

RED TIDE
AND OTHER STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Red Tide and Other Stories is a fictional collection of eleven short stories in which characters react to their struggles with loss, frustration, regret, loneliness, and love. Each story presents a strong sense of place and moment, while examining how characters are influenced by these elements. While individual stories present new characters and scenarios, they are connected by elements of water and include aspects of coasts and shorelines in the setting of the real world. The commonality of water in the stories works to demonstrate a connectivity between all people and cultures because water is shared and linked between continents without regard to socioeconomics or political boundaries drawn throughout the world. Regardless of these drawn boundaries, we all share grief and disappointment, just as we share water.

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WATERLOGGED

Lewis couldn't remember the last time the sun warmed his skin. The rain seemed normal now. Outer bands of hurricane wind whispered through rustled palm fronds, telling Lewis something, but when he tried to listen, the breeze stopped. The last weather report that Lewis saw on the TV when he was drinking coffee at The Conch Diner showed the hurricane still out at sea, probably heading to the Yucatan Peninsula. He went to the diner once in a while to catch up on news. About six months ago, a month after Melanie left, he cancelled cable TV. Then about five months ago he realized that he wasn't interested in anything on the internet. When his phone contract expired three months ago, he closed his account.

Two days ago, he caught the news while eating at the diner, but Lewis wasn't worried. He'd been through this before. To him, it felt more like an offshore storm. Within a few hours this storm would probably slip past, just out of reach of the cord of keys and bridges that ran through the shallow waters off Florida's southern tip. Yesterday's mandatory tourist evacuation left the islands abandoned. So, as the sun rose over rippled water, Lewis stood with the rain lashing his face to hear what his island sounded like without the hum of truck tires and motorcycles accelerating on Overseas Highway. The polyethylene-paneled door of his mobile home flapped open and shut in the wind.

A silver Honda sped along the dirt road that ran in front of Lewis's house. When it slowed to turn into his driveway, he knew that it was Melanie. Lewis wanted to run to the car, but he didn't move. The car stopped a few feet from him. Melanie lowered the window and waved for Lewis to come over. Limestone gravel crunched under Lewis's flip flops.

"Hey," Lewis said. "Good to see you." He bent down to look into the car.

“The mandatory evacuation should go into effect by the afternoon,” Melanie said. “You need to get out of here.”

“Seriously? We probably won’t even get hit. And Sweetie, you know that I can’t leave the fish.”

“You can’t be serious, Lewis. There are always more fish.”

“These are our fish, Sweetie. You caught as many as I did.”

“Lewis. Don’t be stupid,” Melanie said. “I’ve got to go. Traffic is still backed up along the stretch into Homestead.”

“You can always hunker down here with me, Sweetie.”

“No way, Lewis. And stop calling me Sweetie.”

“I know that you hate traffic, so if you turn back, I’ll be here. I have enough food for both of us. And you can help me with the fish. Okay, Sweetie?”

“Lewis! I don’t have time for this. You need to get out of here.” Her window closed before Lewis could respond. She drove across the lawn leaving deep tire tracks flooded with water and headed out the main road.

Lewis hopped in his ’95 Toyota pickup, started it, and gave it some extra gas as the idle dropped in rpms. For once, there was almost a full tank. He’d filled up the day he went to the diner.

Melanie’s sweatshirt lay wadded on the seat beside him. He held the soft fabric against his face. He searched for her smell, only finding the musky scent of his truck’s interior. Lewis backed his truck up to his trailered Boston Whaler parked on the narrow strip of grass between his back stoop and the line of Bay Cedars. There wasn’t any dry ground in this low spot of the yard. The boat trailer tires were already in about a quarter inch of water. Lewis moved the truck

and boat over to a higher part of the yard. If he decided to leave, he wanted the truck ready. The sagging blue boat cover held puddles of water. He swung Malanie's sweatshirt over his shoulder and lifted a corner of the boat cover. A cascade of water splashed into a puddle of water on the other side.

He stacked the bins from the truck bed, and placed them inside the house, beside a row of fish tanks. Fluorescent tank light and the sound of bubbling filters with mini waterfalls filled the living room. Macie lay cuddled on the sofa with her legs tucked underneath her body. Her black and tan coloring made her look more like a shadow than a dog. Normally she'd follow Lewis everywhere, but she hated the rain. Her short dachshund legs caused her chest and belly drag over the wet grass, so she stayed on the sofa even after the rain stopped for a few minutes. Lewis threw Melanie's sweatshirt on the sofa next to Macie and he used it as a pillow. Macie cuddled next to him on the wadded sleeve. In one of the 40-gallon tanks, a spotfin butterflyfish darted in and out of the light, its yellow fins vibrated in the florescence. The black band down its steep forehead and across its eye and its pointed snout made it head seem disproportionately small. Melanie had said that butterflyfish looked like women with bad nose jobs. But they were easy to catch since they liked to hide around seawalls and jetties, so Lewis sold a lot of butterflyfish. He also sold a lot of anemone and sea urchins. His tanks were filled with different species of sea creatures allowed under his wholesaler and retail license. Most of his stock began with harvesting from nearby reefs and shorelines with Melanie. She'd care for the coolers and buckets of fish while Lewis searched for more. They had often spent the night out on the Boston Whaler, sometimes searching for more stock, sometimes just sleeping under the dark offshore night sky.

"He's probably hungry," Lewis said, still watching the butterflyfish. "But I can't feed them."

Macie's ears perked at the word hungry. Lewis had reduced Macie's meals over the last few days since she would willingly go outside only when the rain stopped for a few minutes. Even then, she'd stand on the front porch, lifting her feet off the deck one-by-one while waiting for Lewis to let her back inside.

The butterflyfish continued in spurted circles.

"Sorry, dude, but we gotta keep your tank clean just in case the power goes out." Lewis rolled over on the couch and parted the window blinds. "It's not raining, Macie. Time to go out."

Macie hesitated as Lewis stood. She watched him walk to the door.

"Come on, girl. It's the driest that it's gonna be for a while."

He patted his thigh and she crept to the door. "Let's go." As Lewis opened the door, wind caught it and the door slammed against the home's vinyl siding. Macie startled past. "It's OK, girl. Go. Pee."

The front deck was saturated, so Macie delicately tiptoed down the steps. She squatted in the wet grass and relieved herself. Immediately, she ran up the steps and stood with her nose at the doorframe.

"That's all, Macie?"

Macie looked up at him and looked back at the door. He cracked it open and she pushed it further open with her nose and ran inside. She shook the water off her belly and jumped back on the sofa.

Lewis started to organize the things that he would need if the power went out. He checked a box in the kitchen to see how many battery-operated water filters and working flashlights he had.

It was raining again, but Lewis stayed outside to close the hurricane shutters. He left a small gap in the shutter that covered the living room window. The gap left the window exposed, but he couldn't stand to be inside a pitch-dark house without being able to see what was going on outside. As he walked around to each window, he realized that the ground was under water all around the home.

Back inside the house, the sliver of sunlight from the gap in the shutter cut across the living room and through one of the big fish tanks. Lewis left the front door open while he got the camp lantern from the kitchen. He set it beside the sofa and pushed Macie off the sofa.

“Come on, girl. One more chance to go outside.”

He carried Macie and placed her down on the wet grass. She stood there without moving, and looked up at Lewis. Lewis stepped away and she followed, delicately placing her feet in the shallow water. Lewis carried her back inside. He turned off some of the tank lights and cuddled on the sofa with Melanie's sweatshirt. Macie crept next to him. Rain splattered against the window in breezy spurts.

#

It was dark. Really dark. For a moment Lewis thought that he was sleeping on the boat cushions with Melanie.

“Macie?”

Macie shifted closer to Lewis. Wind wailed outside. In his fog of sleep Lewis wasn't sure where the sound was coming from. It seemed to be from a living creature.

Then Lewis realized that all of the tank lights were off.

“The power's out?” He jumped up from the sofa and found his feet in two inches of water. After searching with his hands in the dark for the camp lantern, he realized that the house

was flooded. Lewis walked with slushy splashes behind each tank, unplugged the filters, and pulled the filters out of the tanks. The filters could already be full of harmful waste after sitting without water circulation. He grabbed the battery-operated filters from the box and set them up in each tank. With a dim flashlight, he checked on the fish. Lewis made small splashes on the tanks' water surface to add oxygen. As he looked closely at each fish he remembered the trips with Melanie to collect them. One night they didn't find any fish. Melanie told him that she didn't mind not catching any because it left more fish in the ocean to live free.

Lewis regretted not leaving a gap in one of the hurricane shutters that faced the back yard. He couldn't see anything outside, but water was creeping in under the doors. Behind the sofa, where Macie was shivering, the front deck railings were visible through the slit between the shutters, but that was all. The front of the house faced north, so Lewis didn't try to open it. He returned to the back door and stood holding the doorknob, not sure if he should risk opening the door. As he held the knob, he could feel the wind pushing and sucking the door in bursts. Lewis turned the knob and tried to push it open. It didn't budge. He shouldered it and opened the door with a tiny gap. A rolling wave of water came inside. He only got a peek at the back yard, but it looked like a small sea. The boat had floated off the trailer and rested against the tree line. The truck was covered with water up to the door windows. The wind began to pull to door open, so Lewis put all his weight on the door knob and pulled the door shut with a slam. He locked the door and leaned against it.

Lewis returned to the sofa and Macie climbed on his lap and whimpered.

"Don't worry girl. I locked the door." Lewis laughed and strained to hear over the sound of the wind if the pumps were running. He shined the flashlight on the tanks and saw a sea of creatures behind glass seeming to move with the rhythm of the wind.

Lewis shined the light on the brass barometer that was on the wall when he moved in. He stood to look closer and tapped on the plastic case to be sure that the needle wasn't stuck. The barometric pressure was below 930 mbar, but he couldn't remember if that was normal or not.

Lewis return to the sofa, where Macie had perched on the arm. The water had risen almost to the seat cushions. He pressed his hand on the seat and it felt like a wet sponge. Lewis tucked the flashlight under his arm and picked up Macie. He carried her to the kitchen counter and placed her on a dry kitchen towel. She shivered and tried to shake the water from her fur. Lewis went back to the sofa for Melanie's sweatshirt. Only the cuff of the sleeve was wet. He sat on the countertop, wrapped her in the sweatshirt, and held her against his chest. He leaned back against the cabinet and turned off the flashlight. In the dark, it felt like they were lost in an underwater cave.

Lewis wasn't sure what time it was. He assumed that it was still nighttime because there wasn't any light coming from the gap in the hurricane shutter. He leaned on the countertop, put his head on a dishtowel, and cuddled with Macie. Every few minutes he turned on the flashlight to check that the filters were still operating. After listening to the storm in the dark, Lewis got restless and slipped down from the countertop. He left Macie on the counter while he went over to scoop and pour water in the tanks. The fish rose closer to the top of the water with the possibility of being fed.

He aerated the last tank and noticed a little bit of glowing light from outside. Just as he was heading back to the kitchen to sit with Macie, there was loud crashing and a thud. The kitchen seemed to blow into pieces. Lewis pulled slabs of wall and ceiling out of the way and saw that a large telephone pole had fallen over the kitchen. He rushed over to where Macie had been but didn't see her. After pulling more debris off of the kitchen counter, he finally found her

still wrapped in the sweatshirt. She jumped in his arms. Just as he picked up the sweatshirt from the counter, the wall of cabinets and countertops tipped back into the water. The sound of crashing plates could be heard over the wind as the cabinets disappeared under the dark water surface.

The open end of the house let in an onslaught of wind and rain. Lewis dropped Macie and he was knocked down into the water. He struggled to stand among his floating belongings and pulled Macie out of the water. She doggie paddled her little legs in the air until Lewis put her against his chest. He struggled to stand with Macie in his arms. His feet slid in different directions and he tried to hold Macie with one arm and grab hold of the top of the fish tank, but she squirmed without his arms' complete support.

Lewis searched for a place to set Macie down out of the water. All the kitchen cabinets were gone, so the only other high surface was on top of the fish tanks. Most of the black plastic covers had blown off with the gust of wind that came when the end of the house opened up. He carried Macie over to one tank that still had the cover and tried to place her on top. She struggled to stay in his arms, but he got her to stay on the plastic surface. Her feet slid on the slippery surface and the plastic cracked.

Lewis looked for another place, but no surface was high enough. Even the back of the sofa was underwater. Lewis thought about his boat. He walked through the floating debris. With no light in the hallway to the back door, he shuffled his feet until he hit a wall. He cuddled Macie with his left arm and searched for the doorknob under the water. He turned it and pushed, but it wouldn't open. He pushed more and it didn't budge. Lewis threw his right shoulder against the door while turning the knob. It gave way a tiny bit and closed again. He tried again. The same thing. He couldn't open the door with Macie in his arms. He floated the sweatshirt on the water's

surface and placed Macie on the shirt. It wasn't enough to hold her up, but it kept her nearby as she paddled in a circle over the cotton island. Then he threw all his weight against the door. Still, it didn't fully open. Macie clawed at his ribs for him to pick her up again. He tried to open the door again. This time it swung open enough for him to see outside. The waterlogged door had swelled and the bottom of the door dragged on the rear stoop.

Lewis grabbed the loose arm of the sweatshirt and pulled Macie toward him. He held her tight in his arms.

“I'm sorry girl. Forgive me.”

She shivered and licked his chin. The fresh gust of wind blew the door open wider and the top of the door jamb split off the house. Now the door hung open and Lewis could see outside. The limited daylight revealed that the whole island was covered with the water surge. He searched for his truck, but didn't see it. The glow of his white boat in the dim light showed that it was on its side against the top of the trees. The sideways position left the hull too steep for them to climb.

Lewis carried Macie back inside the living room. The sun was rising and the room was silvery grey. But the wind seemed to be building even more now. He couldn't stand and hold her like this for much longer. Lewis dropped her in the water again, this time near the submerged sofa. Macie swam around in circles probably because her toenails touched the back of the sofa. Lewis stood behind one of his 50-gallon tanks. He pushed it with all his strength. It didn't budge. He tried again and still it didn't move. Lewis grabbed a 2x4 floating on the surface of the water and wedged it underneath the tank. He pushed down as hard as he could and the tank turned over on its side, spilling most of its contents. He rushed to the other side. Some butterflyfish were stuck in a crevice of rocks left in the tank. They flopped and fluttered trying to return to the

water. Lewis scooped them, careful not to rip their fins, and released them in the deep waters of his home. He pushed out the remaining anemones and sponges. He imagined them sinking to his living room floor. Lewis took the board and used it as a lever to stand the fish tank upright. He went back to where he'd left Macie. She was swimming in circles in the place where the sofa should be. The sweatshirt trailed behind her. He pulled her from the water and she panted with deep breaths in his arms.

Lewis held her over the top of the fish tank. The rim of the tank was so high that he couldn't get his elbows past the edge. The sweatshirt hung from her and dripped water inside. She doggie paddled in the air. He couldn't gently place her in the tank from his position. He looked around for something to stand on, but the wind was getting much stronger. He had difficulty standing. He took her back in his arms, removed the shirt, and wringed out as much water as he could with one hand. He tossed it in the bottom of the tank, held Macie above the shirt and dropped her into the tank. She scrambled to stand on the wet glass, her tiny feet scratching in different directions.

Lewis climbed the tank stand, one of the few solid wood surfaces in his house. He'd built the stand himself to hold this tank that Melanie gave him for his birthday. The house creaked with his movements. Just as he was above the surface, the wind came in a gust and pushed him back down into the cold water. He climbed again, his hands wet and slippery. Finally, he was high enough to throw his leg over the fish tank rim, and gently placed his foot next to Macie. Aquarium rocks crunched under his bare feet. Macie jumped up on her hind legs, clawing at his leg for him to pick her up. Inside the tank, he crouched, hunkered down behind the glass, and pulled Macie into his lap. Lewis stretched his legs out as far as he could and fell asleep in a puddle of water.

#

Before Lewis opened his eyes, he felt the pink glow of sunlight through his eyelids. He opened his eyes expecting the reality of grayness and wind. But the sun was bright. He stretched out his arms and legs to accept the warmth. Macie lay across his lap, also stretched in the sunlight. The wind had stopped.

Lewis looked around his home. His fish-collection buckets and boxes floated on the surface of the water. Sunlight from the space of the missing kitchen shined through green water. He could see the furniture underneath the water. Reef fish circled around his sofa. He saw the yellow glimmer of the butterflyfish.

Lewis climbed over the edge of the tank. He lowered himself into the water, especially cold on his skin. Macie watched him, but didn't stand to follow. Lewis walked to the next tank. He watched the trumpetfish, seahorses, and blue tang inside. The blue tang rose to the surface as he approached. They were hungry. Lewis found a board again, maybe the same one from before, placed it under the back of the tank and crashed the tank on its side. All the fish emptied from the tank into the green water. Lewis went to the next tank full of damselfish and angelfish. They were soon circling his living room. He turned over all the other tanks except where Macie rested and watched behind the glass.

Soon Lewis was standing in his own manmade reef. Fish circled his legs and his sofa. The huddled under floating books and pictures. Some plastic canisters of fish food floated through the living room.

“Here you go, kids. Eat up.” Lewis sprinkled as much fish food he could find. Fish sprinted to the surface for their bite and returned to the depths of his living room. From the opening that was his kitchen, Lewis could see a double rainbow spread over the island.

The brass barometer on its wood mount floated near him. The barometric pressure was below 900. Maybe lower was better and the hurricane had passed. He looked and found a bottle of fresh water. The rest had washed out into his yard. As soon as he turned back to Macie’s tank, the clouds cut out the sunshine and the wind picked up again. She looked eager for him to return. He climbed back up the tank stand with seawater pouring out of his pockets and back inside with Macie. He took a swig from the water. Then he cupped his hand so Macie could lap some fresh water.

