

COLD SNAP

by

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ABSTRACT

Cold Snap is a collection of short stories that details the breaking down of self by those closest to us and the rebuilding process necessary to continue on in this diverse world. The sometimes autobiographical short stories attempt to explore the different stages of psychological and/or physical abuse and their aftermaths. Three short stories revolve around a singular family and include themes of cultural division, LGBT coming-of-age, neglect, and acceptance. The other short stories focus on themes including but not limited to self-worth, fear, desire, and survival. All characters revolve around the Buddhist idea that to want is to suffer and conclude with how the protagonists live with those consequences.

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COLD SNAP

Orn returned from work to a disheveled house. Half-eaten bowls of cereal strewn on the counter, newspapers with coffee rings and mashed scrambled eggs melding with wet ink. The sticky tile floors popped with every step. Her annoyance grew, but who was there to blame? Her children and their lack of responsibility? Her husband for his inability to discipline the children? Or her, the exhausted mom running the marathon race that is the American Dream? At the end of the day, whether she wanted to or not, she'd have to clean the house and make dinner for the kids. Nearly fifteen years in the country and that was her American reality.

Her husband, dressed in his blue lab coat, rushed out the door the moment he saw her in the kitchen. No hello, goodbye, welcome home, or kiss. The man who once snuck out of a Cambodian refugee camp, who bribed the guards with gifts she'd given him just to see her was nowhere to find. And she was too. Predictability and routine displaced adventure and passion. At 4:30 pm she returned home, and her husband left to work. Her youngest child, Jake, had nicknamed them sun and moon after Thai Songkran, Thai New Year. Unlike the New Year celebrations in the States--fireworks, BBQ's, and midnight kisses--Songkran is considered the most important day of the year in Thailand, a day revolving around the sun and moon and the crop cycles of Southeast Asia.

She missed Songkran more than anything else since coming to Florida. The festivals and parties that continued throughout the night and all through the week, her family setting up booths selling durian and lychee to tourists partying the night away. But even her memory of Songkran

was tainted. Her husband remembered Songkran as the day he escaped from Cambodia.

Songkran was the last time he saw his family before the Communists invaded the country.

Orn turned on the faucet and filled the sink with soapy water. She trashed the newspapers and wiped the counters. She placed the bowl in the water and cut her finger with a knife. She pinched her pointer-finger to her thumb, the dull throb annoying more than painful. Her hips sideswiped the trashcan as she reached for the cabinet with Band-Aids. Bottles and that crumpled up paper now soaked in yesterday's old scraps spilled out on the already dirty tile floor. Orn fisted both hands.

Unable to take it, Orn bandaged her finger and went outside to tend to her plants. The red and green Thai chilies sprouted and lined the entryway of the door. Her children couldn't take spicy foods, so the chilies would eventually die unused. Floral and citrus scents intertwined as lemon grass lingered in the air and small buds of pearl-petal Jasmine began to sprout. The only Jasmine her daughters knew was the princess. Growing plants for her was an extension of her heritage, of her identity. Her ancestors worked farms. Her husband, while in Thailand, picked and sold fruits in the capital. She came to America for a better life for her children, but had she succeeded? She spent more time outside with her plants than inside with them. Plants didn't frustrate or tire her. She'd plant a seed and watch it grow. When no one looked, she'd sing Thai nursery rhymes to the plants before bedtime, songs her husband didn't want her singing to the children as babies. "They need to learn English in this country. They are American."

Pressing her thumb to the head of the hose, Orn sprayed a thin layer of water over the plants. The skies appeared serene and light blue, but Orn had spent enough time outside to know when a sudden shift in weather would come when the heat would be devoured by cold. The

water would work as a barrier, a frozen shield to keep the plants alive during the coming cold snap.

A sharp pain shot through her lower back. Orn sat down on the bench near the door. It had been years since they left Thailand. And it showed. In her skin—in her bones. She never liked running, but it felt like running was all she knew since she met her husband.

Orn had cried most of her earlier drive home. Not that her husband would know. Or tell. Her workday was much like her home life. Routine. As an assembly technician for Unisys, all of her tools including wires and soldering guns needed to be put away and unplugged at the end of her shift. Any supplies used during her shift needed to be re-stocked. But Lynn and Angie, two women from the adjacent work row appeared to have a single work goal, and that was to test Orn's patience. At first, Orn thought of this as some tradition for new people. Traditions, Orn could understand, but the relentless women never quit. Then, when Orn heard them call her "slant eyes" she knew the teasing would never end. When Orn returned from her department meeting at the end of her shift, her supervisor scolded her for her messy station, and when she tried to explain, the man told her, "I don't speak Chinese."

The words had replayed in her mind during her drive home. Although she was not Chinese, her children and her husband had Chinese blood running through their veins. Did that change who she was? And what good would it have done correcting him? She, a woman and a minority? He'd likely say she was lucky to have the job. She knew not all Americans were like her supervisor. Her husband's boss, a middle-aged man with blonde hair and brown eyes, respected her husband and treated him like a person. But Orn--she was the "Chinese" "slant eyes" who wasn't even Chinese.

Teyona, who had similar issues as Orn at the company, tried to speak to the supervisor for her, but nothing changed. Lynn and Angie, the “Mocking Queens,” said Orn couldn’t fight her own battles. And they were right. Orn didn’t want to fight. She didn’t want to be a troublemaker. She didn’t want this life.

Orn stepped inside and filled a bucket with warm water, then returned outside to soak her feet. Across the street, the beeping of a moving truck echoed.

Orn had known the moment she caught the Chinese woman eyeing her grapefruit last week that she’d be seeing more of her. And today confirmed her suspicion. Orn and her husband had toured the home across the way before purchasing theirs, but Orn disliked the direction the house faced and that the front yard was wider than the back. No one could save money with such a shallow back yard.

The Chinese woman waved at Orn while simultaneously directing movers with boxes. After the discussion with her supervisor, the last person Orn wanted to talk to was an actual Chinese person. She’d rather talk to the Vietnamese “Grandma,” a nickname Orn uses with her in hopes that she treats her kids like family next door who stole her grapefruit when she thought no one was looking.

"Nín hảo." Orn looked up to see a floppy purple hat atop her new Chinese “friend.”

"I don't speak Chinese," Orn said. The woman had probably seen the Chinese red Ba Gua octagonal mirror above the front door that kept spirits out. But that didn’t necessarily make her Chinese. Orn believed in luck, Feng Shui, and superstitions all around the world.

"Oh, sorry. Where are you from?"

ABA. American based Asians. In Thailand, she rarely was asked, "Where are you from?" But in America, every Asian person she met asked. Even if they already knew. It was like the equivalent of the American handshake. After the fourth or fifth time, she wondered if she missed some manual she should have received when she got her citizenship. Next to, "What are the three branches of the American government," "What is the most important question to ask when meeting another Asian?"

"How is the neighborhood?" the woman asked.

"It's good. Safe. Good schools."

"The neighbors?"

"Quiet."

Orn wondered if her new neighbor would understand the double meaning behind her words. Could the Chinese woman see the weathered woman with her feet in a hot bath just trying to find some tranquility in the chaos of her life? Could she see how annoyed this weathered woman was by the loud-speaking Chinese woman who looked like a white-faced demon? Despite not saying it aloud, Orn felt bad about thinking of the woman as a white-faced demon, though a little more color in her makeup and less in her clothes would probably help her appearance. She blamed her stupid supervisor and his all-Asians-look-the-same attitude.

The woman continued talking. Orn continued nodding. By the time the woman left, the water had become cold.

Orn returned inside and called her husband at work. Partly, so she could update him on their new neighbor, and partly so she could hear his voice. She couldn't remember the last time the two talked about something other than saving money. She explained how they needed to

extend the gate. How the Chinese woman across the street would also steal her grapefruit, but her husband ignored her concerns and told her to stop worrying. How what grows from the Earth is God's doing and should be available to all God's creatures. Orn believed in God. She also believed that the fruits that grew from the Earth belonged to the woman who planted them.

"Bring over the extra duck," her husband said.

"Our ancestors might still be eating," Orn replied, referring to the custom of leaving food out after prayer and inviting their ancestors to dine on a good meal. Shouldn't he be doing this? Shouldn't the kids be doing this?

"Chinese New Year. You give to your family. You give to your ancestors in the afterlife. And you give to your neighbors."

#

Orn did not want to see the Chinese woman again. But she wrapped the duck in Saran wrap and marched over to the woman still directing the last of her boxes.

"Happy Chinese New Year," Orn said.

"I thought you weren't Chinese?"

"I'm not." The two stood in silence.

"So those grapefruits look amazing," the Chinese woman said.

"They are." The silence continued until the Chinese woman thanked Orn for the duck and excused herself to continue with her move. When Orn returned to her side of the street, she paused and looked back. She could hear her husband's lectures. Hear him say that building a community and friendships was important because of all the ties he'd lost. She didn't lose her friends and community. She left hers.

After Orn had dropped off the duck, she checked on her children. Her oldest daughter, Laura, sat in her room, the see-through plastic phone and red, yellow and blue wires lighting up like her daughter's face. Although a part of her worried about who her daughter spoke to on the phone, still, Orn was happy to see her happy. Orn knocked and pointed toward her daughter's school books, and Laura shooed her away with her hand.

Her other daughter, Stephanie, asked to stay the night at a friend's house. Orn quickly said no. It was a weird tradition in the States, to inconvenience another family with her child. To have them feed her child and put a roof over her head? Was this some way of stating Orn failed as a mother?

"Mom, please. They live just around the corner," her daughter said.

"I said no." Orn surprised herself standing her ground, but her daughter was quick to point out how much she hated her. Orn smiled, knowing she did her job. Stephanie reminded Orn of herself as a child. Outgoing and popular and sure to be trouble when she grew up—She could even see her running away with a boy someday.

When it came to finding her third child, Orn never knew where Jake was hiding or playing. His imagination left him in the most awkward of situations. She once found him hanging from a tree branch upside down, his legs holding him up. She nearly had a heart attack that day.

When she couldn't find him in his room or the backyard, Orn walked out front. On top of the green electric-company box in front of the Vietnamese Grandma's house, he held up his arms and flapped them like a flightless bird. A short, pudgy, good-in-hot-oil flightless bird.

She walked over to her son, his brand new denim overalls stained with grass and dirt. His new long-sleeved shirt remained clean. More work for later. Yawning with fatigue, she called to her pudgy little five-year-old bird. She ruffled his hair and took a deep breath, leaning on the box herself. The warmth and vibrations from the electricity felt like a massage.

Just before she could take a deep breath, her son leaped off the box, and she caught him by the waist. With all his wiggling and giggling within seconds, he flipped upside down, his fingers grazing the grass.

"I will drop you on your head little bird," she said.

Her son cocked his head to the side, confused. She flipped him right-side-up and let him stand for himself. A dull pain shot through her shoulder blades. Five years old, she reminded herself.

"I like grass," he said.

He fingered the single blade, and then along the middle fibers, ripped it into two. The pieces fell to the ground.

"It's like ripping paper without anyone yelling at me," he said.

"Don't be wasteful. Let's get inside and get you cleaned up before dinner."

"I keep seeing a white van drive by," he said. Orn looked around and saw the back of a white van turn toward the next street over.

"There are always white vans driving through here." Between after-school programs and the neighborhood being relatively new with new families moving in almost every other week, vans, moving trucks and buses passed through all the time. Still, she knew her son wasn't the

most observant so for him to bring up white vans was odd. She shivered and rushed him inside, the cold coming sooner than she thought.

#

Orn skipped any cooking for the night, and instead ordered pizza. She loved pizza in America compared to the overly sweet pizza in Thailand. And they delivered too. Sitting on pink dragon-skin cushions, Orn wondered if she had the right to complain about her life. The furniture in the living room was hand-carved by master artists in Thailand. The accent wall featured giant, diamond-shaped mirrors, and in the dining room gold-plated portraits of the King and Queen smiled down on her family. Here, her children took showers in bathrooms and had hot water and plumbing. When she was a child, she had to fill buckets with water to bathe. In the winter, baths took even longer because she had to heat the water herself to stay warm.

As much as she questioned her American Dream, she could not deny that her children were better off. The life she could provide here for them was exponentially better than anything she could give them in the homeland. Even if it meant she'd live a life disconnected from everything she knew. In America, she could imagine the day her son got married. She could imagine a future here instead of just a life.

Orn and Jake sat in the living room, nibbling on pepperoni pizza and watching TV when she heard the garage door open. She couldn't explain the feeling, the coldness forming bumps along her arms. Her fingers felt paralyzed as she squeezed Jake's hands. She called out to her husband and then covered her mouth. Deep down, she knew he would have called if he were coming home early. Her mind quickly drew up the blueprints of the home. Stephanie was in her room. Laura sat at the dining room table near the entryway of the garage talking on the phone.

Jake sat beside her. No one else had a garage opener aside from her husband. No one else would be coming over at night. She pulled Jake behind her. Her hands shook as she stood. Before she could call out to Laura to come over to her, the door to the laundry room flung open, and two people dressed in black stormed the home.

Everything slowed in Orn's eyes. Movement, physical objects melded into one like colors on a paint palate. But her mind felt bombarded with questions. What's happening? What do I do? Why can't I move? Why can't I speak? The first man and taller of the two yanked the phone from Laura's hand. She screamed. The phone flew into the painting of the Thai King. The wire ripped from the wall like a wild snake.

Stephanie rushed out her room. Jake tried to run to his sister, but Orn held him back. When the taller robber grabbed Laura by her hair and yanked her into the living room, the paralyzing fear Orn had felt dissipated. Like Florida's eerie weather, Orn's state quickly changed into a thunderstorm. Orn's chest burned, her knuckles cracked, her teeth ground against one another. Orn returned to her roots and started screaming in Thai, "Xya chup luk chan." Despite the language, Orn was sure they knew now not to dare touch her children. She had played soccer in Thailand, but Orn had never moved so fast in her life. She ran to the taller robber and clawed at his eyes like a tiger. The shorter robber tried to pull her off, but little could stop her. It wasn't until the butt of the smaller robber's gun hit her on the side of the head that she fell to the floor.

The kids ran to her, yelling for the robbers to stop. Despite the pain, Orn stood again and told her children to stay back. Orn hated guns.

"Jewelry, take it off," the robbers said. The smaller robber ran to search the master bedroom. They wanted everything she had worked for. Soon, the other robber would find the

safe. *Save, save, save.* Everything her husband and she saved would be gone. Orn ripped her necklace from her neck and threw it into the corner of the room behind the wood furniture. She pulled off her ring and swallowed it. The robber grabbed her head like a football and slammed it into the diamond-cut mirrored walls. He then yanked her earrings from her lobes and put them in his pocket.

The second robber returned, and the family was told to line up along the walls and on their knees. One by one, the robbers stripped Orn's children of their jewelry; the gold coin she received the first time she went to a Thai temple in Thailand, stripped from Laura's neck. The jade bracelet that had changed colors to white when Stephanie wore it, ripped from her wrist. The white was supposed to mean change for the better. What good could come from this? All these heirlooms from older generations in her family, or one-of-a-kind pieces she collected herself over the years, gone. Despite being turned away from them, Orn could see the robbers in the mirror. Was this it?

Flashes of the Killing Fields in Cambodia came to mind. Would her family die now like her husband's family? Would they be shot in the back of the head, execution style, and left on the dirty tile floor she hadn't cleaned? Tears formed in her eyes. She spent so much of her life not taking risks, not fighting back—What good were dreams if she were dead?

“Combination to the safe?” the shorter robber asked. He'd found it in the closet, hidden behind stacks of clothes. This time, Orn did not fight back. If not fighting back meant maybe they'd let them go, it was worth it to lose their savings.

The robbers bound everyone's hands behind their back with zip-ties and went to test the combination. Her children cried, and her heart broke. Her body had been aching for weeks, but

nothing compared to the pain of hearing them cry. She'd heard them cry before but never like this. When Laura got into a fight with friends when Stephanie wasn't invited to a party, when Jake scraped his knees for the millionth time. These cries changed her. They felt like a monster had burrowed within her, grabbed her soul and ripped it down the middle, a pain she'd feel in every new life she'd have after this.

Orn was sure the sound of sirens was her imagination at first. As she watched the robbers gather all they could and rush out the door, she wondered how those sounds affected everyone. Did the robbers feel fear? Like the fear she felt when they robbed the family of their security. She could only hope that when they fled like the cowards they were, one day, her guardians and ancestors would come back and return all of her pain twice fold. For her kids, she knew this robbery would bring them stress. Laura and Stephanie aged a bit in their eyes. And Jake, well, her pudgy little bird was confused as always. For Orn, the sirens reminded her of the fireworks on Songkran even though they sounded very different. With the robbers running from the home, she felt unrestricted like she did the many nights she celebrated her Thai New Year.

Minutes felt like weeks, but the police came and cut the ties that bound her hands. The officer asked if she were okay, but Orn couldn't reply until each of her children's hands were free. She nodded. She didn't know what okay meant, not in this situation. But she knew she needed to get out of the house. She didn't need to run or hide, but going outside felt freeing. The cold snap felt uplifting rather than chilling. Orn gave her statement, detailing everything that occurred. The cops looked surprised she could speak English, but she didn't let it bother her. She mentioned the white van her son had seen on the streets, waiting and watching her family and home. She regurgitated every detail of the night.

Beyond the strobing red and blue, the Chinese woman stood in front of her home and waved, giving space. Orn waved back, bowed, and mouthed “thank you.” The Chinese woman bowed in return.

Her husband arrived almost a half-hour later, approximately, the same amount of time the robbers occupied the home before fleeing. She couldn’t believe how so much could change in such little time.

When she saw her husband, she didn’t wait for his kisses or his words. She took the initiative and took him in her arms. What she thought would feel like a stranger felt like home.

He whispered in her ear little things like how strong she was and she agreed.

“When I got the call, I felt like—” Orn stopped him and shook her head.

His words quickly shifted.

“How are you all?” he asked the children, and Orn cried again. But this cry was one of strength and change.

THE ART OF GAMBLING

Jake waits in the car outside the 7-Eleven. The orange-green-and-red neon sign dims in one corner from a dying bulb. His mother is first in line, her hands full of what he can only imagine is a mix of twenty-dollar, ten-dollar, and two-dollar scratch-offs. She never buys five-dollar scratch-offs because she knows they never win. A man in baby blue scrubs waiting in line behind her balls his fist. Jake's hand instinctively hovers over the door handle of his mother's SUV. The man releases his fist and Jake drops his hand, but his eyes never move, never stop watching.

At home, Jake's mother studies the scratch-offs and swears she can tell by the number in the corner which tickets are winning tickets. The multiple boxes stacked in dusted corners and deserted closets do not deter her from purchasing more, nor do the multiple arguments she's had with family, with strangers.

What if she argues with the wrong person, a person not afraid to hit a middle-aged woman, or worse a person with a gun? For Jake, each gas station trip leads to an anxiety destination unwelcomed.

Blue Scrubs slams his bottled pop on the counter and leaves the store. A girl with large golden earrings—the kind commonly inscribed with a name through the hoop—stomps her foot and then checks her phone. Gold Earring's foot-tapping speeds up, and Jake whispers, "Don't do it." She steps forward. Jake opens the car door. She throws her polished hands into the air, turns, and flings the double doors open, exiting. Jake sits back and releases the breath he didn't even

realize he was holding. He's played this gambling game at the gas station before, a teen guardian to his supposed guardian.

His mother returns to the car ten minutes later with a handful of tickets, red tickets, white tickets, blue tickets—so patriotic. For a moment, she twirls a single rose between her fingers for tomorrow, Valentine's Day. Jake deduces she has spent well over two hundred dollars but says nothing. Monday is synonymous with direct-deposit day, giving her the most cash to spend of any day during the week.

“Can we pick something up for dinner?” Jake asks.

His mother's eyebrows crinkle for a moment.

“We have plenty of food at home,” she says. Jake nods, but knows this isn't true. Aside from the *Mama* instant noodles and a half-empty bottle of Sriracha, the pantry and refrigerator are barren.

