

SMALL NOTHINGS

by

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ABSTRACT

Small Nothings is a collection of ten short stories exploring the connection between place, friendship, and family. Set in Missouri's capital, a variety of characters grapple with different types of separation and loneliness. Couples struggle with emotional distance, children try to reconnect with their parents, and an old woman faces the loss of her independence. Through small conflicts and choices, these stories revolve around isolation, disconnection, and absence. How do missing presences affect family and friendship? How do people deal with change through everyday choices?

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THE GIFTER

Tilly wasn't good at much. She could bake without burning down the house, and she only took her driver's test once. She was an average janitor, too. At Jefferson Elementary, she spent the day sweeping up cracker crumbs and sprinkling Vo-Ban over the bathroom laminate. The teachers, young women mostly, complained that she missed spots or that they could still smell regurgitated lima beans. And they always came to Tilly. There were a few other janitors on staff—beefy men with smoke-stained voices—but the teachers never talked to them.

The only thing Tilly thought she was good at was gift-giving. One fifth-grade girl, Meredith had called her a “gifter,” because it sounded like that Lois Lowry novel. Tilly left a small box of chocolates on the teacher's desk.

Despite her talent, Tilly could not find a gift for her daughter's December birthday. Leaves piled on the lawns, the local Hobby Lobby exchanged summer foliage for plastic pumpkins, and still, nothing came to mind. Francine didn't approve of her mother's job or her mother in general. Francine had turned her into a fun story told at dinner parties—even the ones she attended. Tilly forgave her daughter—she always forgave Francine. Her daughter needed rush and motion and activity. When Francine was little, her fingers would twitch until Tilly stroked them with a fingertip, tracing bones and joints. She missed those moments when quiet gestures mattered to them both.

#

Tilly was pregnant in the twilight of her beauty. Everyone around town said that was a good thing, that pregnancy gave her a fertile glow and she didn't have to worry about it aging her because she was already aged. Tilly disagreed. She thought laughter made her lighter and

younger. William, Francine's father, taught third grade, and everyday he came home with new stories about Bobby Prescott sticking crayons up his nose and Susie Reynolds dipping pigtailed into paint. One time, when they were first dating, he took her to the children's Christmas concert. He knew she liked music and kids and the smell of winter. Together, they winced as young voices transformed Silent Night into crow calls. He joked that their kid had better be talented because he couldn't sit through that noise again. But they returned next year and the year after that. They went she was pregnant, and Tilly's hand rested on her belly, protecting the unborn child from squeaky high notes.

#

Tilly sang to make herself feel unique, special. She hummed hymns as she mopped the floors and wiped away lunch leftovers. When the children left, she would go into the bathroom and sing loudly, the strange acoustics adding an final twang to each syllable. Tilly's voice creaked on the higher notes, but she sang those loudly too. As a baby Francine cried to her mother's singing. She grew into shushing and side-eyed glares and jokes over martinis. Tilly didn't mind. Francine was like her daddy, coping through sore diaphragms. And she couldn't be that bad anyways. Teachers loitered outside the bathrooms while she ploughed through Old Susannah and Shenandoah. Something made them come back.

One afternoon, the young, music teacher applauded and thanked her.

"That was really pretty," she said. Lip gloss turned her smile glassy. "Do you sing a lot in church?"

Tilly thanked the music teacher in return. She had reached her car when she realized what Francine's gift should be. She would sing her daughter a song. Tilly liked gifts that required effort and time. Francine enjoyed music. What would she think of a song just for her?

Tilly asked her church and book club for voice teacher recommendations.

"Not too strict," she told them. "It's for Francine."

Her friends nodded like they understood when she knew they didn't.

#

Tilly went with thankful music teacher's recommendation. His name was Frederick "Call-Me Freddie" Stapleton, and he carried himself like stardom was in his future. Fresh from college, he walked toe-heel, toe-heel, like a dancer and rolled his *rs* in words like *operatic*. When he said his degree was in musical theater, he said the-ah-truh.

"Why have you come today, Tilly?"

"It's for my daughter's birthday. I want to sing her something."

That was the wrong thing to say.

"Your rendition of 'Happy Birthday' is probably just fine. I'm here to transform you into an artist." The last word came out *ar-teest*.

Tilly suspected he didn't talk like this typically. No one talks like that without meaning to, especially from this area. Sometimes students came in with a rural drawl, stretching their vowels like a sleep cat. Freddie's accent was more golden age cinema, a voice lifted from an Audrey Hepburn movie. But Tilly enjoyed how much he enjoyed his performance, she nodded and pretended to be an *arteest*.

#

After they got married, the town began calling them Billy and Tilly. *Look! There's Billy and Tilly Schmidt buying some cabbage. There's Billy and Tilly Schmidt going to the movies. Don't forget to invite Billy and Tilly.* They became a collective, a pair of cherries always connected by the same stem. But at home, she was still Matilda and he was William, and they could laugh together.

Then Francine came. William said it was God's sense of humor, sending him a child with a proclivity for math. Tilly wasn't sure what proclivity meant, but she nodded and smiled when Francine asked her why two plus two equals four. Tilly said because it does. William tried to explain in more detail but settled on because it does too.

#

The lessons were held in the First Methodist practice room, a low-ceilinged room beneath the gymnasium area. Small windows line one wall, stained window panes reflecting small rainbows on the ripped carpet. Freddie played the upright piano while Tilly on the other side trying to match pitch. Tilly liked her teacher. She might even call him sweet even though yelled when she hit a sour note or when she couldn't count a waltz.

"It's *one*, two three. *One*, two three." Freddie clapped with each number.

He taught her to see music as well hear it. The calligraphic symbols were difficult at first, a mix of squiggles and dots and foreign sounding words. She decoded the notations instinctually at first, but after a few weeks she began to understand. She could anticipate the where her voice should go, hear the pauses. A sideways *m* was a comma, and the little top hat was a period.

October ended, chilling the basement. Tilly wore a down coat to practices, only able to disrobe once hot, singing breath had filled the room. The weather's turn meant Francine's

birthday was a month closer. She had not practiced her song, hadn't even decided on what she would sing. When she asked Freddie, he shook his head

“That has to be your decision.”

“But you have such a good ear.”

He handed her a two beginner song books and told her to start researching. Tilly finished those the next day, unimpressed by the French or Italian melodies. She borrowed, bought, and scavenged more books from the elementary school. The music teacher introduced her to parents with children enrolled in similar lessons. They set up a chain system for parents to pass the book to the music teacher who left them outside the music room for Tilly. Soon she had a stack of them on her coffee table. She spent most dinners and weekends thumbing through the contents, the pages crackling. Most of the books were falling apart. Her favorites were the ones without covers, the ones with exposed pages. She traced constellations between the notes, pretended she had interrupted the writer mid-composition.

#

William grew quieter as their daughter grew older. All three of them spent more time apart than together. Francine studied algebra, William taught, and Tilly scrubbed and vacuumed and polished the wooden cabinets with Pine Sol. When Francine reached middle school, laughter no longer filled the house. Francine must have noticed. Tilly felt her watching as their family frayed, as the exchanges between her and William became more rehearsed. By the time Francine graduated high school, the laughter was gone, and so was William.

#

“I want to sing ‘Danny Boy,’” she said, setting a hand-me-down songbook on the piano.

Freddie shrugged. “That’s more of a funeral song, Tilly.”

“It’s what I want to sing. It’s perfect.”

Freddie shook his head and slid the book on the pedestal. Yes, the song was sad, but Tilly heard something sweet in the notes. The melody pleaded for return to summertime and happiness and youth. Soft piano strains reminded her of the first day of school, when Francine sucked the hem of her mother’s skirt until a teacher pulled her into the classroom, when her daughter chewed her fingernails to the quick even though William dipped them in vinegar. The song reminded Tilly of the they left unsaid once the house grew quiet.

Freddie played the opening chord, pausing to let her know when she should begin. The melody had sounded simple and easy when Tilly listened to the CD, but her voice tangled the first line. She went up instead of down, she scooped into notes like a soup ladle, and somehow, she always managed to be flat. Freddie kept telling her good try. He gave her tips between each chorus. She returned the next week, and his advice was the same. Drop onto the note, breath from your belly, don’t shout the music.

“*Pianissimo*,” Freddie said. “You’re supposed to be quiet.”

“What’s the point of being quiet? No one can hear you.”

“Maybe they’ll hear you better.”

Tilly studied the colorful windows, wondered if they had always been fake. Had the operatic voices made them replace glass with plastic? She tried singing quieter, and Freddie nodded like the song sounded better. He was lying.

#

Francine began to change. Tilly noticed the differences when she came home from Freshman year of college. The town noticed too. They didn't have much gossip. Children coming and going were the most interesting. No one said anything to Tilly, but she heard the muttering behind cereal boxes and fruit roll-ups. The neighbors called her Fancy Francie even though Tilly had never heard anyone call her daughter Francie. Francine smiled like she was the same girl sucking fabric and asking why, why, why. Tilly tried to ignore the name, but Fancy Francie bothered her. Francine returned the next summer *officially* Francie.

“I changed my records. Francie is my official nickname,” she told her mother proudly. Tilly tried to be proud too.

#

“Let's try something else,” Freddie said before they entered the practice room.

After practicing daily, Tilly could stick to the melody, but the notes still felt stiff coming from her throat. Even slowing down, Freddie pecking each note with his index finger, sounded scratchy. Tilly wanted to be like the recordings she studied, her voice honey-thick and languid. Instead, she hit the notes like a hammers-strike.

“Maybe I should try another song,” she said.

Freddie shook his head and played the intro again. She hated those first few chords now—hated how heavy they were, how Freddie pulled them from his fingertips easy as breath.

She sang, and Freddie joined her this time. He had never sung with her before. Some weeks, he sung a section or an exercise, expecting her to repeat it back. Tilly hadn't realized he wasn't trying those times. As Freddie's fingers skittered across the keys, a memorized routine, he let his eyes close. His velvet baritone guided hers, gently pulling it like a parent tugging their

child's arm. He drifted into harmonies, always coming back when Francine lost the flow. The sound reminded her of rainy days, when water hushed the town and she and William would just watch. It reminded her of the way William used to touch her light and careful, and the way they would swing Francine by her arms and she trusted them hold on no matter what.

#

Tilly wasn't invited to Francine's college graduation. She wasn't asked for help when her daughter moved into the new apartment on St. Louis. She wasn't invited to celebrate when she was hired as the accounting firm's youngest employee to date. The problem wasn't that Francine didn't want Tilly there but that she didn't care. At least, that's what Tilly guessed. Neither spoke about the missing invitations, and Tilly began inviting herself to these events. Francine was surrounded by women and men who carried smiles like weapons. Tilly waved and sometimes her daughter waved back. For the rest of the night, Tilly would settle into a corner and leave when she felt it was polite to do so. Francine said goodbye sometimes.

#

Tilly offered to host the party, but Francine said thanks, she had it covered. Her colleagues had been raving about a new restaurant—one with a French name Tilly couldn't pronounce—and they booked a table. She would finally get to try the cheesecake!

"Can you pick me up?" Tilly asked. The restaurant was in St. Louis. Tilly had never driven that far without someone in the passenger seat.

"It's a little far for you." Francine sounded soft and far away.

"I wouldn't miss your birthday." Some dirt was in the tile grout. Tilly planned to get her scrub brush for the afternoon. "I've got a surprise for you."

“Nothing too extravagant. This is a work event too.”

“Yes, dear. Looking forward to seeing you.”

“You too. Oh, and remember to wear something nice.”

Tilly wanted to say that she already picked a dress—that she had prepared. . The maroon dress suit, hung in her closet, so it wouldn’t wrinkle. Silver swirls patterned the skirt, spiraling around her thighs. She stopped eating dairy and refined sugar weeks because Freddie said it muddied the vocal chords, making voices froggy. She missed her annual Thanksgiving pumpkin pie because she was afraid the sugar would scrape her throat raw. Her diet became light foods and honey-lemoned tea, one glass before bed. The flavors soured in her sleep. She woke with slimy gums and a bitter aftertaste.

#

For the first time in years, Francine was home. Her daughter looked disheveled after the drive, hair mussed from resting it against the seat. Crumbs and smoothie stains speckled the sweater. Tilly wondered if Francine was nervous.

She greeted her daughter with a hug, and Francine complimented her mother on the housekeeping. They exchanged tight conversation over dinner, Francine relaxing a little once Tilly asked about work. Her daughter went to sleep in the guest bedroom, her old bedroom, her things stacked on a chair like she was staying in a hotel.

#

For few years, Tilly wouldn’t allow her daughter to say the word *fine*. Francine stretched the word into two or three syllables. Fine-uh. Fine-uh, I’ll eat my peas, fine-uh I’ll pick up my

toys. Take a shower? *Fine*. William would send her to her room, and she would fine that too.

One day, she caught her teacher complimenting the weather.

“What a *fine* day it is.”

Francine pointed her finger, indignant that grown up could say the forbidden word and not go to their room. While William handled the teacher, Tilly knelt and stroked her daughter’s round cheeks. She explained that there were many types of fines. Some fines were pretty and delicate, and some fines sharp needles poking your skin. The meaning depended on how the word was said.

Francine nodded and moved towards her desk.

After William left, people kept asking how Tilly was holding up. They never said what she was holding, just if she was holding it. She told the neighbors that she was fine. She told Francine the same thing, but she wondered if her daughter really heard.

#

They arrived outside the restaurant late.

“Fashionably late,” Francine told her.

Diners entered beneath a faded awning, their heels muffled by weather-worn carpet. Gold cursive spelled out the restaurants name. Tilly thought the extra curlicues resembled bargain store decorations, but everyone else approached the doors like they were entering a famous museum. They expected to be dazzled. Francine expected that too. She talked of nothing but accounts and promotions and cheesecake on the drive.

Tilly was anxious about her present. The song was something meant for greasy diners and corn-bread. It was meant for Formica countertops and plastic plates. Should she sing anything in a restaurant where there were multiple wine glasses and forks.

A hostess led them to table filled with fifteen business people. Black and gray fabrics swished as the table wished Francine Happy Birthday. When they realized Tilly was another guest, their expressions grew plastic. Seating was already tight, and there were no open chairs left at the table. Tilly wondered if it was a sign.

“Hello,” she said, waiting for the hostess to bring another chair.

Cold faces assured everything was alright. She felt obligated to say something—maybe apologize or explain herself—but the hostess had already placed the extra seat next to Francine. Red wine filled the wine glasses already. From the sky, their table probably looked like chicken pox skin. Real candles burned in the center, protected by plastic sheaths.

The guests were squeezed close together, close enough that Tilly could taste her neighbor’s cologne. Thick, oversweetened, chemical. He gave her a toothy grin.

“Francie is amazing.” The appetizer on his breath almost overpowered the cologne. “You should be proud of yourself.”

Tilly settled her napkin into her lap. “It was all her. Really.”

“Don’t be modest. You did fine work.”

Tilly didn’t know what else to say, so she nodded until the man began discussing complex balances with his other partner. Francine’s guests formed a living statuary of beautiful people saying and doing beautiful things. They moved like swimmers, every gesture efficient and fluid. Francine slipped into the rhythm immediately, slowing her limbs. Did it take practice?

The Francine next to Tilly was someone who fixed numbers, who walked in high heels without making a sound. This Francine probably could waltz. Tilly doubted she could waltz, and she sure as hell couldn't balance on three inch heels. Maybe Tilly didn't have anything to do with this Francine.

#

Dessert was what decided Tilly. She would feel completely ridiculous serenading her daughter over cheesecake. Francine seemed happy to talk and laugh with her sparkling friends. Singing would just ruin that, right? Tilly hadn't worked that hard on the song. Besides, nobody knew they were missing anything. Francine would declare this a good party and a good dinner and forget that Tilly was there. She wouldn't tell Freddie either. Let him think she serenaded her daughter from the table top like someone who had too much tequila. Let him think that dingy lighting was her spotlight, the smell of hops her perfume.

"I almost forgot." Francine stopped the conversation and faced Tilly. "Where's my surprise?"

Tilly had already spooned a sliver of chocolate when she heard the question. The table studied her expectantly, and the spoon slid in her grasp. Part of her wanted to stay seated and silent. She could apologize to everyone, claim she left the surprise at home. But Francine's eyes were little-girl wide. Tilly missed that.

The chocolate began to melt on the spoon, warmed by the metal and her anxious breath. Her cologne-heavy neighbor gave her another toothy smile. Tartar gathered near his gums, and Tilly wondered if he had cavities as a child or if his bad dental habits came in adulthood.

“It’s not...it’s not something you can see. But if you listen, maybe you can hear it.” Her speech sounded cheesy, and she wished she could take her words back.

She tried to forget her last words and forget the well-dressed mannequins waiting, waiting, waiting. Their waiter was waiting too. When she opened her mouth, she thought of Freddie and Francine and William. She tried to mimic their laughter and their silence as she moved through the song. Her voice was small, barely heard over the classical music. Tilly’s last breath felt like the small puff of air Francine blew to clear eraser shavings from her math homework.

COLD FEET

Dan Schroeder had not seen his parents since Thanksgiving when he first told them about his boyfriend, Kevin. That left them little time to process it until he returned for winter break, and even then they spent the first week tiptoeing around Dan. Only when they finished decorating the tree did they slip into a grudging acceptance that only existed in silence. Dan's presence made the house quiet over Christmas. Quiet when they opened their presents and quiet when they all sat at dinner eating his mother's traditional roast turkey and mashed potatoes. This quiet language of nods and patted backs and pointed looks lasted past December into January until finally Dan asked if Kevin was allowed to visit sometime that spring.

"I don't see why we can't go meet him at your college," his mother asked between bites of leftovers. "It'd be a lovely reason to visit the campus again. Wouldn't it dear?"

His father avoided the question by heading back to the kitchen for more food.

Dan scowled. "Is there a problem with Kevin coming here?"

