

CALLING THROUGH THE HOLLOW

by

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my grandparents: Tom and Audrie, Mary and Pete.

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## ABSTRACT

These stories are bound by place. Each was born of a connection to the upper-Midwest prairie, to North Dakota and Minnesota, to the places I've called home. This collection explores the complicated natures of that home: of human connection navigated across a long horizon line, of cold-weather people, of loneliness in open spaces, of hope, and hotdish, and sometimes healing, too.

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## BLUE RIBBON

Cecelia stole it. It was *my* Sour-Cream Raspberry Ripple Cake recipe and *she* walked away with the win. I normally wouldn't make such a fuss. I'm not one to complain or point fingers. But in this case, I can't keep quiet. I just can't shut my big mouth. That blue ribbon means my winning recipe is going to the Minnesota State Fair, and going without me. That ribbon, and all that came with it, should have been mine and mine alone.

Let me tell you a thing or two about Cecelia Bentz. She was my best friend for twenty-two years so I think I can speak freely. Cecelia Bentz is no baker. She can cook a very nice Thanksgiving dinner—turkey, potatoes, the whole nine yards. Sure, she can cook, but she cannot bake. Cecelia uses all-purpose flour for almost everything and pre-made mixes for everything else. Once I began to bake, I asked her kindly to make the sides. *Leave the desserts to me, dear.* And up until one week ago, she did.

What makes her deceit so hard to swallow is that Cecelia was my only rock in the whole world when Roger died this winter. She was at our home when his heart gave out, and lucky, too, because I was away for a few hours, bargain shopping at the outlet mall. Later in the hospital, when his heart beat fast, trying to recover, she stayed right by my side, right by his bed, the whole time. She took the rotating shift at night to let me sleep. When I needed black coffee from the cafeteria or a hot shower at home, she stayed with Roger until I returned, never leaving him alone, not for one minute. A true, kind friend.

“He likes it when you hold his hand,” she said and took his left, smoothing the frail skin with her fingers.

“He does,” I said. On my side of the bed, an IV pierced the top of his hand. I rubbed his forearm, slowly smoothing the black hair.

When it was time, when my Roger passed out of this world and his soul took up communion with the angels in heaven, she sobbed and I sobbed and we held onto each other there in the hospital room.

Cecelia’s the only reason I got through all of that. I’m still getting through.

This whole horrible ordeal with the recipe happened a week ago at the Cyrus County Fair. The fair has been a constant in this part of the state for over one-hundred and twenty-two years. I am proud to say that I have attended thirty-seven of those years and my Roger, thirty-six.

Roger was a man of many passions. In the beginning, he was interested in classic cars. He spent hours with them, long admiring the velvet seats and long lines of buffed pick-ups and shiny convertibles. I’d often find him under the hood, studying the parts that made them hum. If it wasn’t there, I’d catch him in line, waiting on some kind of sugar. He had an insatiable sweet tooth. I liked the corndogs, myself. But not Roger. He ate funnel cakes and elephant ears and any color of snow cone. He ate roasted almonds and honeyed fruit and miles and miles of pink cotton candy.

A few years after the car shows, Roger took up the banjo and put together a small band. They played on the bandstand, which in those days was more like a houseless porch than a stage. They played for four nights in a row, and it was crowded each and

every night. Another year he decided to buy an old junker. He tore the doors off, gave it a spray with cheap green paint, and entered himself into the demolition derby. I was less than pleased, saying Hail Mary's in the stands while I balanced two babies on my knees, trying to soothe them during the crashes and the cheering. He didn't win but he didn't hurt himself either, thank the Lord.

When the kids were older, we took them to the Midway. They twirled in fat strawberries until they were almost sick, then ran over the dragon trains for a quick bounce up and down along the track. The two were terrified by the ghosts of the haunted houses, walking through them over and over again. The Midway isn't what it used to be, I'm disappointed to say. After I accepted my red ribbon this year (or I should say, after I was denied the blue), I found myself wandering around the fair in a sort of daze, seeing everything differently. The rides looked worn, used. They had chipped paint and stiff gear shifts. They were all plugged in, with enormous hose-like extension cords, into small electrical boxes throughout the fairgrounds that sat in puddles of mud.

I walked home through the cemetery and stopped to visit Roger's grave. It was the brightest one in the whole yard, newly planted. There was a small splay of red flowers on the stone. Roger was loved by everyone, but no one as much as me. I left a snow-cone there that matched the flowers. His favorite flavor—cherry red. I walked away before I could see it melt.

I loved the fair but never cared much for rides, so when Roger and the kids were off spending our summer allowance zipping and zapping around the place, I would sit on a straw bale outside the Midway or on an empty bench under the bingo tent, and watch people. That was always my favorite thing. You learn so much about people just by

watching them. An otherwise miserly old man will give his granddaughter ten dollars just for a funnel cake and fries. A frazzled mother will finally find peace as her children wait in line after line after line. A young couple will take each other's hand, but not before looking around to make sure no one else is watching. I could sit and watch for hours. And for many summers, I did just that.

This was all long before I had any inclination that the kitchen could be an enjoyable place, and not just one for mashing potatoes and washing dishes. I guess you could call me a late bloomer with baking. I remember the first time I tried to bake a pie, when Roger's mother came to visit after our Donna was born. It was a disaster. A right disaster. Imagine this: mother-in-law and bawling new baby rushing into the street while the whole kitchen is thick with black smoke. And me, trying to fight it off with a dish rag, burning my eyes out, a wet, sopping mess. I know now that I misread the baking temperature and my pie boiled over. Much over.

Roger didn't encourage much baking after that, bless his heart. He learned to satisfy that sweet-tooth somewhere else. He came home most mornings from work with a box of doughnuts or a sweet pie or cookies by the baker's dozen from May's Bakery.

It wasn't until about ten or so years ago that I took another swing at it. I wanted a hobby. Roger had yet another one, cross-stitch this time. He sat in the living room, bent over the tiny needle and thread, wearing his reading glasses—the ones that made me smile every time he put them on because they were purple and made him look so young and so handsome. He stitched each little “x” perfectly. He had patience like a saint. I was better with trial and error. I think that's why, when it came, baking came so naturally.

I began with cookies. These were simple because you could burn a whole batch and still have something more to work with. Fool proof. After mastering cookies, I tried pies again. In the summertime, northern Minnesota overflows with bushes of berries. Blackberries are my favorite, and raspberries. The pies went well. And when one boiled over and black smoke started to rise out of the stove, I didn't panic like I had done when I was younger. I simply asked Roger to please stop sewing and take the batteries out of the fire alarm and open a window.

I made bars, too, the staple of any picnic or potluck. I was quite inventive. Spiced pumpkin praline bars in the fall. Sweet and sassy lemon bars in the summer. Orange blossom and lavender-scented cheesecakes in the spring. Double-fudge devil brownies in the winter.

People said, *Oh Ellen, these date bars are divine*, and *These lemon drop cookies are better than anything my grandmother ever made*, and *This angel food cake makes me feel like I've died and gone right straight up to heaven*. I always smiled and thanked them. It is important to be humble, especially when one knows she has a gift.

At Easter one year, after eating my Christ Is Risen Coconut Cake, my Baptist cousin Mindy suggested that I share my God given talent by entering into a competition. At first, I thought, No, I couldn't possibly. And then I asked Roger, and he said, *Do it*. So I did. Roger got sick that spring, but was still a great sport. He tried eleven different kinds of bars, small portions, of course (careful of his heart), before I settled on the one I would enter. I remember it to this day. Chocolate Potato Chip Jumlbers. A fat brownie bottom with a creamy peanut butter middle and chocolate-covered potato chips crunched on top. The judges loved it. I won first place.

I've won plenty of blue ribbons since then. Let me make it clear, once again, that this whole thing isn't about the ribbons or the title. Or the fact that the winning cake this year from the Cyrus County Fair is entered not only into the state baking competition at the Minnesota State Fair, but also has the chance to launch the baker onto a segment of a weekday edition of "Morning Brew with Mark and Emiline," the most popular morning talk show out of Minneapolis. It isn't about any of the prizes or the prestige. It is about honesty and truthfulness and what is good in the world. It is about being straight and owning up to one's wrongdoings, one's lies, one's deceptions. It is about *my* cake.

Last summer I entered my Sauerkraut Surprise Cake in the competition. I was hesitant at first, but Roger convinced me. His new thing was Pilates and he stretched and curved his spine into a "u" and said, *Do it*. The sauerkraut is meant to be a novelty, you see, something to tickle the eater's imagination. You can't actually taste it. The judges thought it was clever and delicious and gave me a red ribbon, second place. Adeline Sumner won the blue with the same German chocolate cake she had entered for the last five years. I heard someone say she won first because she had severe pneumonia and wouldn't last through the winter (which she didn't) but I paid no mind to those rumors, nor spread them along. I do not approve of gossip—secrets spread around and around in mean little circles.

This year, though, I was sure I'd found it. The winning recipe, the perfect dessert. Chocolate Peanut-Butter Swirl Pound Cake. Rich. Delicious. Baked to perfection. An easy win. Had it not been for Cecelia's stolen dessert, my cake would have shown supreme.

The Sour-Cream Raspberry Ripple Cake was one I tried on Roger a year ago. He loved it. I remember watching him take the first bite, licking homemade raspberry jam from the fork. He asked me to make it again the next week. And I did. I made it for one month straight, anything he wanted, then, when he wasn't feeling well. After that, I didn't bake it again until the funeral.