His phone vibrates and he sees text messages from his best friends, Leah and Brad, asking if he can make it to the party at Gameworks in Ybor this weekend.

He hesitates before asking.

A moment later, he texts his friends back saying, “Sorry.”

His mother doesn't understand the word “savings.” She doesn't understand her family's financial struggles. She's blinded by their affluent past that no longer exists and with every coin slashing through the opaque covering on scratch-offs or with every press on the penny slot-machines at the Hard Rock, she dreams of making it out of the hole she believes the family is buried in.

Or maybe she believes winning money will patch things up with her husband. A rose or money won't fix that broken man.

They pull into the driveway, and Jake does not see his father's car, again. Instead, he sees the dead Thai chili plants and browned jasmine petals his mother stopped tending to years ago. His sister Laura tries to water them when she can, but she's no miracle worker. Jake gets out of the car and observes his mother leaving the rose on the seat to wither away, trapped in the Florida heat.

Instead of playing video games or watching TV, Jake watches the clock while doing homework, a curiosity turned ritual. It started with his father returning home one—maybe two hours late. His father would stroll in around 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening and Jake never gave it much thought. But now, Jake never knows when he'll return. With Laura living in her own house and his other sister, Stephanie, away at college, Jake returns home every day to a seemingly vacant house. His mother hides in her room upstairs plugging ticket numbers into an Excel sheet. The clock chimes throughout the house as it turns 8:00 and Jake hears the sound of keys jingling in the front door.

It's his sister Laura. She gives him her half-eaten calzone, and he devours the buttery crust. She opens the refrigerator and yells for their mother. Their mother doesn't bother to answer, likely to avoid another argument.

"She's at the damn gas station every night, and she can't pick you up food," Laura says. Jake feels guilty for texting her.

Jake points at the clock. "Dad's not any better." Laura gives Jake *the look*, a mixture of side-eye and a deep sigh, and tosses a twenty at him.

“Don’t forget, I need you to watch my dogs Saturday night and Sunday morning, so I can go to my reunion.” The edges of her cheeks pull upward when saying reunion.

#

Despite the overwhelming number of foil balloons in shades of red and pink congregating above everyone, the sounds of reggaeton music and beats blast through the gray hallways of Jake’s high school. The administration decided years ago that the battle against noise pollution before school was a battle not worth fighting.

In a high school made up of predominately Cuban-Americans, Jake doesn’t stick out. Students and even the occasional teacher have mistaken his Thai, Chinese, Cambodian, and French heritage to be Hispanic or Filipino. Even though his physical appearance fits the status quo, inside, he still feels *different*.

The bell rings and Jake files into homeroom. Brad takes a seat behind him and lightly massages his shoulders.

“Sucks you won’t be there,” Brad says.

Jake feels the tips of his ears grow red, Brad’s touch charged and pulsating. He’s known Brad most of his life, but Jake never realized when his feelings toward him changed from innocence to enflamed. Was it when Brad came out last year? When did a simple touch make Jake feel like he was holding in a scream?

“Yeah, it does.”

After homeroom, the two meet Leah holding a rose near the flagpole. The multilayer school reminds Jake of prisons he’d seen on TV. Leah kisses Jake on the cheek and tries to hold his hand, but Jake pulls away without thinking. Jake sees the confusion in Leah’s facial

expression and is sure it matches the expression on his own face. Leah tosses the rose at Jake and leaves. For a second, he thinks about the rose his mother left in the car to die.

“You don’t get a girl a flower on Valentine’s Day when you don’t like her,” Brad says.

“And your experience makes you an expert?” Or lack thereof.

“Awww... roses on V-Day. I’ll never get one,” Brad says.

“You want it?” Jake asks, and then wishes he hadn’t. His cheeks convert from tan to pink, and Brad laughs.

“Aww... sweetie, you shouldn’t have,” he says. He knows Brad’s just joking, but like Leah, he can only think of doing one thing.

Jake runs away. As much as he knows he *should* like Leah, he can’t help but question what he feels toward Brad.

During the rest of the school day, Jake evades Brad and Leah. In the classes he shares with them, he tells his teacher he needs to move closer to the board to see. In the hallways, he knows their daily paths well enough to go the unexpected route. If all else fails, he waits in the cliché restroom, stares into the cliché mirror, and apologizes for the cliché feelings he wishes he didn’t have. Jake knows he’s good at avoiding problems.

#

On Saturday morning, Jake showers and puts on his khaki slacks and long-sleeved button up. He wears striped dress socks and slips his feet into his wedding/casino shoes. In the bathroom, he squirts gel into his hand and runs it through his hair, the smell never welcoming but always expected. He holds his arms out, and notices the loose material under his arms and down his sides. He feels like a child playing dress up.

His mother's Chanel No. 5 perfume diffuses down the steps. He walks upstairs, his father's snoring echoing off the walls. She's in her room on the opposite side of the half from her husband's. Jake can't remember the last time he saw them sleep in the same bed or the same room, the last time her smile came from something other than lottery, scratch-offs, or casino wins. His mother puts on all of her jewelry and a smile like she's actually won the lottery. To be a winner, she says, you have to think, dress, and act like a winner.

The Hard Rock Casino is busier than usual. Jake sees a sign for some pop singer performing later that night. More security guards line the entrance, but their usual guard is nowhere to be seen. Still, his mother walks up with confidence, her jewelry shining under the warm glow of the lights above.

"Ma'am, he's too young to enter," the guard says.

Jake's mother randomly spouts words in Thai, as she looks for her usual guard, a stout Thai man with a wandering eye often too concerned with his mother's breasts.

"Too young," the guard says, gesturing with his hands, palms pressing toward the ground. Jake says nothing but wants to. He wants to say that he's not that short you stupid prick and that he doesn't even want to go in. His mother says "you ugly man" in Thai, but hides it behind a smile. Before the guard can say another word, Jake intervenes.

"I'm her interpreter. We've been coming here for years." Jake knows the best lies have some form of truth to them. "Ask Kamnan. He's the usual guard at this entrance on Saturday mornings."

Jake then sees Kamnan rushing over, and he gives the new guard the thumbs up. Without waiting for a response, Jake pulls his mother past the guard and into the casino.

Bright lights, gold and silver, and sounds surround them blinking like an epileptic's nightmare. Machines designed after old movies like *The Wizard of Oz* play songs from their respective soundtracks. Jake wonders if the colors and the themes of nostalgia are used to purposely trap people in a fog of false dreams.

His mother finds her usual seat, and presses the plastic button. The numbers start spinning. The machine is alive, familiar, family. No matter how many times she loses, every time she presses the button, her frown is replaced with a smile. Her bright red lips turn upward, her eyes wide and reflecting the lights cast by the machine. Her smile makes Jake smile.

"If I win, we can get back everything. We can vacation in Thailand, build a new home, replace everything we've lost."

He doesn't want to be swept up in her fantasies, but he can't help but imagine how different things would be had they not been robbed. After his parents began saving again and his mother won money by chance, his father lost it all again. His father *had to* loan money to his friend who ran off with it and never returned.

The two move from machine to machine, cursing the one that came before. Jake gets lost in the adrenaline of spins. Win a little, lose a little, win a little, lose.

A loud announcement rings overhead. Jake recognizes the timed announcement, and pulls out his phone. Having lost track of time, Jake runs outside of the casino where he has signal. Six missed calls. Laura's reunion started an hour ago.

"Laura?" he says, the phone bonded to his ear.

"You're still at the casino, aren't you?"

“I’m so sorry. We lost track of time, but I can get her. Get ready, you can still make it to your reunion. You’ll just be a little late.”

“It’s on a boat, Jake. God, I can’t count on that woman for anything. I told her you needed to be back. I gave her money for the damn casino just to make sure you’d be back.” His mother never mentioned that to him.

“It’s my fault too. I should have checked my phone.”

“I’ll help dad with the bills. I’ll help you with groceries and food,” Laura says. “But I’m done with her. I won’t fund her addiction. She hasn’t been a mother to me in a long time.”

Before Jake can say another word, Laura hangs up.

#

“Where’s dad?” Jake asks, when he and his mother get home from the casino.

“I don’t know,” his mother says. “Everyone needs a break every once in a while,” she adds after seeing Jake’s face. Jake isn’t sure if his mother is talking about him or herself.

For the second time this week, Jake sits at the dining room table waiting for his father to come home. In the china cabinet, instead of antique silverware and plates lined in gold, trophies Jake had won over the years in baseball peek through the glass doors. His father had been at every game, every practice. Jake always wanted to make him proud, pushing himself in the sport, in making good grades. He always heard the phrase money doesn’t make people happy, and maybe that was true, but losing money could break people and shatter families. He couldn’t remember the last time his father gave a damn about him.

Jake’s father stumbles in around midnight, the smell of sour alcohol superseding any bit of fresh air in the house.

“It’s my fault,” he says while stumbling to remove his shoes. He begins to slur, and Jake doesn’t understand a word he’s saying. But then again, even when they do talk, Jake rarely understands him. The words come out clear, but they carry as much weight as a passing conversation with a stranger. He wonders how he’s known the man for so long and still thinks of him as a stranger.

“Help me get these damn shoes off,” he says, suddenly clear.

Jake begins to remove the first shoe, and there, underneath the heavy alcohol smell, the scent of perfume lingers. Not Chanel No. 5. Something cheaper. Like fifty-cent gas station perfume.

“Take your own damn shoes off,” Jake says.

“Excuse me? I’m your father—”

“Since when? When were you the father? Better yet, since when were you a husband?”

His father’s already reddened cheeks turn a tinge darker.

“I smell *her* on you.”

Jake doesn’t wait for a reply. Everyone in the family has a role to fulfill; his father, a husband; his mother, a nurturer; his sister, a guide; and Jake, a son. As far as he is concerned, they all failed, including him.

#

“Jake, why are you avoiding me?” Brad asks Monday in homeroom. “Switching seats, ducking me in the hallways?”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Okay, so we’re good then?” Jake nods. “What about you and Leah?”

“I’m going to ask her out.”

“Why? You don’t like her that way,” Brad says. “What’s going on with you?”

Jake doesn’t answer. He decided over the weekend that if he wanted change, he needed to change the narrative of his life. He texts Leah to meet near the flagpole and ditches Brad.

“What do you want, Jake?” she asks. Without answering, Jake kisses her. He feels nothing. And it’s better than he’s felt in a long time. Jake wishes his eyes matched Leah’s, open and simply happy.

Jake’s mother picks him up from school and then stops at a different gas station. She changes the location depending on the day. She doesn’t ask Jake how his day was, or how he’s doing. Before she can get out of the car, Jake stops her and says, “No.”

“What’s wrong? I’ll be quick.”

“You have a problem and you don’t listen. Laura is mad at me. She won’t text me back or call because we screwed up her reunion.”

“Watch your mouth—”

“She tells you this all the time. You don’t have the money to keep buying tickets— You need to grow up.”

His mother doesn’t say anything. He’s not used to being stern with her. She puts the car in reverse and backs out of the parking spot.

He doesn’t look directly at her, but in the rearview mirror, her eyes blink quicker than usual like windshield wipers trying to keep tears away. He says nothing. He can’t always comfort her. He can’t always be her protector.

But he can't change overnight either. And even though he wants to go home and do anything other than sit in a parking lot at a gas station, how can he abandon her like everyone else in the family?

He wonders what would happen to her if he weren't here, if he left for college, too. Could his mother have relied on his sisters? Knowing Stephanie means knowing nothing. As giving as Laura could be, Jake knows sympathy is not in her nature. He understands that better than anyone. When his father worked graveyard shifts and left Jake's mother in charge, Laura stepped up. Laura had to be the mother. At least as best she could as she juggled work and college.

Jake places his hand on his mother's and squeezes. She looks at him and nods. He nods in return. He doesn't need to tell her to turn back and go to the gas station. He doesn't need to tell her to do what makes her happy. She knows. He recognized that look on her face as she backed away from the gas station. He had the same look on his face when he hid from Brad in the restroom, staring into the mirror.

He knows what his sister would say. She'd tell him, he was aiding an addict. He'd tell her he was supporting their mother. That someone has to. Not everyone can go out drinking night after night, doing whatever and with whomever they please.

Jake's phone vibrates. A text from Brad:

I know you don't like her, Jake. You don't like *her*.

#

Jake sees Laura's gray pumps outside the door when they return. Inside, she's sits on the couch in her gray pant suit.

"Mother," she says, as if that's a greeting.

“Laura, I don’t have time to fight,” their mother says.

“Me neither, not with you.”

Jake imagines running out the door, but knows if Laura wanted to talk with him, she’d find him wherever he ran. When the two are alone, she begins her rant.

“You never change. And because of you, she doesn’t change. When I was your age, I had a job. I worked for food, for everything. I put myself through college. You won’t learn if I keep giving you handouts, and that’s all I ever do with this family. Give handouts. It’s like you all think I’m an ATM. You are oblivious to the real world.”

Jake wants to say something, but nothing comes out. Instead, he feels his eyes burn. It’s his fault as usual. He tries to help everyone, be who his family wants him to be, when in reality, the only person he wants to be, he can’t be. She says he’s oblivious. She doesn’t even know he’s gay.

“Do not cry. You’re a man. Stop crying.”

“I’m sorry,” Jake says trying to keep his emotions under control.

He never claimed the title “gay,” never accepted it until just then.

#

Saturday morning, Jake wakes to an unusual noise. Staring out his bedroom window, he sees his father mowing the lawn. Jake walks to the kitchen smelling five-spice, and sees a large metal pot. On the stove, Palo is simmering. Large white eggs float in the thick brown broth and chunks of pork simmer on low-heat. The smells remind Jake of his childhood when the family would eat the stew over jasmine rice and talk to one another on the weekends. Even though his parents worked opposite shifts then, he felt like he saw more of them. Jake checks the cabinet for

crunchy Cheetos. His parents used to laugh at him because he would crush the orange puffs on top of his Palo, a dish of Thailand garnished with an American snack.

He runs upstairs to thank his mother for cooking and to ask when they can eat, but instead finds her huddled in the closet. Jake knew Laura stashed a steel lock box upstairs in case of emergencies, and he didn't even know his mother knew about it.

"Mom? What are you doing?"

His mother turns with a wad of cash in hand that she tucks inside her bag.

"How can I defend you when you do things like this?"

"I do this for the family."

"No," Jake says. "You do this for you." He leaves her with her mink coats and furs that she refuses to sell.

Jake showers same as every Saturday morning, gets dressed. He puts on his khaki pants and long-sleeved button-down. His dress socks and his dress shoes. He runs gel through his hair and combs it. When he leaves his room, his mother says, "I'll get ready soon."

Jake doesn't answer and walks out the front door.

His dad is in the garage putting the lawn mower away.

"Jake," he calls.

Jake doesn't stop. He's wasted enough time on both his parents.

Jake walks down to the local grocery store and applies for a job. The manager hires him on the spot. "I like that you took the initiative to dress up for the application," the manager says.

"To be a winner," Jake says. "You have to think, dress, and act like a winner."

#

A month goes by and Jake is content with his new life that consists of school, work, baseball practice for the Spring season, and Leah.

“I like that you have more time,” Leah says. “But we don’t have to go to every party.”

“Why not? I feel like I’ve been eighty my whole life.”

“But the eighty-year-old you is the you I like.” Jake ignores her, and takes her to the party of the week. There, he plays beer-pong and takes shots with friends he used to never see outside of school. In the cabinet near the system blasting music, Jake spots a bottle of Crown and begins drinking it straight from the bottle.

“Come on, let’s go,” Leah says. “Before you get too drunk.”

“I’m not drunk,” Jake says.

“I don’t know what kind of act you’re putting on but this is not you.”

He hears her mutter something that ends with or sounds like ‘your father,’ and Jake leaves the party.

Stumbling down the sidewalk, Jake walks around the same block a few times before realizing he has walked in the opposite direction of his home. Instead, he finds himself near Brad’s house. His legs feel like curtains caught in a breeze.

“Brad!” Jake screams outside his window. “Come out here!”

Brad opens his window and tells him to simmer down. A minute later, Brad runs out in a robe and Jake laughs.

“Are you drunk?” Brad asks as Jake collapses onto one of his lawn chairs.

“I’m doing fine, Brad. Thanks for asking.”

“Thanks for dumping me once you started dating Leah.”

Jake laughs. "I didn't dump you. I'm hiding from you."

"Why?" Jake takes in a deep breath and leans his head on Brad's shoulder. Orange and cinnamon. Jake missed his scent.

"I don't know why. Or maybe I do. I don't know, maybe I just want to feel something. Cry even."

"Then cry."

"I'm not a man if I cry."

"Cry." And for the first time since his fight with Laura, Jake begins to cry.

Brad wraps his arms around him and rests his chin on Jake's forehead holding him until his tears dry and his body stops shaking. Jake can't tell how much time goes by, but he's never been more comfortable than in Brad's arms.

"Brad, I'm sorry," Jake says.

"For what?"

Jake tilts his head upward and kisses him, sober enough to know that this isn't some drunken mistake but his choice.

#

The next morning, Jake wakes up in Brad's bed. Beside him, he hears Brad's light snoring. After a month of trying to be something he's not and trying to balance school, work, training, and parties, Jake realizes it wasn't any easier than dealing with his family. But at least he had found a little bit of clarity in all the pandemonium. He is gay, and he likes Brad. And after a night of awkward kissing and cuddling, he knows Brad likes him too. It is as simple as that.

The not so simple part? Brad doesn't drive, and Leah drove to the party. Jake is on the opposite side of town.

He texts Laura, but she can't make it out there. He calls his father but hangs up when he answers. In the end, he calls his mother who says she'll be there in fifteen minutes.

"Give her a break," Brad says from bed.

"What do you mean?"

"You're happiest when you're helping your family. We may not have seen each other much this last month, but it's the saddest I've ever seen you."

"This whole wise thing is not going to get you far," Jake says, and Brad laughs and Jake screams.

"What in the world?"

"Been holding it in for a while," Jake says.

#

It's a rare cold Florida morning outside, and his mom has on her mink coat outside her old nightgown. She looks angry. Like she wants to fight, but he knows she doesn't like confrontation. A part of him is happy he can tell she cares. For once, he feels like a high schooler. Her fingers strangle the steering wheel. Every few seconds of uncomfortable silence, she cracks her knuckles. He peeks over every few seconds waiting for it. When he thinks maybe she doesn't care, she starts yelling.

"If you're going to stay out all night, you need to let me know."

"Yes, I'm sorry."

“And just because you have a job and a girlfriend, doesn’t mean your grades can slip. You got a B on your Calculus test. I saw it on your nightstand. I wasn’t snooping, but how long have you been failing?” she says.

“B is considered above average and it was a hard test.”

“Do not back talk. Respect your elders. You’ve been getting away with running your mouth lately, but it’s done. Another B, and you’re done. No job and no girlfriend.”

“Okay.”

She takes in a deep breath, and she smells it. She grabs onto his ear and pulls him closer.

“Ouch. Mom. Maaa—”

“Alcohol. No one in my family drinks alcohol.” Dad drinks. Why doesn’t she confront him? They pull into the driveway. “Go to your room. I’ll have to talk to your dad and see what we’re going to do. Maybe you can spend the summer at the Thai temple with the monks. Shave your fancy hair.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll get my grades up, and watch my mouth,” Jake says. “But mom, don’t shave my head.” She heads upstairs, the sound of her feet stomping out each step, likely representing the number of weeks he’ll be locked inside.

“And—thanks for getting me.”

That night, Jake hears his mother and father arguing over his punishment while folding the laundry. He hears his dad say to let it go, that he’s a good kid. His mom says he is, but he still needs discipline when he does something wrong. Throughout the fight, he secretly cheers on his mother. If she wins, he’ll be grounded. But it’s nice to see some fire in her again. Maybe she’ll take up gardening again. Maybe this is what she needs to stop gambling?