"Kevin sounds like a lovely boy, but be reasonable Daniel. We could visit your—your friend at school and take you to that nice Indian restaurant you mentioned."

"How about," his father had returned, twirling his fork like a conductor, "Kevin comes to visit us in the spring if you go to Meredith Freymeyer's wedding?"

The last thing he wanted to do over winter break was to attend a wedding of an old high school friend. And using the term "friend" seemed inappropriate seeing as they only ever saw one another during youth group. When he first spotted the invitation on the counter, he was surprised, but Meredith probably invited him out of pity or politeness or a misplaced belief that

examining bible verses together meant they were still close. He had planned on sending it back with a halfhearted apology and a gift card.

“The Freymeyer’s keep asking if you’re coming,” his father said. “Rebecca’s going to be there. And Meredith and her husband said they’re looking forward to seeing you again.”

His mother nodded even though her face was rigid and Dan suspected that one of them would sleep on the couch tonight. Dan agreed, but the words left his mouth tasting like vinegar and mashed peas.

#

The first time Dan came out was to Rebecca Kavannagh by accident. Both graduated from Washington High and went to a college in a town with very little to do besides study. Freshman year Rebecca made sure he got to his classes without getting lost, pointed him to the best restaurants, and even helped him write a couple of essays now and then. They grew so close that most people thought they were dating even when Dan told them that, no they were just really close friends.

This past semester, they had both been stuck in a Russian Lit class with a professor infamous for giving quizzes over the notes instead of the reading. They began studying in each other’s rooms, although usually they ended up in Dan’s room because his was cleaner. They came and went as siblings did—without worry or shame or, sometimes, knocking to enter.

It was a rainy Saturday, and Kevin had come over unannounced with a bottle of wine and old cartoon movies. The evening began innocently, drinking out of Dixie cups and humming songs, but soon their cheeks were stained with wine from the other boy’s lips as they thrashed

about on the rug, neither really knowing what they were doing. And during all of this Dan forgot that Rebecca was coming over to study.

Light from the hall spilled onto his face, then Kevin's, both of them still tangled together in a way that could not be mistaken for wrestling.

"I'm—I'm sorry," Rebecca said before she fled back down the hallway.

The next day, Dan took her out for coffee and explained. It was a local joint, one where the cashier knew your name and indie music played in the background even though most people were wearing headphones. He told her about high school and the failed girlfriends and finally Kevin. She was so quiet through the whole conversation that he feared she would bolt again. But when she spoke her words were soft and sad.

"Oh Dan. I wish I'd known sooner."

#

Two days before the wedding, the phone rang, and Dan, expecting Kevin, answered it without looking at the receiver.

"Dan!" a voice deeper than Kevin's roared, "Dan the man. How you been?"

The bass timbre belonged to Meredith's fiancé, Jacob Carpenter. Dan knew him from high school (and his position at Meredith's side), but they never became more than passing acquaintances. Jacob was devoted to Meredith in a way that seemed both comical and sad. He never missed her phone calls, took her side on every argument, and even set up an elaborate proposal that even made Dan a little jealous.

"Good. How about you? Any problems with your impending nuptials?"

“Same squirrely Dan,” Jacob said with a chuckle. “No problem at all. Just wanted to invite you to my bachelor’s party tonight.”

“Sounds fun, but I’m not really a party person if you remember.”

“Thing is, Meredith’s not a fan of the whole boys-gone-wild act, so I promised that you’d be there. You know to keep an eye on us and stuff.”

After a lot of pestering and few more jokes, Dan agreed and Jacob told him to be at Pfenny’s later that night where he and a couple of old buds were meeting up for beer. Dan was skeptical at how crazy the party could get at a local sports bar, but he kept his promise, arriving when Pfenny’s was at its busiest: half-full tables and voices peaking at the volume of a coffee shop. Jacob and his friends were already gathered in a corner, half-empty beer glasses in front of them. He was waving vigorously when the bouncer stopped Dan to check his I.D.

“You with Jake?” The man was burly with a rough voice that matched.

Dan nodded once he realized the bouncer was talking about Jacob—Dan had never called him “Jake” and didn’t know anyone else who did either. Dan nodded as the bouncer waved him through without marking his hand.

“Struck a deal with Stu,” Jacob said as Dan slipped into the booth. “We’re all legal tonight.”

“How often do you come here?”

“Just something to do.”

Dan took a sip of his drink, the thick taste coating his tongue. He wasn’t a fan of beer but Jacob was drinking it and so were his friends and it felt like the wrong time for him to order a martini.

“That’s it.” Jacob patted his back. “Drink up. We’re here all night.”

Slowly his glass disappeared and a buzz hit his system. Jacob and his friends, he discovered, were already two beers ahead of him and still going strong.

“Remember that time?” Jacob asked putting down his fifth beer.

“What time?”

“That time you wore a beanie to school.” His words slurred together so, for a moment, Dan thought he was talking about a bean he wore to shul. “Everyone thought you looked weird but, I thought it was the coolest thing ever.”

Dan had worn beanies to school many times. In fact during his sophomore year they had become a staple of his wardrobe. His closet was filled with beanies in every shade imaginable. A rainbow of beanies his mother said to him. He had hoped that such a fashion statement would capture the attention of the basketball captain and they could become friends. What he forgot was that teenage boys were more impressed by trophies than headwear, and the beanies sat uselessly in his closet through the rest of high school. Only in college did they reach their true potential.

He smiled. “Yes, I wore them a lot.”

“No man. You *wore* them.”

Dan wasn’t sure how to respond, but, when he saw Jacob teeter up out of his chair to ask for more beer, he figured he better end the night before someone got a concussion.

He hustled the other guys into separate taxis, which took a lot pushing and pleading and help from Stu the bouncer; once he was sure they were safely headed home he went back for Jacob who clung to the barstool like it was buoy.

“We need to get you home too,” Dan said, unpeeling Jacob from the stool and hauling him to his feet. Then like a three-legged-racer, they limped toward the doorway where chilly winter air blew in but you couldn’t feel it yet because of the heating fan by the entrance. They lingered there, Dan catching his breath and Jacob teetering slightly, with hunched shoulders so that heat trapped between them.

“Thanks.” Jacob’s enunciation was clear. “You really are a cool guy.”

The two were pressed so close together that Dan could count Jacob’s freckles. For the first time, he noticed Jacob’s hair was soft and smelled like strawberries. Dan leaned closer until their lips touched. Jacob did not pull away.

For a moment, Dan was frozen, distracted by freckles and the stale beer-taste of Jacob’s lips. They stood under the heating vent until the chattering of arcade games reminded Dan he was in a sports bar, holding someone who was not Kevin.

“You’re beautiful,” Jacob whispered before turning and heading back to the bar.

#

Dan spent the next few days debating whether or not he should still go to the wedding. His parents thought his sequester was because he feared that, somehow, Meredith knew about Kevin. They were surprised each time he asked if anyone from the Freymeyer house had called or stopped by. The morning of the wedding, his fingers shook as he buttoned up his jacket, and he declined a ride with his parents, hoping that he could slip in the back late and unnoticed.

The Washington Southern Baptist church had renovated since his last visit. It still sat about sixty people comfortably, but they installed a new sound system and enlarged some old photographs to hang on the wall as posters. He recognized one of the pictures from a Colorado

hiking trip the youth group had taken one summer. Rebecca was smiling sweetly towards the camera, and her friend was off to the side, pretending a tree was her dancing partner. Jacob and Meredith were at the center of the group, his lips frozen against her cheek forever.

When the ceremony began, his knees bounced up and down, up and down. The movement was probably distracting, but Dan couldn't make himself stop. Rebecca was first to take the aisle, and when she saw Dan, she smiled warmly as she passed. He was not surprised that she was Meredith's only bridesmaid. People used to joke how those two shared everything except blood relatives and boyfriends. Part of him worried that she would even share his secret, but only a small part. Rebecca had been the caretaker of their youth group, the one who listened to every problem, complaint, and crisis without spilling a single word. After her procession, Dan relaxed a little and thought perhaps he could make it through the day. But next was Jacob, whose gaze avoided Dan in that awkward, intentional way of studying everything around him without meeting his eye. By the time Meredith entered, his knee was *jiggling up down up down* again.

Although he was not especially fond of Meredith, he felt obligated to tell her about Pfenny's. Each time the pastor mentioned fidelity, Dan sunk lower into his seat. The receiving line was even more nerve-wracking as he shook everyone's hand with a sweaty palm. It bothered him that Jacob could smile through it all, and even meet his eyes when their fingers finally touched. By the time he reached the reception area, Dan was nauseous and overly twitchy. He retreated to a table in the corner hoping that no one would notice him sitting by himself. But Meredith, once she finally entered, did and slowly weaved towards him. Jacob was entertaining other guests, which helped a little, but Dan still wished they were serving alcohol so he could down a shot before she arrived.

“We weren’t sure you were coming,” she said with a smile.

“I RSVPed.”

“Jacob said you were sick at his bachelor party.”

Dan kept his face as straight as possible. “I’m better now.”

“Thanks for that by the way. Jacob’s been going out so much lately—well I just don’t want him getting into trouble.”

He hoped he was still smiling, hoped that he looked happy for her and happy for the celebration just like everybody else instead of looking like a cat about to be sea sick.

“I need to tell you something.” His voice shook a little as he spoke. “About that night.”

“Oh, Jacob already told me,” Meredith said, but her tone sounded forced, like if he pushed a little bit more, the cotton candy coating would dissolve away to reveal rocks. “No need to apologize. He made it home safe, and I’m sure it was hard enough managing those other boys into taxis. Honest mistake.”

“It’s not that. Can we step outside?”

Meredith’s eyes turned stony. “Whatever you have to say, say to me here.”

Dan glanced at Rebecca, who’s eyes looked sad again like the day in the coffee shop. Jacob was heading over, his expression the picture of matrimonial concern, a hand already reaching toward Meredith. All eyes were fixed on them because everyone wanted a turn with the bride, and instead she stood here, arms-crossed and toe-tapping, waiting him for say his bit and go.

“Congratulations. Congratulations to both of you.” His voice cracked. A bitter taste pickled his mouth.

The other guests settled down at his comment as Meredith thanked him and continued making the rounds, this time with Jacob at her side, smoothing her hair and kissing her cheek and performing all the other little gestures you do once married.

Dan lingered a few more minutes, watching how they moved together with practiced ease and knew that all of it was, in fact, practiced. Later, he would call Kevin and apologize that spring break wouldn't work, that his parents would have to meet him some other time. When his parents refused to visit him, he would explain that too. And, eventually, Kevin would hear the whole story and their relationship would become tense until Dan decided they should take a break. Through all this Dan would think about the wedding and the reception and try to forget the way Jacob reached toward his new bride as if she were the barstool holding him up.

THE FINAL GAME OF CASEY WHITFIELD

I met Casey Whitfield for the first time in Anthropology class. I had heard of her, of course. This town lives on sports, and once the soccer season started, her name spread through campus like a summer cold. Star of the Lincoln University soccer team, her silhouette was plastered on most athletics posters and calendars. Last year, the papers covered her in a puff piece about our school's first appearance at the national tournament. Everyone said she was nice, that she reached the stands first to take pictures with young girls and shake their hands. My younger cousin hung a signed t-shirt above her bed.

Casey entered the classroom, almost late. Her shoes trailed dirt, and a lock of hair had escaped from her ponytail. A tan stopped a few inches past her elbow. Two girls, with tans matching Casey's, waved her towards an open seat. She waved back but slid into the desk-chair next to mine.

When she caught me staring, she rolled her eyes and unpacked notebooks and highlighters. Her foot jiggled, knocking more dried dirt to the carpet. The chair squawked with each twitch. I asked her to stop.

"Sorry," she said. "Nervous."

The professor entered before I could ask why. Her voice, a practiced melody, reviewed course expectations and assignments. The lesson moved slowly, and I doodled to kill time, inking crude flowers around the course description. The two girls who had waved passed notes under their seats like they were in middle school.

Casey was the only one paying attention. She switched between yellow and green highlighters on the text. Before we left, the professor put us in pairs, for studying and the final

project. She divvied everyone up by seats, so Casey and I became partners. The note-passers were together, and when class ended, they headed towards the front lectern.

Casey turned towards me. “Don’t switch, Lills.”

“It’s Lilly.”

“Whatever. My teammates are asking the teacher to put me in their group, but I have to do well. Say you want to be my partner.”

“You don’t know me.”

“Doesn’t matter. Anyone is better. I love Morgan and Shelby, but they’re not the best study partners.”

In my other courses, there was an unspoken rule that varsity athletes chose each other as partners. My friends said it was because their schedules matched, but I thought something else pulled them together.

“I won’t stick you with all the work. Promise.” Casey stuck out her hand, and I felt like I was in second grade again, where handshakes and spit can hold the world together.

#

Casey asked to meet three times a week, the same days as the class. The first time, at the on-campus coffee-shop, she explained that she needed to maintain good academic standing for her scholarship.

“I failed biology,” she said through coffee steam.

We agreed to after-dinner study time, staying in the café section until they closed. Dim lighting and the strange combination of broiled beans and body odor turned the air thick and humid like summer evenings. Casey was usually late, her hair in wet strings when she arrived.

Some days, her teammates walked with her, yelling goodbyes as they headed to their dorms.

Morgan and Shelby never stopped to study with us.

My friends joked that I was becoming Casey's "nerd-for-hire," but she held up her end of the bargain. She worked hard—she just needed science lab level instructions to stay focused. Without a plan, she gets distracted by the people or the coffee or grand ideas about what the final project should be. The first brainstorming session took two hours, because she was convinced that a stage production would be easier to complete than a diorama. A few days later, she spilled strawberry smoothie over her notes, and she refused to leave until she copied mine. We moved to the library when the coffee shop closed, and everyone stared at her pink stained loose-leaf.

Before I left for my dorm, Casey smiled like we were friends and said, "Knew I could count on you, Lills."

I wanted to say my name was Lilly, not Lills, but decided I was tired. Maybe I wanted to pretend we knew each other better.

#

I saw Casey a couple times outside of class and our study sessions. A few evenings, she camped out in a student lounge with Shelby and Morgan. Their legs stretched across dirty sofas, and a college soccer game played softly in the background. Books and snacks occupied most table space. Between studying, they cheered and pumped fists and spilled salsa on their shirts. Another time, she was talking to a group of potential students, walking backwards on the curb like a circus performer.

One day, she was outside the student union raising money for the local children's hospital. Five other girls were with her, all of them sporting cleats, muddy knee socks, and thigh

length dresses. A hand-drawn banner hung above them like a lopsided smile. Mismatched letters spelled *Soccer Prom* as a speaker pumped classic rock.

Morgan and Shelby worked the registration desk, oohing and cheering when people stopped to describe potential outfits. Casey was one of the players asking for donations, any donations at all. A bucket, shaped like a jack-o-lantern swung from her hand. As she moved, loose change rattled in the empty plastic like maracas.

She saw me and tried to shoo me towards the registration line.

“You’d look great in a prom dress.” Her gown was straight from an eighties rom-com. Puffy taffeta sleeves crinkled when she raised her arms, and her bow kept brushing against strangers.

“I don’t play soccer.”

“You don’t have to be an expert,” she said, her voice speeding up as she dropped into the practiced spiel. “It’s a friendly game. The point is to get dressed up, get muddy, and have fun with your buddies.”

“None of my friends want to do this. I wouldn’t have a team.”

“You could join ours.” Casey nodded towards her friends who laughed and danced and encouraged everyone to donate. “We don’t bite.”

I shook my head and slipped five dollars into her bucket.

#

Casey returned from Spring Break with crutches and a cast. A medical boot clamped onto her ankle, and she hobbled her way to the chair next to mine. Classmates said sorry over the

notebooks, some even hissed through their teeth in sympathetic pain. Morgan and Shelby looked at anything but Casey's leg.

She smiled like the day was still normal, waving off people's questions about pain and medication and what happened. I wanted to ask, myself, why plastic protected her shin, but the questions felt rude.

The professor stopped by her desk, too, asking if Casey needed anything to be comfortable. Casey, who had already propped her leg on an extra seat, said no. The professor nodded and lectured on ethnographies, and how to be part of a culture but apart enough to study the people.

Casey hid her face in her folded arms. No one saw but me. The professor was too busy explaining her trip to Peru, and other students doodled. Even Morgan and Shelby didn't notice.

"I'm just tired," Casey said, before I could ask. Her eyes weren't red-rimmed or puffy, but her face looked heavier, like gravity pulled more on her cheeks than the rest of her body. The polite thing to do was cancel our study session, let her rest from broken bones or twisted muscles or whatever was wrong. I didn't want to be polite.

The professor ended class, and everyone hurried to their next class or snack or nap. Morgan and Shelby left as I headed over to help Casey gather her things.

"Do you still want to study tonight?" I asked.

Casey nodded. "Can we meet in my dorm room, though? The coffee shop may not work anymore." She shook her cast, but the movements were slow and syrupy, plaster weighing down her leg.

#

Benedict Hall looked like the other campus dorms—small, squat, and a bit industrial. The elevator was broken, so I had to take the stairs up to Casey’s room. Door decorations, the ones the RAs made, were taped to each room. Casey’s hadn’t been changed since Valentine’s Day. An anatomically correct heart hung where a doorknocker would be. In the center, her name was printed in block letters. The phrase “I stethoscope you out,” was written around the edges, the silvery cursive bleeding together.

The lamination made the heart look fleshy, the muscle seeming to expand and contract as I approached. There was no light beneath the door, so I expected no answer when I knocked.

“Door’s open,” Casey said, her voice raspy.

Without light, the dorm room became a bruise of blues of purples. There was no music or television show playing. The space seemed to hold its breath—not in anticipation, but for survival, like a child about to plunge underwater for a long time.

“May I turn on the light?” I asked.

“No.”