The wind rapidly picked up again to as strong as it had been earlier. Pieces of the home shifted with each gust.

“Please. Leave!” Lewis said. He didn’t know if he could make it through another long stretch of wind and water.

But it continued, and the water rose higher than before. Soon, the water was level with the top of the tank stand and Lewis felt like his fish tank was floating on the surface of the water. But after another stretch of wind gusts, the water was rising above the bottom of the tank. He saw the reflection of his feet and legs on the shiny glass surface of the tank walls. Soon after, he could see the reflection of Macie in his lap wrapped in the sweatshirt.

Lewis couldn’t bear to hear the wind anymore. He couldn’t stand to see any more pieces of his home torn from the walls. He closed his eyes and stroked Macie’s wet hair.

#

When Lewis opened his eyes again, the water was a few inches from the top of the fish tank. Macie shivered in his lap. He couldn't hear the wind anymore. In fact, he couldn't hear anything. It was silent. He tried to look out the glass wall of the aquarium, but he mostly saw his reflection. He shifted his body so he could see the world better outside of the tank. The glass wall of the tank allowed him to see above and below the water at the same time. Enough sunlight came through so he could make out the shape of the underwater sofa. The front door had been blown off and sunlight came through the opening. Lewis looked for anything else he could recognize.

A formation of five butterflyfish swam past the tank. As they kept swimming around the living room, Lewis leaned his head against the glass. He saw all the other breeds of fish that he had collected. They grouped in clumps underneath anything floating. Some damselfish were collected under a picture frame. The photo was crinkled from the water, but it was a picture of Lewis and Melanie on the boat and buckets of fish in the background.

In the back of the living room, near the hallway he saw something large move. He squinted, but he couldn't see it any clearer through the water, but he thought that he saw Melanie's long hair drifting about the form. It even had the same shape and when it moved again, it moved the same way that he'd seen Melanie swim a million times. Then it disappeared.

WHERE YA FROM?

Sugar cane is brutal. Andre's hands and forearms are covered with patches of small, sharp, translucent hairs, almost invisible. He feels them press into his skin like flexible shards of glass anytime he rubs against something. His grandfather had told him stories of hot days in Trinidad, hunched over and swinging a machete close to the ground with the sun on his back, but Andre had no idea what that meant until now. Even Andre's father did it for years when he was young, before he found his job as a cook in a resort. Andre's father brought his wife and son to the U.S. As an immigrant, he worked late at night, early in the morning, and all through the day. All this so he could save enough money to send Andre to college, so Andre would have more opportunities. And now, Andre stands in the yard at Angola, stacking stalks of sugar cane in the prison yard, tearing up his hands that were meant to escape this type of labor.

Bonnie, the mule, clops around the circle surrounding the metal grinder. Blinders shadow her eyes and the metal jingles where the bit connects to the bridle and harness. The mule-powered grinder is used by the Louisiana State Penitentiary for only the short period of the sugar syrup harvest. The field of sugar cane to be hand-cut takes up an acre of the grounds and the syrup is sold in the gift shop at the Angola Museum. Nearby, a crop of mustard greens are being picked by other inmates. Once the corrections officer heard Andre's Trinidadian accent, he considered him Jamaican. "You Jamaicans are good at working with sugar cane," he said. At Angola, the Caribbean consists of Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Haiti. The other island nations don't exist within the fence line.

Andre came with his family from Trinidad when he was fourteen. His life was different, but he was still connected to his culture through his family. Once he left to study at UGA, Andre had the opportunity to disconnect from the limitations of his island culture. Television and

movies told him that normal American life in the United States was more exciting than anything he'd find among the same places where his father and grandfather had built their lives. During his first few months away from home, he felt bad for leaving his mother back in small-town McIntyre. Andre was the baby of the family and his mother's duty was taking care of him. She picked his clothes out in the morning according to what he planned to do after school or on Saturday. Andre didn't need to tell her to buy his toiletries, socks, or underwear. She always took care of these things.

The day he left, she cried so much in the car ride to Athens that his father told her that he'd take her back if she didn't stop. He thought that Andre didn't need to be upset by her overreaction.

She collected herself so she could go in with them, fixing Andre's shirttail as they stepped out of the car in front of his dormitory. As soon as she saw his room she broke down and cried on Andre's shoulder, wiping tears off his shirt afterwards. "Allyuh tink I'm crazy, bein' so upset. Especially ya faddah. But, yuh so grown nah. Dat's all."

Andre was glad that she stopped talking when a blond-hair, blue-eyed boy came in the room. Two rich looking white people followed behind him, carrying boxes.

"Hey, I'm Scott. We must be roommates," the boy said with his hand out. His parents were looking at each other.

"Pleasure to meet you. I'm Andre," he said. Andre stepped in front of his parents. His mother was making up his bed. "I took this bed. I hope it's okay."

"No prob, man."

The room was cramped with the six of them. Scott's parents asked where he wanted these boxes.

As they were finding a place for Scott's things, Andre turned around and said in a quiet and low voice, "Mama, lef dat."

"Alrih, son." She stopped fixing his bed. "Shif yuh carcass," she said pushing her husband to the door. "Time to go."

Andre followed them into the hallway. Kids and their parents passed them as his mother kissed him on the cheek.

"Don be mooksie, make sum friends," she said. "But don be a bobolee either. Watch out for des rich people. Dey can be the worse teef of dem all."

He watched them leave and he saw the other people watching them, too.

#

Andre felt he was constantly explaining where he was from. Students asked if he was from Jamaica, from India, from the Bahamas, usually anywhere other than Trinidad. If they had heard of Trinidad, they asked if he always went to Carnival. That was the most any of them knew about Trinidad. Less than half way into his first semester, Andre started saying he was from Jamaica. It was easier to be Rastafarian than Trinidadian. And that answer erased questions about his Indo-Trinidadian roots.

Andre found it easier to fit in as a Jamaican, especially among the stoner white kids. By Thanksgiving, he was invited to go home to eat with Scott's family, since a plane ticket to Jamaica was too expensive for just a few days visit. Scott and Andre stood by the window in Scott's bathroom most of their two days there, smoking joints and drinking rum. When they sat down at the table for Thanksgiving dinner, it was like Andre was part of a TV commercial. Scott sat across from him, pouring a lake of gravy over his food. Scott's father stood over the turkey, carving it into tidy slices that fanned along the sides of the platter. Scott's mother passed plates

of food to the boys, telling them to take more. She filled her wine glass just short of the top, splashing a trail of red wine on the white tablecloth.

“I’ve always loved reggae music,” she said. “Well, since I was in college.”

“Oh, really?” Andre said. Scott’s bathroom exhaust fan hummed and softened the silence.

“You know, Steve, we should take Andre with us to the Sugar Bowl.”

Scott’s father looked up from his plate. “Well, I don’t know that Andre would like that sort of thing.”

“Do you want to go?” she said.

“I’m not sure if—“

“—Yes, come,” she said.

It was the type of opportunity that he’d never had before. But bowl tickets cost several hundreds of dollars. There was no way he could ask for this much money from his parents.

“We already have an apartment with enough space for you, and Steve can get another ticket for you,” she said.

#

Andre stood on the arched, wooden bridge in Louis Armstrong Park. The water below was murky and green. Scott threw pebbles at the pigeons underneath the twisted branches of the live oak trees. The sound of synthesized drums and percussion came from a group of men at the edge of Congo Square. The park seemed more tropical than the rest of New Orleans.

“Man, I want to get high. I knew I should have brought my stuff.” Scott kicked a pebble off the trunk of a live oak.

“Probably not a good idea on the plane.”

A pigeon landed on the trumpet in the bronze Louis Armstrong statue. Music echoed off the building surrounding the park.

“That’s some fast reggae.” Scott listened to the music and started to shimmy to the music.

“It’s soca. From Trinidad.”

“What from where?”

“Trinidad, my country. The music is from there.”

“Are you serious? This whole time I thought you were Jamaican. Guess it doesn’t matter.”

#

Later that night, dinner with the parents was followed by a night out on Bourbon Street. Each bar Andre and Scott popped into had a different live band that played better than most of the bands that Andre had seen in New York. It was late in the evening and the crowd got even thicker making it difficult to find a place inside the bars to drink. When it started to drizzle people pushed their way into any refuge.

“I’ve got to get out of the crowd for a minute,” Andre said.

They walked down St. Philip Street and stood out of the rain under the protection of a double gallery townhouse. It was the porch of a small shop that had closed for the night. A couple of guys had the same idea and joined Andre and Scott. They were smoking and Scott asked for a cigarette.

“Got anything else to smoke?” Scott asked the men.

“Dude,” Andre said. “Stop it.”

“What? They don’t mind,” Scott said.

“What do you mean? Anything?” the taller man asked.

“Some weed.”

Andre walked to the other end of the porch, blowing out a sea of smoke. “Fucking idiot.”

Scott came over to Andre and pushed something in Andre’s pocket. “Let’s go.”

“I’m not carrying this.” Andre felt the folds of plastic in his pocket.

“You’ve gotta. I don’t have any pockets.” Scott ran the palms of his hands along the seams of his basketball shorts.

“Then I’ll throw it out.” Andre had his hand in his pocket and walked toward a trash barrel.

When he was within three feet of the barrel, the two guys bolted past Andre and dropped a backpack at his feet. A cop chased them down the street, obviously no match for the young boys. By the time the cop came back panting and stiff-legged, a second cop had Andre and Scott on their stomachs. Andre felt the cop’s knee in his back. The porch was damp from the rain and getting his shirt wet. Andre hoped that his shirt wasn’t ruined. He turned his head to the side to try to keep his face wet.

The other cop was standing over the backpack. He pulled out a gallon-sized ziplock bag full of smaller baggies of weed and held it to Andre’s face. “What’s this?” he said.

“Don’t know. It’s not mine,” Andre said.

The other cop searched Andre and pulled a baggie from his pocket. “Guess this isn’t yours either, huh?”

Scott craned his neck to see the baggie. He squinted his eyes, but not at the cop. At Andre.

“It’s mine. But the backpack must belong to one of those guys that ran. Right, Scott?”

“I’m going to need a lawyer,” Scott said.

#

Scott would remember this as the time he missed the Sugar Bowl because he was waiting for his bail to be set. Andre would remember this as the moment he was sentenced to six months in prison.

One month into his sentence, Scott called. He was out. He asked for the phone number of Andre's parents.

"Why do you need that?" Andre asked.

"My father wants the money for the Sugar Bowl ticket," Scott said.

"Does he now?"

#

"Andre, you're out tomorrow?" Pete says. They're both loading wood into the galvanized metal box that hold the fire that turns cane juice into syrup.

"I am. Not soon enough."

"Where ya going?"

"I'm going back home so I can finish school."

"Home. Where ya from? Jamaica?"

"Na, man. I Trini. Nah I goin home."

HARDLY BREATHING

The headrest was stiff, the way that old, velour-covered cushions hardened with age. Rita fingertipped the plastic-y fabric fibers that felt more like industrial carpet than upholstery. The photos on the Greyhound website of big, leather seats that reclined only resembled these bus seats in configuration. Maybe they used the elegant and comfy buses along I-95, but clearly not here for trips across Florida along the south side of Lake Okeechobee. Rita wiped her hand on her jeans and cradled Lily's head in the crook of her arm. The rhythm of the bus's acceleration and slowing lulled Lily back to sleep.

Next to the window, Rita could see down into the cars that passed and see how people held their steering wheels in different ways. Some people did the 10-and-2 or 9-and-3 style. Others had one hand on top, or one on the bottom, or one on the side. Most people had the passenger's seat filled with papers or fast food bags. Rita's view into these people's lives was obstructed by their cars' roofs, but they seemed to have direction and certainty in their lives. She couldn't see their faces, but imagined that they were all smiling. She wanted to be like them.

Rita's view was interrupted when a semi-truck passed the bus. The truck blocked the sunlight and Rita saw her reflection in the bus window. She saw vulnerability in her own face. She knew that she should be stronger for Lily's sake. Lily was six now, and noticed more about her mother's emotions and mood. But something had changed in Rita over the last few years.

#

Rita and Glenn started dating in high school, but Rita never considered that she would stay with him long. She wasn't even sure if she liked him that much. Sometimes she thought they were together mostly because everyone else thought that it was a good idea. He was a real catch according to them. So, maybe there was something wrong with her. She didn't even feel that

close to him, although she liked to wrap her arms around him when she sat behind him on his motorcycle. She liked how safe she felt with him in control. She stopped riding the bike after she got pregnant. And after they married, Glenn didn't ask her to go on rides with him anymore. He'd go alone and not come back for hours.

The excitement of Lily's arrival dominated Rita's first year of marriage, and it was easy to ignore problems with Glenn. But Glenn's displeasure with Rita grew. After Lily's birth, Rita struggled to keep up with her job, the housework, and herself. Glenn made sure that she knew that he noticed. He complained most days. He told Lily that she's stuck with him, that no man would want her in her condition. He called her stretch marks disgusting scars and said she'd better work on herself because she was almost unfuckable. He never hit her face hard. He knew too much about not leaving marks. The first time he pushed her down, Rita looked up from the floor and was surprised at how angry he looked. Spit came out with his words. After that, she only looked at the floor when he yelled over her. Rita knew that she should leave him, but being alone and without money to take care of Lily scared her.

#

One morning when she went to deposit Glenn's paycheck, she withdrew \$150 in cash. She hadn't thought about where to hide it yet, so she tucked it in her purse. She was so distracted with thinking about redepositing it, that she left her groceries at the register after paying. The cashier had to run after her. But she never went back to the bank.

When Rita heard Glenn's bike in the driveway, she felt a tremor inside. When he walked in the door Rita immediately served him a plate of food at the table. He picked up the plate and took it to the family room.

"You're not eating in here with me?" she asked.

“Nah-uh.”

He fell asleep in front of the TV with his plate of food in his lap. This was a good sign that he didn't know about the money. While cleaning the dishes, Rita went to get the plate. She leaned over him and examined his face tilted to the side while he slept. Rita picked up the plate and the utensils slid around the surface. She collected the silverware in her hand. The fork prongs protruded past the knife and spoon. Rita leaned closer to Glenn. His eyelids quivered. She thought he felt her presence, but realized that he was dreaming. His eyes searched back and forth under his lids. Rita could see the shape of his cornea under his thin lid. Rita held the fork near his eyelid. She moved the fork closer, not sure if the metal was touching his skin. Glenn's lid fluttered and his eyelashes grazed along the fork prongs. She pulled away. A clump of mashed potatoes was behind on his eyelash. Rita laughed. Glenn opened his eyes.

“What's so funny?”

“Nothing.” She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead.

“Rita, did you deposit my check like I told you?”

“Yes, of course. This morning.”

“Was it short or something?”

“I don't remember Glenn. I just deposit it. I don't even look at it.”

“Yeah, it must be nice to not worry about money.”

“Why are you asking about it?”

“Went to get some cash and the balance was lower than I thought.”

“Maybe they took out money for the insurance or something. I don't know how all of that works.”

“You should fix your hair better if you’re going around town. You look like a librarian. It’d be nice to come home to a pretty wife.”

Rita touched her bun of hair. “I don’t think looking like a librarian is so bad,” she said as she walked back to the kitchen.

#

The first time Rita realized that he was cheating, accepting that it was more than suspicion was the hardest part. Denial is easier when it’s only him pushing her to the floor. Rita could blame that on his temper. Cheating was different. There was a decision to deceive her. She was sure in that moment her heart wilted—not completely filling her chest and hardly pumping blood through her body. It was if her intestines pushed up into this empty cavity, to stuff the void. Her gut drove her, and it was usually sick, writhing, and uncomfortable.

Rita worried that her heart had grown so numb that it could never be a hot, beating muscle again. But Lily was her defibrillator, an electric pulse through Rita’s flesh.

Rita hid her fading heart well most of the time, but she felt especially fragile during the few moments after she switched off the bedside lamp and her eyes had not yet adjusted to the dark. She could see *nothing*. Covers to her chin, she thought how natural it seemed to whisper into the darkness to her husband next to her in bed. Some nights there was no one there. The oppressive silence was only broken by her heartbeat as its pulses pushed through her eardrums. When she thought she heard a noise, she’d tiptoe to the doors to check the locks, huddled like a child afraid to see a monster outside the window. Being married to a cop in a small town had given her a false sense of protection she depended on and hadn’t been prepared to lose.

#

Rita tried to guess where the other bus passengers were from—likely not Clewiston, because she'd recognize them—and it became obvious who wasn't from Florida the moment the bus ran along one of the canals that lead to Lake Okeechobee. Words like *is that an alligator?* or *that alligator is going to eat that bird* echoed through the bus. Things got really exciting when the bus cruised past a six-foot alligator corpse, sliced open roadkill—the rot inside swollen under the broken skin and making the scutes seem like delicate paper and not like boney, protective plates. The alligator's legs were tucked next to its body, and it could have been mistaken for sleeping in the sunshine if buzzards hadn't been hopping around its body flapping their wings as the bus passed.

#

One stop along the route had a roadside giftshop with Florida t-shirts and souvenirs. Alligator heads with marble eyeballs and open mouths lined the shelves like headhunter's conquests. The thick, ridged hide that protected the gators was now the reason they became paperweights, wallets, and keychains. But, they were much smaller than the stuff that could be seen on the side of the road, mostly juvenile gators. Rita held the gator head against her cheek. She rubbed the bumpy alligator skin against her own. It felt cold. Rita ran her fingers across the delicate alligator toes on a foot made into a keychain. They were dried out and brittle, but the skin was still thick.

Lily stood next to Rita and played with plush alligators she pulled from a basket of other friendly-looking stuffed gators. They were colored like a box of crayons and had felt teeth. She made roaring noises as the green gator battled the purple one.

“Can I get one, Mommy?”