After finishing two loads of laundry, when the fighting has been replaced with silence and snores, Jake brings up his parents' laundry. He checks on his sleeping mother and sees her old Rolex spin inside its box. He can see why she swears it has sentimental value. Watching it spin is mesmerizing like a baby's mobile. As it spins, the gold lights illuminate her serene face. In the room across the way, his father sleeps, snoring loudly as always. Jake didn't like him sticking up for him. After dropping off the basket of clothes, he shuts the door to his father's room.

#

Skipping school isn't an option, but Jake seriously considers it Monday morning. He needs to tell Leah the truth. She deserves that from him. Brad offers to be there when he tells her, but Jake says he will do it. He needs to be the one to come clean.

Instead of at the flagpole, Jake sees her in an empty classroom and enters. She looks beautiful, her dark brown hair pulled back in a simple ponytail, her eyes large and doe-like. Why she ever liked him, he never knew. She could have anyone in the school she wanted.

"So you ran away," she says. "Didn't answer my calls. Is it safe to say, we're over?"

Jake took a seat beside her, and said the first words that came to mind.

"I'm gay."

For a second, Leah looks hurt, but then she starts to laugh.

"You're serious?"

Jake nods. She laughs again. So much so, Jake can't tell if it's a good thing or a bad thing.

After a moment Leah hugs him, laughs, ruffles his hair, and laughs again before leaving the classroom. Halfway down the hall, Jake hears her cackle one more time. When Brad asks him how it went, Jake says he honestly has no idea.

Jake is surprised to see his father in the pickup circle after school. Jake doesn't want to talk to him, but gets in the car.

"I never cheated on your mother," he says the second he closes the door.

Sign of guilt.

"I really didn't. I flirted. But I never cheated. Still, I am your father. And not too good lately, but I will fix things."

Jake stares out the window. He always wanted to appease this man beside him, but now, he questions everything. Jake knows the past crushed his father's spirit, changed him, but he couldn't understand the man. Or trust him.

By the time the two get home, Jake has said a total of five words to him. "Thank you for the ride."

Jake has come clean to himself and apologized to Leah, but he needs to do the same with his mother. If she could admit her problems, like he admitted his sexuality, then maybe she could get past it. Jake understands now there is a difference, that unlike gambling, being gay is not a sickness or something he feels he should hide, but maybe his mother accepting her issue is what will lead her toward a path of recovery.

Jake walks up the steps, listening to each creak before taking another. His mother is adding tickets into the computer.

"Mom, can you stop for a minute," he asks. "Look at these."

Jake shows her the many boxes full of scratch-off tickets she's filled from the gas station, and stacks them on her bed so she can see everything.

"So, I buy a lot of tickets. They're with my money. My paychecks."

"Mom, please. You have an addiction." Jake says. "We can get help. You just have to admit it. You have to want change."

And then she smacks him.

He's out of place. He's supposed to be on her side. She doesn't say that, but Jake sees it in her eyes.

"I have no one now," she says. "Leave."

"Mom."

"I said leave."

Jake leaves—the door shuts. He stands and waits and listens. If he presses his ear to the door, he can hear that slight *wshh*, the noise of her eyelids closing, blinking tears that flow down her face filling in age lines like rivers. Jake knows Laura hasn't seen this side of her. He wonders if the man downstairs trying to cook dinner has seen this side of her. And Jake hates them for abandoning her. He hates them for making him abandon her even though he knows he needs to.

Jake sits on the other side of the door, his silent cries mirroring her own.

No matter how bad the situation, he knows she has always been on his side. On her family's side.

Jake imagines standing up and going back into her room. He sees himself hug her as he apologizes. She hugs him back and it's the only hug that matters because she's his mother, his

family. But because she is his mother, Jake knows he can't be there for her. He can't gamble on his mother in the hopes that she'll get better. Instead, he walks down the stairs and listens to each creak before he takes the next step.

ROOTS AND WINGS

My last two words to my father were “fuck you.” I didn’t exactly say this to his face, but I am sure he heard me since the majority of our conversations were one-sided retorts under our breaths. The morning I loaded up the car to move across the country, my mother wore her bright pink Chut-Thai dress. The print along the hem shimmered gold, a stark contrast to the overcast sky. I was twenty-five. Two years have passed since I left Florida for Seattle, the rainy city of the West.

And now I have to go back.

I pick up my boarding pass at Sea-Tac airport and wait outside my gate. The sky is almost identical to the day I left. Dark clouds muddle together, graying the sky. Oddly, I can see the outlines of each cloud, together yet separated. A cover band plays 90’s music, and families trapped in nostalgia break into choreographed dances.

I try calling Brad, but he doesn’t pick up—that’s right, he’s working late. Brad’s going to hate his voicemail. *Sorry, traded in my ticket to the Bahamas to visit my father in Florida. We’ll reschedule the rescheduled vacay later.* I can hear him say, “But you never go see your family.” Brad is right. I never *ever* go home. Even when Brad travels back to our old stomping ground to visit his family in Florida, I stay in Seattle.

No holidays, no birthdays. In the beginning, I thought I would have at least made it to out for Songkran or my niece’s birthday, but life in Seattle compared to Oldsmar is like comparing racing statistics for the hare and the tortoise. “Or the rat and the pig,” my mother would say.

I re-read the text message saved on my phone. The one that caused this abrupt change. How does one respond to a short text that barely contains a complete clause? Especially when the text reads, “Dad in hospital” in the middle of a meeting. I don’t know how I should feel. Maybe something like this deserved a phone call? Maybe the text shouldn’t sound rushed, making me think my father was rushed to the damn hospital? And worst of all, not knowing how to feel only makes me feel guilty.

The airport’s stainless steel chars are cold and clinical like a surgeon’s table. My stomach rumbles for food, but I deny my biological call. Airplanes and I do not have the best past.

When the gate attendant begins the boarding process, I realize this is it. If I get on the plane, I can’t get off. Not until I get to Florida. I swallow two extra-strength sleeping pills dry.

On my tenth birthday, my mother and sisters took me to Clearwater Beach to sail a pirate ship. The wooden ship looked like a set piece from a movie. All of the right edges were properly distressed, the accents of the actors felt genuine. But my adrenaline-fueled excitement died an hour into the ride when the captain forgot about a sandbar during low tide. The ship sat in the middle of the bay, grinding out sand. Suddenly, the pirate accents vanished. The dialogue switched from swashbuckling adventures to complaints about pay and dates the actors would never make. It was amazing to see how easy it was to be fake. Memories surged back to when I was robbed and bound a few years back. Dad was at work, leaving mom to care for everyone. Watching your mother get thrown around like an old toy really changes a child. Next thing those actors had on their agenda was mopping up my vomit. I swore I’d never be confined to a space I couldn’t get out of, but here I am. Don’t say I never did anything for you, Dad.

I take my seat and close my eyes. The chalkiness of the pills lingers in the back of my throat. I listen to the growing growl of the engine. I think to myself, it's just one week. I have to be back in the office in one week. I feel the jerk of the plane, the speed-up, and the eventual lift-off. My ears pop.

#

Tampa International is much smaller than Sea-Tac. The tram rocks side-to-side, and I wonder if I'd survive the twenty-foot fall if the tram derailed. I imagine myself jumping just before the tram made contact with the ground and surviving. I also imagine physics probably doesn't work that way. Still not having responded to the first text, I check my phone and see I have two new messages.

"We're home." Okay.

"He's asking for you." Shit.

It's been so long since that man asked for me. How long has it been since we laughed together or joked around? Before baseball began, I remember hiding in the racks of my mother's large fur coats as he entered his office. I would pretend to be a ninja and attack him from the shadows. He would feign scared and I would chant "I win, I win." My dad would then retaliate and pick me up like he had super strength and twirl me around. My father the superhero.

The humidity feels similar to Seattle, maybe a bit dryer here as I don't feel that usual film on my skin. I don't miss the film. But the temp, damn, had it always been this hot in October? Welcome back to the no-season state.

I request an Uber and decide to respond to the text. "I'll be" I start to type and then pause before typing the next words. I finish the text with "at the Oldsmar house in twenty." My family

does have another home in Largo so the specificity to location shouldn't sound too weird? No, it's weird. I delete it and write "home in nineteen minutes." But home isn't here. It's in Seattle with Brad. I delete "home in nineteen minutes." No home. Florida is not my home. But my sisters would argue home doesn't necessarily mean a physical address. The commercials singing "home is where the heart is" come to mind. Ugh. They're not even here and winning the argument. I type "there soon" and hit send. I shield my eyes from the sun looking for the Uber. Only in Florida can I look left and see lint-clouds and pouring rain and peer right and see clear blue and the sun slipping from the sky.

The Uber driver maneuvers into the Country Chase subdivision. Besides the yellowing letters, the sign remains the same. I wonder if my name is still scribbled behind the "N" in Sharpie. Brad scribbled his name behind the "A." Even though I returned home for holidays in college, I can't help but feel like it's been much longer. Sure, the homes side-by-side still model one another. Same thickness of grass, same white fences, everything standard thanks to the home association, but had that swing set always been yellow? Was the pool always that small? When the Uber stops in front of the house, I close my eyes.

Six years. I lived in this home for six years of my life. The majority of my milestones were achieved here. The majority of why I stayed away happened here.

I smirk at the little details that set our home apart from the others. While the majority of homes used neutral colors like herringbone for their front doors, my childhood home had bright red front doors. "Good luck and good fortune," my mother would say. And the shape of the lot, how it was narrower in the front and wide in the back meant saving money would be easier than spending. I never realized the home Brad and I purchased in Seattle had the same shaped lot.

“Welcome home,” the Uber driver says.

I unload my bags and walk up the curved walkway. The Thai chili plants are alive and thriving which means mother was in a good mood. The Longan trees are thick with brown fruit. Hidden behind an assortment of shrubs, some with inch long needles, I spot a rotting water-logged baseball.

#

My dad enrolled me in baseball when I was six years old. It started out as a way for me to have a normal childhood after the robbery. Laura started dance classes, Stephanie piano. And none of us showed any promise. Laura had two left feet and Stephanie had stubby digits. The Little league team did what every team does to the kid who can't catch or hit—they stuck me in the outfield. When I was eight, my coach ran out of pitchers and gave me a shot on the mound. I hit a kid in the head. But my fastball had potential. Potential led to professional training and worldwide travel. All of a sudden, I couldn't hang out with friends. School didn't matter. My life revolved around baseball. But I resented what the sport had done to my father and me. And when the family lost money lending it to the wrong people, even more pressure was put on me to be great.

I felt more like an investment than a son.

#

I knock at the front door. No one responds. I can hear my niece and nephew running around. The scent of fish sauce and Bi Kapow leak through the door. I hated the smell as a child, but it smells familiar now. I try my old key and step inside.

“Uncle Jake!” Lana yells and hugs me.

My mother pokes her head outside the kitchen.

“Am I seeing a ghost?” she asks.

“It’s me, Mom.”

I hug her and Chanel No.5 swallows up the Bi Kapow. She feels smaller than I remember.

The inside of the house is just as I remember. Aside from the stains in the carpet from the kids, the thick hand-sewn curtains my mom made framed each window. The hand-carved wood chairs and table set covered in pink dragon skin cushions hadn’t moved an inch since we moved in. On the far right, portraits of the King and Queen of Thailand frame my mom’s prayer alter.

“You heard about your father,” she says.

“Yeah, maybe you should lay off the spicy food you cook for him,” Stephanie says to my mom.

She eyes me, sizing me up.

“You want some of this, punk?” she says and pretends I’m a boxing bag. I hold out my hand and press it to her head, keeping my five-foot sister away. After settling down, we sit at the dining room table.

“How are the kids?” I ask.

“Lana’s good. Landon’s been diagnosed with moderate autism.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It just happened and you don’t respond to calls or texts until weeks later.” Stephanie punches me in the shoulder, but her shaking voice says she’s scared of what this means for her son. Feigning strength, holding in tears. I wasn’t the only one told emotions were weak.

I don't ask where dad is. I don't have to. Dad's upstairs in his office, hidden at the back of his winding "L" shaped closet. When I quit baseball, he began frequenting the space more and more. Somethings just never change.

#

I didn't expect a backlash from quitting baseball. At first, I felt free from this burden. Free to be who I wanted to be. The days where every thought and every decision required approval, planning, and even documentation, were over. My dad entered everything I did into Excel sheets. I was data sent from one program to the next. The cost of lessons, the cost of travel and gear. I even had to sign an Excel sheet to "rent" one of my dad's DVDS. But after I quit baseball, he ignored me. Pretended I didn't exist. We could be in the same room for hours and I would stare at him waiting for him to say something, anything, but he never gave in. Then Dad refused to come to my high school graduation.

"Please?" I remembered saying. Dressed in my navy cap and gown, I counted down the time before graduation. I never knew how much I would miss my dad just being there. And because the patriarch of the family, might not show, would his family? I never wanted to quit the family.

For the longest time, I wanted to go back to that day before I quit baseball. I thought I'd rather have a father who forced me to do something I didn't want to do than be the son who had to force his father to spend time with him.

My breathing felt like scattered winds, some deep, some shallow. I couldn't stop the tears.

"Men don't cry," Dad said.

I went to graduation alone. When I spotted my mother and sisters in the stands, late, as usual, my excitement grew. Maybe Dad was in the restroom or parking the car. Maybe he was somewhere on the ground floor snapping photos like he did at Laura's and Stephanie's graduations. I checked my phone and found a message from my sister that read, "Dad is sick and stayed home."

The tips of my fingers shook, and everything negative around me amplified in its annoyance. The ringing of the illegal air horns, the toxic perfume of the girl beside me, and the posters that said a variety of clichés from "Best son ever!" to "My daughter graduated today!" When the person to my left had the audacity to nudge me, I grabbed the kid's cap and flung it into the audience.

#

I watch my father for a few seconds before saying anything. He's purchasing socks from Amazon. His hair is thinner and grayer than I remembered. To his left, I see his Excel DVD checkout sheet. I was sure one of the highlighted lines had my name on it.

"You not going to say hello," Dad says.

"Hello."

"Don't be a smart-ass."

I hold my tongue.

"Did you take your medicine?" I ask, noticing the small bottle to his left.

"You a lawyer, not a nurse."

"I had no idea," I slip. I ball my fist, angry I took the bait.

"What do you want?"

“I don’t know, you asked me to come. I got some cryptic message at work and came.”

“Well, if you don’t want to be here, don’t be here.” I wanted for so long to be his son again, to have him around. And for what?

“Fine,” I say and leave the closet. Halfway down the steps, I want to yell “that’s the second time I’ve left the closet in this house” but choose not to. I refuse to stoop to his level. That and as much as the man annoys me, giving him a heart attack is not on my to-do list.

“What happened?” Mom asks.

“The same thing that always happens.”

I drag my bags outside and open my Uber app. How in the world am I related to that man? We have nothing in common. Before I can request a ride, Laura pulls into the driveway.

“Please for the love of all things holy in this universe take me to the Marriott before I lose my mind.” I dump my bags in her backseat and take a seat up front.

“What happened?” she asks.

“I don’t know how you all put up with him all the time.”

“Dad’s going through a lot,” Laura says, pulling out of the driveway. “You know Mom does nothing to help him. Not with bills and now with Stephanie and the kids living there, he has to support three more people.”

“That may explain his stress now, but he’s always been this way, Laura. How many times have we had this conversation? How many times have I stormed out of that house because he is impossible? Jesus, why am I here?” I slam my head back into the head rest and stare at the gray ceiling of the car.

“Good question, Jake. Why are you here?”

The rest of the drive is silent. Good thing there's a Marriott only ten minutes from the house. I lie and tell her I'm tired. She offers to pay for my room, but I say no. I want Laura to know I'm okay and don't need anyone's help anymore.

She would never be able to understand my relationship with Dad. She would always remember him as the man who showed up to her recitals and graduations. To her, he's been her support.

In the suite, I plop onto the bed. I watch the fan blades glide in circles, never getting anywhere. Why am I here? Why did I come back? I'm not naïve enough to believe I'll ever have a functioning relationship with him. But for some reason, no matter how hard I wish to be free of my roots, of him, something draws me back. Even when I start a new life on the other side of the country.

And then there is Brad. Brad who I left behind. Brad that would return home tonight to lined suitcases by the door, brochures of Vatican tours and Zagat-rated restaurants stacked on the living room table. I canceled our last vacation starting work with the new firm and here I do it again. Unzipping my suitcase, I pull out a small red box. In it, a simple band that represented how much I love and trust the man—even if I have a hard time showing it.

#

I stop by my parents' house again the next day. Having talked all night with Brad, I realize how stupid I am being. I'll hash it out with Dad and then go back to where things make sense.

“Hello?” I call into the house. I wait a few seconds. Silence. No one is home. I open photograph albums and go through the last two years I missed. Lana's first day of Pre-K, Landon's first steps. A photo of Laura and Stephanie fighting over a Michael Kors purse on sale.

Mom holding up a scratch-off winning \$1,000. And photos of Dad playing with his grandchildren.

“I thought you ran away,” Dad says behind me.

“I don’t run away from things. Like you.” He ran away from Mom when she needed help with her gambling; he ignored me for two years after I quit baseball. Maybe it was time for me to say Fuck You to his face and not under my breath. Maybe I should say screw customs, screw respecting your elders and just do it.

“You ran away from baseball. You ran away from your family to Washington,” Dad says. Did I run away? Or did he push me away?

“Why do you hate me? You never treat Laura or Stephanie the way you treat me. What did I ever do to you?”

I could feel my eyes grow damp. With every breath, I fought for control. I refused to look weak in front of this man. Men don’t cry. I got it, Dad. I got the damn message.

“The doctors said I don’t have much time left. I haven’t told anyone.”

It takes a second for me to understand him.

And then I say, “No.”

“It’s true.”

“That’s not what I mean. I mean no. You can’t treat me like shit my entire life and then pull the dying card. You can’t do that. I had this planned out. You’d drive me crazy, and I’d die decades before you.”

“Shut up!” Dad says. “I’m not saying this for forgiveness or for you to feel sorry for me. I just think it’s time you understood where I come from.”

“I know you’re Cambodian, Chinese, and French.” I know I sound like a petulant child, but I can’t keep my composure. It’s like my dad mapped out all of my buttons over the course of my life, knowing when and where to push to get a reaction out of me.

“Let me talk.” For some reason, whether it’s the tone or the look in his eye, I stop talking and listen. I feel like a little boy again.

“I want you to write a book.”

“I’m a lawyer.”

“You can read; you can write a book.” That’s not how that works.

“And what am I supposed to write about?”

“Our story.”

#

I have never taken a journalism class in school, but I find myself acting like I’m Joan Didion. At first, I scribble everything down. My dad left Cambodia a few days before the Communist invasion to celebrate Songkran in Thailand. The year, 1974. Dad was rebellious, always acting out and having fun. My grandfather threatened to cut him off if he didn’t stop running away from responsibilities. Songkran was supposed to be his last hoorah before settling down. When his brother asked him if he could go too, Dad said no. Stay home. Be the son he could never be.

“And then what happened after that? When the Communists invaded?” I ask.

“The Communists went after the military families first.”

“Our family was in the military.” Within seconds, I understand what my father hadn’t said. Why over the years, I’ve never heard him speak about his side of the family. My face grows red; my knee starts to bounce. I feel like every bit of anxiety I had growing up has returned.

Mom always said Dad had been through a lot.

“I ran away and left my family to die.”

“Why tell me this now? Why not sooner?”

“You’re all I have left. To pass on my blood and my family name.”

#

I wake up that night with a ring of sweat around my collar. I close my eyes and open them again. Every time I close my eyes, I see black. But not the usual closed-eyelid black. Instead, I see black smoke followed by bright flames kicking into the night sky. I hear cries that rip my soul in two. Even though I realize it was just a dream, it was the type of dream that paralyzes the body. As the cries grew louder, they began to change. First, I heard my mother. My father. My sisters. My niece and nephew. Before I could open my eyes, I saw my family’s corpses stacked upon one another, feeding the flames. My entire pillow feels like I’ve dunked it into the pool outside.

Did Dad see the same when he closed his eyes? Were cries the soundtrack to his nightmares?