The night before Roger's funeral, the house was full and asleep with family and friends from out of town. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't spend one more minute lying in my bed alone, so I went to the kitchen. My hands moved as if from memory, pulling the flour and the sugar and the baking soda out of the cupboards, sifting and measuring and cutting cubes of butter. I made that cake from memory alone. And I believe Roger was there, beside me, helping me get it right, just how he liked it. When I drew it out of the oven, golden brown, perfectly risen, I began again. I mixed another batch and then another. I must have pulled three more out of the oven when I was startled. It was Cecelia, in the door of my kitchen. I looked at the clock. It was 4:15 AM.

"You're already awake," she said.

"How long have you been there?"

"What are you doing, Ellen?"

I looked around at my kitchen.

"It was his favorite," I said, and then sobbed into the batter.

Cecelia stood firm in the doorway. I kept mixing, and I was crying, too, faster and faster. The fourth cake was overcooking in the oven, I could smell it.

"Stop it," she said.

Then louder. “Stop it.” Again.

And just like that, he wasn’t there anymore with me, Roger, his spirit. It was as if he had simply gotten up and left out the door into the early morning. I stopped stirring.

“He’s gone,” I said.

Cecelia’s eyes filled with water. She came out of the doorway and hugged me, so tight, as if I would fall down to the floor if she let me go. When I finally pulled the last cake out of the oven, it was black in the pan.

Cecelia was there for me again, early this summer when I felt the clutter of the house pressing in on me, and I asked her to come over and help me get rid of some things.

“What should I do with his crossword puzzles?” she asked, and handled them gently.

“Recycle.”

“His cross-stitch?”

“Don’t you do it, dear? Any patterns you like, just go ahead and grab.”

“His Pilates tapes?”

“Take ‘em if you want, or get rid of them.”

“The pressure cooker?”

“You’re much better with jams and jellies than me, it’s all yours.”

Cecelia made small piles around the room. She worked slowly. I could see she was still upset for me, the way her eyes watered.

She held up his eyeglasses. Those special purple spectacles.

“Those I need,” I said. “Those I’ll keep.”

I held them in my hand for a long time before setting back to work.

“What about the miniature tractor and trailer made of green spray-painted nuts and bolts?” she said.

I snapped my head back over a heaping stack of Sunday paper’s and cocked an eyebrow. We laughed and laughed together amid the piles of Roger’s things.

We met last Wednesday for coffee, Cecelia and I, like every Wednesday since we became friends, like clockwork. I was telling her all about my Peanut Butter Swirl Cake when she ran out of coffee filters and walked down to the grocer for more. While she was gone, I decided to make myself useful, folding some laundry and washing up a few dishes. When I was putting away the crystal, I found a pair of glasses sitting in a small bowl in a tall cupboard. I nearly crushed them with the gravy boat. When I took a closer look, I saw that they were Roger’s. The same silly purple frames. I was so happy to find them. I thought they were lost. I cried for two whole hours on the floor of my bedroom thinking about them being gone.

When Cecelia came home, I told her how I found them bunched in with some dishes, accidentally packed away with the canning supplies from earlier that summer. I hugged and thanked her, with a happy tear still in my eye. We didn’t get to have coffee after all that morning. Cecelia didn’t feel well once she got back from the store. I fixed her some tea and filled up a hot water bottle. I tucked Roger’s glasses into a pocket in my purse and went home.

We haven't spoken about the cake incident. She hasn't called to apologize. I'm not about to make the first move. I am too upset, hurt, really. I suppose she'll say she forgot it wasn't hers, even though it was written on a card that said, "From the Kitchen of Mrs. Roger Ellroy." Last time I checked, that was me.

I have spoken with Cecelia twice though, since the fair. Not by choice, but by the good Lord's will and intervention. We belong to the same prayer chain. The first time she called about a prayer for Mrs. Baker, the diabetic. She tried to get me to say something, explain why it was I hadn't called, hadn't accused, hadn't asked her for an answer.

"What did I do?" Cecelia pleaded over the phone. "Tell me, Ellen! Tell me what I have done?"

I just kept right on with my Hail Mary's. I prayed extra loudly. The prayer chain is no place for that conversation. The second time she called—when Timothy Niles broke his leg jumping off a wet trampoline—it was much colder. We said our prayers and hung up like we didn't even know each other, like we had picked up the phone for a wrong number, an unfamiliar voice down a long distance line.

It doesn't make me happy to say these things, to tell what I know, and say what I'm saying. Cecelia was my friend, my real true best friend. And to me, that means something. I can't shut up, not this time, can't allow her to get away with taking something that doesn't belong to her. I can't just allow her to parade around as if it were hers, as if I had never been there, behind the whole thing, all along. That recipe was mine. It was mine, you can see that now.

## MACDO

Picture this: Jimmy with a backwards McDonalds' cap. Jimmy with one silver earring. Jimmy with a grapefruit rind between his greasy teeth. Picture me: beyond annoyed, beyond unimpressed.

“Try this,” he says. “Your lips go numb.”

“Your brain is numb,” I say.

Jimmy's found me behind the dumpster, sitting on a curb. Not the most original locale at a fast food joint, the first place any manager would check in search of a missing employee. In fact, I think I saw that exact scene on the training video. But no worries here—Jimmy's not my manager. He's just a stoner in my grade at school. We're sophomores, but I'm pretty sure he did the first grade twice.

“What're you doing?” he says.

“It's called reading. It's called a book.”

I'm on break. I have to be on break, for at least the next ten minutes, because of the four-hour shift I started this afternoon. Half over—thank God. I found this spot back here just yesterday. It's better than the break room anyway, which smells like a locker and is too close to the bathrooms. I'd be in there right now, wishing to catch a glimpse of Nick—my big time, summer long crush, and, oh yeah, my manager—on his way to the

freezer, but I tried to sit in there on Wednesday and the sound of the flushing grossed me out. Somehow I thought I'd come out here to get some quiet.

“Where'd you get that anyway?” I say.

“What?”

“That dumb fruit. I know there's not any in the fridge.”

“Mom.”

“Your mom packs you a lunch to go work at McDonalds?”

“Every day.”

Jimmy's black hair falls out below his cap in waves. Above it, he wears the headphones for the drive-thru. Right now, no one's coming. We could see the cars anyway, if there were any.

“I wish my mom did that. The food here is disgusting.” I scrape my new black tennis shoes against the pavement. I hate them. They're almost as ugly as the black pants I had to buy and the sweaty blue shirts for the uniform. I can't believe they force us to look like this. No wonder they're always hiring.

“Try this, I'm telling you,” he says. “Rub the skin on your teeth and lips. It's trippy.” Jimmy holds out a slice of the grapefruit.

“I don't live with my mom, anyway. I mean, she can't pack my lunch if she doesn't even know I work here,” I say, even though it's a lie. I told her last week at her new apartment above Headlock's Hair Salon. The apartment was so obviously decorated in the 1970s. My mom has done this thing to brighten the dark wood paneled walls

where she bought all this scene printed fabric—a calm ocean, a empty snowy field, a bright jungle with multicolored birds and snakes, a forest of birch trees—and tacked them up like photographs. They're all lighter than the wall behind them, so I guess it's a better look, but I can't tell if they actually brighten the place.

“Do you smoke?” Jimmy says.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, do you smoke?”

He holds up a pack of cigarettes he pulled from the pocket of his black pants. His pants look exactly like mine, but dirtier.

“No.”

“Do you smoke anything else?” he says.

“I don't smoke *weed*, if that's what you mean.”

He laughs. “That's why you don't like the food here.”

He lights his cigarette with a match. The back door opens and Nick sticks his head out. Most of his hair is covered by his hat, but like Jimmy, some spills under the sides. Unlike Jimmy's mop, Nick's hair looks freshly washed, like warm, blond laundry. I stand up from the curb awkwardly.

“We just got slammed up front. Darla, can you clock back in?”

Jimmy nudges me.

“Make sure to wash your hands,” Nick adds, before ducking back inside.

I shut my book, then look at Jimmy, who's poking his lips with his finger. He looks dim.

"Make sure to wash your hands," Jimmy says.

I roll my eyes.

He offers the fruit to me again, and I take it this time. I quickly suck the pinkish pulp from the middle and squeeze my whole face tight against the bitter taste. I run the rind all along my gums, my tongue, my lips, real fast. It tingles. I smack my lips together.

"It's weird," I say.

"Leave the book," Jimmy says.

When I get home, my dad is on his exercise bike and looks abused. His hair is matted to all the parts of his head it still grows, and his light gray shirt is dark gray almost everywhere.

"Your mother called," he says.

"Shit. I totally forgot."

He doesn't scold me for swearing.

"How was work?" My dad is obsessed with my new job. He keeps saying things like: *Hard work never hurt anybody*, and *It's the only way to get anywhere you want to go in life*. I've heard it all. I get it, Dad. Enough is enough.

“Work was okay.”

“Keep it up,” he says, and speeds along in the living room.

I shower before I call my mom. I smell like grease all day from that job. I shower and I still can smell it. I put my shirt and ugly pants and ugly shoes in the garage to air out. I have to work tomorrow morning. I don't have time to wash anything.

When I finally call, my mom drives to pick me up for supper at her place. I don't have a car, which would be the reason for the minimum-wage crap job. Well, one of the reasons anyway. Nick's the other. I didn't just meet him at McDonalds when I started two weeks ago. I met him at the beginning of the summer, the fourteenth of June to be exact, on a double-date with my best friend, Tina, and Nick's best friend, Brandon, who were seeing each other then. I got this job because of him. Well, not because of him, but *because of him*. I applied because I knew he worked there. I got hired because I wasn't brain dead.