I flipped the switch anyway. Fluorescent lights flooded the room. Casey was on the bed, her leg cradled by a stack of pillows. A university-issued desk sat under the window, the bookshelves stacked with picture frames and trinkets instead textbooks. Polka dotted bean bags sat opposite the bed, clearly a study space. Black cleats were piled in the closet area, a neon orange pair topping the set like a Christmas star. Casey had stashed few beaten soccer balls under the bed.

All dorms had white cinder block walls, but you couldn’t tell in Casey’s room. Magazine workouts and soccer posters blocked out most bare spaces. Lincoln’s soccer team appeared may

times, smaller high school posters filling the gaps. The largest poster, the only framed one, was of the national soccer team, sharpie scribbles covering the team's glossy legs like tattoos.

Casey was dressed for sleep, in a ratty jersey and underwear. Did she forget?

"You said you wanted to study."

"I'm tired." She tried turning towards the wall, but the cast and pillow pyramid made it difficult.

I settled into a bean bag, trying to get comfortable even though plush swallowed my ass. The fabric smelled like dust and Febreeze. The entire room stank of artificial cleaner, strong enough to cover sweaty clothes.

"We could just talk," I said.

"Talk about what? Girl stuff? Not really in the mood, Lills."

"You could tell me what happened." I pointed at her cast. "Looks pretty bad."

"Accident. I cut around somebody, and *wham*—my ankle gave out. Most likely it's a torn ligament, but maybe not. Trainers say I'll be out for the rest of the season either way."

She didn't say anything else, just studied the popcorn ceiling for constellations. Tacked above her bed are photos of her in the college uniform. One picture looked posed, the official team picture, everyone arranged in neat lines smiling tired smiles. In another, Shelby held Casey piggy back style while other girls laughed. A picture just below that was from the soccer prom. All the girls sported dresses with torn and muddied bottom hems. Casey wore a tiara like a sweatband. The girls had arms slung over their neighbor's shoulders, transforming the team into a giant caterpillar.

#

Casey went in for surgery a two weeks later. She explained the process to me in very technical terms, but all I understood was that her leg would be cut open, bones and muscles exposed. Her mother came to campus that week too. She was a stout woman, her hair cropped short and neat. Pearls guarded her throat, an extra row of teeth. When Casey introduced us, Mrs. Whitfield shook my hand and called me *Mizz Lily*.

The night before her daughter went under, her mother asked if I would keep studying with Casey. She told me Casey would be in a lot of pain, and that the tutoring helped her maintain a scholarship.

“We’d be willing to compensate you,” Mrs. Whitfield said.

“No,” I said, a little too loud, and Mrs. Whitfield flinched. “I can’t take your money.”

Casey had worked hard the last three weeks, her textbook propped on her belly. We met a bit later, so she could still watch soccer practice and crutch back to her dorm.

“Got to support my girls,” Casey explained when I asked.

I assured Mrs. Whitfield that studying with Casey was no trouble, that we were *partners*. Her mother smiled and thanked me. She warned that Casey might not be able to talk tomorrow due to the pain, but everything would go back to normal soon.

Casey’s first night back, she texted me and asked me to come over. Mrs. Whitfield had already gone home. We watched CW dramas and the shopping channel. I squeezed her hand when she cried. I never asked why I was the only one there.

#

We held the study sessions in her dorm regularly, still scheduling around soccer because she still insisted on attending every game and practice. At first, she walked home with her

teammates, but she talked me into being her walking buddy. She convinced me to attend a few games with her, too. Her crutches made us late to every game, but we still found good seats. At least, Casey said they were good—I couldn't tell the difference. During halftime, I bought popcorn and pretzels, listening to Casey's running commentary while salt dissolved on my fingertips.

Her team checked in a few times. They joined us in the stands, and sometimes, they even dropped by for our sessions. Casey worked hard to sit up straight for these meetings, dismantling the pile of pillows and sometimes sitting at her desk. Placing her foot beneath her chest increased the throbbing, but she didn't seem to mind.

"They're worth it," she told me after a close game. The team had won in overtime. Barely.

Shelby and Morgan pretended to study, but most of the time they just snuck glances at Casey's ankle. Then they would ask me about my life, but I could tell they didn't care. They just didn't want to talk about Casey. They never stayed long. Nobody did. They would come, say sorry, and leave.

They made me angry.

#

Casey texted me that she wanted to stay home during the final game. I could go if I wanted to, but she didn't feel well. Sure that she was joking, I knocked on her door anyway.

"That was very funny Casey, but let's go."

There was no answer. The anatomical heart was still fastened to her door. If I squinted, I could pretend it real.

“Come on. We’re going to be late,” I said, knocking again.

“Go away.”

I didn’t. She kept the door unlocked when she was awake, since the crutches and new boot were a hassle.

The room was dark, but evening sunlight revealed her crooked silhouette on the bed. The orange cleats were tucked into her arm. Above her bed, the wall was empty, torn shreds of paper scattered on her sheets. Small paper triangles marked where the pictures and posters used to hang.

“You okay?” I asked.

Casey gave a small snuffle.

I cleared off a space beside her, wiping the paper bits to the floor. Slowly, I eased myself onto the bed, careful not to jostle Casey’s foot. The cleats were nearly spotless, only two scuff marks on the toes. I could still smell the new plastic and rubber. How many times did she get to wear them?

Casey didn’t scream when she found our faces so close. Instead, she cried, and I pulled her close enough that I could hear her heartbeat. We watched shadows play on her wall, watched them run towards the ceiling, stretching with the setting sun.

#

“Do you have a car?” she asked. These words were the first she said since I laid down next to her. The sky had turned to twilight, purpling Casey’s face.

“Yes,” I said.

Casey sat up and handed me the cleats—shoved them into my chest, almost pushing me off the bed. “Put these on. I want to show you something.”

The orange fabric was stiff around my feet. The plastic heel dug into mine, a blister forming just under the surface of my skin. I pretended they fit perfectly.

Casey smiled and swung her legs off the bed. She left the crutches against the wall. Instead, I was her cane as we made our way to my car.

She directed me to the soccer field’s parking lot. The field looked different when it was empty. The overhead lights were off, so I left my headlights on. Blue-white light stretched shadows until the goalposts seemed like long fingers daring us to step onto the pitch. There was no fence to keep us from touching the grass. Casey turned me towards the concession stand dumpster. Between the metal frame and the brick wall sat an old ball, left from who knows when. The checkerboard leather had browned, and patches peeled from the center like rotten fruit skin. I was afraid the ball would dissolve in her hands. Casey gave the ball a hearty thump. She winked at me.

“New team members kick this in every year. It’s tradition.”

She led me to the front of the goal as best she could, although by the time we were lined up, her palms were sweating. The ball squelched next to her feet. It probably deflated a little.

“Shoot,” she told me.

I almost stepped away from her, but then she would fall. “Casey, no. This was your final game. You should do it. Be part of the team and all.”

“I can’t.” She pointed at her foot. “Do it for me.”

“But it’s a team thing. I’m not on the team.”

Casey just shook her head, hopping backwards until it was just me and the ball.

The circle of light ended past the goal, the landscape beyond the field composed of unfamiliar shapes. The trees were the same trees that had overlooked the daylit soccer games. I was frozen, staring at the fold where the hunchback tree line met stars. The headlight circle reached out to join them but couldn't. There was nothing for their light to reflect back. All was silent until Casey chanted my name *Lill-ee, Lill-ee*. The name echoed back, the baseline of an unfinished song that followed me after we left together.

HOUSE HUNTERS

Over the past three years, Rebecca had sacrificed a lot for her husband. She graduated early, moved to Florida, and agreed to live a cramped apartment that smelled like cat pee no matter how much she cleaned the carpet. She didn't complain when Jamie came home late from teaching or when his diet became her diet because he wanted a support system. She woke him up to go running every morning, bribing him with kisses and tickles until he unrolled the covers. She even kept pace with him even when she felt herself getting faster and faster.

She left him in bed this morning, cocooned in blankets despite the heat. She wanted Jamie in a good mood during Kenny's tour, and Jamie was never in a good mood after getting hot and sweaty. He didn't like talking about houses either.

"Don't you think we should consider buying a house?" she had asked over one dinner.

"It's not in the budget right now," Jamie said.

"We can make room for it."

"You willing to live without electricity for a few months?"

Rebecca would normally laugh. She didn't. "Don't be dramatic. We've been saving for years."

They had been saving since Jamie proposed. Even though his parents wanted a larger ceremony, Rebecca insisted on small wedding. Everything was homemade or clearance. She told everyone that they would be moving into a home quickly. Her friend Meredith offered DIY decorations, and her sister Katrina, six months pregnant at the time, drove down to help with the hair make up.

"We're *fine*. We should at least start looking."

“Just don’t get your hopes up,” Jamie said.

Rebecca jogged when the sky was still dark, a golden blush peaking over the rooftops. Rebecca’s neighborhood wasn’t anything special, but the streets were isolated and safe. Before the sun rose, the neighborhood seemed abandoned. Few cars on the road meant she could run on concrete rather than grass. The landscape was flat and lonely. Rebecca came from a town of hills where, even during quiet mornings, she felt the promise of something happening just over that ridge or the next. Florida was flatland and there was always noise. When the noise from the main road vanished, Rebecca could pretend she was running into the sun.

Her phone rang, and Rebecca put in her headphones to answer.

“Becky? You there? I hear a lot of static.” Katrina sounded frazzled. She had used Rebecca’s old nickname, one that had fallen away like an old earring back.

“It’s me, Treen,” Rebecca said between breaths. “I’m out running.”

“This early on a Saturday?”

“You’re up earlier than me. It’s seven-thirty here.”

“What are you saying?” Katrina’s voice turned playful, dipping with some syllables like an old aristocrat. “Are you insinuating I sleep in regularly? I’ll have you know that a *child* keeps you on a rather irregular schedule.”

Rebecca continued to run while Katrina went on her overdramatic tirade. Katrina like to talk through most conversations, leaving Rebecca to listen then say goodbye. Since moving, Rebecca enjoyed talking with her sister more. She found it easier to tolerate her sisters monologue when she was moving—washing dishes, folding laundry, running.

“So, thank you for accusing me of being a slacker.”

“How’s Grayson? I’m assuming he woke you.”

“He has diaper rash.”

“Poor boy.” Rebecca slipped into baby talk even though her pounding feet made it difficult. She imagined rubbing Grayson’s tiny forehead with her thumb, his skin soft like warm cookie dough. She wished (not for the first time) that home was a closer drive.

“Poor me. I haven’t slept all week. And of course, Jared’s out of town so it’s just me and cranky pants. Got any talcum powder?”

“Sure. I’ll just walk it over.”

“You know I like to whine.”

It was hard to pity Katrina. When Grayson was born, Katrina moved into an old but cozy house with her new family. She said the house felt right. Rebecca suspected the proximity to their parents helped that feeling. She visited in the fall and wasn’t surprised to find it cozy and clean. A boxy TV sat in a living room corner and a sofa across from it—gifts from their mother. Hardly any of the stuffing was missing. Rebecca sank into the fabric and tried to forget her apartment with a ceiling so low that she could scrape away spackle with her fingernails.

“If that’s the only reason you called, I’m hanging up.”

Katrina lowered her voice. “I wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

Rebecca was glad their conversation was over the phone. She was not a good actress.

“I’m fine. Everything’s fine.”

“Just—just let me know if you need to talk.”

Katrina’s latest visit to Florida had ended badly. The trip started off well. She flew down with her husband and Grayson, and both boys behaved well. Rebecca and Jamie met them at the

gate with an airconditioned car. The couples exchanged hugs and kisses. Grayson even smiled at Jamie. During dinner, Jamie made Katrina laugh so hard that her husband had to help her back onto the couch. Grayson applauded them, and for a moment, Rebecca hoped they would get through the visit without a sitcom mishap.

But somehow Treen misread the recipe and added too much salt to everything, Jamie pouted when Rebecca didn't agree to watch baseball, and Grayson threw up on Jamie's lap during peek-a-boo. Then the air conditioning broke so everyone went to bed hot and cranky.

When Katrina left, she promised Rebecca to call more often. She called almost every week now. She would ask if the weather was hot still and if the carpet still smelled and if her sister was still happy. Rebecca always answered yes.

“Got to go. Don't want to get too much sun.” Rebecca ended the call before her sister realized it was too early for sunburns.

#

They met in the summer. Rebecca was working in Florida, and her family knew congregation members at the primitive Baptist church Jamie attended. Something about the pastor's daughter knowing a friend who went there. She was scared her first Sunday, and she remembered him introducing himself and asking to set next to her. At first, she thought he looked like a teddy bear with round face and small, beady eyes. Later she realized he liked to smile, and when he laughed, his eyes softened finger-warmed chocolate.

He asked her permission for their first kiss, wrapping his arms around her hips only after she said yes. His lips were soft and slobbery. When he pulled back, a string of saliva dangled between them.

Rebecca wiped it away and smiled. “Like *Lady and the Tramp*.”

Jamie’s face relaxed, and they laughed about it on the way to her door.

That was before she returned north for college. They didn’t date “officially” until she came back the following summer. He proposed in winter. Her friends said things were moving quick and that it might be better to wait. Rebecca didn’t listen to them because they couldn’t see the way Jamie made her smile.

#

Jamie was awake when she locked the front door. His attention was on the toaster lever which took two tries to stick.

Rebecca kissed his cheek. “Sorry I didn’t wake you.”

He grumbled a little but said it was fine and that she should hurry up so they could get this thing over with already.

While she rinsed off, Jamie sat in the living room flipping through various news stations, volume cranked so loud that Rebecca could hear it over the shower. The soap air softened the broadcasts to whispers, but she could still tell there was an accident on the 408. She thought about marching into the living room naked and demanding he turn it down, but they would only end up arguing. She didn’t want to argue before the met Kenny. She wanted Jamie smiling.

Kenny was leaning against his car when he arrived. He fanned himself as if he had been waiting, but his khakis were still crisp and creased. He wore his hair slicked back and his shirt buttoned to the collar. The only hint of the Kenny she knew—the one she’d seen drunk in underpants, spread over the toilet like a starfish—was a pair of Superman socks.

“Bold choice,” Jamie said, spotting the socks. “Is the ‘S’ a symbol for sales?”

Kenny laughed because he was a salesman. Rebecca laughed because Jamie almost smiled.

“Sure man, sure. You two ready?”

#

Rebecca had called Kenny yesterday to ask if he could show some houses. He was Jamie’s friend more than hers, but she knew he was a realtor and always eager for new clients. She explained that they wanted to look around but weren’t ready to buy. Kenny didn’t return her call. He rang her doorbell later that evening. He was still in his work clothes, a plastic nametag pinned to his dress-shirt.

“I thought you would call me back,” Rebecca said. She angled her body so Kenny could not see the clutter in her apartment.

“We like to do consultations in person. Even for friends.”

Jamie, still seated on the couch, heard Kenny’s voice and invited him to *pop a squat*. Kenny squeezed past Rebecca and settled on the couch. Rebecca asked if Kenny needed anything, trying to play nice hostess while she counted the spots his shoes left on her carpet.

Kenny was a regular at their house, coming over every Thursday night to play video games with Jamie and a couple other high school friends. They would settle down in front of the TV, don their headsets like crowns, and then proceed to blast their way through whatever game Kenny had brought over. Rebecca usually hid in the bedroom during these sessions, reading a book or listening to 90s soft rock. The sound effects still leaked into the room, interrupting her quiet with muffled tings and clashes. Sometimes the boys would stop early. When the gaming noise stopped, Rebecca would peek through door and catch their faces serious and vulnerable.

Jamie waved a hand toward the fridge. "Help yourself. Mi casa and all."

"I'm good. Besides I'm here on business this time." Kenny sat up straighter on the word *business*.

"Business?"

"Rebecca mentioned that you wanted to start looking at houses, and there's a couple we could view this Saturday."

"She didn't tell me about this."

Rebecca took his hand. "You said we could look."

"Not this soon." Jamie's voice was almost a whisper.

"I didn't mean to step in the middle of anything," Kenny said, standing.

"You're not," Rebecca said.

They had spent the rest of Kenny's visit hashing out the details. What kind of neighborhood did they want? How many bedrooms? Did they want a renovated kitchen? Did they want a yard? Rebecca answered most of these, occasionally glancing at Jamie for any facial cues. Jamie didn't say much. He joined the conversation when Kenny asked about budgets.

#

From the front, the house was a squat structure, hugging the ground like most of the houses around here did. The simple exterior was meant to be tasteful rather than cheap. Jamie scrunched up his face at the front door color (mauve), but the front yard was big enough for kickball games. Rebecca could even imagine a small picnic table set for tea, bitemarks on the rubber food.

"This seems out of our price range," Jamie said.

Kenny assured them that it was a steal and even if they were “just looking”, he’d keep them apprised of its availability.

Inside, the hallways were lined with hardwood floors, and deep burgundy carpeted the living room, a color that would hide most juice stains. When she pointed this out to her husband, Jamie nodded with closed eyes.

He didn’t speak until Kenny showed them the bedrooms. First was the master, a spacious room, larger than their bedroom now and, Rebecca suspected, even the one Katrina slept in. A window sat across from the bed overlooking a fenced backyard with a single tree growing in the center. Its branches stretched out more than up, like the trees on an African savannah. White leaves took on a bluish tinge when the sun hit it just right. It was the perfect tree for small feet to play and dance under, maybe even climb when their parents weren’t looking. Rebecca showed Jamie the view, expecting him to smile at least a little. He didn’t. He said it looked nice.

The next bedroom was smaller, and whoever currently lived there seemed to use it as a girl’s bedroom. Dolls and their clothes were piled into little plastic bins and shoved under the bed as if someone had stashed them away before hurrying off to ballet or soccer practice. And although the walls and the bedsheets were not pink, a small bookshelf housed a number of pink book spines, golden letters promising tales of ponies and princesses. Two shelves held sets of miniature horses, all frozen in various stages of galloping. Someone (Rebecca suspected it was not the little girl) had paired them so that each foal stood next to a grown version of itself.