The next day, I agree to write the book even though I only have four days left. There’s too much to learn about my family and him.

I meet my dad at a Starbucks near the house. I arrive early and find a small round table near the front of the store. A cushioned sofa, a steel chair, and a leather footrest surround the

table. Options are always good. I make sure to order coffee before he gets there. I'm sure the prices would prompt the flight response if he saw them.

The front door jingles and my body tightens. One on one with Dad. It's not him, and I take a deep breath. A few minutes later, he walks in. He is wearing a bright red Buc's shirt, gray gym shorts, and a baseball cap that says the Rays. He's apparently a local sports aficionado today.

I hold up coffee and he looks around before sitting. It's like my dad is a wild animal gathering around the water pool, checking for predators before finding his place. And then I wonder if he is cautious because of the obvious. I tell myself again, my dad's past warrants understanding. It does not warrant forgiveness.

"Everyone wears such tight pants here."

"Hipsters, dad."

"It's hip to cut off circulation to your balls?"

"Please stop."

Dad takes a sip of his coffee, and his eyes begin scanning the menu board.

"What is this?"

"Is it good?"

"This is the best coffee I've ever had."

I smile before I realize it. I try to hide it, but I'm sure my face is an easy read at this point. Of all the coffee in all the world, Starbucks was all it took to make this man happy.

Together, we delve into the story. Dad starts by describing his home and his brothers and sisters. He had eight in total. He describes the type of relationship he and his father had.

Minimalistic at best. Does Dad not see the pattern? But just sitting here is changing things. Dad's facial features are moving in directions I never knew possible. How many times does a person wish they really knew someone, only for that person to sit down and tell you exactly who they are and how they got to where they came to be? Hours pass in that little Starbucks, and I feel like I am finally beginning to see through some of the cracks.

The next two days continue like this. Meeting up at Starbucks or at the house. Family dinners and babysitting the kids. Driving with my mom to the casino, or listening to my sisters vent about men. As much as I want to hate this, life feels natural and welcoming.

#

On my second to last day, after breakfast with the family, I return to the hotel. I invite the family and the kids to go to the pool. And even Dad said he will come. This feels more like a graduation than my actual high school graduation. Everything is absolutely perfect.

A few minutes later, I hear a knock at the door. Everyone is early. I open it, and before I can react, Brad presses his lips to mine. He then says the word no one really wants to hear unless it's their birthday. "Surprise!"

"You have to go," I say.

"What are you talking about?" Brad says, kicking off his shoes. He drops his two bags by the closet and collapses on the bed. "I'm here for moral support for you and your crazy pops. And I'm here for our vacation. You used our joint account for this room."

"You don't understand. My family and my father will be here in twenty minutes. We're going to be using the pool, and they're nosy so they're 100% for sure coming to see my room. If

anything, my mom will be checking to see if I've left bottles on the table or clothes on the floor.

I don't know how I'm going to explain the extra man in my single room."

"Hide my bags. I'll play bellhop, and you can be the cheap hotel guest who I force to give me a tip."

Oh dear lord. "Go see your parents!"

#

"Lana! Landon!" I say hugging them. "Sisters! Parentals!" I kick the strap of Brad's bag further into the closet.

"You smoking in here?" Stephanie asks. Dad smacks her in the back of the head.

"This is a nice room, Jake. I could have gotten you a better one," Laura says.

"No. A simple, single room is all I need."

"Well, you should have just stayed at the house. Big job means big money but you don't know how to save your money," Mom says.

"Let the boy live his life." Everyone looks at each other. Yup, the patriarch just said that.

Everyone enjoys the pool. With the sun beating down, it feels nice to splash around in the cool water. When we return to the suite, Landon's passed out in Laura's arms and Lana is sitting on Grandpa's shoulders. Poor kids are exhausted. I just hope Brad is still with his parents.

I use the restroom first and text Brad. He replies he's having dinner with his parents at the Cracker Barrel. I hear a gasp and rush out of the room.

My mom holds the bright red box in her hand. Her face matches the box.

"I didn't even know you were dating a young girl," she says. "Is she Thai?"

I try to grab the box from her, but she pulls it away to analyze the ring. And then she goes into a spiel about how Jake should have had her pick out the ring because she knows what women want. I know what Brad wants and it's simple.

"Who is she? Do you have a picture?" Stephanie asks. I look to Laura who is the only one who knows the truth.

"You guys, leave him alone," Laura says. "We need to get the children back home."

Everyone agrees, and I'm left with a damp hotel room, a ring box, and a family who's never going to let it go. Maybe I should just tell them. For once, I'm on good terms with everyone. But would it break him? Even though it's only been about a week, I've never been closer to my dad. If I told him I am gay and can't pass on the family name by blood, would I destroy the beginnings of our newly formed relationship? Or worst, would I kill him?

Maybe everything is better when I stay away.

Later that night, I explain everything to Brad. Including the ring, which he slips on his finger right away and says yes. What should be the happiest night of my life instead is just depressed and confusing.

"I've never had what I have with him now," I say.

"Then don't tell anyone yet. Your father told you he was sick. And while I don't want anything to happen to him, I'm fine where we are. I can wait."

"I can't make you do that."

"I've waited fourteen years. You've waited your whole life to be close to your dad."

#

Around 10:00 pm, I hear banging. Brad beats me to the door and opens it. My parents are outside.

“Wrong room,” my mother says. “Sorry.”

“You’re Brad,” Dad says. How in the world does he recognize him? Good thing we’re both fully clothed.

“Mom, Dad what’s going on?” I ask. “This is my friend, Brad; you know from high school. We were just catching up.”

“You look like you just woke up,” Mom says. I run a hand through my hair and remind her it’s only 10:00. Which for me working full-time feels like 2:00 am.

“My hair is always a mess!” Brad says with a smile. It takes a second before Mom returns it. She buys it.

“What’s going on?”

“Landon’s in the hospital. We figured you’d want to go,” Mom says.

I nod and grab my things. Before I moved to Seattle, going to the hospital with Landon was almost a weekly thing. First, his undescended testicle, then his hand, foot, mouth disease. Mom always noted Lana was a difficult pregnancy, so she’d be strong and healthy throughout life. Landon, on the other hand, was an easy pregnancy... I know I shouldn’t believe all of my mom’s superstitions, but sometimes—

“He’ll be okay,” Brad whispers, breaking me of my tangential thoughts.

I tell Brad to stay but he says he wants to go too. I don’t have the energy to fight him.

“What happened?” I ask when we all pile into my parent’s SUV.

“He passed out. No one knows why. He woke up late after the pool, around 8:00. He then started jumping and playing around. Out of nowhere he just collapsed. He came to right away, but Stephanie didn’t want to take any chances.”

When we get to the hospital, we learn everything is okay. Landon has an IV and is eating. Because he’s so picky with food and after the long nap, no one realized he barely ate today.

“Who is this?” Stephanie asks.

“Hi, I’m Brad. You don’t remember me?” Brad says.

“Right, the boy who was in love with me.” We all laugh at that. Likely for very different reasons.

I turn to Dad and ask him if he wants coffee but he pulls away. I look at him, and he’s staring at me like I’m a stranger. His eyes glance at the ring on Brad’s finger and then back at me. I feel my stomach make a sharp turn. Brad quickly tucks his hand in his pocket, but not before Mom and Stephanie see too. I just have to look at their face to tell.

“We’re going home,” Dad says and pulls Mom from the hospital room.

“Why is that boy wearing Jake’s fiancé’s wedding ring?” Mom asks.

Dad doesn’t answer.

Laura says welcome to the family and Stephanie swears aloud she always knew but didn’t know. No one understands what she means. Brad apologizes and I tell him it’s not his fault. One week couldn’t save my relationship with my dad. I should never have expected it to.

“Let’s go home, Brad.”

I kiss my niece and nephew goodbye and promise my sisters I’ll be in touch more. But this is it for coming back to Florida, unless it is to meet with my sisters. Mom would know any

minute now and her dreams of me marrying a Thai woman will be over. And Dad, he's never wanted much for me, but now I've managed to fail him again. No passing on the name and bloodline when the last male is gay.

The flight back to Seattle is nowhere near as bad as the flight to Florida. Possibly because I was smashed from the second I got to Tampa International. I missed Brad and my home. I missed work that dealt with the law and not the past. I missed living somewhere with an amazing walking score. I don't even think Florida has those because you can't walk anywhere in that heat.

"You miss Florida, don't you?" Brad asks a few days later.

"Yeah," I say. "I do."

THE WORD IS LAW

The sound of the Mustang colliding with the old woman echoed the repeating thuds of the TV chef tenderizing chicken. For a hit and run, everything seemed so slow. The old woman's flip and dip onto the ground, that near-silent thud of flesh meeting concrete. The woman's body lay in the street, elbows twisted at unnatural angles. Her blood splattered against the dark gravel like puddles of oil glimmering beneath the morning sun. His fingers reached out to her and then stopped, blocked by the window separating him from the outside world. Niall Robertson never realized how beautiful death could be.

His next instinct was to leave his perch and alert the authorities. But he couldn't move. Blood slugged through his body. His muscles hardened. Slowly, he watched people leave their homes and congregate around her. He popped open the window to hear the commentary better.

"I saw the Mustang. Yellow. Out-of-state tag."

"Did you get the tag number?" she asked.

"It's Miss Leopold." His neighbor's grandmother. How would her granddaughter Jenna take the news?

"The car didn't stop. It kept driving as if it hadn't taken a life. As if it hadn't been on our street," Niall says.

The sound of the chef tenderizing the chicken breast continued as an influx of cheers and sirens filled the small suburban neighborhood. Someone made the call Niall couldn't. And someone couldn't wait for the festivities. Celebration would soon fill the streets and house parties would ensue. And then something occurred to Niall. The chicken on the TV had been

breaded, fried, and plated, and the start of a new show had begun. The steady beating that filled his ears was nothing more than his heartbeat.

Niall understood the proper protocol of death. Death only contributed to society and thus should no longer be mourned but celebrated. Many of the older generations envied death. The Word was law, and the law was to be followed. But he had never witnessed death himself, not in the seventeen years of his life. His parents were killed on a mission. While it was still illegal to kill a non-tagged person, the local force spent little on random murders.

The plush carpet hushed his grandmother's footsteps as she made her way to stand beside him at the window. She gasped. Her hand rose to her mouth, her fingers spaced apart as if she tried to lock her voice behind the bars of a cell.

"Death," she said. "It's always so messy."

Niall continued to watch the scene unfold, detached from the mounting emotions of his grandmother. Some felt envy, like his grandmother, while others flushed with exuberance. He could sum up the emotion he felt as worry, and he stifled it immediately. Emotions were a weakness, an uncontrollable variable. The mid-afternoon sun shifted behind the clouds, and a great explosion of color filled the darkening skies. Red, gold, and green showered from the heavens.

A single girl caught Niall's eye beneath the burst of light.

He often called the C-Two his angel despite the laws that refused any spoken word--aside from work-related business--exchanged between the higher and lower classes. He often dreamed of her becoming a C-One, but with her unpredictable behavior, she'd never be an asset to

society. He wanted to talk to her, pick her brain, but the Word was law, and the law was to be followed.

Later that night, Niall heard the pop of his window. The first time Jenna had slipped into his room, he thought it was a dream. Now, two years have passed and the two still have never spoken, even at the Factory. If there was one thing Niall prided himself on, it was obedience. She would sometimes speak to him, and he'd listen. But he never broke the Word. He and she were assigned to someone else. Also, he was ranked higher than her, a C-One instead of a C-Two, and speaking to one another was forbidden.

Still, he had always been fascinated by her. When he first saw her at the shuttle stop, he gawked at her beauty and her dark skin like damp earth. She glared at him with her round brown eyes. He imagined this feeling to be love.

She slipped beneath his covers and rested her face on his chest. Her breathing, like the beginning of an amateur symphony, felt staccato and without rhythm. Eventually, her breathing evened out and fell in sync with his. The sound of her house party likely hosted by her C-One mother echoed outside his bedroom window.

What would it be like, raised by someone who outclassed you? Who lived in another home because the two were not allowed to live together? Niall's parents outclassed him, but they died on mission and Arch-C was a class earned, not assigned. There was still hope for him until graduation in becoming an Arch-C, but Jenna would never be a C-One. Not again anyway. Rumors had it that she was born a C-One but was stripped of her ranking due to a lack of obedience, the one thing society valued more than anything. It made sense. What she did every other night, coming into his room. And he was just as guilty not turning her in. If caught, he'd be

demoted to C-Two, and she would be kicked out of the Factory all together and forced to live life on the streets, without work, food, or guarantee of a future.

Niall felt moisture dampen his chest. He moved his hand to caress her back but stopped. While she leaned on him or pressed her body to his, he never touched her in return. He could not bring himself to be that much of a deviant. He always wondered if his angel would be the end of him.

That, and he didn't want to complicate an already complicated situation. She didn't need touching or questions. She needed someone silent, strong, and obedient. Someone to listen to her woes without questioning her questioning behavior. All of the traits that kept him apart from her. He hoped the moisture on his shirt came from tears of joy and not tears of mournfulness. Not because he knew it'd be more rules she refused to follow, but because in his eyes, angels should never be sad. Especially about death.

Hours later, with his arm numbing at his side, a dim glow filled his bare bedroom. The sun that pushed through blinds left vertical shadows along the wall. Niall continued to count backward by three while covering the right side of his face in his pillow. He tried everything he could think of to fall asleep, but his chest felt tight with pressure. The bed shifted and Niall held his breath. Jenna slipped from his arms. He forced his eyelids closed. The lingering scent of lemon left his senses as he heard the snap of Jenna's hairband beside him.

He knew Jenna's ritual by heart. Every morning after his grandmother left for work, she'd straighten the bed, fix her hair, and climb out of the window without a sound. He rarely woke during this time, but if he did, he'd pretend to be asleep. But today, fear snaked through him. Why couldn't he rid himself of this emotion?

He heard her hand knock the lamp beside him and then felt the warm and indescribable feeling of her lips on his cheek.

#

Niall sat up, the warmth of Jenna's lips lingering. His face shifted from pale and sun-hungry to red and spotted like blood vessels bursting beneath his dermis. Despite the warmth, he felt immobilized again.

That unsettling fear refused to lift and give way to the new day. The fear evolved into a gravitational force pressing against his chest that increased exponentially the longer he lay in bed.

Had this been any other day, he'd rush to his desk and scatter a few sheets of paper on the way. He'd grab the loose sheets, straighten them and take a deep breath. He'd write a few lines, and critique every word, meaning, and subtext behind the line. And then he'd crumble up the paper and toss it in the trashcan full of identical twins. But with the death of her grandmother, likely the only one in that family as disobedient as she, Niall had no idea what trouble Jenna would put herself in today.

While he committed no crime, his thoughts betrayed the Word. He hated himself for his disobedience, and yet, he felt envious of Jenna as well. Shaking his head, Niall decided he overanalyzed the situation, and when he arrived at the Factory later that day, Jenna would be on the C-Two floor studying servile professions like medicine.

Niall clocked in at the Factory fifteen minutes early. His white soles squeaked against the linoleum floors as he paced from side to side outside the elevators. She never came. He waited downstairs, dressed in all white like all C-One's. The possibility of him missing her was slim at

best, but he hoped he had. He stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for floor two. The doors began to close. Before the two metal slides met, he saw a fellow C-One staring at him with her green eyes.

As he tapped his wrist with his two fingers, the numbers 7:20 flashed beneath his skin. He continued to pace in the elevator until a soft ding indicated he had reached his floor.

Shock overwhelmed his senses as he stepped off the elevator. He could only describe it as absolute pandemonium. Paper balls ricocheted off walls. People dressed in the gray C-Two uniform ran back and forth, weaving in and out from one another with no concern for those around them. On the C-One floor, everything from the shiny white uniforms, to behavior was immaculate. Shouting and annoying laughter about topics he didn't understand filled the room. Niall stepped back as a C-Two rushed past him chasing after a ball like a stray dog.

After taking in a deep breath, he stepped forward and past another clock-in tower. He'd never stepped through the large gray swinging doors. The cubicles and teaching areas seemed more controlled inside. Still, the whispers and hushed laughter were inappropriate for a teaching floor even though the day had not officially begun.

He scanned every cubicle searching for Jenna, but he could not spot her wild braids tied back into a ponytail. With only ten spare minutes to clock-in, Niall could not believe people were still in aisles and out in the hallway.

"Can I help you?" a teacher asked.

Her knotted gray hair matched the color of her uniform though as a teacher, she was considered higher than the other people on the floor. But her forwardness surprised him. The law stated a C-Two teacher could speak to people of his stature if she meant to be helpful—

“How could you possibly help me?” Niall could feel his patience minimize like a computer window, and his tone sharpened like a saw. The teacher stepped back, her eyes refusing to meet his.

Niall realized his frustrations had caused his tone to be unfriendly and stepped forward to apologize, but the movement sent the teacher into tears. He shook his head, unsure of her weird mix of emotions, and returned to his familiar floor.

That was the problem with C-Twos. That lacked emotional stability and therefore could not be trusted or relied upon by the Factory. C-Twos are guaranteed jobs over those without an education, but in the Factory, they were considered the runts of the litter. C-Ones were given everything first. The first pick of jobs, higher salaries, families larger than the societal norm of three.

Sitting in his cubicle, he waited for morning announcements and twiddled in his chair. At precisely 7:30 AM, the Factory’s mission statement played.

The Factory originated in a time of chaos to soothe the desperate cries of the people. Born from the burnt and weary of society, like the majestic phoenix emblazoned on our crest, and under the leadership of he who knows, we sort, we order, we cast. We work with the law and never against it for the Word is law, and the law is to be followed.

While his mind half-processed the words echoing in his ears, the other portions of his mind filled with thoughts of his angel.

He sat through his morning lectures until the speakers finally shut off. He had decided during War Tactics that he would re-visit the C-Two floor after lectures. But before he could

press the button to the second floor, a hand shot out blocking the elevator from closing. As the doors reopened, the scent of clean linen diffused into the small shaft, and Niall groaned quietly.

Kristen stepped into the elevator. No other member at the Factory, even the renowned C-One teachers, made him feel as nervous as Kristen. After all, the two had matched when they began the Factory. After graduation at the Factory, the two would be assigned the same household and required to reproduce one child. Although impossible, he felt like she could see through his veneer.

“Are you going to the second floor again?” she asked. He refused to face her, afraid of showing his face.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Here. I’ll press the button for you.”

The elevator shifted downwards and stopped. The doors opened. Niall refused to move. She wanted him to get off, to test him. He’d be a fool to try look for Jenna with Kristen present. She was too observant and too smart. And if he did anything wrong, she’d be the first to report him and have him sent to C-Two.

The elevator doors closed.

Niall backed into the corner, keeping his eyes on Kristen. Aside from obedience and intelligence, the last remaining factor that designated one’s caste group dealt with genetics. Her natural blonde hair entitled her to C-One status just like him, and yet her superior attitude unsettled him.

“I’ve watched your eyes linger far too long on that girl, Niall. Remember your place.”

In a way, she was right. He needed to remember his place. His parents would want him to succeed, to be good, and the only way he knew how to do that was obedience.

#

When his C-One teacher failed to arrive on time after lunch, Niall and his other classmates wondered where she could be. Stumped, most replayed recordings of yesterday's lectures and sat in silence. After the block of repeated lessons, the C-Ones joined for mock field missions. Niall often looked forward to this part of the day where he outshined everyone else. Field exercises tested C-One's physical and intellectual capabilities. Those who show great promise in either area or both areas had the chance to become an Arch-C. His parents' legacy as Arch-C's flowed through him on the field. Those lucky enough to have him on their team always won their missions. Since only C-Ones were allowed to go on missions because of their absolute obedience, Niall had still not seen Jenna.

Fifteen minutes after sitting in silence in the small conference room for the end-of-day lectures, Niall stood up to leave. Kristen grabbed his wrist and yanked him back down. Without thinking, Niall snatched his arm away, shocking the rest of his classmates.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To figure out what is wrong. Your controlling behavior is not welcoming in a C-One. We may be matched, but you are as replaceable as I am."