Rita checked the price tag—\$5.99's not bad for a souvenir. And this trip was special. “Yes. What color?” Rita slipped the keychain into her purse and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill.

“I can’t decide between blue or purple.”

“They’re both beautiful alligators. But you have to pick one.”

“I want the brown one. It looks like Charlie at Willie’s. He’s big like that.”

“Oh, the bigger ones are more. But that’s okay. Charlie is an old friend of ours, isn’t he?”

Lily kissed the gator on his furry nose.

At the register, the price came to \$9.62. Rita handed the cashier the twenty-dollar bill.

“One sec. I think that I have change.” She opened her purse to look for loose coins and realized that the alligator foot was just inside. Rita looked to see if the cashier noticed. “No coins. Sorry,” Rita said and took her change. She dropped the wad of bills and the coins in her purse and zipped it closed.

#

Traffic thickened as the bus got closer to Miami. A semi-truck pulling a gasoline tanker trailer came into view as the bus approached a red light. The truck cab pulled past Rita’s window. The tanker’s silver, reflective surface beamed sunshine into the bus. The curve of the tank made the trailer seem like a funhouse mirror. The reflection of the bus was distorted, but the greyhound dog was clear, with its nose and narrow paws reaching out for something. Rita saw the reflection of the square bus window curved over the top of the tanker’s surface, and Rita’s reflection of her face stretched with it. She liked this distorted version of herself.

“Look, mommy. It’s us,” Lily said. “I can see you smiling.”

Rita saw in her reflection a deeper smile now. She watched their reflection as she kissed Lily on the forehead. Their reflection wavered as the bus turned into the depot. The bus parked under an overhang, and passengers shuffled to collect their belonging. Rita led Lily into the narrow aisle and down the stairs into the hot Miami sun. Rita shielded her eyes and held Lily

with her other hand. They waited among the group for the driver to chuck their bags from the undercarriage of the bus, and followed the swarm of passengers into the depot lobby. People spread in different directions across the room. Rita scanned the room. Nell rose from a row of plastic seats and smoothed her pencil skirt. She shifted her purse over her shoulder and approached them, her smile rising as the distance lessened. Lily hesitated but Rita edged her toward Nell with pressure on Lily's shoulder.

"You're getting so big, Lily," Nell said. She hugged Lily and looked Rita up and down. "You look tired."

"Probably because I am," Rita said.

#

A few days before the bus trip, Rita sat alone at the conference table with a lawyer that went to high school with her.

"It's difficult to prove infidelity, and really the court doesn't care so much about that anymore," Randy said. His fingertips joined together to make a cage of chubby fingers. "This really isn't like the soap operas or rom-com's that you've seen. It's tricky. But we can always try."

"I just don't see why he would want custody. He's hardly home, and when he is, he's drunk."

"I understand that you're upset. You should rethink this. It isn't like it used to be, Rita. Husbands have done really well in custody and divorce cases over the last few years. There's a shift from the idea that children should stay with their mothers."

"So, I should stay with him because he's a cop and the court will give him favor?"

“I didn’t say that. But it will be a difficult case. Be sure that you want this before you proceed. Both of you always seemed so happy. Maybe you can forget about everything and move on.”

Rita ran her hands along the smooth surface of the wood table. Grains of the wood trailed off like tiny rivers. Some of the wood grain looked like lapping waves. “Aren’t you supposed to encourage me to use your services?”

“Sure, Rita. I will happily represent you,” he said. “I’ll just need to collect the \$6,000 retainer fee.”

“I don’t have any money of my own. Glenn would wage war against me if he noticed that money missing from the account.”

“Is there someone that you can borrow the money from?”

Light from the hall filtered through the frosted glass wall, giving the conference room an anemic haze. A shadow glided along the glass from the other side, like something trapped under thick ice.

“Randolph, can we set up the room for the two o’clock?” said the figure from the other side of the glass, her voice muffled by the illusory barrier wall.

“Sure,” Randy said in the direction of the door. He swiveled his chair back to the table. “Anything else, Rita?” and stood up.

#

A thin sheet of water spilled from the rock waterfall into the pool and muffled the city sounds of Miami. Rita sat back in the sumptuous cushions of Nell’s outdoor furniture, and balanced a glass of red wine on her thigh. Neighbors’ backyard lights reflected off the surface of the water in the canal behind Nell’s house.

Rita leaned forward to see Lily and Richie through the sliding glass door, standing in front of the large screen television with console controllers in their hand. Lily jumped in bursts along with the movements of her video game character.

“No more wine after this.” Rita took an extended sip from her glass. A squawky *wok* came from the direction of the canal. “I think that’s a black-crowned night heron. You probably see them hunched in trees during the day.”

“Are they the ones that don’t look like they have necks, like old fat men in suits?”

“Yes. Them.”

“I’ve never seen them moving around. I just thought they were super lazy birds.”

“Most of the time, they’re resting during the day. But at night they fly around and hunt. So, there’s a whole other side to them that you don’t see if you only look during the day.”

The night heron called *wok-wok*.

“Nell, I’m not just here to visit. I need your help leaving Glenn.”

“I know you’re having some problems with him going out and stuff, but are you sure you don’t want to try to work things out?” Nell said.

“Yes. I’m sure, Nell. I don’t want to be with him. In fact, I’d rather be alone forever than to be with him.”

“That’s harsh.”

“Nell, you don’t know how bad it was.”

“No, I don’t. You never told me anything, and you guys seemed like pretty much the perfect couple.”

“Things aren’t always as they seem.” Rita scratched underneath the base of her bun.

“If you are sure that’s what you want to do, then of course I’ll help you. You and Lily can stay here.”

“I have some money, and once I get a job I can get us a place.”

“As long as you need, Rita.”

“It’s funny how I got this money. I sold his bike.”

“What do you mean? He loves that bike.”

“I sold it this morning, before we got on the bus. Lily was at school. I had to ride it to Moore Haven in the rain. A few times I dumped the bike over. I’ve never ridden one alone before.” Rita showed Nell her raw elbow.

“How did you get back?”

“The guy that I sold it to gave me ride.”

“You went with a stranger on his bike?”

“Yes, and he drove really fast. I forgot what it’s like to be on a bike.”

Even through the haze of city lights reflecting on thin clouds, stars glimmered above the city. Rita thought of the ebony night sky of Clewiston, not polluted with city lights. She thought of how those stars were brighter in her back yard and how she could see the bleeding glow of the lights of Miami and south Florida, even from so far away.

Nell was telling her something about being more careful, but Rita wasn’t listening.

#

When Rita and Nell were little girls, they didn’t have much more to do than run around outside all summer. Around lunchtime, they’d come in and cool off in front of the oscillating fan, waiting for it to pivot in their direction. Their sweaty hair would harden into crusty strands while their mother made them sandwiches. One day, after lunch, the girls ran out the back door. The

slam of the screen door chased away a great blue heron that had been pulling with its beak at something on the ground. Rita saw a movement in the grass.

“Nell, that bird was eating a snake or something,” Rita said, walking in the direction of the writhing creature.

“Be careful. It could be a cottonmouth,” Nell said as she caught up with Rita.

A baby alligator rolled in a circle of grass that it had pushed down. Grass and dirt stuck to its tiny snout and the bleeding wound on its belly. Then it stopped rolling. The girls knelt and leaned over the reptile. Its belly was split open, but the underside of the gator lifted with a tiny breath of air.

“It’s still breathing,” Rita said.

“Are you sure? I didn’t see it.”

“I’m getting a box.” Rita ran into the house and called for their mother. A moment later, Rita returned with a shoe box and a small dishcloth folded on the bottom. “Here,” she said.

“I’m not touching that thing. It’s dead. And if it’s not, then it will bite. You do it,” Nell said.

Rita watched it, waiting for it to take another breath. “Is it dead?”

The heron pulled in its wings as it landed next to the canal behind their house.

“What are y’all doing?” their mother said from the back doorway.

“It’s an alligator, Mama,” Rita said.

“Get away from that thing,” their mother said.

Rita grabbed it. The little alligator tried to squirm from her hands, but it was too weak. It held its mouth open like it wanted to bite her. She placed it in the box and it let out a faint, squeaky call.

“It’s alive, Mama. We need to take it to the vet.”

“I’m not taking that damn thing to a vet. No telling how much that will cost. Let me see if they’ll take it at Willie’s.”

The girls watched the little gator for any changes. Its closed mouth showed its natural shape, almost like a smirk.

“Make sure it doesn’t get out,” Nell said.

“It can’t hardly move.”

It was hot. The sugarcane rustled as the wind blew across the field just past the canal. A bank of heavy clouds drifted to block the sun for a few moments.

The screen door banged when their mom came back outside. “They’re coming for it. Now, y’all let that little guy alone.”

Rita picked up the shoebox and held it the crook of her arm. “I’ll wait out front with it.” She sat down cross-legged in front of the house on the edge of the warm pavement and put the box in her lap. The little gator flipped its tail and head back and forth making the C shape. “I’ll call you Charlie,” she spoke into the box. “Don’t worry. Willie’s is a good place for a gator like you.”

ALONG THE LAKE SHORE

The sun's heat radiated across the back of Julie's neck. A sultry warmth spread between her shoulder blades as sweat migrated through the fibers of her t-shirt. Julie lingered at the plywood bulletin board with pushpinned papers curling and blowing in the breeze. She wasn't interested in the flyers for dog sitters and walkers, but wanted another moment with Duke waiting at her side, watching her and waiting for her next step. She liked to bring him to the dog park because he enjoyed it, but sometimes she felt jealous about how much he found pleasure playing with the other dogs. She knew that it was ridiculous to be envious of dogs, but Duke was her only companion and she always felt relieved when he returned to her side at the end of the park visit.

Today, the dog park was full, especially for an early afternoon on a weekday. A woman seated at one of few shaded benches snapped her schnauzer's leash. Julie took a direct approach, casual but intentional, arriving at the bench just as the woman walked away. A man arrived there at the same moment with an apparent shared interest in the shaded bench. They stood facing each other in front of the bench. More sweat clung to her shirt and she wanted to scratch her armpits. She wasn't sure if it was all because of the heat. Something about the way that he didn't look away from her when their eyes met made her feel vulnerable.

"Go ahead. You were here first," he said. He motioned to the bench for her to sit.

Julie felt pressure between her butt cheeks and turned to see a black lab muzzle behind her. She brushed off her pants and sat down. Duke ran off with a pack of dogs along the edge of the lake. Their collars and tags jingled in unison. The black lab remained near the bench, watching Julie. The man broke their line of sight when he stepped between them, seemingly unaware of the tension that Julie saw between her and the dog. Instead, he surveyed the row of benches. She followed his gaze and noticed that the other benches were already taken, mostly by

couples. These other people shielded their eyes from the glare of the sun as they watched the erratic mass of dogs running in the shallow water.

“There’s room, if you want to sit down,” Julie said. She scooted to one end of the short bench.

He smiled, took a spot next to her, their thighs almost touching. He looked up and she followed his gaze to the leaves above them. Sunlight made it through the tender leaves, adding a green glow.

“It’s hot,” he said.

“Yes. If Duke didn’t love the water so much, I’d stay inside today.”

“Lucy loves it too. I can’t keep her out of the water.”

Duke trotted out of the lake, holding the end of the stick. The black lab that had nosed Julie’s butt gripped the opposite end. Duke paused to get a tighter grip and ran to Julie, pulling the other dog with him.

“Duke. Your feet are coated in mud and grass,” Julie said.

“That’s your dog?” he asked.

“Yes. That’s Duke.”

“This is Lucy,” he said. The other dog still held on to the end of the stick claimed by Duke, both of them panting through their teeth. The main difference between them was the shape of their skull—Duke more round, like a bowling ball, and Lucy, more of a pointy cone head. Otherwise, they were indistinct from each other.

Julie pulled some of the grass off Duke’s coat. She removed his collar to fish out a clump of grass in the buckle. A powerful shake started from Duke’s shoulders, spread down his body, and escaped out the end of his tail. A rainbowed aura rose around Duke as drops of lake water

misted the air. Lucy followed with a long shake of her own. Julie shielded her face with her hands and laughed.

The man took the stick out of the dogs' mouths and threw it toward the lake.

"I see that Duke has a phone number," he said.

Duke's collar slid across Julie's thighs as the man took it from her lap. She leaned over to see the dogbone-shaped tag as if she saw it for the first time.

"I added him to the family plan. He complained that all the other dogs have their own cell phones," she said.

The man held his phone. "I'm texting him just in case he wants to hang out with Lucy."

"I think that he wants to very much." Her phone vibrated in her pocket. "Duke doesn't know your name."

"Tell him to read the text."

As he left with Lucy, she felt ridiculous for wanting to tell him to be sure to call. Then she felt like telling him never mind, not to bother, that she'd find some way to screw it up before they could really get to know each other. It'd been a long time since she'd belonged to someone. Some of her girlfriends, especially the married ones, told her that the bar was too high. Julie wondered how she could possibly change her expectations without feeling cheated by a compromise. She'd tried dating a few other lawyers at her firm, but their egos kept her from developing feelings for them. They didn't share any of her interests either, like gardening or hiking. It was always about how things appeared to the rest of the firm. The only outdoor activity they were interested in was cycling, but not the relaxing bike-on-the-beach type. They had bikes that cost more than cars and a closet full of uncomfortably tight clothing, shoes with clips—serious cycling that was always about who could go faster.

#

Julie convinced herself that her conversation with Mike was brief and trivial, but she kept running the words through her head, wondering if she was even more awkward than usual. A few nights after their meeting, she chose to watch a movie instead of her normal routine of watching *Louie*. While watching the opening scene of *Bridget Jones's Diary*—one of those scenes in a romantic comedy that reminds women that they should be sad if they are alone—her phone vibrated. She never answered unknown calls, but almost as if in a dream where actions don't follow the ordinary, she took the call and heard Mike's warm and confident voice. She hadn't recognized Mike's because she hadn't bothered to add his number to her contacts.

“Lucy wants to know if Duke's free on Thursday again,” he said.

“I don't know,” she said.

“Well, did you ask?”

“Ask what?”

“If Duke's free?”

“Oh, yeah.” She said it before she realized that he meant her. “Yeah. After I finish some boring Thursday meetings, I can take Duke to the park.”

“Great.”

Julie added his contact to her phone.

#

On Thursday, Mike was waiting on the bench where they'd first met last week. She sat down next to him, a little too nervous to look directly at him. She wondered what it was about him that made her jittery. Maybe it was because he always seemed to catch her off guard, and she knew that these were rare moments.

“Relax,” he said and touched her hand that was resting on the bench.

She didn’t pull her hand away.

“How were your meetings today? Boring?”

“Yes, as expected.” She was surprised that he remembered.

“The breeze must feel good on your skin after being inside all day.”

“Oh, yes. So nice.” Julie hadn’t noticed the breeze coming off the lake until he had said that. “I don’t like being inside an office all day.”

“But working outside can be tough.”

“I’m sure. Do you work outside?”

Mike rolled Lucy’s leash in a pinwheel circle. “I do project management.”

“So you keep everyone in line?”

“There’s a troublemaker in every pack.”

“Pack? Is that what you call your team?”

Mike nodded and leaned back on the bench.

#

The next Thursday, Julie arrived early, waiting for Mike. She wasn’t sure how long she’d been waiting when he arrived. He’d called her on Sunday to be sure that she’d be free and asked her if she wanted to go to the park again. She still had a lot of work to finish, but getting out of the office would be a nice break. Duke bounded toward the lake shore and Lucy greeted him with a playful mouthing of Duke’s muzzle. Then Lucy came to the bench and watched Julie. Lucy didn’t break her gaze until Mike her.

She was surprised that she felt anxious as he approached the bench. It was silly for a woman like her to feel like this. However, when he sat next to her, she relaxed. Her air-conditioned bones warmed in the sun.

“Here. A treat for you. I saw these when I was walking today.” He handed her a small bouquet of delicate wildflowers, an assortment of asters and black-eyed susans.

“Wow, thanks,” she said. She stopped herself from telling him that she’d always wanted someone to pick wildflowers for her. “These are my favorite.”

“I had a feeling.”

“You were walking today?”

“It’s something that I do.”

#

The next Thursday, Julie arrived early. Again, she waited on the bench. She wasn’t sure how long she’d been there, but her skin felt tight and sunburnt. When Mike arrived, Lucy followed behind him this time. When Duke spotted Lucy, he ran over to them. The day was getting hot, so Julie went to the lake to get her feet wet.

The water felt good. Mud squished between her toes. The dogs ran past her, splashing her with water. Mike didn’t join them. He stood next to the bench and threw a tennis ball to the pack of dogs. Lucy was faster than the other dogs, so she usually got to the ball first. Mike lobbed the ball just past Julie. All the dogs followed Lucy to the ball.

He threw it again near Julie. The ball landed in the trough of a wave, so Lucy didn’t see where it landed. Lucy searched back and forth looking for the ball.

“Julie, can you grab that?” Mike yelled from the shore.

Julie pointed to the ball, but Lucy didn't see her. When Julie reached for the ball, Lucy must have realized where the ball was and bounded toward it. She bumped into Julie and knocked her down in the water and mud. Julie held on to the ball, pulled herself up from the muck, and Lucy backed away.

"You're going to need a bath!" Mike yelled from the shore.

Julie looked down to see mud all over her feet and legs. She held the ball in the air, ready to throw it back to him, and realized that she couldn't throw that far. Her hands felt cramped and smaller, maybe from the water.

"Bring it back," Mike said and patted his thigh.

Julie trotted to the shore. Her clothes were covered in mud.

"Sit, Julie," Mike said. "I'll get some of this mud off you." He brushed mud off her shorts. "Your clothes are filthy. We're going to have to take them off." Mike removed her shorts and underpants.