She went over to these, finger hovering as if to pet them. She thought about the books she’d read when she was younger and how she’d kept them all just in case. Packed them into cardboard boxes and begged Katrina to keep them for her, for a little while longer please.

When she looked up, Kenny had left her and Jamie alone in the room. Jamie stood at the center, shoulders hiked to his ears.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“We’re not getting it.”

“I’m not saying we should buy it now. I just wondered what you thought.”

He shrugged. “It’s nice I guess.”

“Well, I love it.” She studied the books again, wondering which one was the favorite, the one with pages stained and creased, the one read over and over again until it became a memorized lullaby.

“What’s wrong with where we’re living now?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it,” Rebecca said. “It’s a nice place, but we need something bigger.”

“Who do we need to make room for?”

She thought about chucking one of the books at him. “We could have guests over more. What if Katrina visits again? Or my friends? There’s not enough room in that apartment for anybody other than us.”

“That hasn’t been a problem before. Your sister didn’t mind sleeping on the floor.”

“That’s not what I mean, Jamie.” She wrapped her arms around him, hid her face in his chest. Rebecca felt like she was begging, and this was not something she wanted to beg for.

“I don’t think I can do it, Becky.” The nickname sounded strange coming from him. It shrunk him somehow, smoothed away laugh lines and crow’s feet until he was almost a boy again. “I’m not ready.”

“You are,” she whispered. “I know you are.”

“Don’t, please don’t.” Beneath her arms, he was cardboard-stiff, press too hard and he would twist into a new shape.

“We can wait,” Rebecca said. “It’s okay.”

She was happy when he smiled, finally, and happy when he left to cancel the rest of the day’s showing with Kenny and happy that, at least for the moment, her words were still weightless, their promise not yet settled into her chest. Her eyes drifted around the room—to the dirt Jamie’s shoes left on the rug, to the dolls stacked in baskets like bodies in a mass grave, to the horse pairs lining the bookcase. Rebecca wanted to rearrange the horses so there was at least one trio waiting for the little girl when she got home. Two big horses with their necks curved over a smaller one, almost like a heart. But she knew it would be impolite to touch. Looking was fine, though. She could stare at their airborne hooves, their picture-still gallops caught between here and who knows where until Jamie was ready to go.

REUNION

The invitation waited for Meredith when she got home from work—creamy paper, shiny letters, the kind you could order in bulk. It looked nice from a distance, but the paper felt flimsy between her fingers. The stylistically ripped edges cut off the *n* in *reunion*, and for some reason, they addressed it to her maiden name rather than her current one. She could have understood the mistake if her marriage had been recent or if the wedding had been out of town, but neither was true. Many of the reunion committee attended the wedding. It was strange to see *Meredith Freymeyer* printed on something that looked both official and cheap.

Meredith was the girl who, even in high school, was already looking backwards, already imagining what it would be like to return with bunned-up hair and a husband on her arm to see how many of her classmates actually made something of themselves in the past ten years. The thought of returning alone made Meredith sweat. The whole situation could be resolved if her husband was home, but he was away on business. The invitation sat in her hand, addressed to someone who no longer existed.

She considered making excuses, pleading sick or a dance recital to avoid facing friends that felt more like strangers. Meredith called her parents hoping that they wouldn't be able to babysit Gretchen for the night, and, when that didn't work, she told Gretchen that she'd be sleeping over with Grandma and Grandpa, hoping to provoke a tantrum. Gretchen squealed and clapped her hands because Grandma and Grandpa have the best board games.

She dropped Gretchen off a bit early, an excuse to see her parents. They chatted for bit, Meredith fidgeting with Gretchen's shirt, pretending to settle her even though the little girl had

already flung herself onto the sofa like she was home. Her parents smiled and hugged her before shooping her back to her car.

“Don’t want you to be late.” They waved from the front door, Gretchen running to the curb to blow kisses.

#

Meredith took the long way to her high school, opting for roads that curved around the highway like a shell. If anyone asked her later, she would say she was touring *all* her old schools, as if that was the normal thing to do before reunions. She drove past the elementary school and the middle school. She made sure her route passed the homes of old friends, homes she remembered as exciting labyrinths during sleepovers. They looked like houses now. Did time turn all memories mundane?

The high school appeared the same, boxy and prison-sturdy, despite the years of proposals and planned renovations. To reach the entrances, you had to walk up steep inclines or long staircases. Everyone came to class a bit out of breath. Although many people had already arrived, Meredith’s old parking spot was empty. That made her smile as she stepped out of her car. She wondered who else had reclaimed their old hang outs.

Crowds meandered towards the gym, moving slowly as they caught up with old friends and navigated inclines in heels and pinchy dress shoes. Meredith, remembering the hills and the stairs, had sensibly worn flats. She outpaced a few groups and reached the gym with small stains on her dress.

Trashcans propped open the gym doors, and a fold-up table was set up with permanent markers and nametags. Two teenagers sat on metal chairs, shaking hands and directing foot

traffic in a polite but bored fashion. They were probably volunteers. The lights were dim, and Meredith couldn't tell if anyone she knew was inside already. She wasn't sure if she wanted to greet old friends or avoid them.

“Mare Bear!” A woman wrapped Meredith in a hug. “Long time, no see.”

It took Meredith a couple seconds to place the tall, stocky woman, but the hair gave it away. Shelby was the only friend who wore ponytails like an appendage. Back in high school, Meredith swore that girl threw herself together five minutes before driving to school. The woman in front of her had no fly-aways, no little wisps circling her head like a halo anymore. Everything was stiff, slicked back, professional.

“You've changed,” Meredith said.

Shelby squeezed them both closer. “So have you.”

Meredith glanced down at her conservative hemline and her bodice half-covered by a simple, woven shawl. She didn't think she had changed.

Someone called Shelby's name, and she waved to them, big sweeping motions like a frantic child. The woman who joined them looked like a sucked-in straw, skin stretched over bones. Dark circles pulled at her eyes, but she still wove through the crowd like a dancer.

“Look, Tara. I found Mare.”

Tara, as Meredith remembered her, was loud. Two words and she commanded a room. She was the speech and debate stud who carried around a boxy accordion folder around school. At school, she was one of the people who first wore ugly Christmas sweaters ironically. The slinky Tara in front of her looked like she wouldn't even touch a wool sweater.

“At least I found two people to talk to,” Tara said, her palm pressed against her forehead like a 1920s actress.

All three of them stared at the door, waiting for a cue that now was a good time to enter. People moved past them, some of them bobbing their head in recognition. Soon they were the only ones left. Music echoed from the gym, some high energy pop song played softly so that people could still chat. The two students left their post once the music played.

Shelby scratched her head. “Anybody want to go inside?”

“Let’s go somewhere else,” Tara said. “You know? Have our own little reunion.”

“Is there anywhere *to go*?”

“One of the bars downtown installed a dance floor,” Meredith said.

Tara raised an eyebrow. “You’ve seen it with your own eyes?”

Meredith nodded and offered to drive.

#

Rarely did Meredith drink, but she liked going downtown just to sit at the bars. Her favorite was hidden above a knickknack boutique. The door leading to the stairs snuggled between two larger shops. Silver-lined letters spelled *The Riverside* on the door’s glass, but the grey stairs hid the logo. Weekdays it grew busy right around five. Bankers crossed the street for some beers after work. They wore crisp suits and flicked their wrists to show off their shiny watches. When it was someone’s birthday, they trailed balloons. Meredith preferred the bar at twilight. During sunset, ascending the stairs felt like finding a secret.

Meredith led Tara and Shelby through the door to a mostly empty bar. A few people sipped cocktails with fruit and umbrellas. Old couples mingled with fruit-juice filled martini

glasses in hand. The bankers were at home, snuggled next to their wives. A bartender polished glasses and countertops to pass the time. He saw Meredith and gave her a small wave.

“You come here a lot?” Tara asked, sliding onto a barstool.

“Just to get out of the house.”

The bartender passed out napkins. He took Shelby and Tara’s orders and, when he got to Meredith, winked.

Shelby laughed. “Must be a small house.”

“Hey, at least it’s a house.” Tara nodded to the bartender when he brought out their drinks. “I’m getting real tired of living in an apartment.”

Meredith pretended to laugh with them, hoping they wouldn’t notice her nerves.

Tara must have noticed something because she turned to Meredith and smiled. Her lipstick was a bold red, the same color the three of them had used during a middle school performance. The drama teacher made them buy lipstick the shade of cartoon clowns, and they all giggled once they had lathered it on. They took turns pouting into the mirror like super models. Meredith was the first to stop posing. She tried to smile, but it came out stiff, her eyes and lips crooked. Tara, though, looked completely natural. She fluttered two fingers and kissed her own reflection, marking the mirror with a faint red shadow.

“Relax. We’re still the same,” Tara said. “Mostly.”

They began the customary chit chat that came with reuniting with friends turned strangers. Meredith tried not to talk about Gretchen too much, but she showed them a picture anyway. Shelby made baby faces at the photo, and Tara complimented Gretchen’s pigtails. They both laughed when she asked them about kids.

“I can barely take care of myself,” Shelby said. “Besides it’s not like I have anyone to make babies *with*.”

Tara lowered her voice. “What about downstairs Craig?”

“Who’s that?” Meredith asked twirling her straw.

“Someone I work with. Boring.”

“Dating is not *boring*. Some of us wish we had time to date.” Tara’s words were neat and clipped, but at times, her cadence sounded almost exotic.

Meredith’s phone buzzed, and after seeing it was Jacob, she slipped it into her purse.

Shelby pointed. “Shouldn’t you get that?”

“It’s Jacob. He’ll be fine.”

“Where is he anyway? It’s his reunion too.” Tara said, studying Meredith’s face, eyes flicking back and forth as if memories were written in her pores.

“He’s on a business trip.”

“I guess that’s more important.”

“It is to him.” She tried not to sound too relieved.

The small talk evaporated around the same time they finished their drinks. Tara remembered there was a dance floor. It was tucked into a back corner like a broom. A disco ball hung over the center while old couples held hands and shuffled their feet to soft jazz.

“Not exactly what I had in mind,” Tara said, but still she swayed.

Shelby joined her and then so did Meredith, wrapping their arms around each other until they formed a circle like they used to during the school slow dances when none of them had dates. In the gym, they would pull each other close and sing-off key while other couples glared at

them. None of them sang this time. Tara's eyes closed, her head tilted back towards the ceiling as if in a trance, hair swinging a beat behind her hips. Meredith closed her eyes too, moving not with the music but with arms around her shoulders and waist until she lost her balance and bumped into Shelby. After that she kept her eyes open, wishing she could smile the way Tara did. When Shelby's phone rang, she left the other two in a broken circle.

"I wish my hair was purple," Tara said, eyes still closed.

"What?"

"My boss wants me to keep my hair normal. Or at least, *professional looking*. Otherwise I'd dye it some crazy color. Like purple or bleach blonde."

Meredith noticed Tara's lipstick was smeared at the corners of her mouth. Part of her wanted to stop and wipe it away with her thumb.

"Do you say everything that pops into your head?"

Tara opened her eyes. "It's a game. You're supposed to say something you wish for. It can be anything."

"Doesn't seem like much of a game to me."

"C'mon. One wish."

A drop of sweat rolled down Meredith's arm. She felt like a folder stuffed full of secrets, and somehow between the memories and useless data stored up from her life, it seemed like Tara analyzed all of it and found something she had missed. Something dark and mysterious that Meredith couldn't quite understand.

"It's alright. You don't have to." But Tara's lips turned into an overdramatic pout.

"I guess...I wish you a happy birthday."

“Doesn’t count.”

“But I don’t need a wish. I’m happy,” Meredith said, thinking of her children and the way they looked up at her as if she could do anything. “I have everything I need.”

The smile was back, and Tara’s breath tasted sharp like citrus when she whispered into Meredith’s ear, “Do you?”

Meredith should have protested more just like she should have protested Jacob’s trip more. She should have denied and denied and denied until she stormed from the bar and wrapped herself around her daughter in her old bed. But she just stood there and swayed.

#

Tara insisted they return to the school, said there were some people she wanted to see.

“See if they’re still together,” Shelby said. Her words were slurry, but she could walk in a straight line.

Meredith considered going back to the school, to the gymnasium that hosted pep rallies and basketball games and prom. Half-familiar faces would smile and shake her hand, introducing themselves with alcohol and fake smiles. They would ask her to remember.

“Where are you going?” Tara asked when Meredith turned onto the highway.

Meredith smiled for the first time that night. “To school.”

When they left downtown, streetlights became less frequent, and the road stretched like dark satin. They wound through the hills. Tara and Shelby still hadn’t realized where they were going, and their confusion made Meredith smile.

Her old elementary school had two playgrounds: one for kindergarteners and one a little farther down the hill for everyone else. Both had been remodeled since she was child. Rubbery

tarmac replaced the woodchips and gravel that used to cushion landings. The plastic and metal supports were sturdier, and the monkey bars had been replaced by an elaborate metal cage.

Meredith parked in the lot reserved for teachers and janitorial staff, the one right next to the big kid playground. As long as they were quiet, they neighborhood wood stay asleep. Crickets greeted them, and Meredith felt the pricks of mosquito stingers. She had forgotten about the mosquitos.

Shelby headed for the three-laned, and Tara for the swings. The steps creaked under Shelby's weight, grumbling that she was no longer small. Meredith followed her to the slide's peak, unsure of how drunk she was.

Shelby had left her heels on the ground. A good sign. She sat in the middle path and slid. Tara laughed from the swings, and Shelby turned to face Meredith.

"Your turn," she said.

Meredith tested the plastic with her foot. Like the steps, the structure grumbled but did not give. The night air and the mosquitos made her feel childish, fanciful. She chose a different lane than Shelby just to be different. Her path was jerky too, her hips bumping against each too soon. When her feet hit the rubber, Shelby was already climbing the stairs again.

"Same Shelby," Tara said from the swings.

Meredith sat on the swing next to her, plastic digging into her legs. Tara's shoes, like Shelby's, were stacked neatly next to the swing set. She rocked back and forth, and Meredith matched her, synchronized pendulums.

"Are you okay? Really?" Tara asked.

"So much has changed," Meredith said.

The backdrop of houses looked the same, but the people living their must be different. Their old friends had moved to different parts of the city or state. Even the interiors would have changed, the seventies-styled carpet and wall colors replaced by hardwood and neutrals.

“Have you?” Tara’s voice was softer than the cricket chirps. Her skin was ghostly in the moonlight.

Meredith watched Shelby slide again and again and again, unsure of what to say or how to say it. She had changed, maybe.

“Maybe,” she said the word out loud, to see if that made the feeling real. It didn’t. “I have a daughter and husband, and that’s supposed to change you. Right?”

“That’s not what I meant.” Tara nudged Meredith’s leg with her toe. “You were just so *there* in high school, and you look like you’ve stepped out of a yearbook. Time hasn’t passed for you.”

They were still swinging together, their arcs growing a little bigger with each back and forth. Tara’s hair flew around her like a shiny cape.

“People are supposed to change,” Meredith said. She didn’t explain that she felt lost as a mother and wife, that she and Jacob were not good parents. At least, they were not good parents together. Alone with Gretchen, things felt neater, less clogged. But Jacob came home, and she felt like a blanket was thrown over her, the air growing hot and stuffy until someone had to get out.

When her swing went up, she studied the sky, pretending she could see the earth curving above the Big and Little Dipper. Tara’s swing matched hers. Meredith remembered she had asked for a wish. Maybe if things were different and they had more time, together they could

swing into the stars and never come back. They would hang in limbo, sparkling and never changing. That would be nice.

They stayed out so long, the sky began to lighten. Shelby had fallen asleep at the foot of the slide, feet dangling towards the ground.

“We should go,” Meredith said.

Tara grabbed her wrist. Her fingers were bony and slender. “We should watch the sun rise.”

Meredith thought about her secret wish and change and how Tara thought she had been something in high school. Her swing creaked as she stood. She didn’t look, but she knew the rubber had stained her soles.

“I really should go.”

“Please. Stay.”

Meredith thought about Tara’s smile and her hair swaying and swinging in a dance divorced from her body. She thought about her wish to linger in starlight—beautiful and impossible. Gretchen would wake up soon, and if she didn’t hurry, she would leave footprints on her parents’ carpet.

“It’s time to leave,” Meredith said. She headed to Shelby, shook her awake as the neighborhood filled with the smell of morning—car exhaust, stove smoke, and warming grass. She hustled her friends into the backseat and headed towards the highway. She pretended not to see Tara’s sad smile in the rearview mirror.

THE WEIGHT OF WORMS

Jacob brings the worms himself, purchases them from Walmart for two dollars. The bucket makes it seven. Seatbelted next to his daughter, Gretchen, the bucket wobbles every time he turns the car. Jacob worries the contents will spill even though he saran-wrapped the top himself. Meredith told him to buy some bait at the lake, but the only tackle shop is part of the concession stand. Some people are fine with that, but Jacob frowns every time he sees worms and popcorn listed at the same price.

Gretchen doesn't mind sitting next to worms. He hears her tapping against the bucket every few minutes. When he checks the review mirror, she is smiling.

He parks next to the playground, just in case, and helps Gretchen out. Together, they haul the worms, tackle box, and poles downhill towards the dock. He makes her hold his hand when they cross the street even though there are no cars. They walk by the concession stand, too. Gretchen gives a tiny wave to the teenager working the counter, probably a local high school student whose parents wanted them outside more. His dark green polo is stained with sweat and he looks miserable trapped between the pretzels and hotdogs and summer heat. Still, he waves back, frowning a little when he sees the bucket swinging from Gretchen's hand. Jacob wonders if bringing your own worms to a lake is the same as bringing your own food to a restaurant. There's probably a secret rule traded between frequent anglers about that. Jacob wouldn't know. He doesn't fish that much.