My mom doesn't come inside, but honks from the driveway. My father looks out the blinds, irritated and sweaty.

“She can't come in?” he says.

“I'll be home later,” I say.

When I get in the car, she has the air conditioning on high and her face is all splotchy.

“Sorry I forgot to tell you I worked tonight,” I say.

“It doesn't matter,” she says, but I can tell that it does. She quickly reverses out of the driveway. I see my dad has moved to the doorway. I wave goodbye.

At her place, things are tense. I watch as she reheats spaghetti sauce on the stove and makes a new batch of pasta, al dente. I sit at the table. Something about this place isn't welcoming at all. It's dark and foreign and the long brown carpet makes the whole place smell strange, like the home of some sad old person with parakeets as pets. It gives me the creeps. But like always, I try to pretend it doesn't, and slowly pick through my spaghetti. Mostly, I just bite the garlic bread and look at the indentations of my teeth. I think I need braces.

At the beginning of the summer, only a week after I met Nick, I was sent by my sparring parents to stay with my grandpa—my mom's dad. They spent the previous six months whispering threats and accusations at each other that they thought I couldn't hear. I'm not dumb and I'm not deaf. I easily translated their encouragement for time away as: we want to fight in peace and quiet and not have to worry about your feelings when we do it. Let's just say that I had one home when I left and when I got back, they both kept reminding me that I had two.

Mostly, my grandpa's was boring. After my grandma died last year, my grandpa became stagnant like the green water pond on the farm—slow, and in the same circular patterns each day. He drank a pot of coffee for breakfast, an entire pot. He watched the news in the morning, the afternoon, after supper, and before bed. In between that, he watched Westerns on TV. He paid his bills. He snored a lot. He rarely talked or left the house. The sheds were heavy with neglect and worn by weather. The barn floors were

thin and unstable from rotting wood and wild animals—mostly just rabbits and mice and that. Small, but destructive all the same.

My grandpa didn't leave his house, even to check on little things like the gates or empty tractor trailers around the farm, which I remember him doing long after he retired. He mostly ignored me, or acknowledged my presence as something peripheral, something out of the way of his attention. Maybe he wanted someone beside him while he clicked through the channels on the television. Or maybe my parents gave to him the same crappy story they gave me, *Darla would love to come spend some time with you. It would be good for her to get away.*

I read a lot of books. I tried to write letters, but even that bored me. This was the place my parents sent me so they could split, and they didn't even consider giving me my own phone to call the outside world or the tiniest shred of hope for internet access. Tina got to go to theatre camp.

After four weeks of eating a rotation of ham and scalloped potatoes, or cheeseburgers paired with bland macaroni, and imagining what I could possibly muster to do for a few more painful weeks, my grandpa finally left the house.

Picture this: I'm awakened to the sound of three gunshots. I run out of the house barefoot and into the yard, thinking all the very worst thoughts—he's finally lost it and I'm going to have to pick up his bleeding body and shove it into the station wagon I don't even know how to drive and then scream into town, killing the gas pedal all the way to the hospital with him convulsing beside me—or even worse, he's shot the neighbor or the poor US Postman or anyone, really. Any thing. Whatever has happened, it spells clear as day all over the bright summer morning: Goodbye, summer vacation, Hello,

psychotherapy. But instead of any of that, I find my grandpa standing proudly over the crippled body of a fat-bellied raccoon that had been shot directly in the face, its face-guts blown everywhere. I didn't move or say anything for a moment. I stayed still until I couldn't hear my heartbeat in my ears anymore.

“I finally got him,” my grandpa said, and then nothing at all.

All I could think was: why did he have to shoot the little thing three different times? After a while, I took my grandpa's shoulder and led him inside. He washed his hands in the sink with a smile on his face. I left him there and used his old rotary telephone to call my dad and ask to come home. Then I called my mom and said the same thing.

My mom clears her barely touched spaghetti, then suggests dessert. Her mood seems to be brightening. I'm not done eating mine either, but I quickly agree.

“We could go get a vanilla cone at McDonalds?” she says. My dad said the same thing last week.

“Can we not?”

“We can go someplace else together,” she says. “Anywhere you want.”

It's been like this ever since I got back. The “anywhere you wants,” and the “whatever you needs.” It was interesting at first—an experiment in how many times we could make a trip to the mall in one week, and how many new things I could get her to

buy for my other “new room.” Now it’s getting old. I don’t even like shopping. And so far, I’ve avoided sleeping over. I think she’s beginning to notice.

I stare at the fabric waves of the ocean scene on the living room wall. On the edge, the design has begun to repeat itself in another tile that the woman at the fabric store didn’t cut completely straight.

“I like that one the best,” I say.

“Me too,” says my mother. She looks like she wants to hug me but she grabs her purse, instead.

We go to Dairy Queen. I get a blizzard with cookie dough. My mom gets a strawberry shake. We eat our desserts in the car and watch people on the sidewalk busy their way to somewhere. We take our time.

It’s the next morning and I’m at work at 5:30—rotten stinky clothes and all. I feel like I’m going to die. Jimmy walks in after me. He looks like I feel.

I’m on the grill and have to make eggs. I pour this yellow liquid from a milk carton out into rectangles, then fold them over onto themselves in threes. People actually pay money for this. Jimmy is on the line this morning. He’s humming a song I don’t recognize. Two girls I don’t know and haven’t worked with are up front taking orders. They look like children.

I turn the sausage patties over. Flip more eggs. When the fryer beeps, I put frozen hashbrown cakes into the basket, submerge them in the yellow oil and click the

timer back on. It's mostly just like this. When it's really busy, the place erupts in this dense cloud of sound, like it's coming from every direction, pressing into you. When it slows, you can hear it first, before anything else.

After the morning rush, I help set up for lunch, even though my shift ends soon. Nick has come for the afternoon hours and he checks the stations, the tills, roams in and out of the fridge, the freezer.

He stops where I'm filling condiments for the lunch line.

"Busy, huh?" I say.

He nods. He fills out some paper.

"It's really too bad Tina isn't with Brandon anymore," I blurt too fast, as if each word is connected to the one before it. I've been thinking of how to bring it up since my first shift with Nick when he didn't mention it—the car ride this summer, their break-up. I don't want to be too pushy, in case Brandon was real upset about it or something and that's why he didn't say anything. But that's what Tina does, dates a lot, breaks up a lot. She called me up at my grandpa's a couple times. She told me that after Brandon, she started dating a guy named Ty who owned a crotch-rocket. Now she's seeing someone from Alexandria named David. He's twenty or twenty-one. More her type.

Nick looks up at me, puzzled.

"I thought they were good together," I say.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know, Tina, Brandon. They're not together anymore, right?"

“Make sure to fill the tomatoes, the pickles and cheese, too,” he says, and walks toward the front of the store, “Remind me who Tina is?”

I fill the cheese. I fill the tomatoes. I don't bother to remind him about Tina. He walks away before I even can, anyway. I feel weird, like I'm going to cry. How could he not remember? How could he forget? He's the one who held *my* hand. He's the one who said I should get his number from Brandon and give him a call to hang out sometime. And somehow in the month of my summer prison sentence, away from home so my parents could neatly rip apart my entire life, he's forgotten everything. I can't face the pickles. I leave them half-empty.

It's Sunday and I'm sleeping in. My dad wakes me up by nudging me with the cordless and saying there's a guy named Nick on the other line. I try to clear my throat before saying anything, but my *Hello?* sounds like a horse talking.

“I really need you to come in today,” he says. “Krissy called in sick.”

I think: who the hell is Krissy? I agree to come in. I don't know why. Maybe because I want to know for sure he doesn't remember June fourteenth, want to ask him straight out? Maybe I'd agree to anything this early in the morning?

I pull out my clothes from the dryer, which hadn't run long enough last night so my pants are still damp in the middle. My shirt is all wrinkly. I regret this decision already.

I clock in at work and say Hi to Jimmy.

“You’re working again?” I say. “Do you ever have a day off?”

“Tomorrow, sunshine. Tomorrow I’m free as a bird,” he says.

I smile. He returns to singing a song I don’t know. I think the customers can hear him. I punch into the first till out front and Nick’s there, next to me. He thanks me for coming in.

“I knew I could count on you,” he says and touches me on the shoulder. His hand lingers.

I’m so confused. I don’t know how to feel about him anymore, about the summer. Later on, when the sound is a dull quiet, I practice making ice cream cones. All of mine end up looking like a singular blob, no curlicue, no dollop. I practice and practice. Jimmy gets a few of my mistakes. I eat one myself.

Tina stops by with her mom and her little brother and I give them each a sloppy vanilla cone. Her mom takes her brother into Playland. After a few minutes of leaning over the counter and planning our coming weekend between her parents and my two new homes, I see Nick emerge from the break room.

“Hey, Tina. It’s been too long,” he says.

I look between the two of them, back and forth. He knows her now? He knows her now, all of a sudden?

“Nick,” she says.

“You’re looking good today. Must be hot out.” She has on a pink tank-top. I have on this ugly wrinkled polyester shirt.

Then I watch like in slow motion. Nick gives Tina this up and down look, long up and down, and then winks the most disgusting, cheesy wink. He turns to me, as if I'm interrupting *their* conversation.

“Darla, if you're looking for something to do, why don't you start on the dishes?” he says. “I saw there's a big pile stacked up.”