Julie looked around to see if anyone noticed. The people were just watching the dogs run and play. She felt anxious, like someone was going to yell at her for not wearing pants.

"Hold still, girl," Mike said. He pulled her shirt over her head. Then he unsnapped her bra. The cool air blew across her breasts. Mike pulled something shiny from his pocket. "I got this for you," he said. He held up a gold necklace with a *Julie* pendant.

Her body was so muddy that it seemed almost hairy, but she finally felt calm. She ran back in the water. Duke and Lucy ran after her. Mike threw her the ball. Julie felt like she belonged to someone.

RED TIDE

The offshore breeze pushed in clouds and gusts of caustic air from the bloom of red tide, like atomized battery acid mixed with blood. This was the worst red algae bloom Beverly had experienced since living in Bradenton Beach over the last decade. Just past the wood deck, the wind rattled the sail cover of her docked sailboat. The hull pushed and retreated from the bumpers on the canal's seawall. The air would not clear today.

Beverly popped the fitted sheet's corner from the mattress, and the thin cotton billowed on a pile of bed linens. She inched the corner of the mattress above her head, stepped the palms of her hands along the sunken depressions of the mattress, and flipped it over with a thud. In the sunlight, dust twinkled above the bed. Once she opened the window and door to the wood deck, the outside air crept in and gave her a serial cough, each gasp for air bringing another bout of coughing. She choked for a few clear breaths, her throat scratchy from the toxic air over the last two days. Nothing could be done about the poisonous red tide, just wait it out.

Beverly scooped up a pile of linens with a wide, hooked reach. Close to her face, she smelled Carina in the sheets' fibers. Even though more than a year had passed, Beverly hadn't washed Carina's linens yet. She hesitated at the thought of how the battering washing machine would eventually make Carina's sheets threadbare.

But it was time for Beverly to clean Carina's room. An Airbnb.com guest was arriving the next day. She didn't like the thought of a stranger in her daughter's room, but Beverly needed the extra money, and there were only two bedrooms in her canal-side home. The mortgage payment was manageable with Shawn's help, but he had been gone even before Beverly noticed. He said he couldn't look at Beverly without seeing Carina's face. Beverly didn't blame him. She sometimes saw it too when she caught her reflection.

Beverly wanted to disappear too. To escape, but not to anywhere in particular. Just tunnel into a dark hole of dirt, worms, and fossils—the past transformed into spiral shells, spikey teeth, barbed fins, and segmented carapaces. In the darkness, she could feel the fossils' rough surfaces scrape skin off her elbows and knees.

A pillow with its case remained in the corner. Beverly didn't want to remove the droplets of blood, absorbed through the case and the pillow, streaming out in webbed lines, long since turned brown. Beverly bulldozed the pillow with case into the last open gap on the closet shelves, full of Carina's trinkets, medals, and stuffed animals that her friends and classmates sent during her last months. A framed photo of Carina and Waffles sat on the middle shelf. In the photo, Waffles, with his scruffy mutt hair, gazed at Carina and the bare, toothless gum of her open-lipped-smile.

"I need to pick up Waffles from the groomer, Carina," Beverly said talking to the bare mattress now. The generic, factory shimmer of the mattress revealed no evidence that her daughter once slept its surface.

#

At the groomer's strip mall location, a bell clanked with the push of the aluminum bar on the glass door, the place heavy with the smell of cigarette smoke and flea shampoo. The groomer stood behind a case of doggie treats and brushes, and said, "Tell Carina to use the oatmeal shampoo like she had before. His skin is getting dry again."

Beverly nodded.

One whole year, and still she hadn't said anything, not sure if speaking up would be harder than hearing these comments. With time, fewer and fewer people knew about Carina. Beverly's recently hired coworkers were surprised when she mentioned taking the day off to

celebrate her daughter's birthday. "She'll be thirteen. It's a big moment for her," Beverly said to them.

Waiting the car after the trip to the groomer, Waffles pressed his nose in the gap between the car's door frame and the glass while Beverly went inside the hardware store to buy a latch and lock for Carina's closet. Something small, discrete, but effective. The store associate told her the steps—drill holes, and... Beverly imagined all of what was left of Carina entombed in the closet by a tiny lock.

#

Back in Carina's room, Beverly drilled tidy holes in the flimsy bi-fold closet doors as the wood rattled, shook, and jumped away from the drill bit. Waffles watched patiently from his curled position on Carina's bed. On the last hole, the cheap wood split, leaving a sliver of wood hanging by splinters. The screws of the aluminum latch pulled the wood back into place. The only evidence of the damage was a narrow line of unpainted wood surrounded by white paint. After closing the doors to test the fit of the latch, she reopened them to reveal a sprinkling of sawdust and shavings. She ran the Dyson over the open closet floor, careful not to disturb the small shoes lined up in the back of the closet. With the clinking and scratching sound of something too big sucked into the vacuum, Beverly turned off the machine and lifted the head to examine the rows of brushes. A hefty shake revealed that the object was still in the head of the vacuum, clanking around behind the brushes.

Beverly kneeled on the floor and examined the underside of the vacuum head. Waffles jumped from the bed and lay beside her, tail thumping on the floor. The rows of brushes were wrapped with strands of Carina's auburn hair. A year earlier, the first time that Beverly had tried to get past Carina's death, she pulled some hairs from the vacuum's brush. She stopped cleaning

once she realized that she'd have to throw the bitty ball of Carina's hair in the trash. Even a year later, she still didn't want to lose anything of Carina's. Beverly unscrewed the rows of brushes, careful to not pull away any of the entwined hair. A yellowed, decayed tooth stood out against the black plastic of the vacuum. Beverly gasped and cupped her hand over her mouth, the satiny feeling of fine vacuum dust between her fingertips and her cheeks.

“Oh, Carina.”

She stood at the open door to the deck. The sailboat stretched out the spring lines as a fresh gust of wind triggered a coughing fit. Beverly choked up some spit before catching her breath. She kneeled, holding the tooth that was once covered in blood. It was the only tooth Carina didn't want the tooth fairy to have since it had not been pulled, but had been knocked out. She had wanted to save it like a trophy. Carina never said why, but Beverly assumed that it was because Carina felt tough in Shawn's eyes. There was a look of pride on Carina's face when she stood tear-free on the deck of the sailboat, holding her tooth in a handful of blood. The boom had swung across the deck during an uncontrolled jibe, no time for Carina to duck. The thick boom had smacked her directly in the mouth and pushed her against the lifelines. The wires had bounced Carina back from the edge, where the heels of her feet had pointed down to the water.

#

Beverly tasted the toxicity of the air on her tongue, but tried to hold back a cough that pushed through.

“I'm so sorry about the red tide,” Beverly said. “I hope that it doesn't ruin your trip.”

“There's no need to apologize. It's out of your control,” Karl said, looking over Beverly's shoulder at the closet.

“There are towels in the bathroom and you can put your things in here,” Beverly said, pointing toward Carina’s dresser. She opened the door to the wood deck. “This is a great place in the evening, usually. But you might want to keep this closed because of the air.” She turned back to Karl. Something about him reminded her of Carina, maybe his chin or his mouth. Something difficult to describe.

Karl stepped on the deck, coughed as he leaned against the deck rail, and looked both directions down the canal. “It’s paradise here. Much better than a hotel by the interstate.”

“This island is like another world,” Beverly said.

“Sometimes it’s good to escape that world across the bridge.”

#

Later in the evening Beverly sat in a chair on the wood deck. Waffles occupied the next chair, sleeping on his back. The rising moon was getting brighter as the sun faded. Beverly closed her eyes. She listened for the occasional sound of delicate splashes from mullet briefly escaping from their underwater world and returning with a slap of their scaly bodies on the surface. She heard the backdoor slide open and footsteps. For a moment, she thought it was Shawn, or even Carina. Karl’s cough reminded her that they were long gone.

“It’s a beautiful time of day,” Karl said.

“Wait ‘til the moon rises higher. It really is amazing here away from the city lights,” Beverly said.

There was a row of six chairs, but Karl stood in front of the chair next to Beverly. He reached for Waffles. “Do you mind if I move you, little guy?”

“Oh, yes. Please. Sit down,” Beverly said. She drank her glass of wine.

Waffles stood at the base of the chair looking up at Beverly.

“Fine. Come on.” Beverly picked Waffles up and placed him in her lap. Her elbow bumped the glass and knocked it over. “Damn! Glad it’s plastic.” She reached down, but Waffles squirmed with the shift in body weight.

“Let me get it.” Karl picked up the glass. “Can I refill it for you?”

“Sure. If you don’t mind. It’s on the counter in the kitchen. Grab yourself a glass if you’d like,” Beverly said. “Do you like red?”

“You bet. I like it all.”

Waffles stretched his neck to see around Beverly and watch Karl go to the kitchen.

Karl returned with two glasses. “Here you are.” He placed the plastic wine glass in her hand and sat back down in the chair. “I hope that you don’t mind sharing.”

“Not at all. I have plenty. I’m usually drinking alone. Waffles doesn’t drink.”

A mullet splashed on the water’s surface.

“Do you ever fish out—” Karl coughed. “—Out here?”

“A long time ago. But I stopped when my daughter told me that we were catching her pets. She fed the fish here every day.”

“Your daughter?” Karl turned around to the house.

“She passed away a little over a year ago.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks. Me too.” Beverly took a long gulp from her glass and stood. “Ready for a refill?”

“Sure.” Karl finished his glass in three long sips.

Beverly filled their glasses in the kitchen. She tucked a new bottle of wine under her arm and returned outside.

“And your husband, where’s he?” Karl said.

“No husband anymore,” Beverly said. She sat the bottle on the small table in front of the chairs. “What type of work do you do?”

“I’m a training consultant. I’m on the road most of the time.”

“You like it?”

“I don’t mind it. I don’t have a family, so traveling isn’t that inconvenient. The pay’s good,” he said. He took another sip. “And I meet a lot of people around the country.”

“Girlfriends in every city?”

“I’ve had some success here and there.”

#

The full moon and its perfect edges dominated the navy night sky. The brightness was only broken by the shadows of the moon’s craters and occasional translucent clouds that glided across the sky. The lunar image wavered in rippled reflection across the surface of the canal. Beverly stood on the wood deck, but her thoughts were of the sailboat deck—thoughts of Carina’s bare feet leaving narrow, watery footprints on fiberglass. Perfectly shaped footprints. Almost like clip art or the puffy feet-shaped stickers she put on her notebooks. At anchor, Carina would jump off the boat transom, each time trying an extraordinary mid-air pose. Jumps and climbs up the swim ladder left her panting, but she wouldn’t stop until Beverly or Shawn told her to take a break. Then she’d throw half of her lunch to the fish. Beverly would tell her not to waste her food. Carina would tell her that it wasn’t a waste, that everything lives forever in the ocean because it’s eaten by bigger animals. And those bigger animals die, fall to the ocean floor, and are eaten by tiny animals.

When they were underway, Carina wore her tiny leather Sperry boat shoes and khaki pants, like a small version of the local retiree ladies enjoying some time away from their volunteer job at the library down the street. On their return home after a day of swimming and sailing, Carina would cuddle with Waffles on the bow or in the cockpit, the sea air and saltwater shaping her hair into rigid auburn ringlets.

#

A cough came from Carina's room. With all the lights turned off on that side of the house, Beverly hadn't noticed that the door to Carina's room was open. She crept closer, waiting for more sounds from the room. A deep, throaty snore followed.

This was a familiar sound of almost unconscious sleep. She heard it often over the last few months that Shawn slept in the same bed with Beverly. Shawn's vodka-induced semi-coma was a nightly melody could not be broken by pokes or prods.

Beverly stopped to listen for signs that Karl was awake. Waffles followed her, sitting and waiting each time. Beverly and Waffles lurked outside the door. It was too dark to see anything inside.

"Karl," Beverly whispered. With the wind blowing, she wasn't sure if she was speaking loud enough to be heard. "Karl?"

Beverly entered the room. She stood in the doorway waiting for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, but saw nothing. She shuffled in, stopping after a few feet. The rumbling of Karl's snore filled the room. The bed and furniture were invisible in the darkness. Moving ahead, her thigh whacked the corner of the mattress. The headboard scuffed the wall with a vibrating shake. Beverly waited, but heard no response. She walked around the bed, feeling it. Sliding her fingers along, she felt the soft surface of the comforter, the silk ribbon trim, and the fitted sheet. But no

pillow. Beverly retraced her steps to the end of the bed and across the open space between the bed and the closet. Finally, the moon was giving off a silvery, rectangular glow through the doorway. Luminescence projected on the closet doors. They seemed to float in the darkness. Beverly reached into her pocket and pulled out the tooth and the key to the lock. The moonlight shimmered off the silver lock and latch. Beverly slid open the closet door and slipped the pillow from the shelf. She returned to the bed, placing the pillow on the empty side, and crawled under the comforter. Karl sat up in bed with a fit of coughing.

“It will be okay. Go back to sleep, Karl,” Beverly said. She stroked his hair with one hand. Her other hand gripped the tooth.

Karl lay back down.

Beverly stroked his hair and put her head on Carina’s pillow. “I told her that she’d get better,” Beverly said in the dark room. “That she just needed to fight hard.” Waffles jumped up and lay at the foot of the bed. Beverly could smell Carina. She wondered if Karl could too. “Carina fought. Hard,” Beverly said. “I lied to her.”

“We all lie,” Karl said. He was still facing away from Beverly.

“I didn’t want to lie to her. I really thought that she’d be okay.” She placed her arm around Karl.

He turned to her. They were facing each other now. Beverly could smell his breath. He smelled like wine. He moved his hips closer to hers.

“Can you do something for me, Karl?”

“Definitely.”

“Can you let me—”

“—Yes, I can.”

“Can you pretend that you are Carina?” Even though it was dark, Beverly could see his eyes. “And let me say some things to her?”

“Um, sure. I can.”

“Roll over.”

Karl shook the bed as he faced away from Beverly.

“Baby,” Beverly said. She wrapped her arm around him. “I’m so sorry. I wish that I would have taken you to the doctor earlier. Maybe we would have caught it sooner.”

Karl was silent.

“Maybe I should have asked the doctors to try another treatment.” She ran her fingers through Karl’s hair.

“That feels good,” he said.

“I’m so sorry that you suffered, my angel.” Beverly kissed the nape of his neck. She wrapped her arm tighter around him.

#

Beverly woke with the sound of coughing next to her. Sunlight reached just above the tips of the trees and rooftops across the canal. She pulled the comforter back into place and went out to the deck. The air seemed clearer and not so harsh on her throat. Waffles trotted outside as a pelican waddled a few steps toward the rising sun before taking flight. Beverly opened her stiff hand. The tooth stuck to her palm. She pushed it around in her hand with her index finger. A cough and the sound of movement came from the room.

Beverly stood in front of the coffee pot while she moved the tooth around in her pocket. She wanted to look at it again, but she heard footsteps before she had the chance. Karl was behind her in his underwear.

“If you’re making coffee, I’d love a cup,” Karl said.

“Of course. How did you sleep?” Beverly asked.

“Great, except some coughing. I know you said that the open door would make it worse, but the moon was so beautiful last night. I slept harder than I remember. Sorry if I was snoring.”

“I think your coughing will get better. The red tide is clearing today.”

#

Beverly carried the coffee, and croissants down the hallway to Carina’s room. Waffles sat on the bed watching Karl. Carina’s old pillow was on the bed, it’s stained and faded fabric looked out of place against the white sheets. The closet door was open with the photo of Carina and Waffles at the center.

“That’s Carina?”

“Yes,” Beverly said. She shuffled Carina’s tooth in her pocket. “She died here.” Beverly patted the mattress.

“I’d leave that out of your Airbnb ad.”

“Good advice.” Beverly said. “Let’s go outside. It’s not too hot yet.”

Karl followed Beverly to the canal.

She stood on the sea wall and dropped a piece of the croissant in the water. Karl stood beside her. Beverly climbed down the ladder into the chilly water. She reached up to Karl.

“Come with me.”

Karl took her hand. “It’s fucking cold.” His teeth chattered as he lowered himself into the water up to his chest.

Beverly broke her croissant in tiny pieces and dropped them into the glassy, murky water. She saw her rippling reflection. In a small way it looked like Carina, but in a way too difficult to

describe. Fish broke the surface racing for the bread. They came in spurts as Karl dropped in a few pieces. Beverly fished the tiny tooth from her pocket and pushed it into a chunk of bread. She handed it to Karl. He examined it for a moment and looked back at Beverly.

The wind picked up. The air was fresh and Beverly realized that the algae bloom had withered. The sailboat stirred in the breeze, pushing against the bumpers between the hull and the seawall.

Karl hesitated for a moment, holding the bread over the water. He dropped it, and the bread disappeared into the gathered fish darting from the darkness.

ON HIS OWN

Evan showed Kester how he did things better, like climb to the top of the elm tree by the barn. But other than that, Evan thought that younger brothers were pretty much useless. Kester always tried to follow Evan up the tree. He was only a few limbs behind him for the first ten or fifteen feet. But as the limbs got skinny and floppy, and Evan thought how gravity felt stronger, as if the earth wanted to pull them back, Kester couldn't go to the next branch.

“Wipe your palms if they're sweaty. You don't want to slip and die,” Evan said. Evan knew that one hand free of the limbs would make Kester chicken out. Kester put his hand back on the tree and went back down.

“Baby,” Evan said the moment that Kester's feet touched the ground.

Evan knew that the grownups thought that tree climbing was for kids, but they didn't know how high Evan went. The top of the elm tree was at least three times taller than any other child could climb. From the top of the tree, Evan balanced on the slim branches and looked out over the hazy edges of the Appalachian Mountains, like they were covered with smoke. He looked down to his tiny home and farm built into the rocks and the hillside. Chickens scattered across the yard as Kester ran under the flapping linens on the clothesline. The edges of the sheets stuck to Kester's forehead. They stretched and popped off the clothespins with a violent spin to the ground. If Mama walked by—sometimes catching him in the crime, sometimes only finding the evidence of the crime—she'd call Kester over and have him pick up the clothespins, and stand next to her as she placed the pins back on the line.