There are a few docks around the lake, but the one closest to the playground is small and shadeless. A long strip of concrete jutting into the water, more of an unfinished sidewalk more

than a frequent fishing place. He rubs sunscreen onto Gretchen's face and ears before doing anything else. She gives him a greasy hug, and he wants to hold her forever.

The poles are already prepped with hooks and bobbers. Jacob read that this isn't good for the equipment. He did it anyway hoping to save time. He knows that this will be a long day. The lawn chairs are at home, left in the garage like forgotten toys. Meredith would bring them if he called. She would drive the minivan, the one stained from a soccer trip, too many cookies, and a windy road. She would smile at Gretchen, ruffle her hair, maybe tell her how cute she looks in polka-dot galoshes. She would drop the chairs at his feet without a word and leave, waving goodbye only to Gretchen.

Jacob decides to bait Gretchen's hook instead. A worm already sits on her palm, part of it wrapped around her pinky like a ring.

"Look how brave you are," he says. "You picked out a worm all by yourself."

Gretchen smiles and stabs the worm. "Like you."

Jacob smiles too, but it feels like a sticker peeled away from his face. He is many things but "brave" is not one of them. He does not deal with Meredith much. He leaves her alone. He nods when his coworkers tell him that he'll get through it, that every marriage hits a patch. He gives her time and space and all those things the books say to give when your marriage needs help, when, really, the marriage has wanted to end for a long time. He wonders if any of Gretchen's friends notice that her parents act like divorcees already.

Algae gathers around their doc with green sticky fingers. The lake itself is small and compact, a misshapen birthmark that the city decided to hollow and fill with water. It's probably the same water in there now, mixed with some rain and pee. Jacob remembers how, during field

trips and summer camps, the park was a place far from home. He wishes it could feel far away again, wishes that he could forget the road and telephone poles marking the town's edge just beyond the trees.

#

Last week, Gretchen came home shouting about how algae benefits aquatic ecosystems. She recited fact after fact about oxygen levels and photosynthesis. Their class even filled a jar with water, twigs, and grass!

“It’s a microcosm,” she said proudly. Her face was so close, Jacob could smell her Pizza Roll breath through her teeth. “We’re going to watch stuff grow.”

She continued gushing about growth rates and pH levels while he nodded along. He had done the same experiment in his elementary school. He didn’t tell her that he was the one in charge of getting the water from a nearby pond or that, unlike he had hoped, the algae didn’t clean the brown from the water.

The class microcosm was part of the reason Gretchen asked to go fishing. In secret, she whispered that she planned to join him on his fishing trips, and she wanted to practice. He isn’t sure when to tell her that those trips never happened. Maybe when she’s older, when she knows the difference between dirt and soil and tucks her hair back with paint-chipped fingernails, when he’s taught her something important. Maybe he will never tell her. Maybe she will grow older without him there to see.

#

Without help, Gretchen glides the pole in graceful arcs, the metal flexing with the curve. Her movements are smooth, practiced, and sure. Jacob didn’t teach her that. He barely knows

how to hold or swing a pole. His fishing license lies untouched at the tackle-box bottom, renewed out of habit rather than use.

“Nice, sweet pea. Where’d you learn to do that?”

A frown, in concentration. “Gray taught me during recess.”

“Uncle Ricky must take him fishing a lot.”

“Yep. Aunt Katrina comes too.”

Jacob says, “I promise to invite Mom next time.”

Gretchen releases the button, letting the hook sail into the water for the first time. The arc is perfect, and the bobber lands with a satisfying plop. Jacob wishes Meredith was here to see. Years ago, when he had taken her fishing, she asked if the hook would catch her hair. She was so worried that her first throw went backward instead of forward. Her thumb released the trigger too soon, and the line unspooled behind her. Jacob had laughed and placed his arms around her. Elbows nested together, they drew the pole back. They haven’t touched like that in years.

Minutes pass before Gretchen reels in a fish. She dangles the creature from the line, a scaly piñata. He didn’t think to bring ice or a cooler or anything to hold fish. He honestly didn’t think they would catch any.

“We have to put this one back,” he says. “We don’t have anything to keep it in.”

Gretchen doesn’t cry about her lost prize. She lets him guide her fingers beneath cold, slippery lips to the hook. The fish slaps against the water. Jacob heads back to the concession stand, bait shop combo after she promises not to leave. He makes it sound like a big responsibility, staying put, but he can still see her.

The employee fans himself with a laminated menu.

“Sorry,” the kid says. “Don’t got any coolers for sale.”

“Don’t you have a bag of ice or something?”

He points at his polo. “If I had that much ice, I’d be chewing on it.”

Jacob turns back to the playground and his car. Is there something there that might help? Cardboard leftovers from a McDonald’s Happy Meal, a sand-coated plastic bucket, any type of container that could keep the fish even a little bit chilled.

“I can give you my lunch box for twenty dollars.” The employee dangles a blue plastic box from his finger.

“Excuse me?” Jacob says.

“There’s some cool packs in there, too. Besides, I already ate everything.”

“That’s still not worth twenty dollars.”

The kid shrugs.

Jacob isn’t sure the cool packs will work. The fish might smell on the ride home. Or worse, Meredith opens the lid in the kitchen, lets out the stink there. The salty tang of fresh fish would fill the house, and she would think it a poor planned joke, call him a liar. In the distance, Gretchen winds the reel again.

“Fine,” Jacob says, pulling a twenty from his wallet.

#

Meredith was the first one to ask for a divorce. She treated the idea like a fact, like it had already happened. Jacob wasn’t surprised by the request—even he had felt weight piling up from the missed calls, from the careless looks they gave each other as if unlearning the features of each other’s faces. Like worms, those small slights gathered under the silver-framed wedding photos,

curled over pictures of Gretchen sucking her pacifier. The unsaid clogged their lives until their house felt like a closet, stuffy and full of secrets.

#

Jacob returns to find Gretchen untangling algae from her hook. His fingers relax around the lunchbox handle, and he tells her she'll get the next one. She throws the algae back, and he lets her wipe her fingers on his jeans.

They cast out together this time, not-quite unison, but close enough. He does not tell her that his hook hangs empty in the water, that he didn't want to waste bait because he's too busy watching her throw and yank and reel, that he is ready in case he needs her. She does not ask for help, even though the air grows thick with summer sun, and even though her feet must hurt after an hour of bones pressed against skin pressed against stone. His do. Gretchen studies the water and waits for her rod to move, a practiced patience. Jacob has never been good at waiting.

After a few more fish escape, he tells her, "Good job, sweet pea."

She licks the sweat from her lips and smiles.

He should be talking more. Meredith would be talking more. But she said she had things to do and Jacob should have time with Gretchen anyway. Jacob knows this was a lie—knows because he has learned to smell secrets, because he carries them on his own skin every day. But he lets her lie anyway, lets her smile though most of it and pretend she's cleaning dust when really she's picking up the words hiding in each room.

A loud splash and Gretchen's hands are empty for the first time all day, her fingers still curled.

"Oops," she says and cries.

Jacob kneels and takes her hand. From far away, it might look like a benediction except Gretchen is too small to answer prayers and her sobs, too loud to be a blessing. Hiccups and sniffled-back snot pile on top of each other until the sound becomes asthmatic. Jacob's pole lays abandoned on the ground.

"Did a fish get your pole? Was that what happened sweet pea?"

She shakes her head. Her voices hitches, swallowing words in small gasps. He waits, hands folded over hers, pebbles digging into his knees. He has seen her cry like this before, her chest stretching out, toad-like. Meredith says it happens because she tries to talk as she cries. Jacob is not sure. He just wants to make sure Gretchen can breathe.

"This happens all the time. It's okay." Jacob tries to make his voice sound soothing, but even to him the sound brittle.

"I swung too hard."

"It's fine. It's fine."

"But I wanted to catch a fish."

"We can come back another time."

Gretchen just shakes her head.

Meredith would say something encouraging here. She would curl around Gretchen like an eggshell and whisper about how things would be all right and how she would fix everything. Jacob is not good at fixing things. He finds it much easier to break them.

"There are other fish. I'm sure you'll catch more when we come back."

His knees hurt. He knows he shouldn't think about the pain, but he does. He holds Gretchen's hand, feels her fingers relax beneath his, but he can't stop thinking about the pebbles pressing into his knee cap. When he stands, a bone-shivering pop echoes to his ankle.

"I promised Mom that we'd have fun." Gretchen's voice is still part-sniffles.

"And we did, right?"

More tears. "But I ruined it. I ruin everything."

"This is not that big of deal. You're going to be fine."

She nods, but the gesture is insincere. Jacob can tell because he is also bad at lying. He can tell because she faces the water instead of him.

He does not ask if Gretchen wants him to unlace his shoes or roll up his jeans. He's not even sure why he does it. Maybe because Gretchen is still crying. Or maybe because he wants to try and fix something. Or maybe because he wants to know if the water really is brown underneath the algae. Maybe all of these things, he thinks.

He wades in, stepping through mud and fish shit. Clumps of algae gather on his shirt, slime sliding against his stomach. He hopes his feet can do most of the searching, that he will brush the rod mid-step, catch the pole with his foot. But the water is deeper than he thought, and once it climbs to his armpits, he knows he must give up or submerge.

He dips his head under and finds quiet. The lake presses against his ears, giving silence weight. Algae filtered light streaks the water with green. A few tadpoles flit near his face. The other fish have scattered, scared by the ripples his body created. He brings his face closer to the ground, hoping for a better view. There are moss covered rocks, beer bottles with peeling labels, a metallic something, round like a ring or broken-off soda tab, and no fishing pole.

By the time he returns to the dock, he has shaken the water from his eyes, picked algae off his shoulders. He wonders how to tell Gretchen the pole was not waiting for her.

“I’m sorry.” The words were all he thinks to say. He considers hugging her until they are both wet and slimy. Meredith might not even mind. “I couldn’t find it.”

Gretchen pulls a stray clump of algae from his hair. “It’ll be okay,” she says.

She places the slime in the lunch box, packs it between the two blue, cool packs, and snaps the case closed. She says she’s going to put the plant in the class microcosm, but Jacob wonders if she will build her own. When they pass the concession stand, He thanks employee again.

The kid points to the lunchbox. “Catch anything else?”

Gretchen answers yes, thank you, and takes Jacob’s hand. There is no way to leave without creating a mess. Jacob tells Gretchen to go play while he dries his shirt and jeans on the car roof. He sits behind the wheel and watches her slide and swing and even climb up the pole. He must leave eventually, must return to Meredith and a heavy house and the possibility that his daughter will forget today.

DRINKING IN SUBURBIA

The third-floor girls bathroom always smells strange to me. The school's other public bathrooms use walls and ninety-degree angles to separate the sinks from the hallway, but the third-floor bathrooms use doors, trapping odors. On Tuesdays, a leftover tobacco haze hangs over the porcelain toilets. Sometimes a cigarette butt is left smoking on the window sill or I find wet ash clings to sink's lip. I rub the gray clumps between my fingertips like smudged mascara. My mom would want me to tell my teacher or an administrator what happens on the third-floor bathroom, but I flush the evidence away anytime I find it.

Monday was the first time I smelled anything floral in that bathroom. Mixed in with the teenage sweat and smoke are hints of perfume. Giggles echo from the handicapped stall, and I peak under the stall. My mom would tell me that peering under bathroom stalls is rude but that was when I was eight and she would count the seconds as I washed my hands.

Three pairs of ballet flats shush against the grimy tile, the soles sliding when their owners shifted weight. There is the hiss of a can opening and another giggle. I consider knocking, but another face slides into view under the stall. Her hair bobs around her like a cloud. When she disappears, the conversation stops, leaving only the drip of a leaky faucet.

The latch slides back, leaving a gap wide enough for a half a face. The girl staring at me is different than the one under the stall. Even with only a partial view, she seems more put together.

"Can I help you?" the girl says with too much confidence, the kind of confidence that tells you rules have been broken. Her stance is wide, planted like a linebacker.

"Sorry, I heard voices."

“It’s rude to look under stalls.”

I fold my arms. “Well it’s not like you have any privacy right now.”

“You going to tell anyone?”

I shake my head no, not exactly sure what I am promising.

The girl nods and holds the stall open for me. Her hair is pulled back into a crooked ponytail, and white deodorant stains rim the edge of her tee blouse. She doesn’t seem to care.

Two other girls huddle around the toilet like it’s a campfire. The one with the bouncy hair blows a raspberry at me, and the other girl cradles a Miller Lite between her palms.

I point at the beer. “I want a taste.” It’s polite to ask, but this doesn’t feel like the place for that.

The girl guarding the door laughs, and her friend passes me the beer. I still feel the leftover heat of her palms. I put the can to my lips and swallow. The liquid is warmer and thicker than I expected. It sticks to the back of my throat, something earthy lingering there after I pass it back. The girl who opened the stall offers a hand.

“Cameron,” she says, “and these are my friends, Jean and Lacy.” The girl who recognizes me from under the stall, Lacy, sniffs like a soap opera actress. Jean plays with her hair and smiles a little.

I shake and give them my name, hoping it will spark a conversation or connection, that by sharing names and beer, our gathering might turn into an 80s high school flick where we eventually whisper secrets at sleepovers. But there is not much talking. The can changes hands like a racing baton, but there is no laughter or gossip. Just quiet sips. Jean sips like she’s worried

about brain freeze, and Lacy stands close to the stall door, and she jumps every time the faucet drips. Cameron is the one most at ease, picking her nails when she gets bored with the silence.

Even with our small mouthfuls, the beer vanishes quickly. I take the last drink, knocking my head back like they do in the movies. Cameron plucks the empty can from my hands and crushes it between hers, the crinkle of folding aluminum scratching against my eardrums. She stashes it in the front pocket of her backpack, as the other girls gather their things.

“Thanks,” I say, not sure what I’m thanking her for yet.

“See you soon.” Cameron winks before the stall closes, her timing too perfect to be unrehearsed.

I sit through the rest of class with a grassy taste on my tongue, hoping my breath doesn’t smell.

#

When I get home, my mom has already set out dinner. Two plates sit across from each other like eyes. She says grace and asks about schoolwork and friends. I smile and do not tell her that I remember their playground faces than the ones they wear now. We pretend everything is fine, that her cheeks do not sag with age or worry or other things she never shares with me. I stopped asking her questions a long time ago.

I remember the meals before my dad left. She would kiss him on the cheek and me on the forehead and her smile was so bright. A kilowatt smile, he called it, one she probably learned from watching too many family sitcoms with twenty-minute problems and happy endings. He never said it, but she believed in those families. She believed we could be like them if we worked hard enough.

“Can you babysit on Friday Gretchen?” she asks as she spears some broccoli.

“What if I had plans?”

“You just said you were free.”

I don’t remember admitting that.

She chews, a green sprig sticks to the edge of her lips. Instead of wiping it away or telling her, I let it sit there, let it grow like furry mold.

“It’s just Madeline. We owe Mrs. Barker after last week.”

Our subdivision operates on a system of favors. There is no spoken exchange, but once one household acts neighborly, everyone feels obligated to pay them back. We take turns walking each other’s dogs or house sitting during vacations. On snow days, Mr. Walker attaches a plow-head to his truck and clears everyone’s driveway, and most people leave him a fruit cake or promise to watch his dogs.

Mrs. Barker let us use her laundry machine last week when ours broke down, and my mom refused to use the laundromat. My mom asks Mrs. Barker for a lot of favors, which means I end up babysitting Madeline on a semi-regular basis.

“Fine,” I say, and she smiles again.

She asks more questions about my day, but I do not mention the girls in the bathroom or the beer that I can still taste under my tongue. That night I go to sleep without brushing my teeth, so I can wake up with something sour in my mouth.

#

The bathroom smells clean the next time I visit. There is no smoke or leftover perfume spritzes, and the only noise comes from the one leaky faucet. I check the handicap stall just in

case they left something there for me to find, a locker number or an email or some hint for when they would come back. I return to class before the bell rings and pretend I do not want to go back to the third-floor bathroom.

When I get home, I search for the pictures in old yearbooks. Our school is so small that it's rare you don't recognize a face, and I flip straight to the sports pages, imagining the trio of girls updated versions of *Heathers*. Jean would work on student council and organize themed dances for prom and homecoming, Lacy would sing in choir and star in local theater productions, and Cameron would head the cheer squad or basketball team. I expect to see them everywhere, knowing everyone. But they are not on the sports pages or in the club pictures. The only pictures I find of them are in the class roster, the ones taken with a cloudy grey backdrop on the school day everyone forgets to dress up.

#

On Friday Cameron is waiting outside of the handicapped bathroom. She smiles and holds the door open with a little bow.

“Thought you'd be back.”

Jean and Lacy lean against the back wall, arms crossed, toilet sandwiched between them. They wear serious expressions—or at least, what they think serious expressions might look like. Their lips pucker a bit too much, and Lacy taps her foot like an impatient mob boss. They are trying so hard to pull off the leather jacket bad girl vibe without leather jacket.

“What?” Lacy says.

I shake my head, wait for them to realize how forced this all looks. “Let's just do this okay.”

From her backpack, Cameron pulls out another Miller Lite can, pops the tab, and sips.

“So,” she says after passing the can to Jenny, “why did you come back?”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, I knew you’d come back. I’m just wondering why.”

The can reaches me, and I enjoy its bitter notes against my tongue.

“Boyfriend?” Jean says.

I shake my head.

“Grades?”

Shake

“Family issues?”

“Does it matter?” I say.

“Just curious.” Cameron lifts the can as if to *cheers* my comments. She swishes the beer like mouthwash before she swallows.

Instead of waiting for it to circle back to me, I take the can and drain it.

Jenny and Lacy clap as Cameron heads towards her bag.

“Did you bring a toothbrush?”

I don’t understand what she means until I run my tongue over my teeth. My breath feels thick inside my mouth, and it probably smells. Not enough that students in the hall would notice, but enough that a well-placed whisper might carry stale beer.