For the first time, Niall spotted emotion in his fellow C-One. She and he had been two of the most model C-Ones in the bunch, and with Niall's strong abilities in mock missions, he was one of few who could join the elite Arch-C's. Like his parents.

Niall, shocked at his words, stood again. Kristen's green eyes became cloudy, a thin layer of liquid forming over them. He waited. Cry. If she cried, she showed weakness and the Factory might demote her. Cry.

The two emotions deemed weakest were sadness and fear. While fear could often hide behind false confidence, Niall knew Kristen possessed both of these emotions. Because of them, she overcompensated in other areas.

She blinked a few times and sat back down in her seat. If he hadn't seen the fear or cloudiness in her eyes seconds ago, he'd never suspect them. She had returned to a model C-One.

And then the doors burst open.

A female C-One teacher stomped in and began pacing in front of the room. Niall had only seen her once or twice, but he knew immediately she was Jenna's mother. Although her skin resembled Niall's more so than her daughter's darker skin, the two shared the same body and brown eyes. Niall had a sneaking suspicion that Jenna could be the root of that anger. And then she called his name.

"C-One, Niall Robertson," she said.

"Yes."

"Please come with me."

Niall bowed and followed the woman. As he watched the woman's back, her white uniform the same as his and the other C-Ones, he wondered how she had a daughter who became a C-Two. Had the woman failed in teaching Jenna obedience? He knew Jenna to be bright,

having high test marks in most of her subjects—much higher than C-Ones, and yet her rebellious nature kept her in the lower caste. On Trial Days, test scores were always posted for all to see.

As the two made their way to the elevator, Niall wanted to ask the reason for his presence, but knew he had to remain controlled and obey orders. He should only speak when spoken to when a C-One teacher was with him.

His hands warmed and moisture made his fingers feel webbed. The elevator doors opened, and the woman who instructed him to follow swiped her card for the fourth floor. No one had access to the floor except Arch-C's and a select few C-One faculty.

Niall felt like he had drowned in a sea of red. A few pillars of white that included Jenna's mother, himself, and a few other teachers stood out, but everything else, from the furniture to the walls to the uniforms on most of the people, were drenched in red. Niall had never seen the obscure Arch-C's in person. He barely recalled his parents. The people who stood before him, who draped themselves in the color of strength and passion, moved quickly around the room like wild embers. Niall couldn't believe how they made the most mundane tasks seem striking. He could see the huge difference between C-Ones and the Arch-C's. They worked directly for the Chief of the Factory, the right-hand man of the person who led the nation. Niall had long dreamed of becoming an Arch-C.

“Have you figured out why you've been asked to come up here?” she asked.

“Miss—”

“Victoria.”

“Miss Victoria, I believe so,” Niall said.

He was sure they discovered his erratic behavior and hidden relationship with Jenna. His perfect scores and incontestable obedience records would be washed away forever. Meetings with the Chief resulted in a demotion. His dreams of red vanquished by a gray void.

Miss Victoria and Niall reached a pair of solid oak doors adorned with gold vine-like accents. The intricate vines woven throughout the oak fused the two separate entities into one. Atop the center, the two vines combined and formed a circular wreath-like structure. Niall had learned about the legend of the doors in his schooling. According to legend, the doors once served as the gateways to the most majestic and beautiful of gardens. Unfortunately for Niall, no gardens like those of the past existed anymore. Concrete and gravel had long replaced nature nearly fifty years ago, but he could imagine the beauty of them. The doors inched open. Niall glanced at Miss Victoria who smiled before she pushed them aside and stepped past the threshold.

Chief Longley's small physical stature sat at an equally small desk. He had always imagined the man, from the giant screens around the city, to be much larger in person. But here, Niall could see he was at least a foot taller than the man, who had a buzz haircut and his dark skin, maybe one or two shades darker than Jenna's, were similar to the wood of the majestic doors. The four walls that squared them from the outside world were covered in monitors and lined in red. Each monitor focused on different sections of the school, and the last had a news anchor reporting from the Capital. In the corner, a small shrub in a clay pot sat alone. The luxury of owning a plant showcased the man's power. But the man himself, Mr. Longley, did not appear menacing at all. Niall wondered if this man could be the almighty Chief so many people believed in and feared.

“Niall Robertson, C-One. Son of John and Mary Robertson. Do you know why you’re here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then I must tell you. Your neighbor, a C-Two and this woman’s progeny, has gone missing.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ve seen her??”

Niall nodded.

Mr. Longley stood and sighed. Niall’s knees shook, but he tried to stabilize them as much as possible. He kept his eyes down, no longer able to look at the man before him.

“I want you to find her.”

Niall’s eyes connected with Mr. Longley’s.

“She’s taken something of value from me, and I cannot allow that. You’ve no doubt seen her. I see a lot of myself in you, Niall. You’re inquisitive by nature according to your tests, and you come from an impeccable line of obedience and record. No one has come even close to your scores in testing. Prove to me you can do this. Prove to me you can bring her back, and you will do something people rarely do. Move up in the caste system.”

“Yes” escaped Niall’s lips before he could grasp the scope of his mission.

Mr. Longley smiled, and the two shook hands.

As Niall bowed and turned to leave, Mr. Longley added one more detail.

“If she puts up resistance, I’d prefer a corpse.”

#

Niall returned home to find his grandmother waiting in the living room. She stared out the front window.

“Niall, why are you home?” she asked. His grandmother’s eyes never turned to him. She seemed stiff, possibly recalling memories like he had been yesterday.

“I’ve been given an opportunity. If I complete it, I’ll be in the Arch-Caste.”

“Like your parents.”

Niall nodded in agreement.

Her reaction was what he thought it’d be. Expected. Like everything he did was expected and never congratulated, never boasted. She was a perfect example of who he needed to be. Everything he’d done, everything he’d worked for had prepared him for this. He couldn’t let his emotions rule his behavior, his obedience. He had orders, and the Word was law, and the law was to be followed. Not even Jenna no matter how hard she’d fight him would break him. And still, a part of him wondered if he could hurt her, fight her, and take her back.

“I’m going next door to look for leads.”

“Niall, wait,” his grandmother said. “You have an opportunity here. Do not let past indiscretions cloud your calling.”

Niall nodded, his cheeks reddening from the revelation. He thought he had been so discrete. He wanted to know more, but left her as she continued to stare out the window.

Niall entered Jenna’s home with the key given to him by Victoria. In a usual mock mission like the ones he’d practiced at school, he’d have more detail, more information like what was stolen, but in this case, he felt lost. Where would he start? How could he find her when the two were exact opposites of one another?

The home and its appearance surprised him more than the C-Two floor at the Factory. Pictures of Jenna and her grandmother lined the book shelves. Albums, books, CD's, all things of the past, filled the small living room. No TV's, no computer systems or anything of use could be found in the home. He brushed his finger across a photo and when it didn't move, he stepped back.

He could understand Jenna living a lifestyle such as this, a hoarder, a sentimentalist, a girl unable to move forward, but what of her grandmother? How could she allow such individuality? Weren't the younger generations supposed to inherit the Word from earlier generations?

The fear of entering Jenna's room broke his stride. He prepared himself before opening the door. When he opened the door, the mission would truly begin.

And then he sneezed.

The amount of dust and lack of cleaning infuriated him. Sanitization equaled optimal living conditions. The words of the school's mission statement, a reminder to stay obedient, rang in his ears. *The Word is law, and the law is to be followed.* Cleaning needs to be done twice a day. The room before him looked like no one cleaned since she moved in.

Niall stepped past the doorframe into the grubby room. Was this why Victoria seemed so removed from her life? His endearment toward Jenna slowly ebbed away.

The room had scattered drawings and paintings of the most beautiful yet pointless things he could imagine. Like the legends of the wood doors laced with gold vines on the fourth floor, this room too had paintings of gardens and exotic flowers long extinct. There was even a strong odor Niall couldn't recognize that overwhelmed his olfactory senses. And then the walls began melding into one another until no walls surrounded him.

His mind throbbed, his thoughts lost in his surroundings. The strength in his legs dissipated, and he collapsed onto the carpet. But the carpet had disappeared too.

He felt the pricking of fresh grass against his skin. The scent of damp dirt filled his nostrils as he sneezed again. The paintings and drawings of flowers that covered every inch of the room vanished leaving real flowers scattered around him. He reached out and felt the petal of the red rose. Its smooth and velvety texture reminded him of Jenna's skin.

Images of Jenna filled his mind as his fingers continued to caress the flower petals. His beautiful Jenna, intoxicating like the rose.

Niall flinched as a thorn pricked his finger, drawing blood. Red. Red like the Arch-C uniform he hoped to don someday. Niall reached up toward the sky. He never realized how beautiful the blue sky could be. Blood fell from the tip of his finger, floating down like a droplet of rain and then splattered on his cheek.

Niall closed and opened his eyes. The paintings and drawings had returned. Niall sat up and scanned the room over and over again. The garden, the sky—everything had vanished only to be replaced by the lifeless. The only thing that remained was a less intense version of the odor he initially smelled.

Niall scratched at his eyes and tried to calm that unsteady beating in his chest. He checked her closet and found her clothes missing. She left nothing but the drawings and paintings. And since all of the drawings and paintings were of flowers, he had no idea of where to go.

And then he spotted it. Not a painting or a drawing. An older photograph tucked beneath the mountains of drawings and paintings.

He recognized the older woman in the photograph. Although she was maybe a decade and a half younger, he was quite sure the woman was Jenna's grandmother. He had a sneaking suspicion the baby she held had to be Jenna.

Niall scanned the photo into the memory chip in his wrist. The photo was his lead, the clue that pieced everything together. Jenna's emotions after her grandmother died, the kiss, not showing up at the Factory. Jenna was running away. The stem of the problems rose from the death of her grandmother.

Niall ran out of the home and back to his room. His computer synced with the new file, and Niall uploaded and cross-examined the photo of the home with all of the homes in the city's registry. Within seconds he pinpointed the location of the house, close to the southern border where the Factory had no influence.

Niall placed his hand on the handle of his grandmother's car, and the door opened. He typed the coordinates into the steering wheel and sat back.

"One hour and fourteen minutes until the time of arrival," his grandmother's recorded voice said through the car speakers.

He closed his eyes and shifted the car into auto-drive. One word echoed through his mind over and over again. *Why?*

#

The elm trees hunched over the home on Alastor Drive like limp, emaciated hands. Dangling finger branches caught the scattered winds and scratched at the rusted steel shingles. Little light fell onto the home. Niall had never seen the trees in person, nothing grew in the city, but here on the border, plant life remained like the rest of the world. Only Arch-C's were trained

in botany, though his parents had books he'd read. The remains of a lone decrepit rocking chair croaked like a toad on the porch. Niall waited. He listened. He observed. As the wind died and the scratching calmed, silence and the musky scent of moldy mulch filled the air. Niall looked at the picture of the immaculate home full of life and joy, a stark contrast to the rotted front porch, rust-stained walls, and cracked windows.

He'd never been so close to the border. He grabbed at the dangling branch and felt it disintegrate.

Niall knocked at the door and waited. He glanced down the block looking for movement. With the Factory in the city, most people moved there from the outskirts of town in hopes of enrollment. Attending the Factory guaranteed job placement. Without it, people had to work part-time at minimum wage. Niall could not understand why Jenna would give up security for a life of the unknown. Niall knocked again and when no one answered, he kicked the rotted door in and stepped inside.

The old crinkled wallpaper detached itself from the walls, curling over like paper to a flame. When stepped on, the damp maroon carpet released an undesirable odor, a mix of urine and mold that lingered like an unsettling fog. Yellow wet spots on the ceiling dripped reddish gold, a mixture of rust, dirt, and rain. All of a sudden, Jenna's home next door didn't seem so dirty.

A gust of wind kicked up into the room, and Niall covered his face, unable to take the intensified smell. The smell was the last thing he noticed before he collapsed to the floor.

Niall tried to open his eyes, but they felt heavy. The sounds of the piano jolted them open as he remembered what he had been doing. With his arms tied behind his back, Niall backed into a wall. Loose wallpaper scratched his head. He couldn't identify the song.

"It's a song from the 1960's. One of my grandmother's favorites she learned from her grandmother." Jenna stepped through the doorway from another room and kneeled against a wall opposite of him. "I didn't quite understand the song until now." Niall focused on the knot that bound his hands and found the loose strand. Within seconds, his hands were untied but he feigned being captive.

"What's it about?" Niall said. His face grew red as he realized those were the very first words he ever said to her.

"Home. Love. Family."

"I don't understand. And I don't understand how you could run away."

"Did you come all this way because you missed me, or because you were told to bring me back?" Jenna was sharp. As sharp as a C-One.

Niall didn't answer her. She saw through him like she always had. And even though words passed between the two, he knew she didn't need conversation to understand him. He couldn't bring her back if he were too direct. He needed to have a conversation, connect, compliment, and then carry on the mission. He needed to implement everything he had learned.

Before he could open his mouth, he caught a glimpse of blonde hair from the room Jenna had just left. And then he saw Kristen, who gestured for him to remain silent.

Sweat dripped down his forehead itching his skin. He jerked his head to the left when Jenna changed the song, but Kristen ignored his gesture.

Kristen grabbed a loose piece of wood off the floor.

As she snuck up on Jenna, Jenna must have noticed Niall's eyes and turned before Kristen could make contact. Before the wood could assault her, Jenna caught the piece. The two struggled before the wood flew to the corner of the room. The two tussled but within what seemed like seconds, Kristen joined Niall against the wall, tied up and trapped.

"I didn't expect taking down two higher-class people would be so easy."

Niall stared at Kristen who refused to make eye contact with him. Instead, she stared at the damp maroon carpet. He needed to catch Jenna off-guard, but Kristen's sudden arrival had distracted him.

No. He failed. He watched and could have intervened and overpowered her. But he watched because he didn't know what to do. Jenna was like a virus, and his system couldn't fight it.

"Kristen, how did you know where to find me? Who sent you?" Niall asked.

"No one sent me. I followed you after you left her house."

Niall shook his head, unable to believe his luck. Whether he completed the mission or not, a demotion or possible expulsion from the Factory awaited her. Hijacking a mission. Reckless behavior. He could not understand her or Jenna.

"She did it for you," Jenna said.

"I don't need your pity." Kristen glared at Jenna who merely smiled in return.

"It's not pity; it's understanding."

After a moment of silence, Kristen nodded, and Jenna returned the gesture.

"I don't understand either of you," Niall said. "I don't understand anything at all."

#

After a few failed tries at conversation, Niall decided to hell with theories and plans like the four C's. Conversation, connect, compliment, and then carry on the mission. C-Two's knew the Word. Normal tactics wouldn't work.

"Where do you plan on going now that your mother and Mr. Longley are after you?"

Jenna paced from one end of the room and back. The smell from her steps pressing into the damp carpet made Niall and Kristen gag.

"You spoke to Mr. Longley?" Jenna asked.

Before Niall could answer, his phone rang. Jenna reached into his pocket and answered the call, setting the phone on speaker mode.

"Niall, have you found her?" Victoria said.

"Hi, Mother."

Niall could imagine the shock on Victoria's face.

"Jenna. Return with the C-One at once. I can convince your father not to demote you."

"I want nothing to do with that life, Mother."

"Then don't bother living."

Jenna threw the phone into the wall and let out a scream.

"Do you see how crazy this is? Everything in the Factory is backward. Normal people grieve death. Normal people aren't rated on a scale of obedience and then judged that way for the rest of their life."

“Jenna, that’s a fantasy. Even before the Factory, look at history. Wars over religion, over race, over greed, over emotions. The Factory is fair. The Factory changed our country for the better,” Niall said.

“Niall, you’re blinded. You’ve been obedient all your life and for what? What have you achieved?” Jenna paced again, flinging her hands into the air.

“My parents would be proud of who I’ve become,” Niall said. “And after I’ve taken you in, I’ll be an Arch-C.”

“You’re tied up. And tomorrow morning, I’ll be past the border making the Factory irrelevant to my life.”

Niall could feel another emotion taking over him. The cockiness in her voice annoyed him. His face grew red, but he calmed himself.

“Who am I?” Niall asked.

“What do you mean?” Jenna said.

“I have the highest test scores in the Factory. So high, that they trusted me with bringing you back. Do you think you caught me this easily?”

Jenna backed away toward the wall. Blood rushed through him. His eyes hardened. He stood and his hands fell to his side.

Niall let go of the emotions he held for Jenna and remembered his grandmother and parents. How proud they would be of him and his obedience. He understood the orders given to him. Dead or alive. Mr. Longley did not care. Maybe death was where his angel belonged. He had hoped to reason, to bring her in with cooperation. To appease her humanity. And instead, he now understood, his humanity and her humanity were two different matters. He believed in the

Word, and the Word was law. If she made it across the border, then the Factory's words would mean nothing. And he could not let that be. His emotions for her had been the one thing holding him back.

Jenna covered her ears and ran out the front door. The Factory must have tracked him and sent in help.

Kristen begged for him to let her go, wailed that she came to help him, but he refused to untie her.

“You were never my equal.”

There would be no saving Kristen. And in leaving her bound, he knew she'd be demoted to C-Two.

Niall followed, and rain began to fall. He didn't want to use it, but now it didn't matter. He grabbed his gun from the car and scanned the dirt. Within seconds, he spotted the footprints nearly washed away and took off in the direction Jenna had run.

The rain pelted him like tiny needles. Small fragments of hail soon followed. He looked to the sky and growled, baring his teeth. As he turned the corner, he caught a glimpse of Jenna running, and he picked up speed.

He'd never felt more liberated in his life. In the house with his grandmother, at the Factory even, he felt confined and controlled. His freedom would be born from her death. But one question still bothered him. What had she stolen from Mr. Longley?

Niall shouted Jenna's name, and Jenna glanced back in panic. Losing her footing, she slipped and fell in the mud.

“Wait, Niall—” She raised her hand as she tried to catch her breath. “Come with me! We can be free—together!” Jenna shouted.

Niall stopped a few feet away, and everything began to steady. His heart slowed from a chaotic and staccato pace to one in time. He had control over the situation. Despite feeling empowered, he saw his reflection in the water at his feet. That calm began to stir. He didn’t recognize the boy who had an odd grin on his face. He didn’t recognize him at all. He suddenly wished for his parents, something he knew was wrong.

He could leave with her. Leave beyond the border and be free. As he looked into her pleading eyes, he saw the innocence his angel once possessed when she entered his room at night. Could his change in demeanor at the house have scared her into fleeing? Or could this be some ploy? No, he believed she meant her words.

“Please, Niall. Come with me. You’re not this soldier for them. You’re the boy I fell in love with next door.”

The steady beating of Niall’s heart picked up. Overwhelmed, cold, and confused, Niall shook his head furiously in the rain. His normally kept hair slung loose water from side to side.

“What did you steal from Mr. Longley?” Niall asked.

“Steal? What *I* stole? He stole my freedom, and I stole his pride.”

The words lingered in the air around them. And then a realization settled in Niall’s mind.

“You never had parents growing up. Mr. Longley, Victoria, no one cared about you but your grandmother. Those tears on my chest were tears of sadness, loneliness. Feelings we’re not allowed to have.”

“You understand.” Jenna reached out to him.

Niall took her hand in his and whispered “yes.”

He pulled her up and onto her feet, and she wrapped her arms around him. Despite the rain and mud, despite the mold and urine from the house, the scent of lemon escaped her hair. He wished he could stay like this forever. But forever wasn't real.

“You make me feel, but I can't change who I am,” he said. A part of him wished he could go back to feeling nothing as he should. But he couldn't.

Jenna's grip on his shirt loosened. She let go and took a step back. Her lips parted before she could say another word. Niall fired the gun. Her eyes held his gaze for a moment. He collapsed onto the ground.

“Angels do not belong here—I've broken the Word, and the Word is to be followed.”