When Evan knew no one was looking, he climbed down and took off some of the clothespins. He dropped them on the ground in a row. The chickens scurried over to see what he dropped. Evan climbed back up into the treetop and waited for Mama to find them.

“Kester. Get over here!” Mama yelled. She walked along the trail of clothespins.

Kester came running around the corner of the house. “Yes, Mama.”

“Are you knocking clothes off the line?”

“No. I didn’t do it.”

“Kester, don’t you lie. You’ll be in more trouble for lying.”

They walked in the house. Probably Mama made Kester help her with housework since she thought he lied. She thought Kester lied a lot.

Evan knew he should feel bad for being mean to his brother, and Mama even told him so. But it made him feel better. Sometimes he was happy that he wasn’t always nice to Kester, especially the times when a grownup would say how Kester looked just like his mother. When Evan looked at Mama, he saw the memory of her reading to him in bed, or sitting under the elm tree watching the cows graze. When Evan looked at Kester, Evan saw none of this.

#

Most of the memories of his Pa were in little pieces that Evan accidentally stumbled over and they immediately drifted away. Sometimes he heard the grownups talking about his Pa here and there, but not enough for Evan to remember much. But Evan had one concrete memory of Pa. It was from a winter night when Evan was around four years old, way before Mr. Gordon and Kester. A lot of snow fell during the day. And on this night, some people came over to sled down the big hill behind their house. Anyone not in line waiting for their turn with the sled stood or sat on boulders around a giant bonfire. Evan sat on Pa’s lap and watched fire sparks rise into the cold sky. His Pa’s face glowed orange. He and Pa cast one long shadow that crept into the black world behind them. Pa was singing and a man that lived down the road was playing guitar. It was a song that Evan didn’t know. Pa looked like the men in the cigarette ads in the magazines that

Mama read, probably the way women wanted a man to look. Mama brought Evan a cup of warm cocoa. She sat next to them and rubbed Pa's back as he sung. The cocoa made Evan's tummy feel big, like it was too big. He wanted to stay there and listen to Pa sing, but he felt like he swallowed one of those big boulders people were sitting on. He stood up and rubbed his belly.

"Are you OK, Evan?" Mama asked.

"I don't feel good," Evan said. "I feel like I'm going to throw up."

"Come on in the house. Maybe you need to get inside and warm up."

Mama took Evan by the hand and they left the group of people around the fire. Pa was still singing.

#

Evan's first memory of the warm feeling of knowing that he had his Mama to himself was when he was about five years old. He was in bed. Dim, yellow light glowed from the space between the bottom of the door and the floor. Gaps between wood boards seemed more severe in the shadowed light. Low voices came from the next room, the kind of whispers that made him listen harder.

"I know that it's a struggle for you. But you know that you aren't exactly marriage material," Granny said.

"What do you mean?" Mama asked.

"You've got a son. Most men don't want a woman that already has a child."

"Then most men aren't for me," Mama said. "If a man has a problem with Evan, then I don't want that man."

Evan turned away from the glowing light, shifted his head on his pillow, and fell asleep.

#

Shortly after Evan felt sure that he'd have Mama to himself forever, Mr. Gordon started coming around the house. He already made weekly visits in his bread truck, but he seemed to be stopping by whenever he came down that way to deliver to other people. Evan liked it at first, because Mr. Gordon would bring Mama and him some fresh bread.

Then Evan noticed that Mr. Gordon would stay long enough to sit on the swing and talk to Mama. As far as Evan could tell, they weren't talking anything about bread. But Evan wasn't too worried about this man. He was a little bit fat and didn't seem to know much about farming. One day Mr. Gordon asked Evan if he wanted to see the truck.

"I don't care," Evan said. He pushed rocks around with his shoe and didn't look at Mr. Gordon.

"Evan. Use your manners," Mama said. She was smiling and her lips were red and shiny.

"Yes, sir. I'd like that."

Mr. Gordon took Evan by the hand. "Come on over here, sonny," Mr. Gordon said.

Evan looked over his shoulder at Mama. She was watching them and smiling. "Evan, tell Mr. Gordon thank you."

"Thank you, Mr. Gordon," Evan said.

They walked toward the truck. Mr. Gordon was looking back at Mama and not even looking where they were going. Now Evan didn't want to see the truck anymore. Evan looked hard at his feet and tried to not get too excited about the truck and the baked goods. He wanted to stay mad. He stumbled over his feet and tripped a little, almost pulling Mr. Gordon to the ground.

Mr. Gordon opened the driver's door and lifted Evan onto the seat. The inside of the truck smelled like the Sunday picnics at church. Evan thought that even more than 100 bread

rolls were in the back of the truck. Maybe even some of the sweet pastries that Mr. Gordon gave Evan once in a while.

Evan sat on the long bench seat. Mr. Gordon placed Evan's hand on the black steering wheel.

"Don't worry. You can touch," Mr. Gordon said.

Evan slid around on the seat and saw his own smile in the mirror. He made himself frown. "I want to go in the house."

"Sure, little man. Do you want a cupcake?"

Evan nodded and Mr. Gordon gave him a chocolate cupcake with white squiggly frosting stuck to the plastic. Evan tried to walk calmly back to the house and not look at the treat resting in his hand. Once inside, he opened the plastic and took a bit. The cake was soft, dark chocolate. The middle was white, creamy, and sweet. Evan had never had a cupcake like that before.

#

In the years before Kester was born, Mr. Gordon's bread truck was at the house almost every day. In the summer, there was a small wedding on the bank of the river. The church pastor was there and a few other people. Granny and Mr. Gordon's mother were also there.

"You can call me Granny, too," Mr. Gordon's mother said.

"Why?" Evan asked.

Mama got mad at him, but Evan didn't know what for.

After the wedding, Mama and Mr. Gordon went to Charleston for the weekend. Mama brought Evan a signal whistle she bought in a store. Mr. Gordon yelled at him for blowing it inside the house, so Evan went outside and chased the chickens with shrill whistles. They got

tired and ran around the other side of the barn. Even blew the whistle in Sam's ear, but he growled at him, so Evan stopped. He sat on the porch, but didn't want to go inside.

Evan thought that the whistle was a good sound for a truck horn, so he climbed into Mr. Gordon's truck and blew his whistle. Evan couldn't remember if the horn sounded like his whistle, so he pressed the middle of the steering wheel. There wasn't any noise, so Evan tried again. He felt grown-up sitting in the truck. He smelled the bread that Mr. Gordon was going to deliver in the morning. He opened a bag and ate a roll. It was good and tasted like it already had butter. He ate another roll. Then a third.

Sam was chasing the chickens that came back in the yard, so Evan jumped out of the truck to help.

A few minutes later, Mr. Gordon was standing on the porch yelling for Evan. Evan came over, but not as fast as when he'd been running behind the chickens.

"Why is the truck door open, Evan?"

"I don't know."

"You aren't supposed to go in there without my permission."

"I know, Mr. Gordon."

"Then who was in there?"

"I don't know, Mr. Gordon."

"Stop calling me Mr. Gordon! Call me Pa or something else."

"But you're not my Pa, Mr. Gordon."

Mr. Gordon's face got pink and almost seemed to get bigger. He stood there with his fists at his side looking at Evan, then Mr. Gordon walked in the house.

Evan sat on the ground pushing a stick into the hole of an ant hill. Mr. Gordon and his mother were yelling at each other inside.

A few minutes later Mr. Gordon came out and slammed the front door. He walked up to Evan. "I'd better not ever catch you in my truck."

Mama came out after Mr. Gordon left. "Evan, can you call him Bert from now on?" she asked.

#

Shadows stretched longer across the field as the sun went behind the tops of trees. Dew collected between Evan's fingers and the moist grass. Mama sat by him. It was the same summer as the wedding. She had been sick for a few days and was moving slow all day. They watched Bert give the cows hay.

"Evan. I want to talk to you."

"Yes, Mama." He knew that it was something serious because her voice was shaky, like she had been running.

"You're going to have a little brother or sister."

"How?" His question came out wrong. He meant to ask how that could happen if his Pa wasn't around. "Is that still my brother or sister. We don't have the same blood."

"Partly, you do. You'll share my blood."

Evan didn't talk. He was thinking about having his Mama's blood in his body.

#

It was summer again. Mama just celebrated her six-year wedding anniversary. Evan jumped off the high bank at the bend of the creek and into the deep pool of water. Kester shielded his face

with his arm and stopped singing. Evan liked to think of different ways to make Kester stop singing. It was annoying.

The cloudy creek water was almost up to Evan's knees. He stood in the water flaking off pieces of mica from the clay soil on the bank. It came off in shiny sheets. Evan wanted to save enough to make a sheet of coppery paper, or to make Mama a bracelet. He put large flakes in his pocket with pebbles that he'd collected, but the mica broke into small bits each time he reached into his pocket to run his hands over the surface.

A large flake of mica fell in the muddy pool of water and Evan reached for it. He felt around and ran his hands over a big rock. Evan hurled the rock into deep water near Kester. The rock thudded on the creek bottom and a large halo of water rose and splashed Kester's back.

Kester didn't turn around. He was busy lining up the biggest rocks that he could find across the creek. When water pushed through small openings in his rock wall, he found smaller rocks to fill the gaps. He filled the cracks with the creek's sandy mud. Only a trickle of water made it past his dam.

Evan said, "You're ruining my swimming hole!" He looked down at his feet and the water was at his ankles.

"Wait." Kester said. "I'm making a new swimming hole up here."

Water was collecting on the other side of the dam.

"That's stupid. I want to swim here."

"Just wait a little more. We can swim up here and then break the dam."

"No. I'm swimming here!" Evan pulled pebbles from his pockets and threw them at Kester. He pulled the biggest rock that he'd been saving from his pocket and threw it. Kester

covered his forehead with his hands. When he pulled his hands away, they were bloody. Kester started crying and blood kept coming. It trickled down into the pool of water.

Blood swirled in the murky water. It made Evan sick at his stomach. Evan pulled a rock from the dam wall and water spilled over. Streams of blood filled with metallic bits of mica came with the water.

Kester was still crying and hid his face on his knees. Evan wanted to splash him so Kester would stop crying, but Evan stood in the swimming hole breaking apart the remaining pieces of mica in his pocket.

“I’m sorry,” Evan said. “I’ll help you fix it.” Evan picked up the rock he’d pulled from the dam wall and replaced it.

Kester stopped crying. His knees were covered with blood from his head. He wiped his eyes. Red, sparkly mud was spread across his cheek.

#

Later that summer, Mama was canning tomatoes. She was in the kitchen all day. It was a hot day so Evan and Kester wanted to stay out of there. Mama called them in for lunch. They took some ham and bread out to the porch and ate with their plates on their laps. Evan teased Kester with his signal whistle. Evan blew it in Kester’s face and the shrill sound perked Sam’s ears.

“You don’t have one because you aren’t Mama’s favorite,” Evan said.

“That’s stupid. It’s because I wasn’t born then.” Kester reached for the whistle and Evan pulled it above his reach. “Let me see it!”

Their plates fell from their laps and broke into triangles and other sharp pieces. Sam rushed to pick the ham and bread from between the plate pieces before the boys could even think to move.

“Look what you did!” Evan said.

“That’s not my fault!” Kester said.

“I’m gonna tell Mama,” Evan said.

“Don’t,” Kester said. “She’s not in the mood.”

“I’ll help you clean it up, but you will owe me a favor,” Evan said.

“OK. What favor?”

“Get me a cupcake from Bert’s truck.”

“We’re not allowed in there.”

“But we don’t have any lunch now. Do you want me to starve to death?”

“I’m hungry too,” Kester said.

Evan swept the plate pieces into a pile and put them in a pile under the porch. “Go. I’ll keep watch.”

Evan was surprised when Kester got up and went toward the truck. Sam followed Kester, but Evan called him back to the porch. Evan saw Kester open the truck door, but he didn’t hear any sounds coming from the truck. He counted to ten over and over. He hoped that Kester would be quick and he got a little bit scared for him. Evan could only hear his heart beating. He thought that maybe Sam could hear it too because he was watching Kester and standing like he was frozen. Sam turned around and sat when the front door opened.

“Where’s Kester?” Bert asked.

Evan stood between Bert and his truck. He moved to the other side of Bert and pointed in the opposite direction of the truck. “He’s over there feeding the chickens.”

“Alright. When he’s done, y’all go in the attic and pull down some of the canning jars.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bert paused and looked Evan up and down before going back inside.

Kester was walking from the truck with a cupcake in each hand. Sam ran beside him, sniffing toward his hand.

“Over here,” Evan motioned for them to go around the corner of the house.

Kester followed Evan to the Elm tree.

“Let me hold them so you can climb,” Evan said.

Kester held the cupcakes for a moment and handed them to Evan. Kester reached for the branches and began to climb. He looked down at Evan. “Come on,” Kester said.

Evan held the cupcakes in his mouth by the corners of the plastic wrappers. He followed Kester up the tree. Kester was singing.

“We have to climb high enough that we can’t be seen,” Kester said.

“MMMMHUH,” Evan said.

They climbed. Kester lead and Evan followed. Evan wondered when Kester would stop, but even at halfway up the tree, Kester kept climbing. Evan looked down and his arms felt shaky. Evan wanted to tell Kester that it was high enough, but he couldn’t talk and hold the cupcakes.

Kester kept climbing.

Evan thought about the branches splitting open. He thought about stopping where he was, but Kester kept looking back to him and telling him to come on.

Kester stopped within reach of the open sky. Evan settled on a branch below him, put the cupcakes in one hand, and took in a deep breath. “We’re really high,” Evan said.

“I thought this was where you always went,” Kester said.

“No. I haven’t been up this high before.” Evan felt the sway of the limbs with the breeze. He could see even more of the mountains from here. Evan opened the cupcake and put the

wrapper in his pocket. He handed it to Kester and watched Kester bite into the sweet cake. For a moment, he saw his mother's face. He saw her under the tree with him, and reading to him, back when she was all his own.

MASKING DARKNESS

Jude held an overweight, black cat with her arm under its ribcage and close to her body. Black hairs were spread across the front of her pink t-shirt. This cat looked like at least five other cats perched on the back of her sofas and folded up sleeping in chairs. And those were the cats I could see from the foyer.

The ammonia and dried feces smell wafted outside the front door and I knew as soon as I had touched the doorbell a few moments earlier that those fumes would attach to my clothes, hair, and the moist skin of my nostrils. I should have gotten gas before I came here, because there was no way that I'd be in public right after being here. I had enough gas to make it home. I needed to be sure to leave my sister's house with time to shower before returning to work.

"Hey, Lily. Meet Felix," Jude said. She held it in the air for a moment to face me.

"They let you adopt another cat?" I said. "I thought it was no more after the last one."

"I didn't get him from the SPCA," Jude said, looking into the cat's face as he turned away and leapt out of her arms. "The owner was a man that was just admitted. Mr. Montague. The family needed to find his cat a home. You know how hard it is to home a black cat."

"So, this is temporary. The owner wants him back if he gets better?"

"Lil. No. He's been admitted to hospice care. No one ever gets better."

I looked down at my beige leather pumps, checking the toe for scuffs. I'd have to clean them when I got home, maybe change into another pair of pumps to save time. Next to the tip of my shoe was a litter box with clumps of piss and shit. I didn't ask about her job. A hospice nurse's job is so hopeless.

"What do you have growing now?" I pointed with my chin out the sliding glass door, desperate for fresh air.

From where we still stood in the living room, Jude gestured toward the rectangular garden in the corner of the yard, the shin-high grass seemed to be prospering the most. “I’ve got some suckering to do,” she said, pointing at the leggy, overgrown, tomato plants. “Just a little bit of work to get it back to where it was.”

I bent down to see through a gap of boxes stacked in front of the hazy glass door. Jude didn’t move any of the boxes so we could go outside. All of my recent visits had been confined to the living room. This was the only room in the house where there was anywhere left to sit. I knew this from my visit about six months ago when we got in an argument about all of the shit she’d collected. I was sure that there still was only a narrow strip on her bed that remained cleared like it was the last time I saw it. Otherwise, all surfaces in the house, except for the sofa, were covered with clothes, boxes, and empty plastic cat litter jugs.

Next to the living room, at least half of the kitchen’s beige Formica countertops were covered with dirty cups, empty boxes of crackers and snacks, molded bagels, bags of cat food, and cat dishes. Most of the bags had been pushed open by the cats and one of the big guys was crunching on a mouthful of food out of the top of a bag. The sink was piled with sludge-covered dishes. They may have been there during my last visit a couple of weeks ago, because I noticed stacks of paper plates spilling out of the large, black plastic trash bag. A cat jumped on top of a tower of empty boxed wine. The wine boxes toppled as the cat scrambled to land on another tower of boxes. These brown shipping boxes were stamped with the Home Shopping Network logo, some of them still taped shut.

“Jude, why do keep buying all of this stuff?”

“I’ve got some really cool things here. You have to see this 3-D puzzle I have of the Eiffel Tower.” Jude leaned to reach one of the boxes, unable to find sound footing to step closer.

“Show me later. I have to go home and pack for a work trip in the morning.”

“Please, sit down and stay a few minutes.” Jude picked up a hissing black cat from the high back flowered chair with slashes in the fabric along the sides revealing the cotton batting.

“Another time, Jude. Maybe we can go get lunch.”

“You know I’m busy most days at work. Then I just come home and fall asleep.” Jude looked down at the chair.