The other girls giggle at my expression. At first it sounds mean, like laughter coming from the back of classroom, but it changes when Cameron hands me a small Ziploc bag containing a toothbrush and toothpaste. It feels like I’m part of the joke too.

“It’s used,” she says, “but I’m sure you won’t mind.”

I mind a little. The thought of sharing spit with anyone seems strangely intimate, even it is via a toothbrush. Then I think of my mom’s face and how much more it will sag if she knew I left school with beer on my breath.

At the sink, I load up the toothbrush with Colgate and drown my mouth in mint. The bristles scratch my lips, and I pretend I am at home getting ready for the day.

When I return the bathroom, everyone giggles again. The sound echoes on the walls until it feels like there are more than four of us gathered here.

“What?”

“There’s toothpaste on your mouth,” Lacy says.

I try to erase it with my own tongue, circling it around my lips like a pinwheel, and that makes everyone laugh harder.

“Here.” Cameron uses her thumb to wipe away the corner of my lips. “All better.”

All four of us leave the bathroom together, and I write my phone number on each of their hands, the ink smearing a little on the eights.

Cameron holds me back as Jean and Lacy walk downstairs.

“Do you have any plans tonight, Gretch? There’s a field party, and we want you to come with us.”

For a second, I consider bailing on the plans my mom made for me, but then I shake my head. “I have to babysit.”

“You can come after. It doesn’t start until ten.”

“I really can’t.”

“Maybe next time, Gretch?” She sighs as she speaks, but it feels overdone. She doesn’t seem truly disappointed.

With a small half wave, she heads after Lacy and Jenny. I let her go without saying I tried out the name Gretch before and didn’t like it.

#

Mrs. Barker’s house is across the street from mine, right in front of a so-called creek that ran through the neighborhood. I spent summer afternoons trying to catch tadpoles with my hands. The water ran through a metal tunnel and sometimes I would let my voice bounce around like monster echoes. I would come home sunburnt and muddy, and my mom would check my underwear seams for ticks. It was only as I grew older that I realized the creek was a run-off ditch full of stagnant water.

My mom walks me over to the house where Mrs. Barker is already waiting on the front steps. The graying edges of her hair poke out from an old fashioned sun hat. A pair of round sunglasses hide the crow’s feet forming around her eyes. I wonder if the lines around her mouth are from laughter or worry.

She hugs my mother then shakes my hand. “Thanks for helping out.”

I assure her it’s no trouble and step inside.

Most of the houses in our cul-de-sac were built in the seventies according to my dad. Many families chose to remodel, updating with hardwood floors, state of the art kitchens, or open concept floor plans. Mrs. Barker’s house had not changed since she bought it. Different colored carpet stretched in every room except the kitchen. A yellow color stretched in the living room and down the hall, the pale blue of the television turned the color sickly.

“Don’t let Maddie stay up too late,” she says from the porch.

Madeline sits in the living room, the television playing some cartoon movie or show I don’t recognize. When she hears me com in, she doesn’t bother to get up or even look at me.

“Hi, Madeline.”

“I don’t need a babysitter. I’m old enough to take care of myself.”

We’ve had this discussion before. Every time I come, she complains that twelve is too old for a sitter. Most days I remind her that Mrs. Barker *does* think she’s grown up, and she wants to make sure her baby is safe, too. The TV makes my head hurt, and the smell of microwaved chicken fingers spreads from the kitchen. I don’t feel like cradling her and whispering comforts. So instead of herding her to a table for dinner, I plop on the couch next to her and sulk. The cartoon noise washes over me, and I remember the used tooth brush against my teeth and imagine what Cameron, Jean, and Lacy say as they drink beers with other sweaty teens around a crude bonfire. Dry grass would crackle under their feet, and some boys would be stupid enough to try jumping over the fire. Maybe Lacy would try too, or Cameron or maybe even me if I was there. I’d take off my shoes, and as I leapt, heat would lick my heels.

Madeline offers to share her plate of chicken fingers with me. Trying to smile, I take a one and use it like a sword to guard the ketchup. She laughs, and we spend a few minutes fighting. Crumbs flick onto her shirt, and ketchup crusts the edges of her hair. I should take her to the bathroom and rinse it out—at least brush the crumbs before they leave greasy footprints. I do not move.

The doorbell rings. Madeline, who had been nodding off, sits up a little straighter and faces me expectantly. I must have looked confused because she rolls her eyes and says, “I’m not supposed to answer the door at night.”

It’s her mother’s rule. Last time I babysat, a neighbor stopped by to return some gardening tools, and Madeline made sure I answered the door because she was scared to get in her trouble. But tonight, I don’t feel like following all the rules, even the ones that don’t really matter.

“You should answer it.”

“But I’m not supposed to.”

I lean closer. “Weren’t you the one who said you didn’t need a babysitter? That you were old enough to take care of yourself?”

She seems stumped by that. Her forehead furrows a little, and I can see her working through a couple protests. At last, she stands, brushes off her pants and moves towards the front door. The carpet muffles her footsteps. I turn down the TV until I can hear the door creak and voices. Worry builds in my stomach when Madeline doesn’t return after a minute. As the voices continue, a slide show of boogie men and ski-masked villains flickers in my imagination.

I prepare to stand, to hurry down the hall and slam the door shut, but Madeline begins stomping back before my ass leaves the couch. Her arms cross and her toe taps in what is obviously a huff.

“It’s for you.”

“What?”

“The door,” she says. “It’s for you.”

“Gretch, tell your *friend* to let us in.”

Reaching the front door, I find Cameron, Lacy, and Jean all squeezed into the doorway. They stand on tiptoe so they can all fit, their bodies pressed together in a strange hug.

I gesture for them to come in even as Madeline coughs objections into her fist.

“What are you doing here?” I lead everyone into the Kitchen and double check the front door is locked.

“Your mom told us,” Cameron says, “after we called your house. She didn’t exactly invite us over or anything, but we thought you could use a pick me up.”

Each of the girls carries supplies: matches, some twigs that were probably picked from Mrs. Barker’s front lawn, some stones. But the thing that catches my attention is the pack of Miller Lite strung between Cameron’s fingers. The front two cans are missing.

“What are you planning on doing with all of this?” I am careful to point at everything except the beer.

“A bonfire, silly,” Jean says. She slings her arm around my shoulder and pulls me tight. “We can sit and talk girl stuff.”

“This isn’t my yard.”

“I know that,” Cameron says, peering through the window. “We can still have a bit of fun though.”

“I’m not setting the backyard on fire.”

Lacy pokes my shoulder. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

This doesn’t feel like an adventure. Adventures don’t happen in your neighbor’s house or with a sulky twelve-year old or with makeshift fire that probably won’t burn or with your mother

sitting at home worrying about dinner when she should probably be worrying about you.

Adventures don't put snakes in your stomach or a constant pressure on your chest that hurts and hurts until you think your ribs might crack.

Or maybe they do. I wouldn't really know. I've never been on an adventure, even a small one.

"We're not making a fire." I say it again, this time to convince myself.

"You could use flashlights," Madeline says, her side clinging to the kitchen entryway like it is a parent. "For light, you could use flashlights."

Jean and Lacy swallow laughter, but Cameron listens. She bends down and motions for Madeline to continue.

"You could turn them on and set them in a circle. It's not a perfect fix," she glances at me, "but it's better than fire."

Cameron smiles and ruffles Madeline's hair. "Great idea. What's your name smart stuff?"

"Madeline."

"How about I call you Maddie? Sound good?" Cameron's smile gets bigger when the little girl nods. "Good. Since it's your idea and your house, why don't you lead the way."

Madeline opens up a cabinet and gabs three flashlights, all different sizes. We trek outside follow-the-leader style, Madeline stopping beneath a magnolia tree shedding fat, waxy leaves. We sit and point the flashlights towards the branches. The gaps between the leaves create a star map.

"Pretty," Madeline says.

I nod. “Yeah, pretty.” The fire making stuff remained in the house, but the beer cans rest between me and Cameron where everyone can see them.

“Are you going to drink that?” Madeline says it to me more than the other girls, her head cocked to the side like a bird.

Jean and Lacy giggle, each pressing a finger to their lips, the universal sign for *shh* and secrets.

“You won’t tell on us, right?” Cameron pops open a can and drinks.

I expect us to get our own beer since we have enough, but she passes the can to me. With the lighting, everyone’s face becomes a mask of shadows. Even Madeline, who sits right next to me, becomes a patchwork doll of light and dark. She has not answered Cameron’s question. Her eyes study the beer in my hand, and her fingers trace an outline of my hand pressed against the earth. Only after I take a sip does she answer, “Right.” I squeeze her knee and stretch over her to give Jean the can.

“Let Maddie try.” Cameron’s words are not edged like in mean girl movies. Her words are an invitation meant to delight. A smile comes with it, the kind of smile that reminds me of the one my mom used to have—big and bright and open, one with a ready laugh. A kilowatt smile, my dad said. Get too close and you might burn.

It takes a second for me to move, for me to place the can in Madeline’s palms and fold her stubby fingers around it. We sit there, hands folded over each other in a broken prayer, before Madeline lifts the can to her lips. Her face puckers a bit, but she does not cry or scream or spit out the beer. She swallows and passes the can without a word.

The night is a bit chilly, and even though the flashlights provide artificial starlight, they lack warmth. Madeline shivers and that shiver seems to pass around the circle like a yawn or hiccup, contagious and eternal. We wiggle closer together until our legs become a tangle. The beer can still moves around, although Madeline passes it without drinking after her third sip. Even though we create a cave of body heat, the cold still presses against my back, reminding me in a single breath that I will have to leave eventually and make sure Madeline brushes her teeth before bed.

#

My mother is awake when I arrive home. She sits at the table, reading a bestseller mystery, her pinky turning the pages slowly. Glasses magnify her crow's feet, and I wonder if age was the only thing that carved her face.

She asks how babysitting went, and the question like an interrogation from a crime show, like she already knows the answer. We hid the empty beer cans in the neighbor's recycling. Cameron's car left before Mrs. Barker came home. Madeline slept with minty fresh breath—doubly fresh, since I made her repeat the mouth wash rinse twice. Mrs. Barker even slipped me an extra ten dollars, said I had done really well today. Did my mother tell her about our fight? Did she ask Mrs. Barker to give me extra money because I spent the night with a twelve-year-old rather than my own friends? Just thinking of that favor makes me feel guilty.

"Fine," I say, washing my hands in the sink. The inside lights transform the windows into mirrors. I watch my reflected hands rub soap and water between her fingers.

My mother stands, leaning on the table like she needs help. She joins me at the sink, rubs the part of my spine sandwiched between my shoulder blades. The friction creates a warm patch, and I wonder if the heat will burn through my rib cage and sternum.

Is she suspicious? As the water runs and my hands continue to scrub, I feel like Lady Macbeth outing her damn spot. My mother's warm hand makes things worse, reminding me that she is there for me, has always been there for me.

She kisses my temple, leaving a lipstick shadow. She smiles into the window mirror, and the neighbors must think we are happy.

"I know it's hard," she whispers, "but I'm proud of you sweet pea."

She has not called me sweet pea in years. I almost ask her to wait, to tuck me into bed like she did when I was small. But her steps carry her to her bedroom before I turn off the water. When I check, she is in bed. She sleeps even though she has not changed from her work clothes, the slacks and flowy blouse. Her legs tuck into her chest like she is resting in the fetal position, like she, too, wants to return to a time when she felt small and safe and warm.

FOURTEEN LETTERS, SEVEN STAMPS

October 20, 1997

123 Main Street

Tallahassee, Florida, The Universe

Dear Sir,

My name is Madeline, and I am your daughter. We haven't met yet, so I thought it best to call you sir instead of Dad. We learned how to write letters today, and Ms. Callahan told us to practice. Some kids wanted to write to Santa, but she said it was too early for that. She said it would be better to write a family member who doesn't live with us. The kid who sits next to me wrote to his aunt who lives on a farm, and Bethany wrote to her grandpa who flies in from Germany during holidays. No one else wrote to their Dad.

I made up parts of the address so Ms. Callahan wouldn't ask any questions. I know you live in Florida because Mommy talks about the palm trees near your house. She never told me what city. I picked Tallahassee because we just learned state capitals, and that sounds like something a cowboy might say.

With Love,

Madeline Barker

864 Country Drive

Jefferson City, MO

#

March 9, 2001

465 Broomshedge Trail

Winter Garden, Florida

Dear Mr. James Barker,

Hello, my name is Madeline Barker, and I am your daughter. Please keep reading. I promise I'm real. Don't throw this letter away because it took me a while to get ahold of this address. Mom volunteered me to help her friend Ms. Kassebaum with spring cleaning. I found your old wedding invitation on velvet lined board, pinned behind glossy photos, ticket stubs, and papers labeled "important." Cursive unspooled across the page, the extra swirls twisting your name with Mom's. I could barely make out your return address. Ms. Kassebaum didn't scold me for snooping. She said I could borrow it as long as I brought it back. When Mom's car pulled up, Ms. Kassebaum pressed a finger to her lips and winked. I wasn't sure why you were so secret. The invitation is under my mattress with the other letter I wrote. Don't worry about that. It wasn't a letter like this one.

It's easier to write to you than a pen pal. Did you have a Pen Pal in school? My Pen Pal is named Mary, and she lives in Seattle or Sedalia. It begins with an "S" sound. She wasn't interested in being a real Pen Pal. She wrote about her parents and pets and friends, and she dotted her I's with small hearts. She didn't ask any questions, which seems pretty rude to me. Is my letter rude? Sorry if it is. I have to write this camped beneath a thick blanket, flashlight held between my teeth. The air gets stuffy, and sometimes my pencil gets caught on the sheets. Mom never said I couldn't write to you, so I'm not breaking any rules technically. Still, she would probably be mad if she found out I took a photo from Mrs. Kassebaum. We're spring cleaning too.

If I'm grounded when you get this, don't worry about getting me out of trouble. Bethany's dad did that once, and it seems like a hassle. She asked her mom to go with me to the mall. When her mom said no, she turned and asked her dad who said yes. That night, she told me her dad bailed her out. He looked so disappointed that she almost cried. I'm not sure the first thing I want to see from you is disappointment.

With Love,

Madeline Barker

864 Country Club Drive

Jefferson City, MO

#

May 17, 2003

300 South Vale Road

Boulder, CO

Dear James,

I would ask if it's okay to call you James, but that doesn't really matter does it? A year or two has passed since my last letter. I could say it took me a long time to find your new address. It didn't. You're still Facebook friends with Mrs. Kassebaum for some reason. All I had to do was type your name into the search bar. The person who lives at your old home is very nice by the way. They thought my letter was sweet and apologized for not knowing you. They even mailed it back to me in case I eventually found you.

We're moving. Mom and Brian sat me down today and told me that they're starting to "look around." They say we need a bigger house, and they're right. You probably saw the photos

of Brian kissing Mom's belly and the sonogram. It's all very new, and I'm not sure how I feel about it, especially since they just got hitched—I guess you saw those pictures too. Brian is nice. When he moved in, he pulled me aside and gave me a big hug. He said that everything would be okay, that we would be close but he could never replace you. I wanted to tell him it's hard to replace something that was never there.

I'll write to you again once the new address is official.

With Love,

Madeline Barker

864 Country Club Drive

Jefferson City, MO

#

September 5, 2003

300 South Vale Road

Boulder, CO

Dear James,

Did you do smile a lot? Brian smiles *all* the time. He smiles as he makes his coffee and when he picks me up from school and when he bakes. When I asked him, he said it's because the sugar crystals look like snowflakes in the right lighting. You don't seem like the type to smile at sugar. I found Mom's old wedding photos in a dusty album that creaks when the pages turn. Smiles are everywhere in those pictures, but yours looks the strangest. All teeth like a toothpaste commercial. You posted a couple pictures on Facebook, and the smiles don't match. If Mom

ever looked through these, I wonder if she saw this smile when you left. I wonder if your smile made me cry even though you were trying your best.

With Love,

Madeline Barker

1801 Rainbow Road

Jefferson City, MO

#

August 23, 2008

300 South Vale Road

Boulder, CO

Dear James,

I'm not sure this is your address anymore. My last letter didn't come back, but, according to Facebook, you still live in Boulder. But who knows? You might have moved to Chicago or Atlanta and started a chain of chili dog stands. But if you are in Colorado, the mountains look pretty and green. You're probably spending most of your time outside. I would. I read that the summers were less humid, that you could sit for hours in the shade without worrying about pit stains. Mom said we might take a trip to the Rockies next year. She likes the idea of us hiking together—me, Brian, and Davy balancing an incline for a photo-op while she squints through the lens. Maybe she thinks I want to make snow angels in July. She doesn't know I have your address.

Brian and her are doing well, in case you're wondering. For my graduation he baked a cake as tall as me. Candles outlined a graduation cap. Frosting stuck to Davy's cheek when

snuck a bite then pretended he didn't. Mom and Brian snapped a picture with their digital camera, teasing him until he ran around the kitchen. Brian chased Davy and caught him in a tickle. Mom snapped more pictures. I blew out my candles while they weren't paying attention. Mom still made me pose with Davy and the cake. You might have seen that picture if you're checking my feed like I check yours. I changed my settings to public last spring, just in time for prom.

I finished moving into my dorm. The room is small and stale, but at least I'm sharing it with Bethany. She makes fun of my duck collection. I started a couple years back, the first one from a garage sale on the east side of town. A hollow clay shell, this duck fit on the palm of my hand. Deep greens and blues swirled across the figure's breast, and the its beak turned gold in the sunlight. The duck looked sad sitting between the bargain store knickknacks and abandoned beads, like it wished it was on a different table. The old lady who took my quarters called it a Mallard. Later, I found out it is a Perching duck.

Three ducks now sit on my standard dorm bookshelf. Sometimes I lean in close and stare. Everything in my reflection is tiny and twisted, like there's a fun house me in a fun house dorm room looking out from the lacquered feathers.