PAST THE EXPIRATION DATE

When Marlee remembers she'd left the stove on, dribblets of sweat form along her forehead. She checks her watch and asks her manager if she can leave before her husband wakes up. Carol, the overnight baker, looks at the clock above the meat case and sighs.

"I can stay on and cover the front until she returns," Carol says to the manager. The manager rolls his eyes and motions for Marlee to go.

Marlee pulls her long russet hair back into a ponytail and leaves The Corner Market Deli in Montauk, her left hand flailing behind her like a pale flag, her ring flashing in the sunlight. Her shoes smack the sidewalk like a rolling flat tire. After the first five minutes, she really wishes she'd driven today. When her second wind rekindles, she takes off again, her hair swishing back and forth with each step. Marlee's chest tightens with each stride and sweat drips down her brown brows. Despite the hoary sky and temperature high of 64 degrees, her skin burns. She increases her pace.

By the time she opens her front door roughly eighteen minutes later and slips out of her shoes, she lets out a groan. She used to run every day. Now a run home from work felt like a death sentence.

At the dining room table, her son Becker slurps milk from his cereal bowl. She breathes in deeply but doesn't smell any smoke. Did Dale already turn off the stove? She spins her ring around her finger, releasing pressure. She checks the stove; the dial is turned to off.

She lingers at the doorway to the dining room.

“Mom, why are you back?” Becker asks. Even sitting down, Becker is almost Marlee’s height. When had her boy had grown so big?

“Just wanted to steal your cereal,” Marlee says, taking his spoon and enjoying a bite of his Lucky Charms.

“Don’t eat my marshmallows. I saved them for last.”

She pushes his black hair out of his face. He swats at her hand, and his feeble attempts make her smile. He’s getting older and doesn’t want mom messing with his do. Marlee bites her lip, both happy and sad.

Marlee walks up the staircase and pauses at the top. She listens. She hears the faint ticks of the grandfather clock in Dale’s study. She hears the faint purr of the neighbor’s lawnmower. And then Dale’s snoring.

Before she creeps back downstairs, she watches Dale’s chest rise and fall. He appears tranquil until he stirs. She backs up. His breathing steadies and she releases the breath she's been holding since she made it upstairs. She shakes her head and tells herself it was an accident. It’s only happened once, and yet she can’t keep track of the number of times she's forgotten to breathe over the last week. She takes the steps by two, her bare feet leaving fleeting prints on the hardwood. She stops to look at Becker and smiles at her precocious boy.

“Mom, you’re being a creeper again.”

“Finish your cereal, brush your teeth, and get ready for school,” Marlee says with a smile. “Your father has a big meeting with investors later today so don’t keep him waiting.” Becker nods and she kisses him one last time on the cheek. He blows a raspberry.

Marlee exits the front and locks the door.

After a quick stretch, she slips into her shoes. The double-beep of the alarm echoes. The wave of cold air is both nice and numbing.

#

The Corner Market Deli is vacant of customers when Marlee returns. Carol asks her if everything is okay, and Marlee nods. When Carol walks to check on her last racks of baked goods, Marlee enters the restroom to straighten her uniform and tidy her hair. She's careful to blot her sweat below her left brow. Shades of yellow and green peek through despite her extra concealer. Almost a week has passed since he hit her, and yet, after every blot, she winces.

For a brief moment, she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, the scent of baked baguettes diffusing throughout the market. And then she shifts into work mode. She straightens the shelves by "covering the diamonds" a method that simply means pulling the overpriced merchandise like \$6.00 artisan water over the diamond cutouts near the ends of the shelves. During the morning, she price-cuts items on a list from her manager, Stew. Later at midday, Marlee will begin her food demonstrations. She chooses from discounted items and prepares meals that will save customers money, her favorite part of the job. Her mother believes Marlee threw her life away when she quit college two semesters before graduating with BA in Mathematics, and yet Marlee applies her math skills to her cooking every day. Doubling or halving recipes on busy and slow days, baking cakes and sweets for friends and the bakery. All of that requires exact measuring. An added bonus, Marlee is constantly surrounded by a different assortment of people. What started as a part-time job led to her love for cooking and to Becker. She met Dale on the job.

Marlee pauses at the prosciutto, remembering her honeymoon—the wrought-iron chairs outside a small red-bricked café in Vicenza, the smell of brewed coffee, and the tender salty taste of fresh prosciutto finger-fed by Dale. His laughter and smile had always attracted everyone nearby.

Stew chats on the phone with the delivery driver like he does every Monday morning. He points to the ground pork on sale and Marlee nods. Carol, dressed in casual jeans and an oxford shirt, pops her head out from the back and sees if Marlee has made her decision. Every day, this routine, Marlee loves. Dale once thought he could keep her from the deli, from her friends, but in the end, he could never persuade her to leave. Thinking back, that was likely the only time someone had said no to him.

“How about picadillo? Baguettes make the perfect vehicle,” Carol says. Marlee hadn’t cooked picadillo in weeks. But she remembers her first time making it when she met Dale. Had Carol remembered, Marlee knew she wouldn’t have suggested it.

“I sometimes think the special baked good of the day is based off your stomach,” Marlee says. Carol laughs, agrees, and laughs again. Marlee prefers Carol’s laughs to her own pinched brows of concern.

Marlee pulls items from the shelves for the recipe. Sweet yellow onions for the perfect caramelization. Spicy chorizo and garlic for a kick. San Marzano tomatoes because they’re the best, raisins, olives, and ground pork to appease Stew. Marlee then lines the spices she’ll need on her demo table and preps the onions and garlic.

Marlee slices the onion through its midsection, splitting it down the core but making sure not to slice all the way through. By leaving that quarter of an inch still intact, and then dicing the

onion on a bias prevent her eyes from tearing. It's a tip she learned through trial and error and loves sharing.

"Mise en place," Marlee whispers to no one.

"Looks delicious," Thomas says from behind the counter. Marlee's grip on her knife tightens.

"I didn't mean to startle you," Thomas says.

"You didn't. I just didn't hear you come in."

"Guess my ninja training is paying off," he says while doing the robot. Marlee laughs. Her face reddens, and she looks down to regain some composure. The joke's not particularly funny, but he's Thomas. He could read names from a phonebook and make her smile.

Thomas cleans the slicer and preps the cold bar. Every once in a while, Marlee catches him gazing at her with his deep hazel eyes and a smile that stretches a bit further upward and outward on the right than the left. Kind of goofy, definitely cute, insanely too young. He tucks his dirty blonde hair behind his ears and fixes his hairnet.

Marlee smashes the garlic with her chef's knife, activating the cells, and glimpses Thomas staring.

"That's his tell," Carol whispers, bumping Marlee with her hip. Marlee shushes her friend who appears minutes away from yelling "Team Thomas." Although it was probably obvious Marlee had a mild crush on Thomas; the point she often had to remind Carol of was that she's married.

Marlee peeks at Thomas, who now is lifting boxes in the back and notices he's about Dale's height. What does he see in her aside from fresh age lines and dark bags under her eyes?

Then again, what does Dale see in her? Something she wondered the day he asked her out. Beneath her chef's jacket, her body is a topographic map of loose skin that's never re-tightened. Pale stretch marks river her midsection. A mother, a wife—two of the unsexiest things she could think of... and Thomas knows both, but still, he shows interest. The worst part, he does little to hide his disdain toward Dale whenever Dale visits the deli.

“Damn it,” Stew says. “Okay, thanks for letting me know. The week of. Bye.”

“What's going on boss man?” Carol asks, jabbing him in the shoulder.

“The holiday party is canceled. We don't have a location.”

“But Susan and I have already rented our costumes,” Carol said reminding Marlee she owed her lunch for bailing last minute.

Dale walks into the deli and waves. Marlee smiles but continues to listen to Stew and Carol arguing over possible solutions. Within a few moments, Dale is at her table and listening to the argument as well.

“You're just going to ignore me?” Dale whispers.

“I'm sorry. It's just the holiday party is canceled.” Dale lightly squeezes her shoulder and moseys over to Dale. As much as she knew he meant well, she would never interrupt a meeting at his workplace.

“Hi Dale,” Stew says. Dale smiles, and like a switch, he's on again. That radiating charm.

“If it's a location you need, why not throw the party at our house? It's nearby, plenty of room, drunken guests can pass out in one of our guest rooms.” He looks at Carol when saying this, and Carol glares at him. How could he just offer up their home like that last minute? She'd have to plan, and ordering out would be silly when she cooks. But that would mean she'd have to

go shopping and prep everything on her own. He always made decisions without consulting her. Even having Becker.

“I couldn’t possibly put you in that *imposition*,” Stew says and nods toward Marlee. Even Stew understood the predicament.

“There’s no imposition here. Marlee loves the holiday party, and I would do anything for Marlee.” Marlee hears the cashier girls *ooh* and *ahh*, and Marlee doesn’t know what to do or say. She shouldn’t complain if it meant saving the holiday party. Dale is perfect. She could only hope the party would be the same.

Dale grabs a bottle of coconut water, his *must have* item before leaving.

Stew asks Marlee again, and she smiles and puts on a brave face.

“It’s time to get started on the demo. Don’t worry Stew. Everything will be perfect.”

Marlee looks at her ring, a perfect beautiful ring: princess cut, flawless clarity, and a four-karat diamond set in a platinum cathedral head. She pulls the ring off and scrubs her hands clean like she’s a surgeon. She opens a second table, and Marlee quickly places a red-and-white-checked tablecloth over it to cover the scars.

#

Marlee rushes home but before she can rush upstairs, Dale grabs her by the arm and stops her. She flinches despite his grip not hurting, and he quickly lets her go. His eyes remind her of a puppy who knows he’s done something wrong. She hates what their relationship has become. Instead of a woman, she feels like a child. She reminds herself he’s only hit her once.

“Becker got into a fight at school. The dean would like to stop by the office.”

“That’s not like him,” Marlee says. Did he learn that from them? “Why does Cheryl want to see us?”

“New Dean. Couldn’t wipe this one under the rug.”

Marlee nods and runs upstairs to shower. After putting on a simple pantsuit, she sits in front of her vanity, reapplying her make-up, lining her lips, applying her mascara. Sometimes going out with Dale means becoming a character, becoming someone worthy of her husband. He’s successful and knows what he wants and she’s a college drop out. For once, she wished the proof were balanced on both sides.

In the kitchen, Marlee cleans her hands leaving suds on the stainless steel. She decides on two grilled cheese sandwiches on thick and hearty sourdough bread, one with bacon crumbles, tomatoes, mayo, and sautéed onions, the second, with extra cheddar and American and a side of breakfast potatoes. Her frown lines subside, her body relaxes. She cuts the sandwiches in three triangles reminding her of Dale, Becker and herself. Her family.

She places her sandwich on the dining room table and then walks through the foyer to Dale’s study. The walls are lined with books. Near the window, his grandfather clock ticks away. Near the door, he has a small bar filled with whiskey and scotch and a pitcher of sweet tea she made earlier that morning. Dale sits with his back to her, going over digital blueprints of a new building he designed in the city. Marlee sees his back muscles flex beneath his button up. What once was sexy now scares her. His one hand can overpower both of hers. But still, he’s as handsome as he was when she first met him. The night before he proposed to her, he showed her plans for their house. He had listened. On their very first date, he asked her to imagine her

perfect home. Those blueprints outlined every dream she had as a child. Even though she hadn't planned on getting married so young, she couldn't say no. She still can't say no.

Marlee sees his glass of sweet tea is nearly empty and refills the glass. Dale lightly squeezes her right hand and smiles at her. Her cheeks flush. His voice is calming. The touch of his hand, the focused hold of his eyes, his almost innocent smile— she feels like the words in a poem, on the page but also floating on a cloud of cadence. It is easy to remember why she fell in love with Dale.

“Sandwich looks great,” Dale says, taking it from her. Dale loves her grilled cheese-- well, all her cooking but his inflection in his voice is extra kind. It's the type of voice he uses when winning over clients. She likes feeling appreciated, but something feels off. When he's angry there's a problem. When he's nice there's a problem. Marlee shakes her head at her own conundrum.

Her confusion quickly vanishes when she realizes that like her right hand, her left hand is bare too. She pulls her hand from his and tucks both in her pockets.

After excusing herself, she rushes upstairs and searches through her powder room pulling all the jewelry drawers. She tears through her closet where she put on her pantsuit when she got home. Home. Did she have her ring on when she got back from work?

“We need to go to Becker's school,” Dale says from downstairs.

“Almost ready!” Marlee yells. She runs her hand through her hair and begins pacing. He'll never forgive her if she loses the ring. Or worse. He gets so mad when a stranger flirts with her. Will he assume the worst and think she lost it on purpose or didn't want to wear it?

When she gets downstairs, he pulls her to him, and her body hardens. He thumbs her loose hair away from her cheek, tucking the strands behind her ear. He kisses her and says, “I wish we had some more time before we have to go.”

Marlee forces a smile, and it surprises her how authentic it feels. How long has she faked smiles at him? And now fully aware of her act, how long can she keep it up?

Dale squeezes her in an embrace like a child hugging his favorite stuffed animal he can't sleep without. One he keeps holding—never, ever letting go.

#

Becker's eyes are down when Marlee and Dale get to the school. He sits outside the dean's office, and mouths “I'm sorry” when he sees his parents. Dale shakes his head and sighs. Becker's lip is crusted in blood, and Marlee can see the beginnings of a bruise forming. Marlee lightly squeezes his shoulder and whispers, “We'll fix this.” She kisses him on the cheek and follows Dale into the dean's office.

The new dean is much younger than Marlee would have expected. His sandy brown hair is combed back, and his smile fixates a bit longer on Marlee than she'd like.

Introductions are made, and Marlee instantly notices that Dale is not attempting to hide his annoyance with the Becker. He's not attempting to be a hero or save his son's record. In fact, he appears compliant.

“Zero violence policy here Mr. Willshire,” the dean says. “I'm sorry, but that's a two-week suspension.”

“No, I get it. I agree completely,” Dale says.

Why is he not defending him? Does he not want Becker to go to a good school? She couldn't recognize any part of Dale these days.

"We haven't heard from Mrs. Willshire."

Marlee looks at Dale and then the dean.

"He never had an accident in elementary school. He has never demonstrated behavior like this before. Maybe you could give him a second chance. He's in a new environment, and that in itself can be overwhelming." Marlee stares at the dean, pleading with him in her mind. She's not sure what he's seeing in her eyes, but he doesn't break the hold.

Marlee looks to Dale again. She wants him to say something. Anything to help. But he doesn't believe in violence? Now? Marlee bites her lip and the force strengthens with each passing second.

"I'll give him a second chance," the dean says. "Don't make me regret it."

#

After Becker's meeting at school and a lecture from Dale, Marlee asks if Becker would like ice cream. Becker says yes.

It takes a while for Dale to give in, but eventually the two act like they usually do together. Dale and Becker play-wrestle in the parking lot and laugh and run circles around each other. Seeing Becker happy makes her smile. Dale lifts Becker into the air and holds him on top of his shoulders. Marlee stands behind them in case Becker loses his balance and falls. And then Marlee stops. Dale would never hurt Becker. She knows this. She just wishes she had that same confidence with Dale and her.

Dale sends Becker to his room for the rest of the night. The moment Becker is in his room; Dale looks at Marlee. She recognizes the look. Dale lifts Marlee into the air and over his shoulder. Marlee feels like her body shifts into rigor mortis. He races her upstairs and into their room and drops her onto the bed. He undoes his pants.

“I wanted to do this the whole night,” he says. They haven’t been together since the fight.

Marlee breathes in, sucking in her stomach as he unbuttons her shirt. The invisible hairs on her skin stretch upward, small bumps forming all over. She's cold despite the warmth of his kisses. Adapt. Adapt. It only happened once. Forgive him and let it go.

“You know I love you,” Dale says, his fingers sliding into her pants before he unbuttons them.

“Yes.” As she squirms, her russet hair catches in the backboard of her bed, bringing tears to her eyes. Dale ignores them. She reaches upward to tame her hair, but Dale catches her by the wrists.

Why do you get your hair done every month? Don't I tell you you're beautiful enough?

“Do you love me?”

Her arms ache, held above her and pressed against the headboard. With just one hand, she's overpowered.

“Yes.” Was that an automatic response or sincere?

He pulls her pants down to her knees. After the first thrust, he asks her if she forgives him, and she nods, flinching.

He thrusts harder. “You know, you're my everything.”

Marlee nods again, lost in the pain and waiting for the pleasure. How did things turn out this way? Just one mistake on one side of the equation could ruin a proof. Setting the oven to the wrong degree could result in flames. She stares at the blurry oil painting on the wall. Becker's smile is the only portion she sees clearly. Becker is the only clear thing in her life.

Dale's thrusts grow harsher; his grip on her wrists tightens. Her pain probably sounds like moans to him. "Tell me you'll never leave me."

Marlee stiffens. Her eyes continue to water. Her body is not her own. It's his.

"Tell me," he demands.

"Yes." Was that even her voice?

By the time Dale completes his last thrust, Marlee feels cold, feels nothing. Her mind is elsewhere, unable to stay in the room. Her tears never stop, soaking the pillow. She rolls onto her side and wrenches the sheets tight to her body. Caramel folds of silk cover every inch of her body like a second skin, but no covering is enough.

#

With Dale busy making arrangements for the party, Marlee drives her rarely used car to The Corner Market Deli. Her stomach turns, and she feels like she could throw up at any moment. Her hair sticks to her face, the early morning humidity dampening her already dampened mood. She needs to find her ring before the holiday party later this evening. Dale may be oblivious in the bedroom, but he'll notice at a party where the ring should be shown off.

Once inside the deli, she catches herself in the mirror and jumps when she sees a stranger staring back at her. She yanks her sleeves down over her hands. Her black hoodie, black slacks, and raccoon eyes from day-old eyeliner is someone from a television show, not her. She creeps

closer to the mirror, hoping what she sees in the mirror changes, but it gets worst as she gets closer. She wants to scrape the make-up off with sandpaper and bathe in a vat of Plank's Cor soap. But what is the point in showering or cleaning up? She'd never be able to wipe away this person.

She opens the door to the small back room adjacent to the walk-in cooler and searches through the hamper for her ring. She rummages through the dish pit and finds mashed baguette crumbs, silverware in desperate need of another run through, and a rack of plates left to dry.

Finding nothing, Marlee shuts off all the lights and heads to her car.

Before she can leave, Carol walks in and pauses at the sight of her.

"Carol, have you seen my ring?" Marlee asks.

"Your *wedding* ring?"

"No, egg fry ring. Yes, my wedding ring."

"No," she says. And even if she did, would Carol tell her? Carol was the only person never taken with Dale aside from Thomas. She said she knew he was a dog. And her opinions got louder when she saw the bruise on Marlee's face. Carol made walking away sound so easy but has no idea the pressure and the weight of such a decision or what could happen afterward. She said Marlee deserves to be happy. Marlee isn't sure she deserved anything.

Marlee stares at Carol's promise ring to Susan. The two fought all the time. Where did Carol get the nerve to give relationship advice?

"If you're worried about what he'll do—" Carol says now.

“I am.” The two stare at one another in silence. No matter how annoying Carol can be, Marlee needs her. She loves Carol. She’s her best friend. The two hug and Marlee cries on her shoulder.

One time. It’s only happened one time. Her thoughts flicker to the night before and her body shudders.

The boy at the Yankee’s game flirted with her. She thought it was innocent. He had to be twenty years old, so she didn’t take it seriously. She didn’t think much of it. But when the two drove home, Dale kept saying she enjoyed it. That she enjoyed his attention. The fight continued into the house. Out of frustration, Marlee said maybe she did, and that was it. He hit her. But he apologized right after. He said he made a mistake. One time.

Marlee repeats the words over and over in her head as if the repetition will somehow overtake the memory, as if the words repeated could act as a mantra to calm her. She knows he regrets losing his temper, but how powerful is an apology? If "one-time" can't change anything can "I'm sorry" do any better?