I stare at Nick in disbelief, then follow his gaze. He's staring right at Tina. Right at Tina's lips licking her dumb vanilla cone. The cone that *I gave her*. I know I'm going to be sick. I'm going to scream and barf and cry all at the same time. Instead, I storm away from the counter and back into the fridge, the only place I can think of. It's cool and I need to cool off. I can't yell. I can't cry, can't puke—not here. I walk through the fridge into the freezer.

Inside the freezer, I find Jimmy.

“What are you doing in here,” I say, almost unable to keep the words together.

He pops something into his mouth then rubs his hands fast together like he's trying to start a fire. My hair is standing tall off my arms. I'm breathing fog.

“I froze some grapes this morning. Here, try one. They ooze when you eat them.”

“Grapes?” I say.

“Yeah, frozen grapes.”

I start to laugh, but tears fly out of my eyes instead. I quickly wipe them away. I don't think he saw me. Then I take a grape from the pile in Jimmy's hand. I put it in my

mouth and it is instant ice against my teeth. The insides of the fruit are a chilly relief after their crystallized skin.

“I think I liked the grapefruit better,” I say.

“These are my favorite,” he says. “Especially when I’m high.”

“Are you high right now?”

He makes this motion with his hand, zooms it up in the air with three fingers. I’m pretty sure it means ‘airplane’ in sign language.

I shuffle my feet, rub my arms.

“About that,” I say, “Maybe we could try it sometime?”

Jimmy pops another grape into his mouth.

“Tomorrow, baby girl. Tomorrow’s our day,” he says, and smiles.

I call in sick. It’s easy. I’m supposed to work a six-hour shift today but I don’t want to. I don’t fake a cough or a real good excuse at all, just say I’m not coming in and leave it at that. I don’t know if Nick is working today, and now I don’t care either. I hope he is. I hope when he calls around to get someone to pick up my shift, he can’t find anyone and there are two school busses at the same time and everyone wants ice cream cones and the machine breaks. I hope it’s a pain in his ass. After I call in sick, I call Jimmy.

He picks me up and we drive out of town, up past the turkey farms that smell already this morning, past the river and out to the old cemetery with white stones sticking out like tall, thin pyramids. Gravestones from a long, long time ago. We stay in the car and Jimmy hands me his pipe, which looks like a cigarette. He shows me how to light it. We smoke it a few times and I don't know if I'm high or not. It's overcast, and when we get out to walk around the graves, the sun shines on some of them, making the veins of the marble stand out against the grain. I trace my finger slowly over cuts of names and dates, and think about my grandma's marker—gray and simple, and what my grandpa's will look like right next to it. Jimmy smokes cigarettes on the hood of his car.

“How will I know when I feel it?” I say.

“You'll know,” he says. “You'll get hungry.”

I join him on the car and look out across the plotted land, the gate, the leaves of the trees moving quickly in the wind.

“Did you know that in Hawaii, McDonalds serves Spam breakfast sandwiches?” he says, like the middle of a conversation we've never started.

“Eew!”

“And in Japan, they have a breakfast *hot dog*.”

“Yeah right.”

“I'm serious.”

“Sick.”

“And in Europe, like all over, they call it MacDo. Not MickieDee’s, you know? MacDo. It sounds European, doesn’t it?”

“MacDo.”

The word sounds strange on my tongue, like there was too much of it and too little room in mouth. I say it again. The sun disappears and we both look up; it threatens rain.

“Let’s smoke some more,” Jimmy says.

We sit in the car and rain blots out the windshield, plinks loudly off the roof. The whole car is full of smoke and I cough hard after inhaling. Jimmy turns on the radio and bangs out a drumbeat on the wheel and the dashboard, then on my arm and leg. It feels different when he touches me, like he leaves the pulse of the music there on my skin when his hand moves away. I can feel something now, besides a burning in my chest. Jimmy makes this face where he puffs out his cheeks all full of smoke and then releases it like a dragon. I laugh. I can’t stop laughing.

I imagined we’d drive around like this all day, but the rain is so loud. I can’t see through it. I can’t go home because my dad expects me to be at McDonalds flipping burgers all day, and we can’t go to Jimmy’s because he’d get sucked into babysitting his little brother for the rest of the afternoon and that’s something I know I can’t handle right now. Plus, I don’t want this to end—this experience, this whole weird experience together. I’m thinking in strange circles when an idea drops as if suspended in time.

“I know where we can go!”

“Tell me where you want to go. I’ll get us there,” Jimmy says and takes one more hit.

“We’ll go to my mom’s place. She’s still at work and I have a key.” I pull it out of my purse and show it to Jimmy. It is brand new and it shines silver, even though there’s no sun.

We drive back into town, listening to music so loudly I think my eardrums will burst. Jimmy sings along as if he’s by himself in the car, or as if he doesn’t care that I hear him. I sing along, too. He drives down Main Street and toward my dad’s place and I’m about to remind him how to get to my mom’s, when all of a sudden he takes a left and then another left and we’re in the McDonalds’ parking lot.

“Jimmy! What the hell are we doing here?” I say and turn down the music.

“I have to check my schedule.”

“I called in sick this morning. What if someone sees me?”

I duck down in the passenger seat.

“Can’t you wait until later or something?”

“We’re already here,” he says. “Babe, just don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

Jimmy rushes out into the rain and I slouch down lower. I think he just called me babe. I think I kind of like that. I peek out Jimmy’s window. He’s parked right next to Nick’s ugly Dodge something-or-other. I think about the day before and all the days I’ve worked with Nick since I started. About his blond hair and his manager’s tie. What an asshole. What a colossal waste of my time. I decide to call in sick again tomorrow. I decide to call in sick the next day, too, and every day for the rest of the schedule. And

the next schedule too, if they put me on it. I don't ever want to see him again. I don't ever want to put on that disgusting uniform again. Nick can flirt with Tina for all I care, date her even. They can make-out in the parking lot in his dumb ass car.

I duck down again. A mother and her little girl dash out the back door and rush to their car. They both look happy and wet. It reminds me of my mom. It's been a long time since she smiled like that, since the two of us looked like the two of them. I watch the rain drops on the windshield break shapes. They plop onto one another, trickle down in separate streams that rejoin others and shed down the pane, as if each drop were made just for me, just for me to see something.

I open the door and don't bother covering my head. I walk right up to the back of Nick's car, where the dust of country roads has left a thick film, barely altered by the rain. Dipping my finger into rain drops on the trunk of the car, I trace Tina's phone number onto his back windshield. It stands out clear against the grime. He'll see it when he looks in his rear view mirror. That should make it easy.

I hear the back door swing open. My heart falls to my feet and I can barely stand, barely turn around. I do, and thank God, it's Jimmy. He's running through the rain, carrying a bulging McDonalds' bag and an enormous soda. He's already chewing fries. He looks at my artwork on the back of Nick's car.

I look guilty and wet. "It's not my number," I say.

"I know," he says and smiles. "I got your number."

He scratches the word "asshole" underneath. I'm smiling like I can't control my lips.

“Get in the car,” he says.

I pour myself into the passenger seat.

“Are there any weird fruits in that bag, or Spam or hot dogs?” I laugh, and feel droplets of water trickle down my back.

“Nope, just real pure all-American cuisine,” he says and chomps some more fries.

I dig into the bag as he drives out of the lot and towards my mom’s. We get upstairs and it takes me a while, but I fix the key in the door and open it. The room is dark, except for one pane of light beaming down onto the carpet from the window. The clouds have shifted; the sun has returned. I sit in the sun, my clothes and hair drying ever so slowly. Jimmy dumps out the bag on the carpet like it contains stacks of bills from a bank heist, and we stuff our faces full of double cheeseburgers and chicken sandwiches and so many French fries.

“We have robbed the dollar menu,” I say and almost spit out my bite of burger.

Jimmy loses a spray of Coke across the carpet.

“It’s good, right?” he says.

My mouth is too full to do anything but nod. I wipe a smear of ketchup off my face and devour some more fries. I eat fast—taste fry oil and crispy potatoes and crunchy chicken and American cheese and onions and pickles, too. We eat until we finish everything, that entire monster bag. I suck down Coke like I’m in the desert and will never drink again.

“I like the jungle one,” he says. He points to the fabric square pinned on the far wall.

“I like them all,” I say.

Picture the two of us: We lie in the sun, our McDonald’s remnants and wrappers abandoned beside us. Everything eaten, every last fry. I play with the carpet, the long lush brown carpet, and it feels so soft against my skin. It feels like a whole new texture, something organic, spun from nature, something I’ve never even felt before. I’m petting the carpet like the mane of the tamest of lions when Jimmy takes my hand in his hand. He doesn’t move, just reaches over and envelopes mine in his. He holds it, real soft, real gentle and we lay there for a long time, just like that.

## SACROMONTE

It was Wednesday, my late day to work, and between scrambling eggs for breakfast, shaving my legs in the shower, and taking the long way in past the coffee shack for an Almond Joy Mocha, I forgot to turn my radio on. Every other day of the week I'd be early, and a coworker would be at home playing tag with their snooze button. Every other day of the week I'd already be stamping acceptance letters and filing student visas, or looking up postal codes for cities in Nicaragua and Belarus, numbers I hadn't yet memorized. Every other day of the week I'd be listening to my younger sister Lisa's morning show on KDID, Kidd Country Radio, even though I disliked country music and, to be honest, my sister's radio voice. That morning though, that particular Wednesday, my radio waves were silent and I didn't know what every other listener in the Fargo/Moorhead area already knew.

I took my coffee to my desk, enjoying the smooth shuffle of my thighs as they rubbed together beneath my skirt. I was barely sitting when Fawaz, my work-study student, approached.