Sorry. Bethany says I'm too obsessed with the ducks.

I still have those old letters, the ones that were sent back. They're next to my window in cheap box from Hobby Lobby. Flowers cover the lid, almost the same shade of pink as my prom dress.

With Love,

Madeline Barker

Box 244650

University of Missouri

#

June 13, 2012

300 South Vale Road

Boulder, CO

Dear James,

I moved into my new apartment today. Some neighbors waved while we hauled in the dresser. Brian tried to wave with one hand and almost dropped it. The forecast threatened rain, so Mom made us haul everything into the living room. As we shook rain from our jackets, boxes piled on the floor until it was difficult to walk—some of them stacked in small pyramids, others on their sides like a toppled block tower. Mom left once I promised to unpack them. I haven't yet.

Well, that's not entirely true. I started arranging my ducks. The Perching and its friends form a triangle on top of my dresser. I snagged two blue-billed Stiffetails from a St. Louis Goodwill when we took Davy to the children's museum. Their blue bills guard the old high school yearbooks my mom bought for me. I already unloaded the duck-shaped salt and pepper shakers in the kitchen even though I have no salt or pepper yet. Bethany gave them to me last year as joke thinking I would throw them away. One duck winds its neck and legs around a lampstand. It looks like a flamingo except for the color. They spread throughout the apartment like my own personal flock.

I didn't plan on writing to you again, but my apartment is so quiet. Even with the ducks. The carpet eats sound, muffling my footsteps until I feel like a burglar in my own bathroom. Even though there are boxes and furniture and the ducks, the silence makes the place feels too quiet. I wonder if this is what it felt like when you first left Mom. Were you alone in silence too? Did you feel like your new place needed noise to come alive? Or did silence wrap around you like a comforter, soft and heavy and warm?

Your daughter,

Madeline Barker

398 East McCarty

Apt. 2A

Jefferson City, MO

#

January 8, 2013

300 South Vale Street

Boulder, CO

James,

It's weird working in your hometown as an adult. Classmates pass me in the grocery store or gym, and they look strangely adult. I barely recognized Brie, who now goes by Brianna. When she left the store, she walked like she had people waiting for her. I walked like I was going home to make Hamburger Helper for myself.

Bethany just moved in with her boyfriend. She asked how I felt about that. I lied and said that I'm okay. It's not that I'm jealous or that her boyfriend is bad. The idea of living with

someone who knows you that closely freaks me out. Mom and Brian and Davy and even Bethany loved me with space. Secret habits never left the bathroom because everyone pretended not to see or care.

Right now, the apartment smells like me. My handprints collage the fridge door, and my sweat stains the shower curtain. Fallen hairs bury into the carpet fibers until home is the aroma of my dead skin. It doesn't want to share.

Was that why you didn't come back? I thought Mom kept your name, that boring name Barker, because you would come back. I thought she held a part of you that would have to come get. You would come back like a wintry sun, muted and gray but still there. But you never came back, never wrote back. I didn't understand at first, but maybe I'm starting to. Did you stay away because you missed you?

Your daughter,

Madeline

#

July 19, 2014

James,

Bethany got married today. I don't remember much, but that probably has more to do with the wine than the ceremony, though. I wasn't part of the wedding party. After Tanner proposed, Bethany told me how I was the real maid of honor. She had lots of cousins, and Tanner had lots of sisters which meant bridesmaids were family only. I sat in the pews, watching as another girl took Bethany's bouquet. Bethany apologized over and over. I think she believed me when I said I was fine.

The catering gave us sweaty chicken parm for dinner, and old church biddies hawked over the ceremony details. Why didn't Bethany go for a full ballgown skirt? Did the kiss have too much tongue? What on earth made them decide to use fake flowers! At some point, a woman asked what my favorite part was. She wore a large, pink hat like she was at horse derby, and when she leaned towards me, the brim bobbed towards the table. I could have mentioned vows or the rings or how the girl holding Bethany's bouquet fidgeted a bit too much. Instead, I talked about the flower girl.

This five-year-old ran up the aisle with a full basket of petals. She clutched the basket to her chest like a teddy bear, the wicker snapping as she squeezed. Her parents hurried after her. They frog-crouched and explained just how important she was to the ceremony, how her job was to make the aisle pretty for the bride. Even when threatened with a timeout, the girl refused. In fact, she marched herself and her full basket into the nearest corner and stayed there until the I do.

The table let me sip my wine and smile after that.

Your daughter,

Madeline

#

November 12, 2014

James,

I found another duck today, a wooden mallard (probably a decoy) at a sale near the YMCA. The bottom is flat and scored like the duck had been dragged across the floor by toddlers or dogs. Along the tail, chunks are missing, exposing the sand colored wood. The

feathers shine in patches, the gloss peeled away by time or greedy fingernails. A painted eye is missing, the face frozen in an eternal wink. The lady seemed surprised I wanted to buy the duck, said I could get cleaner ones from the local hunting store. I bought it anyway. I prefer the scarred feathers and cockeyed face.

Your daughter,

Madeline

#

April 24, 2015

James,

Do you know what people don't realize about garage sales? No one really gets rid of anything. Neighbors buy a porcelain chicken only to forget the bird and then put it on the fifty-cent table a couple of years later. They pass the chicken around the neighborhood until no one wants it anymore. Eventually, someone's grandchild or niece breaks the figurine as they climb to the cookie jar.

Bethany comes with me sometimes. When Tanner goes golfing, we drive through the town like teenagers. We roll down the windows, let the wind tangle our hair, blast music from high school even though no one is listening but us. Tanner is always home when I drop her off. She waves goodbye from his arms, and I wonder if you ever held Mom like that.

Your daughter,

Madeline

#

February 15, 2016

James,

I finally started to talk to the neighbors. Really, it's just one neighbor. Mr. Schneider lives two doors down, and every evening at 6 pm, he straps his cat Cecil into a harness and takes him for a walk. I never saw a cat in a harness, and when I asked about it, Mr. Schneider invited himself onto my steps. He said Cecil had grown fat over the winter and the vets said he needed exercise. So Mr. Schneider drags him around the sidewalk, the harness digging into Cecil's armpits when the cat refuses to move.

We talk every day now, even when it's so cold that our words smoke. Mr. Schneider tells me about his children and grandchildren. He talks about his old job for the State and how, when his grandchildren visited, they always asked to ride the stone bear that sat in front of the building. He always looks up when he says this, like the building is tall enough to be seen from my steps. None of the buildings are that tall, really. They just seem that way because they sit on hilltop.

Yesterday, he gave me a Valentine's Day card, the foldable kind you buy in large packs that tear off from each other. He said it he had a couple extra left over from his grandkid's school party. I thanked him and took the card inside, rubbing glitter between my fingers.

Your daughter,

Madeline

#

May 9, 2016

James

When Mr. Schneider tells me about the city, he talks like a storyteller. He uses his hands to paint lines across the sky, outlining buildings and trees. His arms never get tired and sometimes he talks so long that the sun makes small hills out of his knuckles. His favorite topic is cemeteries. He even convinced me to visit one. There's one a couple blocks up the street, and he drags Cecil by it during their walks. He told me that many are hidden throughout the city, tucked in between houses and neighborhoods. Kids play catch and ride their bikes without realizing what they're riding past.

I visited a different cemetery rather than that one close by. There was a good chance Mr. Schneider would be at that one, and I wanted to be alone. I didn't want him standing next to me, staring at the sky or the ground while I did the same. The closeness would feel off-center. I drove by a place near my old elementary school instead.

A gray stone wall lined the property, dried grass scratching at my calves. There was no paved drive into the lot, no looming entrance like the ones from ghost stories. Just small gates rusted so long that they left red streaks on my skin. Most of the tombstones looked forgotten, their words soft after years of rain and snow. They slanted in every direction, crooked teeth rising from the ground. I wandered around like I was looking for something.

Bethany and I used to hold our breath when we rode past this cemetery. The school bus would reach the stones walls, and we would suck in as much air as we could. One day, another kid asked what we were doing. I told him you shouldn't breathe in front of graves. It's disrespectful. Word spread and eventually the entire bus was playing along. We plugged our noses, covered our mouths until our seat had passed the headstones. Sometimes we stopped in front of it, and everyone's face turned bright red.

A couple came in with some flowers, and I moved farther down the hill, pausing before a few modern headstones, black and shiny. When I stood over them, I saw only my face.

Your daughter,

Madeline

#

December 16, 2016

James,

Ever since the cemetery, I wonder what it would be like to stand in front of your grave. I imagine stacking these letters neatly on a stranger's headstone, and I can't tell if that makes me feel better or worse.

Your daughter,

Madeline

#

August 1, 2017

James,

These letters have piled up the past few years. I moved them under my mattress when Bethany left. The mattress ironed the crinkles out of the loose-leaf. The older ones are shadowed by pencil smears, blending the words together until it's more of a sketch than a letter. After a few glasses of wine, I sometimes go through them and consider sending one—an old one from years ago, or maybe a newer one. Doesn't really matter which. You would open the envelope with your pinky, and you would feel something, maybe. The letter would get folded into your shirt pocket. You would pretend to forget it was there, but, every time you moved, the paper would

press into your skin like a child's kiss. Even if you lost it or shredded it or stashed it in a scrapbook, you would never be able to forget that feeling.

Yours,

Madeline

WEEDING

Dandelions hadn't always bothered Tanner. In grade-school, he had hunted through the edges of playground grass until he found the tallest one to rub against his skin. That was the game they used to play. Tanner can't remember the rules or how you won, just that almost every third grader returned to class with a yellow stripe from elbow to wrist. Brett Hanson licked his once and said it tasted like grass. Tanner wondered if Brett licked that too. But the dandelions growing out of Mr. Walton's yard were not like playground dandelions, clumped at the edges. They sprouted from every crack until the yard was covered with golden clouds. Disgusting.

Bethany didn't mind, but she didn't mind much to begin with. Lint left in the dryer? Fine. Fishy smelling? Fine. Crooked, grimy dishes stacked like a Jenga tower where the next piece may cause the whole tower to collapse? Fine, fine, fine. Every night when they passed Mr. Walton's yard, Tanner would say something about the upkeep or the pollen, and Bethany would pat his elbow and tell him that it was *fine*, that dandelions weren't hurting anything.

"This is getting ridiculous," Tanner said one evening when he saw the weeds sprouting around the porch steps.

Bethany patted his arm. "They're not hurting anybody."

"But his yard *looks* bad. Surely the homeowners' association will do something."

"We have a homeowner's association?"

Bethany lived in her own world most of the time, and most of the time he accepted that. She worked for administration and technical support for the local Scholastic factory. Most days she spent in front of her computer, plugging in data and fixing problems on various databases.

When he came home, blue backlight framed her like a halo. She made good money, which was why Tanner didn't complain much.

"They're supposed to take care of this sort of thing," he said. "If the Franklins couldn't build an extra garage, this shouldn't be allowed either."

"They built a big shed."

"Because they couldn't build a garage."

"That's ridiculous. Why not?"

"There are rules against it. Just like there should be rules about yard upkeep."

Bethany began rubbing her thumb around Tanner's hand. He was sure she saw this on some television show or movie she watched. Maybe he had seen those couples too, and, with the golden haze surrounding perfectly manicured nails, he had found it romantic. In the muggy summer evening, her finger, slimy like frog skin, slid in misshapen circles and left trails of sweat across his hand. He didn't make her stop until they reached their front door. He held the door open and waited until she was inside to wipe his hand on his jeans.

His own yard was visible through the living room windows. Straight lines criss-crossed the grass. Most of the trees are in the backyard, so neighbors driving past never miss that checkerboard of green. A concrete walkway curved from the driveway to the front door. Dark soil lined each side like black ribbons, daisies and sweat peas sprouting like polka dots. The orchids sit in a special bed, just under the bedroom window. Tanner had to watch them constantly to get them to sprout. He checked on them before he left for work and then when he came and sometimes by a small circle of lamplight. Once they sprouted, it took him a few weeks to stop hovering over them.

Every weekend, Tanner mowed and pruned and planted until all the flowers sat in their bricked-off beds. His coworkers, when they came to visit, joked about his green thumb. They laughed over beers and asked why Bethany wasn't the one doing the gardening. Tanner told them she was better at fixing the Internet. He didn't mention the way the soil felt between his fingernails or how orchids reminded him of his mother.

In the lamplight, Mr. Walton's dandelions looked like a blotchy sun. Tanner wondered if he should email Molly Fletcher, head of the homeowner's association. The yard ruined the neighborhood's manicured vista. Dandelions would spill over the curb and worm their way past property lines. Tanner could imagine the coming summer months, when the flowers would bloom snowy and children would blow their wishes across the neighborhood.

He brushed his teeth, washed his face, climbed into bed, and, still, he couldn't forget Mr. Walton's dandelions.

"Maybe we should do something about it," Tanner said.

Bethany kissed his shoulder "About what?"

"Mr. Walton's yard."

"Get some sleep," she said, rolling away from him.

Tanner studied the popcorn ceiling and pretended the white specks didn't remind him of dandelion seeds.

#

Molly Fletcher wasn't hard to reach, which surprised Tanner. At the homeowner's meeting, she complained about her cellphones and technology and kids these days. An email address was listed in the newsletter header, but Tanner expected Molly would take a week to

reply. She responded immediately, asking if Tanner could meet face to face. He agreed to meet her at the end of the day.

Her yard seemed duller since the last homeowner's meeting. Tanner was used to ornate metal lawn chairs scattered under an outdoor umbrella and cooling pies sitting on the window sill. He assumed that her house always looked guest-ready. The patio umbrella rested on the ground, the folded canvas gathering dirt. The lawn chairs had been left in the corner like forgotten toys. Uprturned earth speckled the lawn, and the wind mixed fertilizer with fresh dog shit.

Tanner checked his shoes before Molly answered the door.

"Good evening Mister?" her voice trailed into a question.

"Doyle, Tanner Doyle."

"Well, what can I do for you, Mr. Doyle?"

She led him into a cluttered sitting room. Stacks of magazines and phone books were piled on one seat, folded blankets on another. An upright piano was shoved into the corner, its keys stretched into a broken smile. Lipstick-rimmed coffee mugs rested on the table. Molly did not take them into the kitchen.

"It's Mr. Walton," Tanner said.

"What about him?" Molly's lipstick cracked when she smiled, and her floral perfume did not cover up the musty smell of dead skin.

"It's about his dandelions."

"His what?"

Tanner wasn't sure how to explain. He assumed other neighbors would have complained by now. "His yard is overgrown by dandelions."

"That's all? He'll probably mow it some time this month."

Tanner straightened the coffee mugs until the handles pointed the same direction. The word *son* grated against his ears, like he was one of her grandchildren. Sometimes Bethany spoke the same way, drawing out *honey* or *sweetie* until the word didn't sound so nice.

"It's going to take more than mowing."

Molly shook her head and moved toward the piano. "You're welcome to go talk with him. We're all neighbors."

Tanner didn't mention that Molly's house wasn't in danger of seed spray. Enough houses stood between her and Mr. Walton's yard that she didn't have to worry about dandelions planting themselves in her garden. He complained to Bethany, and she just rolled her eyes. She said everything would be fine and rubbed his shoulders, like loose muscles would make the dandelions disappear. She went back to work without kissing him.

#

Bethany didn't notice when he arrived home. Her eyes never left the computer as he changed into heavy clothes and clunked into the front yard. His flowers caught the setting sun and, if he squinted, made a rainbow.

He watered the petunias, trimmed the roses without gloves, sifted through soil with bare hands. The dirt worked under his nailbeds, and, when he pressed his thumb to the side walk, he left a dark fingerprint. His yard smelled much better than Molly Fletcher's perfume. Real flowers smell green, a sharp spike that never transfers to extracts, soaps, and oils.

When they first moved in, he used to ask Bethany to help him. They dug in the earth together like children. She bought him the sweat peas for their first anniversary. Together planted the seeds and drank red wine. The next year they each buried a love note among the roots. Bethany tied hers with a pink ribbon and made him promise not to dig them up until the next year. He lasted two months. It had been raining, and the paper was soaked through the earth, wilted in his hand when he held their letters. Bethany laughed, but Tanner tried to dry them off with the hairdryer. He wondered what she had wrote. The paper cracked as it dried. Seams split words and commas until Tanner could no longer read Bethany's water-bleed handwriting.

He didn't ask her to garden with him anymore. Even when they walk together, her face glows pale, as if she carries a computer backlight in her skin.

When he finished with the sweet peas, Mr. Walton sat on his porch. A straw woven sunhat covered his head, and he used his cane to push him on the rocking chair. Tanner expected him to wave or call a greeting, but Mr. Walton just stared at the golden haze covering his yard.

"Hello," Tanner said, dusting off his jeans. He thought about trampling through the dandelions but took the sidewalk instead.

"Didn't see you there, son."

"Seasoned gardener. I've learned how to be quiet."

Mr. Walton nodded, his wrinkles wobbling a little. Freckles dotted his face and neck, and juice stained his front pocket.

"Your keep a good lawn."

"Thank you," Tanner said. "Yours is very yellow."

"Never had the green them myself. That was more my wife."

Mowing required zero gardening skills, but Tanner didn't say that. Even though she wasn't here, he knew Bethany wouldn't like it. She would call him *honey* and tell him to be nice.

"Do you need some help?" Tanner asked.

"No, no. The yard will sort itself out. It always does."

Tanner walked away without a goodbye. He stuck to the sidewalk and returned to his flowers. He tried to forget about the dandelions, about how *sort itself out* meant pollenating his yard with fluffy dandelion seed, but he couldn't. He crawled under the flower bushes, moist dirt sticking to his shirt and hair. Clods worked their way down his spine, flattening when he put his weight on them. Twigs poked his hands, left some scratches on the webbing between his fingers.

He left his boots by the door and headed to the shower. Different shades of brown whirlpooled down the drain, dry dirt mixing with dry blood like an herbal remedy. When Tanner crawled into bed, he still felt a little dirty.