Marlee, not knowing what to say to Carol, leaves. She starts the engine but is unable to shift into reverse. The cold air blasting through the vents and the pungent smell of freshly detailed seats neither cools her nor settles her nausea. Marlee can’t blame Carol for her perspective. Once upon a time, Marlee would have said the same thing if the roles were reversed. “If a man hits you, you say goodbye.” But does one bad deed supersede all the good someone does for you? One bad moment erases their entire history? And could she drag Becker through a divorce? Did she want a divorce?

Marlee shifts the car into reverse, but can’t lift her foot off the brake pedal.

#

Marlee would rather eat rat droppings than host the holiday party. There are too many variables that could add up to an unexpected end. Carol, who, now knows Marlee's fear of Dale. Thomas, who accidentally saw the bruise under Marlee's makeup, will be drinking.

Dale walks up behind her, half-dressed for tonight.

He massages her shoulders, and Marlee does her best not to tighten up.

"I dropped Becker off at his friend's house," Dale says.

Marlee wants to say, "I wish you wouldn't have suggested we host the party," but keeps it to herself.

"We don't have to do anything tonight but be beautiful. I will make sure everything is perfect," Dale says. He kisses her on top of her head, and it feels off. When she looks in the mirror, Dale appears smaller than he usually does. "Let's just have fun tonight."

Dale leaves her in her powder room so she can get ready. In the mirror, she stares at her body, pale and rounder than she'd like. She pokes at her loose skin around her midsection and cringes. She never felt good enough for him. Who was she to leave him?

She pulls on her Spanx, tucking away more of herself. In the back of her closet, she finds the feathered-flapper dress she found online. The dress is much tighter than she remembers, making her not want to go even more. She is a two and he a ten and no matter what, the two do not add up. She sits at her vanity and applies her make-up, and curls her hair. After an hour, she slips into coral heels with ankle straps and goes downstairs.

"You're beautiful," Dale says.

"You're just saying that because of the dress."

“You’re my wife. You’re beautiful no matter what you wear,” he says.

Carol and Susan are the first to arrive. Carol, who has on a black and white tux, kisses Marlee on the cheek. Susan looks like she’s been plucked out of a club from the 20’s. The two smile and Marlee prays she’s not on spicy mode. Carol looks at Dale, and Marlee holds her breath. Instead of starting with a snide remark or a joking jab, Carol holds out her hand and says hello with a smile that appears genuine.

Dale kisses her hand and bows and tells her she’s quite handsome and the two laugh.

Together, Carol, Susan, Marlee, and Dale move from the foyer into the next room where everyone will be during the night. Poker and scrap tables are set up opposite the buffet. Food Marlee did not cook but ordered in. The marsala sauce looks thin, the mushrooms canned. Marlee cannot believe her eyes. He pulled everything off, but nothing feels right. Half the home still has Christmas decorations she put up earlier in the month. The doorbell rings and more people file in. The mixed themes, the thin sauce—even the cheese looks stale. How could she serve stale cheese?! The DJ begins playing Christmas tunes. The fireplace flicks embers like fireworks and the edge of Susan’s dress catches on fire.

Carol quickly puts it out and instead of freaking out, the two start laughing once Susan says she’s fine. Nothing is fine.

Within twenty minutes, the entire staff of the Corner Market Deli arrives. Thomas too.

“Did you cook all the food?” Stew asks Marlee.

“I gave Marlee the night off,” Dale says and the two laughs.

“Yes, because it’s Marlee’s job to cook for everyone. Even though she’s also hosting the shindig,” Carol says.

“You don’t mind eating her food at work,” Stew says.

“What can I say, I have good taste.”

“Unlike some people,” Thomas says behind Marlee and slips away. Marlee looks at Dale, and it's clear he heard him. Instead of causing a commotion, Dale tells everyone the story of how Marlee referred to herself as “Marlee like the dog” when the first two met and how he knew she was perfect in that moment. The crowd around them swoon but Marlee can’t help but wonder if he meant the reason he liked her was because she’s obedient. She’s not a dog. She’s not the girl who just graduated college. Marlee mingles with her co-workers, but “like a dog” replays in her mind over and over again.

As the party dies down, the DJ asks for all the couples in the home to get on the dance floor. Stew asks for his wife’s hand, and he twirls her on the dance floor. Thomas asks his date, someone Marlee didn’t even see until now who he neglected the whole night. She runs outside. Carol extends a hand to Susan, and the two hold each other, smiling at one another. Could Marlee and Dale ever be like Carol and Susan? She no longer trusts him.

“Can I have this dance?” Dale asks.

“No.”

Marlee runs upstairs and tears off her too-tight dress. She yanks off her Spanx and puts on her college sweatshirt that fits her perfectly. She kicks off her heels and pulls on sweat pants. Marlee couldn’t tell when she started suffocating. Now or their entire marriage?

Dale stands in the door frame of their bedroom. Marlee tears her eyes from her vanity and looks at the man she had fallen in love with.

“I lost the ring,” Marlee says. No reply. Her body is tense, but she can’t help but feel done.

Dale pulls out a small red velvet box from his pocket. When he opens it, Marlee sees the ring. Marlee stretches her back and stands up straight. She has spent so much time trying to figure out Dale in the equation of her, him, and Becker, that she lost herself. She realizes that she deserves to be happy.

“Dale,” Marlee says.

He walks up behind her and gently squeezes her shoulders. She shakes them off.

No one speaks for a while. A light chime from the clock downstairs somehow cuts through the faint tunes of the DJ.

“I know I lost you the moment you left your ring in the kitchen,” Dale says, his voice cracking.

He places her wedding ring in her hand.

“You had the ring, this whole time.” That bastard. The panic. The running to the deli on her day off.

He’s always been like this. Grabbing her, making decisions for her, monitoring her. Keeping things from her. And she put up with it all these years because she thought she didn’t deserve him. Because she didn’t want to hurt Becker. But he will always be this way. This is who he is.

Marlee holds the ring in her hand. Despite knowing it’s flawless, it appears gaudy to her now. Marlee hands him back the ring. Her stomach drops to her toes.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“For hitting me?” Marlee says. “I hate you for making me crazy and making me afraid in my own house. I hate you for keeping the ring when you had to have known I was going crazy searching for it.”

“No—I didn’t mean to make you feel—”

“I’m not done!”

Marlee can’t stop the tears or the strain on her throat from yelling.

“You know why this is so hard?” Marlee says. “Because you’re a great dad and because I know you love me.”

Exhausted, Marlee marches into her closet and begins throwing her things into a suitcase.

She doesn’t know what tomorrow will bring. She doesn’t know how Becker will react to what would come. She doesn’t know anything about the future anymore.

But tonight, Marlee locks away what she’ll need to start over. Dale sits in the corner of her bathroom, arms cradled around his knees. She walks downstairs, the sound of Christmas music floating like clouds above conversation and laughter. Marlee looks toward the room where her guests and friends are. The party is a mess, two themes that just don’t fit together but with all the alcohol, no one cares. Not even about the food she could have made so much better herself. How late will Dale let the party go with her leaving? Knowing him, he’ll let the party run until it ends in the early morning hours. He’s too much of a coward to do otherwise. She sees Carol and Susan who wave at her. Carol must see a change in Marlee because she rushes over. Susan follows. Carol doesn’t say anything. Marlee says nothing. The two hug. Susan excuses herself, to get the car.

“Food sucked anyways,” Carol says as she leads Marlee out into the cool night.

DROWN

Her brother never stops watching. Every time she feeds the baby, holds it, he's there. But today is Monday, and he has gone to work. She and the baby are alone.

She fills the tub with warm water and places the baby inside its walls. It'd be so easy to leave the water running and step outside, daydream her nightmares away.

It's been almost a year since she moved into her brother's apartment with the baby. The skeletons of leaves fall from their perches once again. The clink of metal against metal, the door lock clicks, the creak of the front door opening, sounds that used to break her slump no longer carried the hope they once did. Her ex didn't want a baby.

She didn't want a baby.

Whenever she feeds the baby and presses her nipple to its mouth, feels the pull of her skin, the emission of milk, what should be natural feels wrong. She's not her brother who sings songs of barnyard animals and sunshine and love. She's a woman who matches pitch with a shrieking baby and yells "shut up!" over and over again. She's a woman who stares out the window wondering how this became her life.

With a squirt of soap, the water transforms into a dangerous sea filled with scaled down reptiles and dated dinosaurs. Beside the sink, she finds another toy. She opens the package and removes a yellow rubber ducky, one with a red cap and the trademark "Made in China" stamped on the rear. Her brother must have left it for her to find.

She stares at the toy. The baby mimics her, eyes enthralled by the new yellow wonder. She feels the fine speckle of dust along its exterior, invisible to the eye. She remembers having a

ducky of her own. The baby grabs the ducky from her hands and submerges it into the bubbly sea.

She snatches the rubber ducky away and holds it close to her chest. She remembers the ducky the day she last saw her father. She was five and three-quarters. In the tub, she'd pretend the rubber ducky was a giant ship for sea and air adventures and the rubber wings would transform into wide-spread warmth and plush. She planned out adventures, waiting for her best mate to return from his treasure hunt. But he never returned. Her adventures stopped.

She drowns the ducky, and squeezes it as hard as she can. Hiccup bubbles break the surface of the water.

The dust has washed away.

She laughs, and the baby laughs too. It's been so long. She hands her baby the ducky and he maneuvers it through the air above him. The ducky then dives into the sea, a deep-sea diver plunging into deep water only to return moments later. The mother picks up her nearly one-year-old son and sees delicate features, his pinchable nose, his cheeks waiting for his mother's lips. She opens her mouth and hums a tune.

BASKET WEAVE

Strikeout

Pshhh Velcro apart and
slide callused hands in black
ventilated gloves. To stop the shaking. *Stop*
shaking. Step into the white chalked box
lined on red clay. Drop the bat,
let it sway.

Fuse synthetic leather to ash timber grip
and align two sets of knuckles.
Stay in line. Wait—
swing. Miss. Look past bright lights
crowning concrete poles, past wire fences
to open faces. Search for an aged version of yourself,
dark hair and clear-rimmed glasses. Come up lost
in a sea of black and yellow and boos.

Swing again. Miss again. *He'll never forgive*
you. After the third swing, and the *pop*—
one-hundred and eight enflamed stitches,
a blur of red and white
collides with leather mitt,
ash timber fights to catch
up to a leather sphere
that comes as quickly as it goes.

II. Practice

My father used to say, “Batting is like dancing. It requires a rhythm.” My knuckles line
up. My stance is open. I raise the bat an inch off my shoulder and cock my elbow up. My arms
drop like a turnstile and rock back and forth, back and forth. The head of the bat sways an inch
over the red clay. The salty sweat on my lips tastes good.

The pitching machine whizzes to life, and Coach drops a dimpled, yellow practice ball through the shoot. The two vertical wheels spit the ball toward home plate. I stride. My hips rotate.

I swing. I miss.

“You’re not Griffey, Junior,” my stepfather says from the stands.

My eyes roll toward the bill of my helmet. I hate Junior. My nickname, not Griffey. My stepfather hates that I idolize Griffey’s famous swing. My father loved Griffey.

Whenever my stepfather says things to me at home, I tune him out. I’ll sit in my room and put on headphones or watch TV. Sometimes I’ll stare at his thick goatee and try to count the individual pricks that make up the whole. But at practice, I can’t escape his incessant commentary. The wired fence can’t silence the crowds at games, and the fence can’t silence him. Nothing can when I’m on the field. And worst of all, he never misses a game or practice.

The pitching machine spits another pitch, and I foul the first toward him. Not purposely, though I wish I had those batting skills. The next pitch, I swing and miss. The rattle of the fence rings in my ears. The sound continues as I return to the dugout.

“Come on, Junior! Don’t end on a swing and miss,” Coach says. “This is just practice.”

Coach has adopted the nickname from my stepfather like everyone else in my life and no matter how hard I practice, I swing, I miss.

III. Off the Roster

I loved baseball, *America’s greatest pastime!* But not anymore. I used to spend the night before games, fingering the outline of my jersey number or lying on my back and tossing the ball

into the air, catching it. Now, I dread it. Whatever I loved about the sport has fizzled out like stale pop. I flip through the pages of my card collection. I stop at my father's minor league card shielded behind the plastic casing. He looks like me in this picture, shaggy brown hair an inch or two longer than ear length. The same wide-set brown eyes. Even the same tight-lipped smile. Now, he's locked behind bars.

It happened in the fall, a day I could say he no longer wanted to be on our team roster. I rushed home from the bus stop and waited for him on the front porch. He promised he'd come, and despite the number of his broken promises outweighing the promises he kept, I believed him. I skipped the opening game of Little League and waited until the dry Arizona heat turned cold when night devoured day. There were no stars that night.

A few years later, my mother met Raymundo, my future step-father, at the diner where she worked. The two dated, and when my mother revealed she had a son, I thought it would be the end. That was the role I played in my mother's relationships, but he never had children and always wanted a son.

I like his full name, but he prefers Ray. On the weekends, he takes me to Diamondback games. He says there is nothing more American than baseball in the entire country. Sometimes, he tells me if he had a son, he imagines him to be like me. I'm not his son. I'm my father's son. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to take that. But because he loves the sport, I feel obligated to continue. Because he has been to every practice and every game since I was ten, I have more memories of him than my father.

But Ray only sees what he wants to see. The son he doesn't have. The sport he never got to play in Mexico. He can't continue living vicariously through me.

I'm exhausted. I want to quit, and Mama said I could. Ray refused. Ray said, "I won't quit on you. I won't ever frickin' quit on you."

I frickin' can't stand the man.

IV. In Between Innings

During the season, Ray takes it upon himself to cook dinner, something Mama used to do. Instead, he tells her to sit back and watch TV. He tells her to relax. I think she needs to stay busy. She's bored, and that's why she leaves so frequently. Sometimes she leaves for a day. Sometimes she leaves for an entire weekend. But what do I know? I'm just a "kid."

I used to watch TV or play games while Mama cooked, but now I'm in the kitchen "learning." I don't mind giving Mama a break, but I don't cook.

Ray removes a bag of quinoa and a package of wrapped scallops from the grocery store. He doesn't cook the stuff normal people eat. Mention the words pizza or fried chicken and the man shivers like he's naked in an Alaskan snowstorm. Mama used to make the best fried chicken, but Ray says it's unhealthy and dangerous. So now we eat things like scallops and quinoa—little dry puffs the size of Dippin' Dots that taste like sawdust.

"Okay, the pan is ready. Go ahead and drop the scallops in the oil," Ray says.

I drop the first slimy petroleum-jelly medallion into the oil. The oil splatter kicks up and onto my arms. Weren't scallops supposed to be safe? I stomp my foot repeatedly and keep my mouth shut despite the pain. I begin to hop, but refuse to scream, the burns eating through my skin like acid.

Ray removes the pan from the burner. Yeah, save the dead sea creature first, of course. And then he soaks a towel in cold water and presses it to my arm.

“Why didn’t you pat the scallops dry before you put them in the oil?” he scolds.

“Yes, because that’s common knowledge?” I say back.

It takes him a moment before he laughs and apologizes.

“The vegetable loaf for dessert will make you forget all about that,” he says.

Vegetable loaf? The bastard.

V. Warm Ups

Ray drives me to the field an hour and a half early for the first game of the season. We have that conversation that’s about nothing but never seems to end. The only person on the field at this time is the guy who chucks the lines listening to podcasts of past games. I’m sure he played here when he went to high school a hundred years ago. Ray smacks his glove and slaps me on the shoulder.

“First game of the year,” he says.

“I need to take a dump.”

I use the restroom to stall. I count the tiles along the wall. The doors are gray like my dad’s old van.

After ten minutes, Ray comes in after me.

“Junior, you doing okay?” he asks.

“My turd is as hard as a baseball,” I say and force a groan. I look down, past my little junior, and into the clear water. *Tap, tap, tap* go my cleats on the concrete floors, and I count

each click until he leaves. Fourteen clicks. I poke the drawing of the breasts on the wall and wonder if they look like the real thing. I think of Vicky D from class.

“Okay, clean your hands afterward.”

I do not clean my hands after my fake crap.

He tells me to stretch. I stretch. He tells me to run a lap. I run a lap. But I cut the corners short, I do the robot when he’s not looking, and I pretend I’m winded when I’m not.

Ray was never an athlete himself. He tells me this all the time. He tells me how lucky I am to play on a field with lush grass and clay clean of twigs and shattered tequila bottles. For a fan, he sure seems to know it all. They always do.

We start with groundballs. I can field. I do well. Fielding comes naturally to me. “Soft hands,” Ray yells. No, let me keep them stiff like paddles so the ball ping-pongs out.

Catching the ball, throwing it, I can do that all day. It’s one of the few things I still enjoy about baseball. But hitting. Hitting is impossible. Hitting is luck. The time it takes for the brain to send a signal to both the eyes and hands to swing and make contact with the ball is not fast enough to keep up with the velocity of a pitch. My father used to tell me that whenever I missed a pitch.

After the infield drills, we move to the batting cages. On days like this, I feel like I’m playing a double header instead of a single game.

“Do I have to?”

I’ll be nice for the whole weekend if we skip batting. I cross my fingers.

“Baseball is a game of offense and defense. A game of balance. You can field. You have to be able to bat to be a ball player.” I’d like to bat something other than a ball.

I don't want to be a ball player. But I put on my batting gloves and grab my bat anyway. Standing behind the L-screen, Ray pitches the ball to me. I swing. I miss. Every frickin' time.

“Junior, you're doing too much. Simple stance, simple swing. Don't overthink it.”

Of course, he doesn't like my father's swing. The man never has anything good to say about him even though he doesn't know him. On my ninth birthday, my father and I drove hours to Seattle to watch a game and film Griffey's swing. That night, despite being exhausted, we stayed up and watched Griffey's swing in slow motion, and together we combined his swing with my own. The open stance, the rocking of the bat back and forth, back and forth. My bouncing back elbow. This was my father and my signature swing. This was our rhythm. Ray and I are out of sync.

Ray pitches the ball again. I miss.

“Junior, listen to me. Just keep it simple. You can do this, son. I know you can.”

“I'm not your son,” I blurt out.

Ray drops his glove on the ground and walks out of the batting cage. I pick up the balls scattered behind home plate. I missed them all.

VI. Basket Weave

We win our first game, barely, and the team acts like fools at school the next day. I don't like school. I get bad grades. I get sent out of classrooms for “attitude” problems. And I still have two years to go. My grades are not good enough to get into college. If I fail this semester, I get kicked off the team.

I smile at the thought of C's across my report card.

In Team Sports, we play baseball. Compared to my classmates, I'm a frickin' star. I'm the only sophomore on varsity. My gym coach knows this and uses me to show the class how to field the ball. It's the only class that doesn't require thinking. The ball hits a pebble and ricochets left instead of its original trajectory. I react. The ball slows in the grass. I run. I react. Reacting doesn't require thinking. Reacting doesn't require remembering.

The team makes fun of my fancy footwork. They, unfortunately, know my hitting record as well. "Coach doesn't have him show us how to do that," they say, laughing. But I ignore the jabs. They'll get theirs.

I sneak into the equipment room after class. The guys are too busy talking about girls or workouts to notice. The fake bravado about their perfect worlds makes me gag. I pull a glove from the equipment bag and rip a small section of the worn web. I imagine the guys out on the field, oblivious to what's about to happen. I see them raise their hands to catch the ball, the web ripping, the ball flying through their legs. I'm selective with which gloves I cut. The basket weave, the most durable of webbing for gloves is my target, over and over. So many layers interwoven with one another, the basket weave always looks whole. With so many layers, no one ever notices the small rips, how each glove gets worse day after day.

VII. Cancelled Practice

After gym class, I feel like Ray at the start of a game because I get to see my nemesis/love. Vicky Diggle in Home Economics and I have an interesting relationship. I call her Vicky D because of her set of double D's. They're like my own personal merry-go-round.

“I don’t want to partner with the ditz,” I tell Mrs. Lockwood within ear range of Vicky. Today, we’re baking.