"Hello, Ms. Laurie," he said.

Fawaz handed me an ink drawing of a blue bird—its belly fat like it had swallowed a lemon. I was unaccustomed to receiving gifts from Fawaz. He was sensitive, slowly warming to the women in our office after nearly a year. He was a visual arts major and a Saudi. He reminded me of myself from a long time ago.

“Are you alright, Fawaz?” I asked, slower than I intended.

Before he could answer, Shannon popped her head in the doorway.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

I stared blankly at her.

“Oh my God, you didn’t hear your sister’s show,” she said. She covered her mouth with her hand.

What I had missed that morning, and what was made brutally public on the region’s number one country music station, was the complete and grotesque dissolve of my sister’s four-year relationship to the flip-side of her coin, her fiancé, and long-time cohost of the morning show, Dutch Kinney. Fawaz quickly excused himself, and Shannon proceeded to tell me the details.

“We all heard it—we were *all* listening. Lisa was blabbing about something, and all of a sudden, Dutch freaked. *Freaked out.*”

I could tell she was mortified, but a twinge in her voice gave away excitement as if she couldn’t wait to tell me about it. It was the same kind of compulsion that made me listen to Lisa’s show in the first place. Confronted, I would admit that I listened to hear if she said anything about me. Each day I’d tune my ear just a little harder to hear my name, or “*my older sister,*” hopeful, in a small way, for the recognition.

“What did he say?”

“After a ten-minute rant about her wardrobe, her family—don’t worry, he didn’t mention you, just your parents—her physical appearance, and then some, he ended by

talking about their *sex life*. In detail. And not in a good way. He was lit. Smashed. Drunk as a doornail,” she said.

I couldn't believe it. Lisa and Dutch were that annoying couple who didn't snip at each other in public, but instead gently touched one another's knee when things were getting out of hand. This signaled that they would talk whatever it was over later, at home. In the privacy of it.

“What did Lisa do?”

“At first she was quiet. She might have been crying. Then she screamed—something about his dick, of course—and then she threw what I can only presume to be a chair at him and broke his nose. On the air.”

“Oh my God.”

“He cried like a child.”

Shannon was beaming.

“Are you sure it wasn't just a prank, you know? Like some kind of radio thing?”

I said.

“Sorry, honey. No chance. He called her a cunt for the whole world to hear.”

I left right away, left Fawaz to file transcripts until the end of his shift. I thanked him again for the drawing. I found Lisa in the parking lot at the station—a large brown trailer on the crest of the city, with radio towers reaching tall above young trees. She was in the driver's seat of her Suburban. Her face lay awkwardly against the steering wheel, as if she had slumped right there after a heart attack or stroke.

“Open the door,” I said, after trying the latch.

She looked at me. Her face was red like a sunburn. Her eyes swollen nearly shut.

“Open the door, sweetheart,” I said.

Slowly Lisa unlocked the door and I pulled it open. She slid out of her seat and into my arms. I caught her, and held on tight.

I drove to my apartment on the north side of town. I made her tea and a washcloth for her eyes.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked.

“No,” she said.

That changed. By early afternoon Lisa was pacing around the apartment shouting, loud enough for my neighbors to hear everything.

“I guess he got tired.”

“That’s what he said?”

“Fucking tired. That lazy bastard. *I’m* tired. I’ve *been* tired.”

I fixed dinner, and ate alone. I watched her curl herself in a ball on the couch.

“And Paul—he didn’t do a fucking thing, didn’t cut the feed. Just let it run so the entire universe could hear *everything* and then he says that *I* should take some time off. That son of a bitch. I wouldn’t work for him again if it were the last station on Earth.”

Later, I joined her outside where she smoked cigarette after cigarette.

“We were going to start a *family*, you know. A fucking family. I don’t want to be an old mom,” she said between sobs.

That night, I rubbed her back as she lay face flat into a pillow.

“I should have left *him*,” she said, her voice cold and strong. “*I* should have left *him*.”

For the next three weeks she stayed with me, and we navigated a new rhythm. I listened and soothed. I painted Lisa’s toenails. I brushed her hair. I took her to my stylist to get it dyed back to brunette. I cooked—desserts with excesses of butter and winter dishes that would comfort, even though the buds of spring were popping everywhere. She didn’t leave the house to see them. She watched me move around my home like she were studying me, learning about the single life, and how to live it. Learning that it might not be as lonely as she thought.

She needed me, for the first time in as long as I could remember, and it felt good to be needed. One day she cried so hard she threw up in the bathtub. I cleaned it up. One night she came with me to the grocery store. She wore an eye-mask on the top of her crunchy hair. When we were almost done, Lisa picked up a jar of baby pickles and slammed it against the ground—the glass shattering, the juice spraying my feet, the miniature pickles bouncing down the aisle. She didn’t say anything, just walked away, as if her actions were completely normal, as if she were simply picking out a ripe melon by knocking lightly on its skin.

After three weeks, my apartment was beginning to smother. Piles of her things cut off doorways, blocked the bathroom, changed the layout of my place so that at night I was always running into something. I was bruising all over.

“Take her somewhere,” Shannon said that following Friday at lunch, when I showed her a line of blue blotches up my calf.

“Where?” I said.

“Somewhere they don’t have country music.”

I thought of taking Lisa home—of driving to Western Montana and up the mile-long ranch driveway to visit our parents, to languish for a long weekend under the blanket of our mother’s cooking and the wide quietness. But Lisa wasn’t like me. She didn’t like quiet. She left my TV on when she went to sleep, and I had to leave bed in the middle of the night to shut it off. No, she didn’t need quiet. She needed noise and alcohol and good old-fashioned distraction. She needed to remember what it was like to be herself again. She needed to be reintroduced.

“Let’s go somewhere,” I said to the lump of her under the covers when I returned from work one evening.

Lisa groaned.

“I’m serious.” I pulled the eye-mask away from her face.

“Where would you want to go if you could go anywhere? You’ve never just *gone somewhere.*”

“Anywhere?” Her voice was hoarse.

“Yes.”

“Umm...Mars?” she said.

“Too many men there,” I said.

“Okay, London, then.”

“Alright, that’s closer. But we don’t want to go to London right now. Too rainy. It’s all sad-bastard-gray in the spring. Think of somewhere else.”

“You said anywhere,” she said, and pulled the covers back over her head. “And I’m a sad bastard.”

“Ok, well, think of somewhere else. I mean it this time.”

I poked her through the covers.

“Let’s go to Margaritaville,” she said.

“That might be tough since it doesn’t actually exist.”

“I’m sick of this game,” she said. “You pick.”

I knew there was a limit to where she would go. She had done the whole island experience a couple years prior with Dutch, and that wasn’t a tape we were going to rewind. Like London, Paris was out of the question. Paris is for lovers, not the newly single. It’s a place whose very architecture makes you ache for a mouth to kiss. Paris

would hurt more than it would help. Anywhere in Germany was cold like London, too gray this time of year, and Lisa didn't drink beer anyway. *Too many calories*, she said.

I wanted to take her to a place that would make her forget about Dutch. The men in Prague were too shy to do that. They were the opposite in Italy—too forward, they would pinch and snap from corners or, even worse, they would ignore you completely and snap at some other woman. There was only one place to go. I had it. Spain was perfect. In Spain, a man would call you *bonita* and continue going about his business, barely lifting his eyes for a second look. In Spain, a man would cross the street to cover you with his umbrella while it rained. Lisa needed an umbrella right now.

“I know the perfect place!” I said.

I jumped out of the bed and ran down the hall to the computer. Lisa showed up in the doorway with the comforter wrapped around her shoulders.

“What are you doing?” she said, groggily.

“Get your bags packed, we're going to Spain.”

“We're what?”

“We're going to shake off America for a couple days. We're going to drink sangria, and see the sights, and flirt with beautiful men with thick accents, and drink more sangria,” I said.

“Laurie, come on.”

I clicked the mouse on the *Purchase* button.

“It's done!” I said.

Lisa turned around and climbed back into bed. I followed her, sat on the side of it.

“I think it’ll be good for you to get away,” I said, not sure which end of the heap was her head.

There was a long pause.

“Sangriaville,” she said from somewhere underneath.

The next few days blew past, preparing for the trip. At work I told Shannon all about the travel—the hotels I’d found in Madrid and Granada, how many bags Lisa wanted to take with. She gave me the work camera to borrow.

Before I left, Fawaz gave me a small pencil drawing of an olive tree.

“You will see a lot of these,” he said.

“You’ve travelled there?” I asked.

“When I was a boy. It is beautiful.”

I don’t know why, but I blushed.

“You will see the Alhambra?” he asked.

“I’ve always dreamed of it.”

“And the hill—Sacred Mountain—you will see?”

“We will.”

“You will dance, and drink, and party?” he said.

We both laughed.

“We’ll do all of that,” I said.

I touched his elbow, ever so lightly, then pulled it away—the gesture, too familiar.

“Bring pictures home,” he said.

The flight to Madrid was long, and by the time we arrived at the small hotel room I had booked near the airport, neither of us had any affection left for travel. At my insistence, we peeled ourselves out of bed to eat churros in the middle of the night, scalding, and dipped in hot chocolate the consistency of fudge.

“Let’s eat only dessert on this trip,” Lisa said.

“Dessert and drinks,” I said, and wiped a smear of chocolate off my face.

The next morning we found our way to the bus station—my travelling compass realigning, dusting itself off. I helped Lisa buy a bag of bright candy from a vendor inside the station, then bought our tickets. We boarded the bus, southbound.