#

The next morning, Tanner spotted a dandelion on Mrs. Hattlebrook's lawn. Three of them clumped together under Mr. Anderson's azalea's they day after. All week, yellow. Fuzz sprouted in lawns and gardens like five-a-clock shadows. He sought at Molly Fletcher after work again. She didn't invite him inside, kept him on the doorstep as he asked her to please do something about the weeds.

"It's almost summer," she said. "Dandelions happen."

"They're infecting the whole neighborhood. You have to do something." Evenings had grown muggy, and sweat trickled into Tanner's socks.

"There's no official rule. I can't make Richard do anything he doesn't want to."

Tanner had never heard Mr. Walton's first name. When the old man managed to attend meetings, picnics, and birthdays, everyone called him Mr. Walton.

"I can do some yard work for him."

"He might not like that, son."

"Richard needs the help," Tanner said, trying out the name. He thought using Mr. Walton's first name would make him sound more authoritative, but the familiarity felt strange in his mouth, the syllables sticking in his throat like half-sucked candy.

Molly shrugged. "You should talk to him. It's his yard."

Tanner wanted to say the epidemic would eventually reach *his* yard if someone didn't push a lawnmower over the weeds. Instead, he said goodbye. Molly's still green yard made it easier for her to do nothing.

Bethany was waiting in the living room. Her knees peeked through large jean holes, and she held a small trowel in one hand. She wore a sunhat even though it was evening. She told him digging the weeds would be good for them, that it had been a long time since they'd dug around in the earth. Tanner knelt next to her, not caring that his slacks would probably be ruined. Together, they trimmed the stems and made sure all the flowers had a window of sunlight. Bethany smiled at him, and her face turned old—not Molly Fletcher old, with crow lines webbing her eyes, but worn shoes old. She was the kind of old that grew tired of trying.

"Why now?" Tanner asked.

"You've been stressed lately," she said, placing a gloved hand on his shoulder. Her hand left a muddy shadow on his shoulder.

“We can do something else if you want. Gardening is more my thing.” He didn’t say it used to be their thing, but he meant that.

Bethany lay down the gardening tools and went inside, her face blank like a blue-screen computer. Hinges squeaked, the spring keeping the screen door from slamming shut. Tanner pruned and manicured even though the streetlights would come on soon. He stayed with his flowers, afraid to go inside and find Bethany gone, afraid to find her still there. Shadows stretched into darkness, shading the neighborhood a sea-deep blue.

He found her in bed, asleep or pretending to be. For a moment, she looked young again. He returned to the living room after a shower, his clothes piled on the bathroom floor, probably ruined. He watched late night news at a whisper, the announcers and stories fuzzing together until he almost forgot the dandelion threat and Bethany’s face when she left him kneeling with flower bushes.

#

Tanner immediately went for the sweat peas. He took a rusted shovel and stomped. The blade bit into the soil like a birthday cake, sweet and easy. Dirt clods dangled over the edge as he removed the dirt one scoop at a time. A couple of times his grip slipped on the handle, the shovel driving into the roots. He wasn’t trying to hurt the plant. He wanted to plant another rose bush, that was all. Severed roots heal after a time. Besides, roses were easier to maintain—Mrs. Hattlebrook said hers survived two summers of Japanese beetles—and the garden needed more red.

Bethany checked on him a couple times but always through the screen door.

By the time the hole was deep enough, sweat had dried against his skin, and his face prickled with future sunburn. He laid the peony bush on the ground. The leaves and petals that had fallen off already surrounded the plant like funeral wreath. Tanner expected Bethany to say something, but there was no one behind the screen door when he checked.

He didn't know much about disposing of flowers. Tanner was more interested in planting and growing them, cultivating flowers. None of his bushes died, and he wasn't sure how to get rid of a mangled peony bush. Trash-bags might do. They kept lawn-sized plastic bags in the garage and only used them for fall leave leaves and grass clippings. Tanner supposed they could be used for flower disposal too.

He was flapping open the bag when he saw Mr. Walton. The old man was nodding from his rocking chair, the dandelions still spread through most of his lawn. His smile was crooked, half-cocked like a western gun-slinger. Tanner figured the shovel was already dirty.

Methodically, he dug out a small circle among the dandelion field. The shovel's handle caught on his callouses, and he couldn't smell the flowers over the rich earth and sweat. Gold stains hemmed his boots and his jeans, and he wondered if some gold had worked its way into his nails. Molly Fletcher waved from her afternoon walk while Mr. Walton kept rocking back and forth, the chair never making a sound. He thought Bethany said something at one point, but she sounded far away.

The result was ridiculous. The bush leaned, stems wrapped around each other like Twizzlers. Flower petals, leaves, and twigs trailed back to the bare hole in Tanner's yard. The broken, sweat pea plant sat in the center of Mr. Walton's yard, haloed by dandelions.

Bethany was in their yard. She stared at his wounded flower bed, loose soil dripped into the hole, slowly filling the rootless space. Her sun hat was gone, her hands damp from a recent washing. She cried, and Tanner remembered that she used to be beautiful.

COUNTRY MILE

At 4 a.m., Mary Ruth got out of bed with cinnamon on her tongue.

She slid her feet into slippers and tiptoed to the kitchen. Tiptoeing was habit. She used to do it around her sleepy husband and children. Then her children started their own families, and her husband passed last year. The only time she *really* needed to tiptoe was during holidays, when the grandkids camped in the living room waiting for Santa or the Easter Bunny.

In the kitchen, Mary Ruth rustled through cabinets and the fridge, pretending to search for apple pie ingredients even though she knew the only thing missing was apples. Green and tart and crisp, those were the only kind of apples you bake into pies—her mama taught her that. She remembered summer days spent peeling the green skin into the trash. When she was too young to hold a peeling knife, she twisted away the stems. Sometimes, her daddy drove her into town to fetch something else for the pie, like brown sugar or nutmeg. After banging her knee a couple times, he boosted her into the seat. Sweat glued her skin to the vinyl, and when he felt like it, he would let her roll down the window and stick her arms out like a single airplane wing. The air pushed against Mary Ruth's cotton dress, and she pretended she could fly. Now she rode next to her daughter, air conditioning turned down low in case it gave her the sniffles.

The sun peeked through her plaid curtains—well, really *Katrina's* plaid curtains, because Katrina hadn't liked the ones from Mary Ruth's childhood home. They're too musty, she had said as they landed in the dumpster. Mary Ruth smiled and pretended the plaid was nice, but she couldn't look at them without remembering the flowery pattern that framed the windows of her parents living room, then later her own. The bright plaid felt like a neon sign in her kitchen.

Her doctors—well the doctors Katrina found for her— liked to remind her that she was seventy-five and couldn't pretend any different. Mary Ruth found them a bit silly. She might be old, but she was still sturdy. She knew to avoid marathons and tree climbing, but she could make her own darned toast. Whenever she came back from a walk, Katrina fussed over her hips and her ankles, brushing each joint like an eggshell.

Mary Ruth was careful though. She didn't drive—oh no, she was too smart for that. Things ten feet away blurred into colorful snowballs, and she squinted to press the microwave buttons. She didn't even own a car. Katrina fretted over the rickety Jeep so much that Mary Ruth finally sold it to someone with a sixteen-year-old daughter. Whenever she needed to go someplace, she asked the neighbors or Katrina to take her. She preferred the neighbors. Katrina kept the air conditioning low in case she caught a chill. Once Mary Ruth tried rolling down the window, but Katrina said it was broken.

When the clock chimed eight—Mary Ruth insisted on keeping a clock that rang the hour, even though Katrina thought a digital one would be easier to see—she called Katrina.

“Is it urgent?” Katrina's voice turned to static sometimes, as if she were bustling from one place to another. “I'm running late, and I need to drop off the kids at school soon.”

“That's fine sweetie. I can just ask the neighbors.”

Mary Ruth had no intention of asking the neighbors. Yesterday afternoon, they piled into a minivan for a family vacation. She planned on walking to the grocery store by herself.

Katrina wouldn't approve—the nearest one was a mile down the highway. She would forget that the highway was small, dotted with pastures and farm animals. As long as she hugged

the fences—and Mary Ruth *always* hugged the fences—she would be fine. She even wore a bright, orange cardigan so drivers could see her, just in case.

Morning traffic was light. A car pattered by every few minutes, and sometimes people rolled down a window and waved. Mary Ruth waved back with her free hand. The other never left the fence. Not for balance, just to keep her away from the asphalt. She walked her fingers along the wire as if it was tightrope, barely touching the twisty barbs that appeared every six inches.

A cow grazed so close that Mary Ruth could pet it through the fence. She liked cows, unlike her children. Their patties lined the road her daddy used to drive into town. The earthy smell reminded her of summer and sun and home. She learned how to spot them in grassy fields, so she didn't have to ask mama to wash shit off her shoes again. It was simple really—you just had to look where you stepped. Katrina said everyone *already* does that, but Mary Ruth had seen her stomp on a Lego once.

A teenage girl leaned out a backseat window, her hair a flapping, golden flag. She yelled *moo* over the engine drone, but the car whizzed her down the highway before the cow bothered to move. Its tail flicked casually as if to swat away the sound. Mary Ruth frowned. She knew the moo was for the cow—she had done the same thing as girl, hoping a herd would echo her call—but sometimes she still felt like it was aimed at her.

Sweat beaded her shoulders by the time she arrived at the store. Although clearly a grocery now, the current owner kept the building's gas station skeleton. The metal awning and beams marked where the pumps had stood. Herman told her it seemed wrong to tear it all down, especially when he could put it to good use. Picnic tables topped with red-checkered cloth waited

for people to pause under the shade and buy some lemonade from children charging a quarter. The years of wet glass left wrinkled rings in the fabric.

The door clanked when she opened it, the cowbell swinging from a yellow nylon rope. Herman improvised the door chime years ago. The device held a rustic charm that made Mary Ruth smile.

“Make yourself at home, Mary Ruth.” Herman look up from his box of potato chips and pretzels. He knew it was her. She was the only one who visited this early.

The empty store still felt crowded. Space between the aisles them felt warm and stuffy. Mary Ruth wandered, fingering packages of candy that she didn’t want or need. She liked coming early. If she stretched, she could touch each side of the aisle. Not that she had problems getting from one place to another—she could proudly walk from one end of the room to another without touching a single chair. She liked having the option. You could never be too careful.

Herman only stocked a small selection of fresh produce, claiming that most of his customers grew their own. He had converted an old ice cream freezer into a storage place for vegetables and fruits when they arrived. Old wooden crates separated lettuce from carrots. Somehow, the apples always ended up near the bottom. Mary Ruth wasn’t sure if that was because people went to the nearest Wal-Mart, or if Herman hid them so he could take them home at day’s end.

On her tiptoes, she hoisted a crate of green apples, grunting a little. The box was heavier than she expected. She waddled them to the register and, with Herman’s help, placed her prize on the countertop.

“You need *all* of these?” He flapped open a plastic bag.

“Just a handful. Making apple pie today.”

Herman winked and asked her to leave him a slice.

Mary Ruth chuckled and shook her head. Herman winked at every woman who rang the nylon-strung cowbell. Younger girls stared, whispered behind their hands, but Mary Ruth knew Herman had been happily married for fifteen years. When they were younger, He and Sharon used to host barbecues on their lawn. Mary Ruth and her husband would bring the kids and sip beer as they fished for tadpoles with their hands.

Mary Ruth left the store to find the air had thickened. Heat hung around her shoulder's like a hot towel. The apples grew uncomfortably heavy on her arm. The bag dug into her hand, then her elbow, then her shoulder, then her hand again. Even switching from left arm to right didn't ease the weight.

Cars passed more frequently, their wind tugging at her skirt. Hardly anybody waved. Mary Ruth felt her skin redden, and she wished she had brought sunscreen, or at least a hat. Cow patties baked on the ground, their outer skin clotting in dark chunks. The smell never faded. The thick odor rose in waves so that you never really got used to the stink. Shit lingered in the air, reminding you that cows were nearby. It was so strong she even checked her shoes just to make sure she hadn't stepped in any.

Even though they could have trotted towards water or shade, cows mingled by the fenceposts, their jaws circling round and round as they worked their cud. One even mooed at Mary Ruth. She smiled, stretched to pet the spotted fur. As she pulled back, her bag snagged on a twisted spike, splitting open like a smile. Green apples spilled from the gash, hitting the ground with heavy, deep thuds.

Behind her, an engine shifted from a growl to a purr.

“Need some help, grandma?” A boy propped himself on the passenger window. His sunglasses reflected her own face, and she could barely make out the driver.

“Could I trouble you boys for a bag?” She raised the torn plastic.

“Sure thing. Sure thing,” the boy said. He reached behind his seat, his spine a pretzel. He fumbled around a bit before extending a brown paper bag through the window.

Mary Ruth stepped towards the window, and the car inched forward. She took another step only for it to happen again. The driver snickered, and so did the other boy, the bag still held out for her.

She crossed her arms. “I may be old, but I’m not stupid.”

“I’ll give you the bag this time. Promise, granny.”

She squinted, trying to recall their names. She knew she’d seen them somewhere, maybe leaving dark, liquid rings on Herman’s picnic tables or hiking up the hill where high schoolers laid under the stars and sipped beers. The bag flapped in the breeze.

“You’d better be happy I’m not your granny. If I was, you would’ve been sleeping out in the field with the other jackasses.”

Mary Ruth thought that was pretty clever. For a second, she even imagined them slack-jawed like stunned chickens. The one holding the bag bit his lip, and she saw the driver cover his face—and for a second, she believed she had certainly showed *them*. She marched back towards the fence, steps straight and proud. Because she was focused on her spilled apples and the fence, she did not watch where she stepped and she folded to the ground. Her leg landed with a squelch,

popping open a crusted cow turd. It oozed around her skin, the stink of spit and grass and mud filling the air around her.

When she looked up, the boy with sunglasses hurried towards her, his door still ajar. Air conditioning funneled in her direction.

“Let us give you a ride home, ma’am,” he said.

“I’d rather walk,” she said.

The boy grabbed her elbow, eased her to her feet like a newly placed scarecrow. “Please, ma’am. It’s the least we can do.”

Mary Ruth’s knee was raw, and her hip was a little sore. Walking home would be unpleasant. She nodded and let him guide her into the backseat. The cow patty was drying on her leg, scabbing over in thick globs she could peel away with her fingernail. She did not touch it, afraid to muddy the nice car.

Without a reminder, the boy retrieved her apples and piled them into her lap. He and the driver asked for directions to her house and eased onto the road. Everyone ignored the smell filling the car. Mary Ruth polished the dirt from her apples. One by one, she shined them with the edge of her cardigan until the dirt rusted her sleeve.

“Where do you live, ma’am?”

She didn’t like being a *ma’am*, had never liked being called ma’am. Even when she was ma’amed in her late twenties, the phrase aged her. Now she was crunched by the word.

“Ma’am?”

“Sorry,” she lied. “I was just thinking.”

“I asked where you lived, ma’am.”

The boy in the passenger seat snickered. Mary Ruth considered throwing an apple at his head. That would show them who was a ma'am.

“Call me Mary Ruth.”

“Pleased to meet you. I'm Charlie.”

Mary Ruth was not pleased. Charlie drove well under the speed limit now, waiting for her address. His friend, introduced as Nate, propped his feet on the dash. She wondered if her grandchildren acted like these two boys, wild and sloppy and careful only when someone watched. Had her girls? Had she? She fingered the bruised apples, the internal mush rearranging against pressure. When was the last time she studied her hands? Leathery skin sagged at the knuckles, spilled over her wedding ring. Her whole body felt like a callous.

“Where's your house, Mary Ruth?” Charlie asked. He had pulled over now, turned around to face her. “Are we going the right direction?”

“Yes, yes. I would have told you to turn around already.”

“What's your address? We can pull it up on the GPS.” Charlie's voice was soft, soothing. He sounded like Katrina, speaking to her with that same deliberate pacing of parents coaxing a child to bed.

“I'll tell you when to turn,” she said.

“It's easier with the GPS,” Nate said.

“I will tell you when to turn.”

Nate's pecked his phone, the device making a tapping noise even though there were no keys. Mary Ruth wondered how these smooth phones worked for people who could not see, who relied on their fingertips to read. Maybe it was a good thing she still had a landline. Years and

use had rubbed the numbers away, but she could still feel braille. Sometimes Mary Ruth took off her glasses, let the kitchen turn to watercolors, and traced the plastic bumps. If she practiced, she might learn the language of touch. She would navigate her home with her hands and know her children and grandchildren by their facial landscapes.

The pastures looked strange from the backseat. Creek beds and cedar clusters checkered the farmland like a quilt. Mary Ruth traced the horizon on the window glass, her finger leaving an oily squiggle. When the road cut through a hill, exposed limestone rising on either side, Mary Ruth knew she missed the turn.

She told Charlie to find the nearest exit, apologized for making him turn around.

“I told you we should use the GPS,” Nate said. “She doesn’t know where’s she going.”

“I was just distracted.” Her voice sounded like a little girl again.

“Happens to everyone,” Charlie said. He exchanged a smile with Nate, a secret smile that she wasn’t supposed to understand because she was old.

Mary Ruth understood that these boys thought her frail and small and memory-gapped. They thought she couldn’t remember things like her home or her family or the way sycamore bark peeled from the trunk like dry skin. And she couldn’t say no, because she needed them. Her hip was sore, her feet ached. The afternoon heat was visible, hovering above the pavement.

When they arrived at her house, Charlie helped her out of the car, offered to walk her to the front door. She wanted to tell him to stop behaving like a pretend-gentleman.

“No, thank you,” she said. “I’ll be fine.”

Her hip hurt more—each step felt like another bruise against her joint. By the time she reached the front door, she was limping. She did not look back, did not want to see the shiny

young boys sitting in their shiny young-boy car. They said *good-bye ma'am*, and Mary Ruth wished she could correct them.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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