“Are you sleeping in here?” I asked. My ankles itched from real or imagined flea bites, but I didn’t scratch because Jude would see. I didn’t tell her that I couldn’t remember the last time that I slept in my bed. I rubbed my ankles together.

“Some nights. It’s just easier than cleaning off the bed and I like the sound of the TV.” She looked away and reached down to pet a cat. “Look. Phoenix came to visit. You remember him, don’t you?”

“Sure. But, they all look the same. How do you tell them apart?” But I wasn’t thinking about my question. I was thinking of what she said about the sound of the TV. It was hard to get used to a silent room, especially after so many years of silent moments being the worst moments. Noise meant that everything was going as usual. People coughing in the night, honking car horns, dogs barking, people arguing—that was normal. When everything was quiet—those were the times to be scared.

And I was thinking about what she wasn’t saying. She didn’t apologize for the mess anymore. I can’t imagine that it’s because she doesn’t realize how out of hand things have gotten. It was almost as if she found comfort in the chaos that she’s created. I was sure her landlord had no idea the house was in this shape.

“He was my first black cat. Remember? He was going to be euthanized that day, but I rescued him.”

“That’s right. I remember.” I shook my head with tiny nods, pretending that this memory was more distant to me than it actually was. I had thought about Phoenix and that evening with Mr. Cannon as soon as I pulled up in the driveway a few minutes ago.

“Without him, I don’t know what. That was right after…” She looked back at Phoenix. I was happy she didn’t keep talking. Talking about it always made her cry, and all I wanted to do is to tell her to stop crying. I didn’t cry.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath then cleared my throat. “I’ve got to go, Jude. Call me. Okay?” Within a moment I was stepping out of her front door into the sun and fresh air, trying not to show my haste to get back in my car. Once on the road, I pulled a bottle of hand sanitizer from the glove box, and threw the bagel I had left from breakfast out the window. I couldn’t eat.

#

I worked the rest of the afternoon following some local sales leads before leaving in the morning. I didn’t mind traveling, even on the weekend. I traveled so often that it wasn’t unusual for me not to unpack between trips. I’d just change out a few items of clothes.

I hadn’t told Jude that I also slept in a chair in the living room, but the reason wasn’t because my bed was full of things. I felt more comfortable in the open living room. I liked to fall asleep to the sound of the TV, and when I woke in the night I didn’t feel so confined and lonely. Back when Jude and I lived on the streets after leaving the Cannon’s home, we slept next to an electronic billboard. It was like a giant TV. It kept the area lit enough that we could look out for any problems. Jude’s face would change colors as she slept, to whatever colors were on the

screen. Sometimes, at home in my chair, when my skin lit up to a deep red or blue from the TV screen, I'd think of those nights near the billboard.

#

The day after I visited Jude, she said over the phone, "My landlord posted an eviction notice."

I was pulled over at a rest station along Alligator Alley in South Florida. "What do you mean? You've been paying your rent, right?"

"I have, but I paid it late and he came to pick it up. He said he had warned me before about the condition of the house. I don't know why he's so upset. It's not as bad as he's making it out to be."

"Jude, it's pretty bad," I said. "I can understand his concern a little bit." I waited for her to respond. "But it's not anything we can't clean up."

"He said that I lost my last chance. He'd already warned me a few times."

I didn't bother to ask her why she didn't clean everything up before. It didn't matter now. "It's fine, Lil. Don't worry. I have a place to go. But I'll have to put some things in a storage unit temporarily. It's a smaller place."

"I'll come over and help you get your things packed." I didn't ask how the hell she found a place that would rent to her with all of those fucking cats.

#

As I drove back to Ft. Lauderdale to help Jude, I thought about getting all that junk packed to move. It was amazing that she had collected all this stuff in just the ten years since we had nothing. When Jude found a tiny apartment for us so we didn't have to sleep under the billboard anymore, we only had a grocery bag of belongings.

She was only 16 but looked older, so the landlord didn't ask, nor did he care. Jude already had fake ID that she used to get a job waiting tables. That was how she made enough money to get the apartment. The fake ID was also how she was able to adopt Phoenix from the SPCA. They had no idea that we were still kids. I was only 12 when we had left the Cannon's home.

The small apartment was enough space, except in the kitchenette. Jude would buy food anytime she saw it on sale. She said that she was worried that we'd run out of money and be hungry again. I think that was what she hated the most about living near the billboard—we had no place to hide our belongings, so we could only keep what we could carry. Even if she had food left from her job at the restaurant, we couldn't keep it long since we had no place to keep it.

#

When I got to Jude's house to help her pack here stuff, she hadn't cleaned anything yet. The dishes were still dirty in the sink.

"Jude, how long do you have to get all of your stuff out?" Whatever the answer was, we needed more time.

"Three days."

"You can't be serious!" I stood in the dining room surrounded by boxes and garbage.

"What happens if we just leave all your stuff here?"

"Lily. This is everything that I own."

"I don't even know what to do with everything." I started cleaning the kitchen. We'd already filled up the garbage cart that the city picks up once a week. So, I started putting the full trash bags out in the carport. She came up with ridiculous reasons to keep things—like saving empty boxes for boxtops that she'd never take to school. So, I slipped them in the black trash bag

before she could see. While Jude packed her things in boxes, I threw away bags of trash and drove them to a nearby apartment complex with at least a dozen dumpsters. I was glad that Jude didn't go with me. If she saw everything that I was throwing away, she'd try to keep most of it. One of the dumpsters in the back of the complex was near a row of trees. A small black cat came out of the shade and meowed at me as I tossed a trash bag into the dumpster. I petted her and brought a handful of cat food with me on the next trash trip. It never occurred to me to take that cat home. I knew it would have been for Jude if she had known.

After two days of cleaning and packing, I filled three dumpsters to the top.

#

We unloaded the last box into the storage unit.

“Okay. Let's take your clothes to your new place,” I said.

“No, Lily. Don't worry. I can unload the cats from my car myself.”

“There's some of your clothes in my car, too. Let's go.”

“Just put the clothes in the storage unit.”

“Your clothes might get ruined in here. And I'm not leaving them in my car.”

“Follow me, then. It's just a few minutes from here.”

A stack of clothes on hangers slid around on the back seat of my car as I followed her turn after turn. She seemed to be lost—not going in a direct route. Finally, she parked on the street in front of a two-story house. I walked up to the driver's side of her car and she was digging in her purse. She pulled out three sets of keys.

“This place is huge. I thought that you said it was tiny and that's why you needed a storage unit?”

“It's just easier, Lily.”

I didn't feel like she had heard my question. "What's going on, Jude?"

"Nothing." She said. She flipped through the keyrings and examined each key. Then she tried them in the lock individually. I think that she had tried around ten keys before one worked. When we entered the house, it had the musky smell of stagnant air. All of the blinds were closed and only the foyer light was on. A hospital bed with an adjustable mattress dominated the dark living room.

"Jude? Is someone living here?"

"It's a long story."

"I'm asking for the story." The foyer was decorated with a tall antique vase and small table. The end of golf umbrella and some canes stuck from the top of the vase. I flipped through a stack of junk mail and bills in a basket on the table. "Laurence Montague?" I said. "Is he the patient in hospice?"

"Yes. He's the owner of the house. I'm renting the place from him."

"He can't make that type of an agreement if he's in hospice."

"Don't worry about it, Lily."

"Just tell me what's going on. We've been moving your stuff into storage for two days, and the only things that we've brought here are some of your clothes and the cats."

"Oh, yeah. I need to grab my clothes from your car. I'm sure you have things to do." She walked out to my car.

The house was still dark. I went to the kitchen and flicked the light switch. The fluorescent bulb flickered a few times before filling the kitchen with harsh light. The kitchen wasn't dirty, but it wasn't clean either. A spider web spread from the curtain to the window pane. The dishes in the cabinets were old, like sets found in a thrift shop. I opened the narrow cabinets

beside the microwave and found dozens of pill bottles of different sizes. The prescription bottles were for Laurence Montague.

Jude came back through the door with the stack of clothes. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Just looking around,” I said. “Do you need help bringing the cats in?”

“No. No. Don’t worry, Lily,” she said. “I’ll do it.”

“Don’t be silly. Let’s get the cats.”

I carried a cardboard cat carrier inside. It was one of the quiet cats. The cat was in one corner of the box and that made me carry it lopsided. I sat the box down in the living room, opened the top, and pulled Phoenix from the box. His pupils were dilated as he looked around the room.

“Put him back. Not in here,” Jude said. She hurried over to stuff Phoenix back inside the box as he gave a protest meow. “They need to stay in the screened porch.”

“Mr. Montague’s family doesn’t know about the cats, do they?”

Jude didn’t answer. She still had her purse on her shoulder. “I’m going to get fresh kitty litter. Are you going back to work?”

“No. I’ll go with you. I want to get a cold drink.”

“Fine, but let’s be quick.” Jude left the cats in the boxes.

In the store, she slung four containers of litter in the cart along with new litter boxes.

“Let’s go.” She was already heading to the register before letting the words out.

“Don’t you want some groceries?” I said. “There’s no food in the kitchen.”

“No. I just want to get back.”

She drove like she wanted to get back—speeding and rolling through stop signs.

“What’s the hurry?”

She didn't answer. When we were just down the street from the house, Jude stopped the car.

"What are you doing?"

"Hold on," she said. She was watching the house. There was a white van parked in front. She remained focused on the house and didn't look at me. After a few moments a man in a US Postal Service uniform crossed the street to the van with the small eagle logo on the back hatch. "Oh, God. That scared me."

"Not only does that old man's family not know about your cats, they don't know about you either, do they?"

She finally looked at me. "Lily, there's no way that I can find a place to rent that will accept nine cats."

"Then why the hell did you get all of these cats?"

"They had nowhere to go."

"Now you have nowhere to go," I said. "Well, that's not true. Come stay with me. I can't let you live like a squatter." I was surprised at my own words, but I knew that she didn't have any other options.

"And my cats?"

"Yes, I guess so. But you'll need to keep the litter boxes clean." I knew that I'd never talk her into sending them to the SPCA. There's no way that they'd all be adopted.

#

The agreement was the cats were supposed to stay in Jude's bedroom, or out on the screened balcony, but, even on the first day, they slipped through the door and into the living room. On the

second day, I conceded that they could go anywhere except my bedroom. I'm not sure why I cared if the cats were in my bedroom. I still wasn't sleeping there.

I was surprised how little the cats bothered me. It was Jude that was bothering me more. She hadn't brought all her things from the storage unit, so she kept making trips to the store to buy something that was missing. It seemed that she was always bringing bags in from shopping after work. A lot times, she wasn't replacing anything she had before, or even buying something that she needed. If it was a good deal, then she'd buy it. Buy-one-get-one-free deals were irresistible. She brought home a dozen jars of spaghetti sauce one day. Another day it was four wedges of imported cheese. Then another time it was six bottles of black Rit dye. When the pantry and cabinets were full, I told her to stop buying. But she didn't.

The only problem I had with the cats was the black hair on my beige furniture. I tried using a sticky roller to remove the hair, but it never got all of it. Jude must have known that it was bothering me, even though I didn't tell her, because one day she came home with mismatching top sheets in a variety of flower patterns. She covered the sofas and chairs with a deluge of tiny flowers in yellows, pinks, and purples.

I found the yellow flower pattern repulsive, but I didn't know why at first. One day after work I sat on the sofa covered with a bed of tiny flowers. As I looked closer at the pattern, I realized that it was not exactly the same, but similar to the sheets I had when Jude and I lived in our last foster home. At this home, I used to hide under the flowers when Mr. Cannon came to visit Jude and me in the night. There were times, when Jude couldn't convince him to leave me alone, that my face would be pushed down into the fabric, the flowers rubbing against me as he pushed over and over again.

There was one night when Mr. Cannon didn't want me to put my face down on the fabric. He rolled me over and pulled my head to his lap. Back then I wasn't sure what he wanted because he had never done this to me, but Jude was in the next bed and she knew. She screamed at him and tried to pull me away from him, but he pushed her on the floor.

I never saw what Jude hit him with. He fell to the floor and didn't move for a few seconds. The room was still dark, so it looked like black ink was spilling from his jawline. By the time that he was holding his jaw and pulling himself up, we were running out of the room. I later knew it was a brick that Jude hit him with, because I heard it break apart on the street pavement when she threw it as we ran down the street in the middle of the night. She later told me that she had found the brick a few days ago and had been planning on defending us against Mr. Cannon.

When I realized why the yellow flowered sheets seemed so familiar, I stood up from the sofa and stepped away. Phoenix rubbed against my leg. I'm not sure how long I stood there, but soon I was in the kitchen pulling bottles out from under the sink. There were at least five bottles of glass cleaner, and three bottles of kitchen cleaner. I found the bottles of Rit dye and collected them in my arms.

In the bathroom, I turned on the water and kneeled over the tub. As I poured in two bottles of dye, the deep black ink spread through the churning water in clouds. I collected the sheets from the furniture and shook out cat hair. Some hairs tickled my skin as it collected on my face. I pushed the sheets down in the water, greying my arms with ink. The yellow flowers only became smoky instead of disappearing. So, I added the other bottles. Now the water was jet black, but the sheets kept floating to the top. I pushed them down in different spots, but the other end would float up. I stepped into the tub. My feet and my beige pumps disappeared into the

black water. The sheets still ballooned, so I lowered myself into the cold water. I spread myself over the sheets, floating on the surface of the black lake. I closed my eyes and lowered my face into the water. Everything was dark. My ears filled with water and I heard the vibrations of the building. I fell asleep in the blackness. It was the first time that I could remember when I slept peacefully in the dark.

I woke when I heard Jude open the door to the condo. She was talking to the cats, but her voice was muffled by the water. I could tell that she was introducing them to a new cat. I hoped that it was the tiny black cat that I saw next the dumpster a few days ago when Jude moved. If not, we'd go together to get her.

CIRCLES

A trio of helicopters circle the sky like lazy flies over a carcass. Local news channels battle for the best footage. Since they are not police copters, Stan guesses that it's some major car accident, maybe a multi-car pile-up. A gridlock of traffic waits between Stan and his home. He wants to get home and eat dinner. He hasn't eaten all day, but this type of traffic will have him sitting and thinking about food and his hunger for an hour or more.

It's already been a long day. Stan didn't eat lunch because he was with Natasha, apologizing that he can't see her tomorrow on her birthday. He told her that he had go to a medical conference instead of telling her that it's his anniversary. Natasha has a way of convincing him to change his plans. She tried again today, pulling her arms tight against the edge of her chest, placing her elbows on the picnic table at the park, and leaning closer to him. Her cleavage pushed up and even more prominent than usual. Her heavy eyelashes blinked like they were too heavy for her eyelids. Stan always liked her thick, long lashes. A few weeks ago, he lied to Kimberly about visiting his brother and spent the night with Natasha. That was when he realized that her lashes were fake.

“But I want to spend my birthday with you, Stan.”

“Natasha, I wish I could. There's nothing that I want more. But I can't do anything about it. We'll celebrate when I get back.”

“When is that?”

Stan struggled to remember on the spot how many nights he planned to go away with Kimberly and when they'd return. “I'll be back on Sunday. So, we can do something the

following Saturday. No, sorry. Charlie's birthday party is Saturday. We can get together a week from Sunday."

"So long away? That's more than a week after my birthday." Natasha leaned her head to one side and licked her lips. "Why don't I go with you? Then we can celebrate in the evening and I'll stay and relax in the hotel while you're at the conference. Where is it?"

Stan was careful to not say where he was really going with Kimberly. Saint Augustine wasn't that far away and not a place for a large conference. He hesitated to answer, thinking of a place that was inconvenient enough for Natasha to not want to go. "Umm, Atlanta," he said.

"Umm?" Natasha was leaning back away from Stan. "You're not sure."

"Just slipped my mind for a moment. Atlanta."

"That's perfect. I can visit my cousin while you are doing the conference thing."

"I don't think it's a good idea. I'll have things in the evening with colleagues, too."

"I don't mind."

"No," he said. "It's a bad idea."

"Oh, that's right. I forgot. I'm just a piece of side ass." Natasha's eyes were big now. No doe-eyed seduction. The tip of one false eyelash popped loose from the corner of her eye. Stan felt sweat train down the side of his face. He wasn't sure if it was from the Jacksonville heat, or from the conversation. "It's not that," he said reaching for her hand. "It's complicated." "It's really not that complicated. Either I'm important to you, or I'm not." Natasha pulled her hand away.

"Natasha. Stop being silly. Of course, you're important to me."

“Don’t give me that shit!” Natasha pulled herself up from her seat and stepped over the picnic table bench. She walked away, her sashay exaggerated. When she looked back, Stan turned away. He listened for the sound of Natasha’s car driving away.

A few people were also in the park that afternoon. A couple sat close to each other. A group of guys sat on top of another table. Two girls stood under a tree. One was holding up her phone, apparently taking photos of the other. The girl that was being photographed arched her back and leaned her head back. She fluffed her hair and adjusted her pose several times. She stopped to look at her friend’s phone, then returned to her spot under the tree to face the other direction. Her friend continued to hold her phone up and take more photos.

#

Stan doesn’t think that Kimberly is home yet. She called him earlier, right before taking Charlie over to the neighbor’s house. She always feels bad about locking Pringles in his crate, even though she knows about his habit of searching for food and digging through the trashcan when no one is looking. Every time he’s caught he seems remorseful, but then he does it again.

“I thought that it’d be okay since I would only be gone for a few minutes,” Kimberly said. “But when I got back from picking up Charlie from school, Pringles had his nose in a bag of jalapeño potato chips.”

“Oh, I forgot to put them away last night. Dammit,” Stan said.

“Yes. You promised me you would put them away when you went to bed, but I knew you’d forget,” she said. Stan wasn’t sure if she was mad. “But it was funny. Pringles was licking his lips, obviously feeling the burn. He can’t control himself,” she continued.

