression. I wonder if dreams appear to him in this way, as new worlds, below the one we see each day, below the rigor and routine, underneath the bottomless layers we don't even know exist, seeping into our unconscious minds as we sleep. Jeremy tells me about his dreams

sometimes, where he would rather live and be the characters he imagines: T-Rex dinosaurs in pince-nez ruling an alternate universe or little boys who puke up fully functional remote-control trains.

Right now, Jeremy's sitting next to me, cross-legged on the dock, his eyes glazed, and his breathing a little slower than I'd like, and I can't help but wonder when he'll return to me. He's the only one I have right now. The rain has likely washed away the neighboring trailers and our town, and I've brought us to the dock, mainly because it floats. I don't know what else to do. I'm hoping some rescue plane or boat will come and find us. The rain beats down harder and Jeremy rocks back and forth. It's almost imperceptible, but it's a change from before, his rocking.

Our house is ten miles north of downtown, and we're at least four miles from the nearest neighbor. If the rain creates an upstream current of ten miles per hour, which increases with every inch of rain, how long will it take someone to know we're still here?

I'm good at math, especially word problems, but I don't think we can count on someone to find us in time. We're going to have to save ourselves.

I need Jeremy's help. I reach over and poke the side of his grey and blue striped tee shirt, deep into his ribs. This knocks his body dangerously close to the side of the dock, and he still says nothing, returns to his rocking. But his eyes move, and I can tell I have his attention from the way he looks at me out of the corner of his eye.

We all have a natural blind spot, Mother told us, because of the placement of the optic nerve. Right now, I can't afford to miss anything. I need Jeremy to see what I can't.

"Hey, Jer. Can you, uh, can you see anybody? Do you think someone's coming for us? Is there something I've missed?"

While I wait for him to answer, I take stock of our options: wait for the dock to unmoor and use it as a make-shift raft, dive back into the house and try to take off a door or something else that might float, swim—I could for a while, but Jeremy? Lightning flashes not far from the opposite shore, and thunder makes the dock shake beneath us.

We have to find something to use as a raft.

"Jeremy," I whisper, close to his face, but still off to the side. When he's become inverted like this, he does best when I don't make direct eye contact. It's as if he's turned so far inward that to look out he has to do so in a different way.

He begins to hum along with his rocking. Finally. I'm getting somewhere.

Jeremy points to the dock, and I know what he wants me to do. It would be too dangerous to go back into the house now that it's mostly submerged, especially in the rain that's still coming down. I've got to find a way to get the dock loose. It's old, and there have to be places where the boards have rotted through. I walk back toward where shore used to be and kick at the posts that anchor the dock to land. Maybe I can loosen them this way. Back here, where the wood anchors to shore, a few inches of water have crept up to cover the boards. If I can't get us loose soon, I'm not sure how much longer the rest of the dock will be able to float.

All that can be seen of our house is the oval window that looks out from the attic. Jeremy and I stood there and waved to mother as she left for work early yesterday morning. She hasn't come back. Most likely the rain flooded the roads that led to our house before she got off her shift at the elderly center. She'd have to find a boat to get back here now. She might have tried calling, but if the phone had stayed dry, the storm would have prevented service getting through.

More debris has floated past the dock, mostly tree branches, it looks like, and somehow a pink pair of goggles has materialized next to Jeremy. He must have grabbed them from the water.

"Thanks, pal," I say and put them on. I stick my head into the water near the end of the dock as I wiggle the posts. They seem looser, and with the goggles on, I can see what I'm doing. It sounds strange with my head under the water while it rains, like I imagine it sounds inside a snow globe that's been turned upside down. My body shakes from the cold water, but I focus on loosening the posts, and a squelching sound tells me they are as loose as they're going to get. I try pulling them up and out of the mud, but that's impossible while I'm standing on top of the boards. Instead I lie down and kick at the posts with my heels until the wood splinters. The rain washes blood from my feet as the dock begins to move away.

The dark, churning lake drifts us farther into the middle of the current. I crawl back to Jeremy and pull him down until he's also lying flat on his stomach. That's when I realize I'm still wearing pink goggles, pink girl's goggles, which I push up onto my forehead.

"Where are we going?" Jeremy asks.

I shrug my shoulders and hope the dock-now-makeshift-raft holds together if the storm gets worse. All we can do is wait and watch.

We catch up to the tree branches that floated past earlier. I grab at them and begin to strip off leaves and the little twigs at the end. It looks more like a broom than an oar, but when I dip it into the water, I'm able to change our path slightly. The lake and floodwater have merged so much, I'm not sure which direction we're going. I know that our house and Mother and the town are now somewhere lost behind us.

"Where do you think we should go?" I ask. "We can stay in this current or try to move to the side somewhere, but I doubt we could row against this with tree branches."

Jeremy nods, looking around. There's so much water we can see the tops of trees barely sticking up above the surface. There aren't any other houses up here, and I don't see any boats.

Thunder cracks again, and the sky turns green from lightning. When it's quieted and I can hear the raindrops against the water again, Jeremy points toward my left to a tall tree with a cat clinging to its evergreen branches, a cat who howls like a human screaming. I use the oar and Jeremy sticks his hands in the water, and we paddle in the cat's direction. Maybe if we have someone else to save, we can figure out a way to save ourselves.

I wish this rain was another one of Jeremy's crazy dreams that he had somehow dragged me into.

I wish we could both wake up soon.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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