“Screw you, Junior.” She knows I hate that nickname. She knows me so well. She’s a fan of baseball and works part-time at the concession for minimum wage. That or she’s too shy to tell me how she feels. She tells me I swing like a bitch. I tell her to bitch to someone who cares. She’s my soul mate.

I hand Vicky D. the bag of salt when she needs sugar for the cake recipe. Another lesson my father taught me. When the cake comes out horribly, and her spit spews over the counter, I know I’ve shown her my sense of humor. Women love humor. I have bruises by the end of class to prove it.

After school, Mama picks me up in her truck. I haven’t seen her much this week. She’s usually busy with A.A. meetings or taking weekend retreats with girlfriends. I see Ray more than I see her. Ray doesn’t make her happy. I don’t understand. Why is he even around?

She stops at ABC liquor, and suddenly I wish practice weren’t canceled because of the rain. I stay in the truck.

She’s in a good mood. Why does she want alcohol? She only gets sad when she drinks. She goes to the sale aisle in the back of the store, the usual stop unless it’s wedding or party, and grabs two bottles of vino. I’m supposed to text Ray if she drinks, but I hate relying on him. Against my better judgment, I let him know.

I see Mama pull out her phone a minute later. Her smile disappears, and she glares at me through the window. Thanks, Ray. She puts the bottles on the counter and walks out.

I press my body to the passenger door like a seal. Mom's never hit me, but I hate to see her mad or sad. She throws her phone at the dashboard. I pick it up and try to hand it back to her. She smacks my hand aside and slams her fist on the steering wheel.

"It's okay, Mama."

"It's not okay," she says. "It's not okay."

I want to help. I want to stop the mascara streaks before they hit her cheeks, but I don't know how.

VIII. The Second Game

Ray doesn't drive me to my second game. As we stand beneath the waving flag, I see him find a spot in the stands despite our last argument. I probably shouldn't have lashed out. I see him, but he doesn't look at me.

Maybe he's gotten the hint. I don't need him. I don't need any of his Dr. Ray crap, period. I don't need to hear what I can do to get better. Some people don't get better.

He doesn't stay after the game either. Doesn't matter, Mama told me she'd pick me up anyways. I walk around the other families talking about the game, where we went wrong, the season. I circle the concession and then double check the stands. Where is she? Her truck is missing from the parking lot. Maybe something came up. I sit in the empty stands and wait just in case she's on her way.

My teammates huddle up in cliques—"the cool" kids. They laugh and joke, and I tell them we lost. I tell them they are all pathetic losers posing as winners. They ignore me. People are only nice to those who have something they need. I think about Ray. I don't understand him.

After fifteen minutes, I receive a text from Ray. He asks if Mama picked me up. I respond with a thumbs up. When I walk past the restroom, a sound catches my ear. *Meow*. When I stand on my toes and peer into the restroom window through the opening above, I see a yellow tabby trapped inside. I go to open the door but stop.

Instead of letting the cat out, I go to the concession stand and see Vicky D.

“You don’t want to go to the restroom. I took a crap, and it overflowed,” I say.

“Junior, that’s nasty,” Vicky D. says as she counts down the register.

“What can I say? Crappy game, crappy end.”

She looks up from counting. “Why do you play? You’re not a team player, and you hate the game. Why not just quit?” she asks.

“I can’t quit on you,” I say.

“Whatever, Junior.” She tosses me a set of keys. “They do not pay me enough to clean up after you. Take the keys and lock the door.”

“Do ten jumping jacks.” Vicky D. flips me off. I take the keys and lock the door.

I can hear the cries of the cat, but sometimes no one is there to help.

VIII. Team Huddle

When he’s not cooking or working or at games and practices, he’s cleaning. He even has a cleaning wheel. He doesn’t mind watching after Mama, cleaning up after her messes. So on the night Ray is working late, I don’t know why Mama spends the entire day cleaning. She leaves no nook unkempt. Bookshelves, underneath vases, and in every drawer. After an hour of cleaning, Mama makes baked macaroni and cheese with diced hot dogs and ketchup gravy for dinner,

something my father and I loved eating. Ray never lets us eat food like this, but he's working overnight. My smile breaks on my face as I set the table. Just me and Mama.

After a bite of bliss, my excitement dies when I hear the front door open.

Ray squeezes Mama's shoulders and kisses her cheek. There is a strain on his face, a hunch to his back. He grabs a plate and loads it up with mac. His eyes, however, scan the freakishly clean living room.

"Looks delicious," he says.

I stare at him. Same nose, same face, same guy. What's he trying to pull? Where is Mr. Health Nut?

"Why are you back so early?" Mama asks.

"My back was hurting again, so they sent me home to get my painkillers," he says. "You had a good game yesterday." On D, sure. At bat, I've become the team bunter.

I ignore him.

After a few minutes, he tries his hand at discussion again.

"Who cleaned the apartment?"

"Junior did," Mama says.

"No, I didn't." I don't want credit for something I didn't do. I don't want a pep-talk about how I'm better than I act. And I don't need him "treating" me to more vegetable loaf.

Ray gets up and walks to his room. After a few minutes, he returns.

"Junior, go to your room," he says.

"I haven't finished eating."

"Then take your plate with you." He doesn't appear mad, but his voice says otherwise.

“No, Junior stay,” Mama says.

I stay put and do not move, but then Ray says it again. And I listen. I don’t know why. My body moves on its own like I’m a video game character being controlled by someone else.

I crack my door open, and the two begin to argue. When it was Mama and my father, I grew used to fighting but not between Ray and Mama. Ray says she’s taken his pills he hid from her. Again. I slam my door shut and cover my head with a pillow. Nothing blocks out the yelling. But I try.

X. Runner

Mama leaves for the weekend for NA. She needs to see her sponsor. Ray asks me to join him at the table, but I don’t want to talk to him.

“Yes?” I ask.

He tells me that he and Mama are going to get a divorce. He tells me that he will always think of me as a son and that I can see him whenever I want and that he’ll find a place with an extra room for me to stay in. He tells me he cares about me. He asks me how I feel.

I say nothing. I do nothing. I thought I’d be happy if he left, but instead, I feel indifferent. Is it because Mama just left too? While I want to and know I should say something; nothing comes out.

They never stay.

I go to my room and play a game I’ve won a million times without having to think. Halfway through, I stop. I’m losing. I shut it off.

XI. Error-1

In Team Sports on Monday, we split into two teams. Freddie, a six-foot tall senior, gets up to bat. Coach pitches the ball to him. He hits a line drive to my face, and I move to make the simple catch. I'm a fielding star. I don't even have to try. Some people go running to clear their minds. I field. Maybe that's the real reason I play. I play because baseball is familiar. I know what I am doing. And I need this now. I need to play to think. Why am I not happy that Ray left? Why am I even thinking of him? I'd never take him up on his offer of staying with him.

The ball breaks through the webbing of the glove, and I break my nose.

I wake up in the nurse's office. Ray sits in the chair beside me. I sit up and wince. Bandages cover my nose.

"Ray, why are you here?"

"You put me down as your emergency contact." Who will I put down now?

"Where's Mama?"

"I tried calling her. She's not picking up," he says.

I grab my backpack and rifle through it, searching for my cell phone. I dial Mama. No response. I text her. No reply.

"Junior, calm down, buddy."

"Why isn't she here?" I check the clock. It's 3:00 pm, the end of the school day. If Ray isn't going to be my emergency contact anymore, then who will?

He gives my shoulder a light squeeze. I swallow the air trapped in my mouth despite the dryness. Something other than my nose begins to hurt. My eyes begin to water, and Ray's face

has a sadness I'm not used to. I don't want him to see me like this. I don't want to see him like this. And what I do want—is never here.

“Where the hell is Mama?”

“Junior—”

“You made her leave. It's yo—your fault. You trying to fix things.” He puts his hand on mine, and I swat it away. “Just leave,” I whisper.

I'm not sure what I am saying, but my mouth spits the words out quicker than I can think.

“You wanted to leave so leave. I'm not your responsibility anymore.”

“Junior—”

“You can't fix us.”

He leaves the room, and I cry despite my busted nose.

XII. Last Game of the Series

Ray left over a week ago. My nose doesn't hurt too much anymore. Tonight is my third game of the season. Mama drives me to the game, but she doesn't stay. She apologizes and says she has errands. I don't know if I believe her. Errands at the the liquor store? Or is it her drug addiction? Something is always wrong with her. And she's always busy, even with Ray gone. She never has time for me. She never had time for me.

I look out into the stands and see the same small families that come to every game and practice. Mothers and fathers who come in support of their kids wait for the game to start. It doesn't take me long to realize Ray isn't here. Why would he be?

In the first inning, I make two errors fumbling simple ground balls.

By the second inning, Coach tells me to get my act together, or he's going to bench me. The only thing I have going for me is my strong D. If I can't even do that, the team's not going to need me. They'll just leave me behind. Father did. Mama does.

At the top of the third inning, I see him. Ray. He's here.

The game continues without either side scoring a run. I don't make any more errors and manage to turn a double play. Ray cheers from the stands. As we enter the seventh inning, the score is still zero to zero. With home team advantage, it's our last chance to score before going into extra innings.

Runners are on first and third, and I'm on deck with no outs. We can do this. I feel the crowd's excitement, and I care. I want to win. I want us to win. One run and we win. On deck, I practice my swing. Ray waves, but I focus on the game. My teammate strikes out.

I walk up to the batter's box and stop. If I strike out, again, then we'll have two outs. And the next batter is our pitcher who is worse at hitting than even me.

My knuckles line up. My stance is open. I raise the bat off my shoulder and cock my elbow up. I let the bat drop from my shoulder, rocking it back and forth, back and forth, and wait for the pitcher. He pitches. I swing and miss.

"Come on, Junior! You can do this! Simple swing, buddy. Simple swing!"

I get into the batter's box again after getting the sign to bunt from the coach. I can bunt. It's just like fielding. It's catching the ball with the bat. It's reacting. I'm good at that. Halfway through his windup, I turn to bunt. Foul ball.

Damn it. I can't do this. No one thinks I can, and they're all right. I can't. I'm a screw-up. I have nothing to offer anyone. I couldn't stop my father from leaving. I can't stop my mother from going. The only person who doesn't leave is Ray. He's always here.

He's always here.

I drop my back elbow. I close my stance and think simple swing. My eyes meet Ray's for just a second. How I know this, I have no idea. I shouldn't have time to look into the stands mid-pitch. I shouldn't be able to see the pitcher's upper lip twitch. My reactions shouldn't be quick enough, but maybe we don't know everything. The pitcher is already winding up, already releasing the pitch, and I see Ray raising his arms, cheering. I stride, I pivot my hips, and I make contact. The ball travels fast toward left field. My body starts running toward first base, but my eyes remain on the ball. Did I just save the day?

The leftfielder catches the ball.

I'm out and the runner on third doesn't have enough time to tag up and score. Our pitcher strikes out, and we lose 1-0.

My teammates pat me on the back. They tell me good job. I ignore the annoying bastards. I didn't save the day, but they're happy for me. I turn to the stands and see Ray waving and giving me the thumbs up. I smile and wave back.

OUT HERE

Jane's sedan spits white steam from the gash in the hood. A rusted sign reads US-60 West, an outline of Arizona fading away in the background. Her father calls the late afternoon heat the sun's way of shitting on everyone. He enjoys playing the victim. She kicks gravel at the cacophonous crows as they scrape meat from bone, making her stomach gurgle. The armadillo, or whatever animal, splattered and roasting on the highway is burnt black. Why do crows continuously peck at something disfigured beyond the point of recognition? Where is the respect? Despite her attempts at shooing the birds, the crows continue to eat while eying her with their marble-shaped black eyes. "*Stupid girl,*" the crows say. "*Can you do anything right?*"

She flicks off the crows and laughs to herself. If screams could fix her issues, she'd scream.

To hell with it.

Jane screams.

She looks east down US-60, hoping to see the sign that reads Mauricio's Diner she stopped at for lunch, but sees nothing but the faint outline of a car coming her way. Ignoring her flailing arms, the car kicks up an asphyxiating cloud of wind and sand.

I'm going to die.

Red clay expands toward a bleak blue-gray horizon, a storm building from afar. Gold grass, two or three feet high, stem from the clay in bunches to her left and right. Beyond that, more red. So much damn red.

“Red clay and a dumb runaway,” the crows taunt. Jane didn’t consider her decision to leave Miami as running away. She also hadn’t meant to drive back toward California, and yet here she is, out here in the middle of nowhere-USA.

Her long and messy brown hair stretches upward in odd directions as if teased with a toothbrush. Her white top clings to her slim figure, and sweat and dirt stain her front and sides.

She closes her eyes.

Cool running water. A dark bedroom. Air conditioning— just thinking about it draws the ends of her lips into a wide smile. But her reality consists of a blistering sun and an empty water carton she’d forgotten to fill at the diner fifteen or twenty miles back. *Guc, guc, guc* her engine chokes as more steam shoots out. US-60 begins to ripple like shallow water. Jane licks at her cracked lips.

She pulls out her phone.

“Even with service, no one would pick up,” the crows say. Jane ignores them despite the truth behind their taunts.

Would anyone even pick up if she had service? Her mother? No, she’d hit ignore or miss the call while getting a Botox injection. Her mother’s lips looked rounder these days according to Instagram. #Plumptastic. Her cheating father? Maybe. He’d pick up and make false promises to come and get her, then bail last minute to put suntan lotion on the back of whatever new twink with daddy issues came his way. Or he’d just not show up. He never needed a reason to be a flake.

Jane tucks her phone into the back pocket of her jean shorts, locks her car, and begins her trek toward the diner she could only hope she'd reach by sundown. After a few feet, her heel catches in a divot and snaps off.

Well, fuck me sideways.

She always wore heels. Her mother said if she really wanted to be a model, if Jane really wanted to follow in her mother's footsteps, heels needed to become an extension of her. Instead, this heel felt more like a metaphorical representation of their relationship. Thin, pointed, and broken. After her father had left her mother for a man, Jane tried to do anything and everything to be seen by her.

Empty gallon in hand, and after slipping into a pair of flats from her trunk, Jane begins her slog toward the diner, again.

After about fifteen minutes of walking, an engine's growl grows closer from behind. For a brief moment, Jane contemplates catching a ride to the diner but decides against it. She's close enough to finish the traipse on her own. A rusted maroon truck pulls ahead of her and stops, blocking her path. A crow hovers above her before finding its perch on the mile-marker sign. Large metallic testicles wave at her, hanging from chains on the back of the truck.

The kicked up dust settles around the truck. The tires are thick and at least four feet tall.

A man exits the vehicle and spits a large glob of chewing tobacco onto the road. The small black pool bubbles like a tar pit. He tips his hat to Jane, lowering its smooth, svelte tip to the arch of his nose. His thin lips curl into a tight smile.

"Can I offer you some assistance?" he asks. His southern accent sounds misplaced, fake. Like he's trying to be a gentleman.

Jane crosses her arms, the empty gallon echoing after hitting her elbow.

"No, thank you," Jane says. "M-my husband is picking me up at the diner." She grabs the edge of her denim shorts with her spare hand. His eyes follow her hand and linger.

"Was that your car I just passed?" he asks. He steps toward her; she steps back. His hat never moves to reveal his eyes. "Why didn't you wait in your car with the doors locked? Doesn't your *husband* know how dangerous it can be out here?"

Out here? Jane had never driven through the desert. Born in California, she'd left after high school to New York. After a brief string of success, Jane sent her mother her spread in *Bridal Magazine*. A week later, Jane received a text that read: *Are you trying to rub the divorce in my face?*

After that gig, Jane found little success. The Wilhelmina Agency said she photographed awkwardly. Elite said she was too thin. When Home Shopping Network wouldn't hire her as a hand model because of the burns and bruises along her knuckles from serving tables, Jane began losing any hope of being a model.

And then, when her photographer boyfriend suggested Jane move to Miami with him, she listened. The idea of living close to her father, and possibly mending their broken relationship, felt like a sign from some higher power. Four months had passed in Miami before Jane left a "Go Dick Yourself" note on her boyfriend's car next to the worn La Perla lingerie she'd found in her bed. Cheated on in the most cliché way, even Jane had to laugh a little. When Jane exited the Florida Turnpike in the '92 Cressida she'd paid for in cash at Miguel's Used Car Lot, and merged onto I-75, she swore she would never be that disillusioned trick from Magic City again.

“Sir, I was born and raised in these parts. I can handle myself and my husband knows this,” Jane says. She smiles and strikes a pose with her hand on her hip, her idea of confidence. But she can’t relax her grip on the gallon.

"You're lying. Your license plate says Florida." He points to her empty water gallon.
"Your car broke down, and you're stranded."

The man lifts his hat, and Jane sees his face for the first time. Jane is expecting to see a hideous man, a man with dark stubble along his chin that pokes out at odd directions like ingrown pubes or maybe a face cratered with blackheads, but instead she sees a man who could easily have walked off a runway in Milan. Tall and lean, his jaw is squared and his skin uncanny and smooth. Like it's new. Like he's photoshopped.

She tries to relax, but the fine hairs on her arm refuse to calm. Her heartbeat does not slow. How would she know him? She has never been to Arizona before. And then it hits her. His eyes are like shiny black marbles.

Jane feels her body shrink beneath his gaze.

“Get in the car,” he says. The crows circle above like a dark halo.

A car comes her way, and Jane takes in a deep breath. She waves her arms, but before she can scream, he grabs her by the wrist and throws her inside the truck. Her head hits the passenger side window with a loud *smack*. Her vision blurs and she sees the face of a young girl that looks just like her trapped behind glass in her parents' station wagon moving further and further away. And then she sees nothing.

When Jane wakes, she's in his truck. The cracked leather seats smell like a mix of old coffee and beef jerky. In the cup holder to her left, she sees her phone.

“Evening, Miss,” the man says. “No service.”

The sun is nearly gone, and Jane can feel the drop in temperature. The man drives toward the collection of dark clouds. She blames her shaking on the cold. Outside the window, she hears the laughter of crows and their words “*soon*” repeat over and over again. She feels the bump and grind of driving off-road. She’d give anything to see that rusted US-60 sign again.

“Please, I’ve done nothing,” Jane says.

The weight of her words hit her. Everything she did, was for someone else. Her eyes brim with tears; her fists want to punch something or rip the car apart. She’d wasted so much of her time and for what? She wanted her mother’s respect and tried to emulate her career. She wanted to be in fashion so her father would love her more than his flings. She wanted to be seen by her boyfriend, but what did she want for herself?

“You’re real pretty. Like a model.”

“I’m *not* a model,” Jane says. The words linger in the space between them. No matter how hard she tried. She was never a model. But saying the words made her feel better, stronger somehow. Just weeks ago, had she said, “I’m not a model,” she would have broken down in tears.

His rough hand caresses her bare thigh, and she flinches, his touch awkward like an adolescent trying to be an adult.

Jane sees a shack in the distance and knows if she makes it there, that’s it. The end. She’d seen the movies. He’d rape her, torture her, and kill her, the latter her best bet. No one would care she was missing. Jane grabs her phone from the cup holder, and the man laughs. He laughs.

How pitiful did she appear that the man didn't bind her hands or tape her mouth shut? To not care, if she had her phone in her hand, service or no? Did he see her as a defenseless animal that could do nothing? The now dark sky flashes from lightning. She hears the bang of thunder and realizes all she wants is to be free. Of everyone. Her head rings, and her vision blurs again. She notices a stickiness near her temple. When things become clear again, the man beside her is no longer a man. He is her mother with her plump new lips. And then her sun-tanned father. Then, he transforms into her ex-boyfriend but with the head of a crow and the eyes of black marbles.

Jane jabs the corner of her phone into his eye. The truck swerves, and Jane kicks the door open, tumbling and rolling to a stop on the clay. A sharp pain shoots through her shoulder as she stumbles to get to her feet. The truck engine dies, followed by the slamming of the truck door. He lets out a loud shrill that cuts through the silent night. Another bolt of lightning lights a path followed by a boom. Jane runs through the gold grass toward anywhere and nowhere and for a moment, she's never felt freer.

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