#

Stan's been watching the helicopters follow the same pattern for a few moments while he sits at a stoplight. Probably no chance of getting home soon. He tries to estimate how long before he's home to eat, but there's no telling with the continent of traffic in front of him. His phone vibrates. He reads a text from Natasha. *You don't treat me like I'm important.* He begins to type a reply, but the stoplight turns green.

Two stoplights down, right next to Vera's Wig Shop, is King's BBQ. These places have been here since he was a child, and there are reasons.

For the wig shop, Stan's mother, when she was still living, and every woman she knew from church shopped there for full wigs and pieces. They liked that place because it wasn't expensive and the owner always told them that they look beautiful. Sometimes they'd show up for Sunday service or the grocery store with matching wigs. No one ever mentioned it. Except once. When Stan was a boy. For some reason, Stan's dad was at a church picnic. This wasn't typical. Maybe Mama made Pop go for some reason. Aunt Jess had this new blonde wig. Stan remembers not recognizing her with this unnatural hair color.

"You look just like Belle. Y'all have the same hair," Pop said.

"Oh, you've been looking at Belle again, have ya?" Mama said.

"Naw, dear. I just saw her the other day at Tally's Meats."

"I bet."

Mama and Pop walked out to the parking lot. They were yelling at each other. A few minutes later Pop left. This was probably one of the times that Pop didn't come home for a few weeks. It happened a lot.

Stan learned to never talk about anybody's wig.

For King's BBQ, it'd been around for so long because King was out there early every morning smoking meat and ribs in his barrel drum. And his sauce was perfect. Not too sweet and with a little bit of spice. It could make a shoe taste delicious. As far as Stan knew, King never took a day off over the last thirty years. Stopping in for BBQ would be a good way to wait out the traffic.

The interior of King's hasn't changed any that Stan can remember. Still orange Formica tables with mismatched chairs. A fluorescent light flickers on the ceiling corner. Some of the other bulbs are out.

"Hey, Stan. How have you been? I haven't seen much of you lately," King said.

"Ah, you know, King. Always busy."

"I have your favorite today. Fried shrimp."

"Then I know what I'll have. With seasoned fries."

"You bet."

Stan seats himself at a table near the window. The helicopters are buzzing in the distance. Thoughts of King's fried shrimp has him thinking about his hunger. It's the type of food that he tells his patients not to eat, but he rarely eats this, so, it's okay. Shrimp is his favorite, because it doesn't taste like any other meat. Some of the other meat, especially with sauce or fried, is hard to tell apart. But shrimp always tastes like shrimp. Stan checks for any food in the window. King grabs two plates and walks into the dining area, and serves two women at a table. They seem about the same age as Natasha. The woman with her back to Stan stands up. Her skirt is short, probably he could see anything he wanted if he was at the correct angle. He is surprised that he feels sorry for her. Stan's phone vibrates again. Another text from Natasha. *You can't treat me like this!* Stan puts his phone back in his pocket.

“How’s your dad?” King asks as he set a plate full of fried goodies in front of Stan.

“Pretty good,” Stan says. “The same.”

“Next time you see him, tell him that we miss seeing his ugly face ‘round here.”

“I will.” Stan gives King an abbreviated laugh and bites into a large shrimp. He feels heat on the roof of his mouth and sucks in air to cool the delicate skin. The shrimp is fresh, battered and fried per order. Delicious. The stuff a last meal should be made of. Something that his patients can’t resist, and he understands why. But he never tells them.

King stands behind the counter, sets his cigarette in an ashtray and points a remote to the TV mounted on the wall. There’s a bright blip, then the 24-hour news channel fades in. A shaky helicopter camera scans the intersection of the five-car crash and a tanker truck. News headlines stream on the bottom of the screen describing the tractor trailer as a gasoline tanker. The big orange logo on side of the silver trailer should make it clear that the tanker is holding orange juice. Maybe it makes the news more dramatic if it’s extremely flammable. The camera follows the streets from the intersection, showing lines of cars waiting for the intersection to be cleared. Stan realizes that there are only two shrimp left on his plate. He starts on the fries. “King. Can I get a pulled pork plate to go?”

King disappears in the back again. A man comes in and looks around the restaurant, then bends over to reach down into the trashcan. He shuffles a few things around, searches in the trash, and pulls out an empty cup. He walks to the fountain drink dispenser, fills the cup, and walks out before King returns from the back.

“You won’t believe what some guy just did,” Stan says to King.

“Oh, Lenny? The cup out of the trash?”

“Yeah.”

“I told him that I’d give him a clean cup, that he doesn’t have to pull stuff from the garbage, but he keeps sneaking in like that.”

“And he only gets soda?”

“Yep. Never food. I guess he just likes the taste of being sneaky. Sometimes I have Glenda yell at him for stealing just to bring him more enjoyment.”

#

In the car, the Styrofoam container squeaks against the leather passenger’s seat. Stan places his hand on the top to keep it from sliding off the seat as he makes a right-hand turn. He’s driving just a few blocks from King’s BBQ on a side road to Lakeheart Nursing Home. It’s a weekday afternoon, so only a few cars are parked near the entrance. Most visitors come during the weekend. The other days, residents search for ways to pass time until the next visit. Stan’s father used to make the most in poker games on these days. People would rather lose money than feel alone. Stan parks away from the entrance and near the manmade pond. A floating pond fountain shoots streams of water in the center, making the air even more humid than a normal Florida afternoon. Stan sits on a bench, and ducks from three directions head over to him expecting food.

“Sorry guys. I’ve got nothing for you,” he says and gets up.

A woman pushes the door open with her foot, her hands full from carrying a smoothie, yoga mat, and duffle bag. She smiles at Stan as he passes her on his way to the door. He can see her in the reflection on the glass doors. She looks back to see him from behind. A woman is working at the front desk, typing something on the computer. Stan isn’t sure if she is a recent hire, or if he doesn’t recognize her because it’s been at least two months since he was last there.

“Good afternoon,” says Stan.

“Hello. Can I help you?” the woman asks.

“No, thanks. I know where I’m going. He’s probably in his room.”

The multipurpose room behind the lobby smells a like a mixture of sweat and foot cream. A few residents are still rolling up their yoga mats and pausing to wipe their foreheads. Stan doesn’t look for his father here. Pop was never the yoga type. Now, he’s not any type, at least not the man he was before. Hardly still a person.

Stan heads down the hallway. The smell of gravy and green beans replaces the workout smell. It’s five p.m., but staff is already serving dinner. Stan makes it to his father’s room just before the dining staff. He hesitates outside the room.

“Mr. Williams, dinner’s here,” the young lady says as she passes Stan and enters the room with a plastic tray of food.

“I don’t want that shit, Jackie,” Pop says.

Stan wants to tell him to not talk to her like that, but his father’s right. It is shit—nothing like the photos in the brochure they gave him when he brought his father there.

“Don’t give me hard time today,” the lady says.

“Dammit, Jackie. I’m watching my show.”

“Pops, I have something you’ll like,” Stan says as he enters the room. He opens the takeout container. “It’s from King’s.” Stan smiles at the lady and checks her nametag to see if, by some weird coincidence, her name is the same as his mother’s. It’s not. Her nametag has *Lisa* printed in large letters.

Pop looks at Stan for a moment and returns his attention to the television. Lisa places the tray on a rolling cart and leaves the room.

“How are you Pop?”

His father turns to Stan. “Son? When did you get here? I can’t remember the last time I saw you.”

“I know, Pop. I’ve been busy.”

“Don’t keep yourself too busy with nonsense. You’re gonna miss out on true living.”

“Your probably right, Pop.”

They sit and watch golf on TV. His father never watched golf before but Stan likes this quiet moment and falls asleep. His phone vibrates.

I’m at your house. I’m telling Kimberly everything.

Stan places his phone back in his pocket. “Pop, I’m sorry. I gotta go.”

“You just got here. Sit for a little while. Whatever it is that you need to do can wait.”

His father’s room is decorated with photos. There’s one of his mother standing over the stove, frying shrimp. His father is at the kitchen table behind her, playing cards with someone not in the photo. His father was one of the best at cards. When he taught Stan how to play poker, he said to always believe that he had the best hand, then no one could tell when he was bluffing. Stan asked his father if that was lying, and he told Stan that yes, it is and that Stan has to decide when to lie and when not to.

“Okay, Pop. I’m not getting anywhere soon anyway.”

“Let me have that plate of BBQ.”

“Oh, yeah, Pop.” Stan pulls the rolling tray over to his father’s bed. “Pop. I really messed up.”

“We all do sometimes, son. It’s what we do the next time that it comes around that matters.”

Stan's phone rings. It's Kimberly. Stan answers the call but doesn't speak. Kimberly's crying. "I knew something was up with you," she says. "I just can't believe that you hid all of this from me." She says something else, but he can't understand her.

"Kimberly. I'll be home as soon as I can. I'm at Pop's waiting for the traffic to clear."

"Don't bother," she says and hangs up.

"But, Kimberly," he says, knowing the she can't hear him.

Stan's phone rings again. He's happy that Kimberly is calling back, but then he realizes before he answers that it's Natasha calling. Stan turns off his phone. He looks out the window. One of the residents is outside feeding the ducks. They're circled around the man as he throws pieces to the ducks in the back.

Stan already knows that Kimberly has left with Charlie to stay with her mother. She's been upset with him before, but not for anything like this. He's never been caught like this before. And he always had some excuse for any of Kimberly's suspicions. This time, he can't think of anything that he wants to say to his wife that isn't true.

Stan falls asleep in his father's chair with the persistent whispers of a golf game on the TV.

SEAWORTHY

Alan's father's boat, *Gilravage*, shifted back and forth in her slip from the wake of a passing boat as the sun crept closer to the tree line of the island. The heavy-duty, yellow power cord that normally draped over the bow of the boat and connected to the shore power box was neatly coiled on the dock. All of the hatches were shut tight and the blue, Sunbrella fabric-covered cockpit cushions were not on the settees.

If his father had been there, then Alan would request permission to board—something his retired Navy father taught him to do even as a child. But since his father was gone, he stepped onboard in silence and removed his shoes. That first step on the deck would have had his father reminding him to keep the filth of the bottom of his shoes, especially asphalt tar, off the brightwork. These were the things that Alan's father made sure he knew. Alan was never permitted to call it wood decking. It was brightwork. There was no rope on the boat. It was line or sheet. The storage under the seat cushion was the lazarette.

Alan slid up the weathered, wood panels to open the companionway. He stepped down into the stale air and darkness, opened the miniature curtains and portholes to let in the fresh breeze. Dust sprinkled from the curtains like snow as a gust of wind pushed into the cabin. Books were stacked on the cushion of the settee and within arm's length was a bottle of Glenmorangie single malt Scotch whisky.

During the last fifteen year, the days of Alan's visits with his father ended in evenings sitting together in the cabin alternating between sail repairs and reading when their hands tired, and a glass of whisky over ice to cool their worn fingers, if they had ice. Otherwise, whisky neat. The glass of room-temperature nectar still soothed Alan's fingers and he enjoyed how his father told more stories during those evenings than Alan had ever heard in all of his years before his

father bought the boat. Alan felt closer with his father during these visits than he had even felt in the years of living in West Palm Beach with him after Alan's mother passed. He opened up to him and told him about problems Laura and that she had filed for a divorce.

#

Alan ran his fingertips along the wood planks and joints of the interior hull wall. His father had insisted on finding a full-keel plank-on-frame construction boat. The only part of the hull that wasn't wooden was the lead ballast.

Before his father bought *Gilravage*, Alan sent him information about modern fiberglass boats for sale in Ft. Lauderdale. Listing after listing, he hoped his father would find an interest in one of these more practical—easier—boats. When his father told Alan that he was buying an old wooden boat unseen, Alan had no choice but to trust his judgment. Even still, he went with his father to Abaco to help transfer the title and move him onboard.

Every two or three months, Alan would take a flight from Fort Lauderdale over the white caps of the ocean's breaking waves and spend a few days sailing the Bahamas Out Islands. The plane would hardly push through the banks of clouds before its descent into Marsh Harbor and onto the short airstrip of cracked asphalt streaked with black tire marks. Bahamian customs was nothing like America, practically ambassadors of tourism.

The taxi ride to the marina was when Alan finally felt away from his life in Fort Lauderdale and when he started to feel the slow speed of the island. Outside the window of the Impala, Bahamians strolled along the roadside, never rushed. He also noted this casualness in his father, which was even more relaxed when he was on the water.

#

After a day out on the water, they would watch the sun set with a drink, sometimes just whatever one of his father's dock neighbors would bring by. Many evenings, the cockpit would be full of retired men who kept in touch with each other through ham radio. A few wives would be in tow. The women's heavy perfume masked the diesel fumes of the boats. Most of them flirted with Alan, and some also flirted with his father as their husbands were distracted by their own stories. Alan's father always pointed out the good qualities in them later, when he and Alan laughed about those evenings. The most intense moments on the boat were with his father and his group of friends as they listened to the Army-Navy football game-or as Alan's dad would call it, the Navy-Army game. All of them would have a story of when they won or lost a lot of money on the game.

The last few years that his father lived in the marina, things were quiet. *Gilravage's* docklines remained tied. Alan's visits became days confined in the 30 foot hull with his father and nights that ended with an awkward crawl into the aft berth past his father's Sailrite Ultrafeed sewing machine, with a panel of sunbrella fabric mid-stitch under the needle that had been there for at least a year.

"Dad, you should move back to Florida with me. You'll be more comfortable," Alan said. "I couldn't be more comfortable than this," his dad said, sweeping his hand across the air.

#

When Alan got the call from one of his father's dock mates, he made arrangements to collect his father's ashes. Alan's dad had declined a Navy funeral in his will and requested that his ashes be scattered in the Sea of Abaco, mid-December during the Navy-Army game. *Gilravage* was left to Alan and he had a few weeks to plan a sailing voyage, with an anchor drop that coincided with the finish of the Navy-Army game. If Army won, ashes would be dropped over the port side.

And if Navy won, over starboard. She remained in her slip for a few weeks before Alan called and spoke with the dockmaster.

“It’s not the fees. Campbell paid for the year. But you’ve got to make sure you have someone here to take care of her if, or more like when, a storm comes. But we have the winter to pass before the season,” the dockmaster said. “I can recommend some people if you want to leave her here.”

“No, I need to come there in December. And after that I need to sell her.” Alan said. “It’s the easiest thing to do. What kind of shape’s she in?”

“Pretty much the same shape. You know those wooden boats, something’s always trying to chew them up and turn them into sand.”

#

By December, Alan was thankful for an excuse to leave the stacked suburbs of Ft. Lauderdale. Work hadn’t picked up. Alan put in more hours with hopes of being distracted from his divorce. It didn’t help that she was living with his coworker, Tim. Alan couldn’t forget the first time he noticed how she talked to Tim, how her stare didn’t break away and the way she smiled at what he was saying. Even now, his breath was deep in his chest as he felt the weight of his realization just a few months earlier.

But Tim was doing great at work, and Alan couldn’t help but feel a bit of joy when his ex-wife called to complain about Tim never being home.

“Maybe I made a mistake,” she said. “Maybe I shouldn’t have left.”

Alan nodded, not sure how it would help for him to tell her that she’s right. But her words ran through his head over and over. He had waited for her to say it, but it didn’t bring him the relief that he thought it would.

#

At the dock, Alan prepared *Gilravage* for departure. He thought about all the things he'd seen his father check before going out. He checked that the sewing machine was fastened down securely, even though he knew his father had it fastened hard long ago. He checked the fuel and battery levels. As he knelt down to reach around the back of the engine to check the oil level, he heard a woman's voice calling from outside.

"Hello?" she said.

Alan peeked up through the companionway and wiped his hands with a rag. "Can I help you?"

"You're Mr. Campbell's son, aren't you?"

"Yes," he said, climbing up topside. "Alan." He reached across the water between the boat and the dock to shake her hand.

"I'm Thalia," she said. She grabbed his hand. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Of course." He held her hand as she stepped over the gap between the dock and the boat.

"I'm so sorry to hear about your father. He was a good man."

"Oh, you knew him?" Alan made an effort to keep his eyes focused on her face. She was much younger than the other women Alan saw his father with.

"Yes, some. He was good friends with my father a few boats down. My father's Mitch Sherman," she said. "I saw Mr. Campbell whenever I'd come to visit Dad."

"Oh, yeah. I've shared a drink with him a few times." Alan remembered this man and his beautiful 44' Hallberg-Rassy, all modern. And all fiberglass.

"Mr. Campbell showed me how to use that heavy duty sewing machine. I fixed our bimini on that a few years ago."

They were standing on the wooden deck. Thalia was holding up her hand to block the sun from her eyes.

“Do you want to get out of the sun? I’ve got a fan blowing strong below.”

“Yeah, sure, if I’m not interrupting anything.”

“I was going to go out a little later, but just piddling around now.”

She followed him down the steps and sat next to a pile of books. Alan picked up the books and placed them on a small shelf behind the settee. He moved a highball glass half-full of whisky to the kitchenette.

“You drinking?” she asked.

“A little. Want some?”

“Yeah. I’ll have a bit.”

Alan poured her a glass. “Sorry, I don’t have any ice.”

“No problem.” She took a sip. “You know, Mr. Campbell was always saying how he wanted us to meet. He said that we’re a good match. Something about me being a handful, but you can handle that.”

“Oh, is that right?” He turned to the sink and rinsed out his glass. “He never said anything to me about it.”

“But you’re married aren’t you?”

“Not really sure.”

She looked around the galley. “Are you keeping her?”

“No. I have to return to Florida soon. I just have a few more things to do before selling her.”

“When you’re ready to sell, let me know. I’ve been looking for something like this for a while.” She placed her glass on the counter and went up the steps. Her feet were delicate, like the feet of a fairy. “See you later, I hope.” She waved down to him as she slipped her shoes back on.