Outside the window the land changed, opened up, lost the horizon line of cranes and sky-rises for wide open space. The hills were not green, but brown and tan and earth colored. Olive trees sprouted in clean lines along the highway, and made me think of Fawaz. I saw the silhouette of a massive black bull, a fourteen-foot billboard, tall along

the road, and pointed it out to Lisa. She sat in the aisle seat and dozed while I stared out the window.

Spain rushed by us with the windows open. I felt the swell of possibility then, on the moving air. I felt happy and warm, knowing that I was able to share this with my younger sister, able to take her away from something cold, and bring her here. I thought that we might travel together, she and I. That she might fall in love with it like I had long ago, and we would go places, simply because we wanted to, and because we could. I would have a companion to share all of it with, and she and I would learn about each other as friends and sisters, both. My head rested on the window pane and I fell asleep, happily on this thought.

A few hours later, the driver stopped at a gas station. Inside there was a small store and bathrooms. I waited in line. The room smelled heavily of warm cheese and country dust.

“Oh my god, that smell,” Lisa said.

“Shhhh,” I said.

“It smells like barf.”

“It’s the cheese.” I gestured to the counter. A spread of ten or more Spanish cheeses, large hunks of hard cheese and soft cheese in thin red casing, sat behind the deli counter.

“I’m going to puke. Let me go in front of you.”

I let her go first, and then an elderly woman, who left urine on the seat. I hovered awkwardly above it. Afterwards, I walked around the parking lot by myself, taking in the

hot stretch of sun. I kept an eye on the driver. Beyond the parking lot, there was a small creek, and beyond that, a neighborhood of small homes. I didn't see anyone stirring in the village, but a dog lay panting in the shade of a short tree. My legs stretched, I returned to the bus to find two men sitting across from Lisa, the three of them talking.

“Baby puke.”

“Loads of babies,” the other said, and they all laughed.

Lisa introduced me.

“Laurie, this is Carrig, and this is Fin.”

We all said hello and shook hands. They were younger than us, and Irish—their accents thick on the tips of their tongues.

“American sisters loose in Spain,” Carrig said in a movie-announcer's voice. He looked amused and half drunk.

“Who said anything about loose?” Lisa said, and she looked half drunk, too.

We spent the rest of the bus ride in conversation. I kept stealing glances outside as the daylight dimmed and the hot sun threw colors at the sky. It was nice to share travelling stories with strangers, if only for a while, to lose yourself in simple commonalities. The boys made us laugh, and Lisa looked prettier and healthier than she had since long before Dutch left her on the radio.

It was dusk by the time we entered the city of Granada. The buildings bled with the last of sunlight. I stood for a long time outside the bus station, staring up at the sky, while Lisa made arrangements to meet the boys for drinks after we got settled. They kissed us on each cheek before we parted.

“How cute are they?” Lisa said.

“Cute,” I said.

“I like the tall one,” Lisa said.

“You always like the tall one.”

We took another bus downtown to our hotel. On our way we passed a cathedral. We passed the square, bars and flamenco clubs barely awakening for the evening. We passed the stone road that led up to the Alhambra, and I craned my neck as far as I could out the window to see the top. The fortress cast a large shadow, and its lights offered a soft glow over the city square.

Later we met the boys for dinner, and ate mussels, and shrimp, and fried peppers, and rice, and sausage. We drank wine, and sangria, and beer.

After that, the night wound loud and fast around us, like a whirlwind, testing all of our senses. Lisa and I walked and drank through the square. We exchanged names with new friends who spoke Spanish, and French, and Portuguese, and the Queen’s English. We shouted to each other across full bars, or held hands and whispered, while swaying over cobblestones from one to the next.

“Another drink?” Fin asked me.

“No, no, no.”

“Just a small one?”

A shot of tequila, and a squeeze of lime, too.

A loud group of Australians came into the bar, and we followed them to another.

“What can I get you?” one of the Aussies asked.

“No. Nope,” I said.

I drank his beer down fast.

I met people whose names I couldn’t pronounce, yet alone remember. We laughed and hugged everyone, and drank everything, my sister and I. Lisa’s eyes were shining.

A Frenchmen followed us around the next place.

“Une petit bière, mon ami?”

“Lord, no,” I said, and pushed my sister toward him.

We snuck away to another bar with our cups full.

“Una más?” someone said.

“I will hide under this table if you make me drink another.”

“Que?”

I shook my head, then tipped it back.

It was late, the night having caught up with me, when I found Lisa in a mix of faces across the room. She was shaping her mouth and tongue for a small audience, trying to form words of a foreign language—sounding them out, then repeating between shots, and lots of laughter.

I felt that warmth again, the same thing I felt on the bus, only amplified by the streams of Spanish beer and sangria in my blood. When I closed my eyes, the world still moved around me, and I remembered a time when we were girls and we ran through the

tall woods behind our parent's house. We ran to a fort still standing from the previous summer, crawled inside, and laid on the dirt floor. Above us, a ceiling of branches crossed over one another and offered openings to a glossy blue sky. We laid there for hours, taking turns counting each leaf nature had woven into the roof of the fort, and letting the earth run through our fingers and onto our clothes and into each other's long hair.

I felt Lisa behind me, and when she grabbed my arm, I opened my eyes. She held on tight, and we stumbled home together through the busy Spanish streets, late in the morning.

We slept long and hard.

"What time is it?" Lisa moaned when I finally shoved her awake.

"I want to see the Alhambra today," I said.

"Ugh."

"Move. Spanish history does not wait on you and your hangover."

"You sure?" she said and ducked underneath the blankets.

I flopped on top of her and brayed in her ear.

"Lisa, please? Please? Please? Please? Don't make me beg."

"Okay, fine," she said. "I'm up."

She was unsteady on her feet.

While Lisa readied herself, I sat down on the bed and held my head. I drank very small, deliberate, sips of water.

Afterwards, we went to a nearby restaurant and picked our food while piecing together the end of the night.

“I made out with Carrig,” Lisa said.

“Ha, ha. Really?”

“I was drunk.”

“Yeah, no shit. At least you didn’t make out with that *one* guy!”

“The Frenchmen!”

We both laughed, but stopped quickly because it hurt.

“I think I made out with Fin, too,” she said.

I smiled. “I knew Spain was a good idea.”

“Wait, wait, at some point were we singing the National Anthem?” she said.

“*You* were.”

“Oh, Lord.”

Lisa’s cell phone chimed. She checked it and let out a chuckle.

“Apparently the boys are awake, and ready to begin again. Carrig says, *Anyone interested in a little hair of the dog?* I’m going to tell him not for a few hours.”

“Tell him not for a few days, please.”

It was early evening already, the day hurrying us by. The Spanish sun leeched sweat from our bodies. Mine smelled sweet, which made my head hurt even worse.

Lisa and I crossed through the square and began our ascent up the stone street, watching our feet closely. The Alhambra was atop a massive hill and both of us, weighed down by cameras and hangovers, were breathing heavy fast. We paused for a moment, and I extracted a water bottle from my backpack. I let Lisa drink first. As I drank, I watched an old woman approach my sister. She was dressed in scarves and held a bundle of sage in her hand. Her face was half shrouded, but I could see broken teeth and parched lips. Before I could warn her, the woman had taken Lisa's hand.

"Excuse me," Lisa said, and tried to pull it away.

"No, por favor," I said. I touched the woman's shoulder. She hissed at me.

"Pull your hand away," I told Lisa.

"I can't."

The old woman spoke slowly in Spanish. She smelled like damp cloth and it made my stomach ache. With one hand, the old woman rubbed sage over my sister's arm. With the other, she held on tight to her hand.

"What is she saying, Laurie?"

"She just wants you to give her money."

The woman traced her coarse fingernail over my sister's palm. Lisa flinched. She smiled large, and all her black and broken teeth were transparent in the afternoon sun.

“What is she saying?”

I knew enough Spanish to know, but I didn't want to tell her.

“Nothing,” I said.

The old woman searched Lisa's face. With the hand that wasn't holding my sister's, she patted Lisa's stomach, and looked her in the eye. Lisa looked confused, afraid.

“Vaya! Leave us alone,” I said.

The old woman let go of Lisa's hand and then rubbed her own belly, low and slow. My sister looked at me with a question on her lips. Just then the old woman reached out and squeezed Lisa's breasts, while repeating the same words in Spanish.

“Esta embarazada. Embarazada.”

Lisa screamed. I grabbed my sister's hand and hissed at the old woman. She spat at us as we hurried up the hill.

“Wait, wait, slow down,” Lisa said and stopped us, heavy breathed, at the top. We were nearly inside the fortress walls.

“What just happened?” she said through large intakes of air.

“She's a crazy old bitch who wants you to buy her bundle of sage for like twenty euro. Ignore her.”

“What did she say?”

“I don’t know,” I lied. “It was all Spanish gibberish.”

“I can’t believe she fucking grabbed me,” Lisa said. She started to cry.

I didn’t know how to comfort her at that moment, so I stood there, unmoving. Then I put my hand on her shoulder.

After a few minutes, she composed herself and wiped the tears from her face. I kept my hand on her back as we entered the outer walls of the palace fortress. The sun had reached its peak. It tipped, and began its slow descent.

Inside, the Alhambra was more mythical than imagination. Each arch and pillar was carved in the most minute of detail, a menagerie of Arabic lettering, and there were pictures chiseled together in the stone. But the shadow of the old woman, and what she had said, painted the walls a darker color, and left my eyes unfocused upon looking.

Lisa and I walked through the gardens, took our time between flowerbeds, snapping photos of fountains, each spray of water arched as if from nowhere, each placid rectangular pool. I kept a close eye on my sister. She was mesmerized by this place. I watched as the memory of the woman faded slowly away from her face as she took it all in. Tourists flowed through the buildings. We followed them, and went on our own. Children followed parents in a daze. Teenagers stood in awe, speechless. Inside the walls, the stone spoke of centuries. It washed away sound. I took a picture of everything—each wall a book of its own, not an inch left untouched by an engraver’s hand. I took a picture up close, a study of the swirls and shapes. I traced my fingers over their grooves. I thought of Fawaz, and his fingertips. I would show him these when I returned. He would call them beautiful.

Lisa and I walked for a long time without saying anything, just pointing and making breathless sounds. Her phone chimed again, but she didn't look at it this time. Round glassless windows let in the last of the day's sunlight.

"This room is called *Sala de Dos Hermanas*," I said. "Hall of the Two Sisters."

I took a picture of the sign, and then pointed my camera upward. Above our heads, the ceiling was an inverted chandelier, its crystals suspended like wax. It was a honeycomb dropping nectar on us. I was lost in the vision.

"She said I was pregnant, didn't she?"

It startled me, Lisa's voice, her question. I couldn't answer.

"Embarazada. I know that's what she said, Laurie."

There was no light left in the hall, nothing left to illuminate the walls, or our faces between them.

Lisa repeated, "I know that's what she said."

I followed my sister outside. Beyond the city we could see the small mountains rising up in the near dark. And inside the hill, the pockmarks of people's homes, of flamenco clubs and restaurants carved into the soft rock of the mountain.

"What is that?" she said, and pointed.

"Sacromonte."

Lisa stared over the fortress walls, far away.

"People live there, in caves," I said.

Lisa was quiet. She touched her stomach, then crossed her arms over it.

“It’s where flamenco comes from,” I said. “Dancing.”

She looked out over the hills, lit behind with the last of the sun. I said a prayer before asking.

“Do you want to go dancing?” I said. “It’s just barely dark. There’s a long night ahead. We can still go, if you want?”

She paused.

“I want to go home,” she said.

I knew then, that we would leave the next morning—pack our bags, and catch an early flight. I knew we would not linger. That I would be back to work by Monday, right on time, and that she would be in her old apartment by the end of the week, maybe even earlier. I knew she would take Dutch back even after everything he said to her, and that years from now she’d ask me why I was cold to him at family Christmas, and pretend she didn’t know the answer. I knew we would never talk about the previous night—the Irish boys, or the Aussies, the singing, and the laughing, and the long walk home, holding onto one another’s arms. I knew that, eventually, we would not talk about this trip. That it would be forever changed in her mind, forever blemished. I knew that the two of us would not get this moment back, and that I would not stretch my legs any further up the hills of this city. So I stayed there, next to my sister, staring out at the dots of light on the bends of the mountain for a long, long time, imagining the climb.

## CALLING THROUGH THE HOLLOW

The afternoon air was heavy when Herman ‘Ham’ Anderson put on his loafers and green mesh cap from the St. Pius Centennial Celebration and rumbled into town. Above his truck, the sky rolled and darkened. Wind picked up speed past his windshield. Herman did his shopping once a week at the makeshift grocer where eggs cost three dollars a dozen and a gallon of milk cost nearly six. He made it inside just as the rain started.

The town of St. Pius had two streets, four churches (two of which had recently closed their double doors), a gas station, a hall, a bar and the grocery. Herman was adding vanilla cookies to a small basket stacked with sardine cans, vegetable oil and tomato soup when the siren sounded from a lonely post in front of the town hall. Mary Ellen Poole, a short, deliberate woman who had long ago played point guard on the same basketball team as Herman’s daughter in high school, and who was now the acting sheriff of St. Pius, volunteered at the grocery that afternoon, like every Friday. She lingered for a moment at the window staring at the sideways rain.

“Well, I suppose we better move, Ham,” she said.

Mary Ellen shooed him to the back of the store to a large utility closet with no door and sat him down on a stool by the mop and bucket. She sat down across from him on a stack of Pepsi cases. Herman looked around. From inside the closet, the siren sounded much further away, but the wind didn’t quiet.

“How about that?” she said.

“That don’t look too bad,” Herman said, turning his eyes to the window.

“I never cared for this part of summer for its storms.”

Mary Ellen reached below, tore the cardboard and pulled out a Pepsi from the case beneath her. She cracked it and offered it to Herman. He took a drink. The carbonation tickled his nose.

“What do you got in there for dinner this week?” she said.

He looked down into his basket.

“Same thing as every week, I suppose.”

At home, Herman had a freezer half full of pheasant, deer, frozen corn, and peas, and all manner of pork: bacon, short ribs, sausage. He had a pantry with black jars of prairie plums, which had been Margie’s favorite, green beans, pickles, spaghetti sauce, and whole stewed tomatoes. The supply was thinner this year than last.

“Let’s switch it up a bit,” she said.

Mary Ellen walked out into the store, keeping her eyes on the large window. The rain was coming down fast and fat. It pinged loudly off the roof. She pulled two cans of purple beets off the shelf, and a can of green beans. She picked out a small onion with flaky yellow skin and brought it all back to where Herman sat sipping Pepsi.

“We don’t have much for the fresh stuff,” she said. “But if you throw these together with some butter, and salt and pepper, you’ll like it. Rhet even likes it, and he doesn’t eat vegetables.”

Herman smiled. The siren stopped.

“Do you still have your garden?”

“Yep.”

Herman took another sip of Pepsi. Outside, the wind slowed.

“And it’s growing?”

“It’s growing.”

“Hope it’s still growing after this. What’d you plant?”

“Carrots. Beans. Squash. Rutabagas. Tomatoes, of course. Corn.” Herman took his time between each word as if he were planting them again in the straight rows of his sentences.

“I hope you remember me when that corn comes up. We couldn’t get ours to take this year. Knee high by the fourth—fat chance.”

“There’ll be plenty,” he said.

Mary Ellen looked at Herman, who looked at the can of Pepsi. His hair was parted directly down the middle. It was white and too long on his ears. He wore black suspenders clipped to khaki trousers, and a button-up short-sleeved shirt with a bulging front pocket, holding his checkbook, wallet, and sunglasses. Mary Ellen thought of her own father who had passed just the year before. She leaned forward and straightened a strap on Herman’s suspenders.

“Where’s Bear this morning?” she asked.

“Decided to stay home.”

Bear was thirteen years old, a black lab, mixed-mutt with a head the size of a beach ball. He mostly slept, but did his best as a companion, following Herman around the farm for minor fixes in the fence, or to the mailbox each morning, or to the garden where Herman tossed him beet greens and dirty carrots that he would mush between his soft teeth.

“Well, I think it looks like it’s slowing down out there.”

Mary Ellen reached down to help Herman from the stool. Once steadied, he handed her the empty Pepsi can, which she took along with his basket to the front. Herman followed her, passing an aisle with everything from canned herring to bread flour to pistachio pudding. He hesitated then turned around, and went back to the closet. He picked up the case of Pepsi, and carried it to the front of the store.

“You don’t want a full case?”

“This is full enough for me.”

Mary Ellen smiled. She bagged his groceries and scanned the Pepsi. She didn’t charge him for the vegetables.

“Mighty wind,” she said once they were outside. Branches lay scattered down the street that was still glossy with rain. She picked up a few small branches in front of the store.

“I suppose this will have done some damage,” she said.

“Suppose so,” Herman said.

“I’m going to close early, just to check it all out, anyway. Any excuse to stop reading trashy magazines and get to work, right Ham?”

She patted him on the back.

“See you next week, Mary,” he said.

“Sure will.”

The storm moved fast. Herman made out dark shadows over tall, white, bulbous clouds to the east. He pushed his bag of groceries onto the passenger side next to where Mary Ellen had propped the Pepsi. His pickup started with a growl and he pointed it west. Cans jingled on the seat beside him as he drove.

Herman passed through town as people started to come out of their homes, a little groggy and curious, and they waved to him from their front steps. He lived seven miles out of St. Pius on a large farm where he used to raise hogs. He and Bear and the occasional stray cat were the only ones that lived there now.

Herman left the tar for gravel. The ditches were half-full of water, a flash flood on flat plains. He passed Bennie Olson’s farm, and saw his brand new grain bin, upturned and squeezed skinny like an empty pop-can. Ralph Elderwiess’ place looked untouched except for his mailbox, which was bent over in a bow. Herman drove a few more miles, then across a small bridge that ran over Chokecherry Creek, and pulled into his yard.

He parked the truck in the middle of the driveway. Trees he planted the same year he built his house were snapped in two or twisted up and missing their branches. He found the branches everywhere else, littering the yard, smashed against the grain bins and the machine shed. They had left dents in the tin of both buildings. His silo’s cap was deflated. The hog barns were seemingly untouched as was the hay barn—its bales

stacked against the south side as neatly as before the storm. But the chicken coop was missing entirely. The ground was black in a six-foot rectangle, with grass growing lush all around it. Herman would find it later, its slats lying against the bruised bark of his section line. He called for Bear but didn't see him.

Herman cleared brush away from the stairs leading into the house and opened the front door. The entryway was intact and covered in shoes and hats and coats from the upturned racks. Herman decided to keep his shoes on. He looked into the kitchen, and then beyond. The dining room dropped away, slats of the floor leading like planks into a gaping hole of sky and prairie beneath it. He could see his garden and his favorite chair, upside down in the beans.