Alan returned to the cabin and unfolded the green bimini top. His dad had done all of the hard work—the sizing, the cutting, and the surging of the edges. As Alan was folding the bimini top and placing it beside the machine, his phone rang. Laura asked how his trip was and some other small talk.

“Laura, what are you calling for? I’m getting things ready to go spread my dad’s ashes,” he said.

“I’m calling because I want us to work things out. I want to come back home.”

“What about Tim?”

“That wasn’t going to last. I don’t know what I was thinking. Can you come back tomorrow? I checked. There’s a flight early in the morning,” she said.

“Yeah. I can do that.”

“Good. Alan, I’ll pick you up at the airport in the morning.”

#

Alan guessed that he had space for one more tack before he changed direction away from the approaching shore. Sailing into the wind single-handed was more work than Alan had imagined and his father had done it for years. The bow of the boat sliced through the water and just as he unwrapped the jib sheet to prepare to change course, the boat shuddered to a halt. A fresh gust of wind pushed the boat even further onto the shoal and a grating sound resonated through the boat. Alan had sailed enough to know what it was like to run aground, but he had never had a hard grounding like this. The boat was leaning to port side, sitting heavy on its keel. He sprang over to

the main sheet and unwrapped it from the winch to lower the sail. With the grounding on a hard bottom, the least amount of damage to the boat would be to wait for the tide to rise. Even a tow off the shoal would risk major damage to the bottom.

Below deck, Alan checked the tide table his father had placed inside the large spiral book of charts. While the tide was rising, high tide wouldn't come for another six hours, at 11 p.m. By then, it would be dark out on the water. The plan had been to reach the cove around sunset, drop anchor, wait out the game, and return to the marina in the morning. That would give him just enough time to close up the boat and make it to the airport for his return flight home. Waiting out the tide added extra time that he didn't have if he would make his flight. He called Laura to let her know.

"I don't know if I can make it to the cove and get back in time for the morning flight," Alan said.

"Then don't go to the cove," she said.

"But that's my Dad's request. He wants his ashes there."

"And he'll know?" she asked.

#

Alan turned on the ham radio to hear the report from one of his father's dockmates of the kickoff for the Navy-Army game. The unsteady voice of the ham operator didn't resemble the professional announcer's voice Alan usually heard from his large-screen TV. He had packed the TV up and put into storage along with his furniture, preparing his 5-bedroom home to be listed for sale. His large, leather sectional sofa with recliners was the perfect distance from the wall-mounted TV. It was all meant to be a place of comfort for him and Laura, but he wasn't sure when the last time was that he had been comfortable in his own house. Alan poured

Glenmorangie into a dusty highball glass and sat in his father's reading spot. He listened to his father's friend's play-by-play radio broadcast. During short pauses, other ham radio operators would weigh in their complaints of unfair calls and stupid plays. Alan chuckled at the thought of his dad's contribution to the commentary, with a definite mention of his trip to the Poinsettia Bowl in 2007. He leaned back on the wall and closed his eyes, the glass leaning between his thighs.

The rising volume of the radio woke Alan and he realized that he had slept through halftime. He grabbed the flashlight on the small navigation table and climbed the steps to the cockpit. It was dark outside and the boat was level again. Alan leaned over the side of the boat, but the water was inky black even with the light shining. As he leaned further out to see down the side of the boat, the glass slipped from his fingers and plopped into the water. If his father was there he'd have some handy way to figure out if the boat was clear of the shoal, but Alan hadn't a clue. The depth finder read 0.5 ft., but Alan didn't know if the read was coming from the bottom of the keel or higher on the keel.

Alan turned on the ignition key and the diesel engine rumbled awake. The sound of the stream of water coming from the stern was a good sign that the engine was working. Alan wrapped his hand over the silver handle and moved it to reverse and gave the throttle a smidgen of power. The boat hesitated, so Alan gave it a little more power. Still, the boat wasn't moving. Alan moved the handle even more, and the boat crept backwards, pushing awkwardly through the water, rocking back and forth. He was off the shoal.

Alan kept the engine running, raised the sails, and pattered toward the cove. It was dark on the water and Alan watched the depth finder closer than he had earlier that day. The cove was empty, so Alan placed the engine in neutral, dropped the sail, and walked up to the bow and

heaved the anchor over the front. He went back to the cockpit and put the engine in reverse enough to set the anchor. The loud, vibrating sound of the engine almost caused him to miss the last few seconds of the game when the Navy win was announced over the radio.

Alan held the metal box of ashes against his stomach. He wished his father safe travels and dumped it over the starboard side. Ashes blew across the top of the water, some sticking to the side of *Gilravage*. He heard the *shhhhhhh* of tiny ashen sand and pebble-size bits hit the surface of the water. It drifted down into the darkness to settle on the seabed.

Alan reached for the spot where the missing glass had been earlier. Then he poured a few swallows of whisky into the metal box. He lifted the box to his lips and drank in the ashy liquid. He felt gritty bits on his teeth and swallowed. Pinching a small, grey clump from the side of the box, he placed the pebble at the back of his tongue like a pill and drank another swig.

Alan looked out over the cove as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, but still the shoreline wasn't distinguishable from the water's surface. It would be a nice place to visit in the morning. The sun would rise in a few hours. Then he could sit in the cockpit and mend the stack of sails his father had been working on. He could sit in the cockpit, with thread, tape, cloth, and sheers stacked on a neatly folded sail and work his way through the stack. After that, he could take a patch of sunbrella fabric and practice using the sewing machine. Then he could complete his father's unfinished bimini top. When he returned to the marina, he could let the man know it was done, ready for him to use it in his own cockpit. Then Alan could plug in the yellow power cord to shore power and stay there in the slip his father had chosen as his home. *Gilravage* could be where Alan was comfortable. He called Laura and told her not to bother going to the airport in the morning. Then Alan called Mitch Sherman on the ham radio to ask Thalia to dinner.

DEPARTURE SONATA

It was late November. I was traveling north, anticipating seeing my mother at the train station. Three passengers, like me, had been on the train all day and night: a young man, probably a college student; an older woman who repeatedly checked her makeup in a compact mirror; and a man dressed in a gray suit, not young, but not yet old, who seemed to keep track of each person's movement on the train.

While he noticed each passenger's goings-on, he never spoke to another person. Once, he nodded at the old man seated beside him as the old man stood to depart the train. He seemed to be listening to everyone's conversations, leaning closer when the noise on the train picked up. I met him in the aisle as he exited the train's restroom, but he looked away as soon as our eyes met. When I returned to my seat I could see out of the corner of my eye that he was watching me dig through my bag in the overhead storage. I settled in my seat for the remainder of the trip, departing the train without any words from the man.

#

I spent four days in New York with my mother. It could have been any Thanksgiving in the past since my father died. These were the quiet years and it drove my mother crazy. I thought that she was getting accustomed to life as a widow, but she teared up when we she pulled a small, frozen turkey breast from the case at the grocery store.

"What's wrong?" I asked. I looked around to see if anyone else saw my mother crying in the meat department.

"It will take us days to eat this little piece of turkey," she said.

"And why does that make you sad?"

"I miss the days—" She couldn't finish her words.

“Mom, don’t cry,” I said. “We can invite Aunt Liza’s family to Thanksgiving dinner.”

“Maybe they are having dinner of their own.”

“You know that she’d prefer to eat the food someone else bought and cooked,” I said.

“Get the big turkey.”

#

Mom cooked the big turkey and Aunt Liza and her family arrived just in time to eat. I’d asked Aunt Liza to bring a vegetable dish, but she had nothing in her hands when I opened the door. This was not a surprise, and I had prepared a vegetable dish myself while Mom had been cooking the turkey.

Even with my three cousins eating like street dogs, the table seemed quiet without my father. I could see in my Mom’s face that she missed him. Probably she missed the loud arguments that my father would start with her sister about anything my father could think of. He always took an opposite position from my aunt, no matter how many times she changed her own opinion. My aunt seemed bored as she watched her sons from across the table.

I opened a bottle of wine with hopes to warm the mood. We three women drank in silence through the first glass. I tried to think of something to ask Aunt Liza that I wanted to know about her life now, but nothing came to mind. By the second glass we seemed more relaxed and I had lost my appetite. I wasn’t sure if it was the wine or my cousins’ table manners. The turkey was looking more like a carcass as they refilled their plates several times.

“He would have made many toasts by now,” my mother said. I was startled by her voice since the room had been quiet for several minutes. “He loved to make toasts.”

“Oh, not with this miserable talk again,” Aunt Liza said. “To being comfortable with loneliness,” she said raising her glass and drank before we could join the toast, although my

mother wasn't amused. The boys left the table. Their greasy hands were soon on the TV remote in the next room.

"The dawn is the loneliest," my mother said. "Except on nights that I can't fall asleep. That's when I really feel alone."

I didn't know what to say, but Aunt Liza jumped in before I could think about it too much. "That's what pills are for," she said. "And, you have your daughter."

"She lives more than a thousand miles away," my mother said as if I weren't sitting at the table with them.

#

The next morning, I made coffee before my mother was awake. In the quietness of her kitchen, I thought about her being alone in the house and unhappy. I wondered what good it would be for me to live here with her. She missed my father, not me.

The coffee was too hot to drink, but I did anyway. I felt the surface of my tongue contract from the heat. My taste buds turned to sandpaper.

I realized something else was bothering me about her grief. I realized, even in her kitchen, that I was content with solitude, that I didn't yearn for companionship like she did. I wondered if something inside me was missing.

#

The return trip on the train promised to be the same as before, just in the opposite direction. When I saw the man dressed in the grey suit from before, for a moment I thought that I had never left the train and had imagined my trip to my mother's house. But his appearance affirmed that it had been a few days since I saw him. He was wearing the same gray suit as before, but it was filthy. The knees were dusty and a lighter gray than the rest of his pants, except the seat of his

pants. Some parts were also covered in the same gray dusty dirt, and some had a layer of brown dirt from the ground. He sat across the aisle from me, and we locked eyes just as I realized that he must have spent the last few days alone, sleeping in the park.

“Have you ever been in love?” he asked. “I mean real love.”

“I’m not sure,” I said, surprised to hear his voice. “I was married before, but I can’t remember if I was in love. But I think that my mother was in love.” I wasn’t sure why I said this to him.

“I had real love. It was difficult to accept over the last few days that it is gone.”

“Why is it gone?”

“I killed her,” he said. “Well, not murder. But I killed her.”

I looked around to see if anyone else was listening. There were no other passengers for the next few rows. “Oh?” I asked. Certainly, I should have considered calling the police at this point. But I didn’t.

“She is dead because of me. She even told me.”

“What did she say?”

“You’re killing me.”

“And you still killed her?”

“I didn’t think that she really meant it. Sure, I was not giving her the attention and love she wanted, but I didn’t think that the loneliness was hurting her for real. And when she died, I thought it was just a coincidence.”

“It probably was. I don’t think she could have died from loneliness.”

“Yes, I thought that too, until I saw her in her casket two days ago. She looked more peaceful than I had seen her before, except on the day we met. Then I knew that I had killed her. I had taken her peace. It killed her.”

“Oh, I see.” It was all I could say. I turned away and looked out the window, afraid that this pitiful murderer would notice how much I wanted to weep.

HARMONY

Liz can still smell the garlic on her fingers—a lot of chopping for a dinner she didn't enjoy. It's the next morning. Liz slides out of bed as blueish sunlight pushes its way over Prague's red tiled roofs and through the delicate lace curtains of their rented flat. Still half-dressed from his late-night out, Kevin doesn't shift his position in bed. She gets up and pulls on clothes for her walk to the bridge.

The steep decline toward the Vltava River draws her down the sidewalk. Her ankles feel fragile as they pivot and shift with the cobblestones passing under her feet. The sun already erases the light of the faint moon, even though it is only five in the morning. She almost passes them—stone, sculptured men holding up the edge of a building. Strained faces of the two men look down at her. Liz places her hand on one of the statue's feet. She rubs the stone, smoothed by other people's hands that have done the same hoping for good luck, and a return to Prague.

Liz rambles down the hill of Malá Strana with increasing speed when she spots the top of the steep-gabled roof and spires of the bridge's tower. She's been here many times since she arrived with Kevin two weeks ago. Sometimes together. Sometimes alone, but never this early in the morning. It is a Saturday in summer, but hopefully too early in the day for tourists. As she walks in the shade of the gate's stone archway, she reaches for her phone with the anticipation of taking an early morning foggy photo of a desolate Charles Bridge.

She emerges out of the shade of the bridge's gate and into the sunlight. Any idea of a photo that evokes a feeling of solitude is burned away. The bridge is crowded, but not with tour group leaders holding small flags being followed by sweaty tourists. Instead, there are small groups of young people, mostly men—probably a few stag parties of Brits and Germans before

their wedding day. Their loud voices, slurred speech, and staggering gaits gives away that they are still out for the night. Liz avoids these pockets of drunkards, zigzagging from one side of the bridge to the other.

Halfway across the bridge, she turns back to Malá Strana. Her eyes meet with a younger man a few feet away. He smiles and speaks to her, maybe in Turkish, holds up his iPhone, and points to his four friends.

“Do you want me to take your photo?” she asks, reaching for his phone.

He nods.

She takes his phone and motions for them to huddle closer, but they turn and pull themselves up on the wall of the bridge, like young boys climbing out of a swimming pool. They joke and prod each other while standing on the wall.

“Guys, that’s not a good idea,” she says.

They smile and wrap arms behind one another’s shoulders. One loses his balance for a moment, but his friends hold him in place. Liz takes a rapid series of photos, too fast for them to change poses, and motions for the young man to come get the phone. She’s relieved when they jump down from the wall.

“Jeez,” Liz says under her breath, smiling at the young man as he rejoins his friends. As they walk away, she walks to the spot where they climbed the wall. She pulls her body up enough over the edge to see below. There’s a long drop to the cloudy water, similar to how the lighter watercolor paints look when all mixed together. She holds this position—watching the river’s current give way and split around the Bohemian sandstone bridge pillars—until her face feels flush and she slips back to her tippy toes.

Just a few feet away, on a pillar over the water, is the statue of Bruncvik, the Bohemian knight. He's all stone, but holds a drawn sword of gold. At his feet is his faithful friend and lion. The legend is that Bruncvik courageously helped the lion fight a dragon. Liz follows the gaze of the knight's eyes, shielded by the rim of his helmet, and repositions herself in his line of sight. She stares into his stone eyes until her eyes dry. For a moment she thinks that his rigid lips mouth something to her. She blinks and the sensation disappears.

In the distance some small, narrow islands, bordered by taming locks and weirs, hold the morning stillness. A strong breeze wisps in swirls through her hair. She hadn't been to these islands before. She's spent too much time with Kevin pulling her through Old Town to another crowded pub or smoke shop. If she didn't do that, then she'd be waiting at the flat for him to return home from a night out. One of the things that she liked about Kevin when they first dated was his confidence and his gift of making people comfortable around him. She felt comfortable and special, in the beginning.

#

Yesterday morning was much the same as today's. Kevin was in bed sleeping off a hangover. It was their one-year anniversary.

"Do you remember what today is?" she asked.

"Of course," he said, rolling the other direction.

"Do you?"

"Yes, Liz. I'm tired. Please don't bother me now."

So, she didn't. He planned to meet up with a friend from London who might be able to help him find a temporary job for in Prague. Liz was teaching English to some managers at a factory. They were required to attend her classes. As she planned an activity to show the

difference between *give* and *take* in English, he ate some knedlíčky left over from dinner the night before. Some of Kevin's friends had come over to cook. That's something that Liz liked when she first met Kevin. He was always making new friends, even in a new country within a matter of days. People liked to be around him, and he liked to be surrounded by people. He was gone before she finished planning her lesson.

When she returned home from teaching her reluctant students, she thought that an anniversary dinner would be nice. She still didn't know where the closest thing to an American grocery store was, but there was a small market on the corner. That'd have to make do. She was happy to find some chicken, pasta, tomatoes, and garlic. She started preparing dinner, chopping the tomatoes and garlic. She delicately sliced the garlic, then minced it into smaller bits. But as she chopped the tomato into dices, her motions became firmer. She sliced through the tomato's red flesh, hitting the knife blade to the chopping board with a loud thwack. As she browned the chicken, she accepted that she'd probably be eating alone. Not a special anniversary dinner. The ingredients were the same, but the atmosphere was different. He came home late that night, in his usual warm mood, ready to wake her, but she remained still on her side of the bed. She never mentioned their anniversary.

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A walk along the bank of the river seems like a logical path to reach the islands. A small bridge takes her to a park, clumps of summer grass blur the lines of a gravel path. Birds and squirrels share the morning here with Liz. She strolls along the path, passing the modern art museum and other places that she would like to visit, but hasn't because Kevin hasn't wanted to go. She stops. Along the bank of the Vltava, a statue of Sri Chinmoy stands in front of her. His praying bronze hands align with his peaceful face. Closed eyes seem to make him more open to harmony. She

touches his cloak and runs her hands along his arms and face. Kneeling there, she weeps while four boats pass along the river.

The back part of Chinmoy's cloak doesn't reach the ground. His narrow feet hide underneath. Liz slips her hand beneath and slides it across his toes. The bronze is not shiny and polished by tourists' hands. His feet are hidden. Only pebbles touch his feet. Liz lowers her face close to the ground. Her right cheek scrapes against smooth pebbles. She pushes her face under his cloak. It's dark there. Liz kisses his foot.

She walks back up the hill of Malá Strana, passing the statues of the men holding the building. She passes a few local pubs where people already know Kevin. Walking up the flight of stairs to their flat, she pulls the key from her pocket. She inserts the key, and hesitates. Replacing the key in her pocket, she walks away.

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