Herman walked carefully into the kitchen. His plates were still in the cupboard. The rotting peach that Mary Ellen slipped in his basket two weeks prior was still in the fruit dish on the table, but the ripe pear he had found in the bottom of his bag last week was missing. The living room and part of his bedroom were leveled, their contents in the yard as well.

As he made his way behind the house, a silver two-ton truck pulled into the drive. It was Buck Palmer, Herman's nearest neighbor to the south.

"Looks like you got hit pretty hard," he said and stepped out of the cab.

"Just going to look at the worst of it. You're welcome to join."

Palmer followed Herman behind the house. His television was upside down on the ground. Margie's rocking chair and quilting hoop were shards of wood under the crab-apple trees, and up against the burn barrels. Herman pulled a small branch off the

couch, which was upright and missing all its cushions. He sat down. Palmer spit a line of chewing tobacco towards the garden. He squinted into the field behind the house and saw, some thirty yards away, the shape of a kitchen table.

“Soon as Cindy let me out of the house, I made my way here. I was hoping you were down in the basement, though I’m beginning to see that wouldn’t have done you much good.”

The basement was piled with rubble from the first floor.

“Helluva storm. Twister shot over the creek and through your place. When the siren started, Cindy dragged us to the basement, dinner be damned.”

“Bennie’s new bin is all crushed up.”

“Bad luck.”

Palmer looked around. He counted the kitchen chairs—he found two busted by the propane tank, one in good form by a stump, one teetering on the broken and exposed staircase to the basement, one that had lost its back and been pushed into the kitchen. He couldn’t find the sixth chair. He looked down at Herman who was sitting on the displaced couch. Palmer remembered that same look on Herman’s face from the night of Margie’s wake—dazed, unsettled.

“Why don’t you come on down to our place?” Palmer said.

“Think I’ll just wait for Bear.”

Palmer looked across the farm for any signs of the aged dog.

“Why don’t you come on down? Cindy wouldn’t have me leaving you here, not for a minute. Plus, she’s frying up some chicken, and if it ain’t burnt, it’s bound to be tasty.”

“I should clean this up,” Herman said, not moving from the couch.

“Ain’t much we can do right now, anyhow, what with everything so wet. We’ll come back and do some fixin later on.”

Palmer extended his hand to Herman.

“Ain’t you hungry?” he said.

While Herman was thinking how to answer, and remembering about his cookies and cans of soup in the cab of the truck, another vehicle pulled into the drive. This time it was Mary Ellen’s police cruiser. She got out and walked through the busted trees to the men in the back.

“Oh, Lord, I sure am sorry, Ham,” she said. “Looks like you got the worst of it.”

Herman nodded at Mary Ellen. Palmer spit.

“I’ve been down around Rigby just now. They got hit with hail. Goddamn golf balls. But most of the corn’s still standing. Everyone else around here’s got minor damage, trees mostly snapped off by the wind storm. Everyone but you.”

“I’ve always been lucky,” Herman said.

Mary Ellen walked around the farm, and the men followed. She picked up sticks and small branches and threw them on a pile in the yard. She inspected the dents in the machine shed, checked inside to see Herman’s tools and tractors in place. She walked by

the barns, with their cracking paint and loose boards. She walked behind the house to see its insides turned out. She walked right over the spot where the chicken coop used to be.

“Well, shit, Ham.”

Palmer hung his head.

Herman shook his.

“You can’t stay here.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” Herman said.

“Come on with me. I’ll take you into town to talk to some people, insurance, all that. I’ll send Rhet out to gather what he can from the inside. I don’t want you messin around in there. Palmer, is Ham good to stay at your place tonight?”

“Of course. My wife wouldn’t have it any other way. More than welcome.”

Mary Ellen didn’t linger. She walked to her cruiser, opened the passenger door and called for Herman. He shuffled, a small resistance with his feet, but she called again and he followed. Mary Ellen drove quickly into town, and stern talked a man from Herman’s insurance company who promised to assess the damage within the week. She helped him fill out all the necessary paperwork.

Before Herman could object, or drink half his bitter coffee, she was on the phone to his youngest daughter Beth explaining what had happened. She went into detail, and was generous with her cursing, when describing the twister, the farm, the house, what was taken, what was left.

While Mary Ellen was talking, Rhet delivered two large suitcases to her temporary office at the town hall.

“These are your things, what I could reach anyway. Sure am sorry, Ham.”

Rhet looked down at his cowboy boots.

“It’s fixable,” Herman said.

He sat back and sipped his coffee. The two men waited silently for Mary Ellen to finish.

“Beth wants to talk to you.”

Herman took the receiver.

“Oh, Dad, I’m so glad you’re alright. Are you alright?”

“Sure, alright.”

“I’m buying you a ticket. There’s a train Sunday. It leaves awful early, but I know you get up early anyhow, and it’s the only one, so I went ahead and bought the ticket online just now as soon as Mary Ellen told me what happened.”

“Good, good. When you get here I’ll be out at the Palmer’s so just swing on in. We’ll take a look at the place. Twister took a bite out of it, but it won’t take too long to doctor.”

“Dad, the ticket’s not for me, it’s for you. The ticket is from Fargo *to* Wolf Point. It’s for you to come to my house.”

“Well, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Yes it does. Now, you can’t stay on the farm, and you can’t stay with the Palmers,” she stuttered, “indefinitely.”

“It’s not so bad. Plus, I’m waiting on Bear, who hasn’t showed up yet. I can’t just be leaving town.”

“Daddy, please.”

“No, thanks. You just come when you can, if you want.”

Beth started crying. This is how she would get her way when she was a little girl, Herman remembered, crying until he was too uncomfortable to say No any longer. Margie was always the one who could hold out. Herman held the receiver away from his ear. Mary Ellen pushed it back towards him.

“Now Beth—”

She continued to sob.

“Okay, okay. The train,” Herman said.

When they were finished, Rhet carried Herman’s bags to his wife’s car, and she drove him and his things out to Palmer’s.

“You keep in touch, Ham,” she said, before pulling away.

“I’ll see you soon,” he said.

When he got inside, Cindy gave him a big hug over the hump of her long-pregnant belly, stuffed him full of fried chicken, which was only slightly dry, mashed potatoes with no lumps and strawberry-rhubarb pie. It had been a long time since Herman had eaten so well, and it made him sleepy.

“Come with me. I’ll show you where you can lay down,” Cindy said.

She pulled the quilts back from the guest bed, and set a towel and washcloth on the nightstand beside him. She brought him a glass of water and hesitated before kissing him on the forehead.

“You’re always welcome here,” she said.

She closed the door behind her.

The next morning Cindy scrambled eggs and sausage, which Herman politely declined, and Palmer ate quickly. She set a cup of coffee for Herman and scooped a bowl full of blueberry crisp, which he ate, licking his spoon when he finished.

“Think I might go on over to my farm for a while. If you could just drop me off?”

“Why don’t you let me come with you?” Palmer said, lifting himself from the dinner table.

“You’ve got work. I won’t be long.”

“My work can wait.”

The late June sun had risen bright, and was quick to absorb the last night’s pouring. Herman looked at the house, but Bear wasn’t on the stoop where he normally sat in the morning. He circled around back.

“Bear!” he called.

He looked at his corn. All of the stalks were broken.

“Bear,” he called again.

Herman walked the farm—into the section line stuffed with trees, back by the lagoon, its smell high with summer heat, even this early in the morning. He walked to the silos, opened one and stepped inside. They had been empty for years. From the inside, he watched as the sun shone down in strange shapes through the crushed cap. He called for Bear once again. The sound magnified, reverberated off the sides, and flew up through the hollow out into the bright blue sky.

The two men walked and called the dog’s name in rotation. They picked up branches, built the pile higher and higher in the front yard of all the debris. Herman worked his way towards the machine shed, Palmer on a different path in the plum bushes and the ditch by the creek. Palmer found the sixth kitchen chair on the bank, face down in the water. When he returned to the farm, Herman was sitting on the front steps of his house. He was out of breath.

“I’m sorry, Ham. I didn’t see him.”

He tossed the chair onto the pile.

“He’ll be around,” Herman said.

The men worked slowly, but steadily until the heat was high overhead. Then they sat on the steps, ate ham sandwiches Cindy packed for them and drank lukewarm Pepsi from Herman’s truck. After lunch, they approached the garden. Palmer lifted most of the heavy things himself. Herman was slower, more careful, with the broken wooden remains of the rocking chair he bought for Margie before their first, Kathy, was born. He

put the dark mahogany wood into a different pile than the rest. The two men worked until the sun was nearly set.

Palmer stretched and looked around.

“She’ll be waiting on us,” he said.

The pile in the yard was as tall as the coop had been. Herman was smeared with sweat and dust from the day’s work. His arms and legs ached in ways he didn’t remember they could. He had just sat down again on the front steps, when Palmer called to him a second time.

“She’s waiting on us, Ham.”

“You go on ahead,” he said.

“You sure?”

“I’ll take my own rig,” Herman said, waving his hand toward his pickup.

“Dinner’ll be ready in twenty.”

“I’ll be there,” Herman said.

Herman sat on the front steps. He called for Bear again through the quiet. The sun sunk behind the barn and threw colors into the sky—deep blue, and faint purple wisps across clouds. Herman held his head in his hands. He thought about Margie. He thought about her in the summertime gardening underneath a wide-brimmed hat, her behind pointed at the high noon sun. He thought of her in the kitchen in front of a range

of boiling pots, her hands flying over the dishes, the movements deft and blind as the steam fogged her glasses. Herman thought of how her fingers moved, long and lean, as she threaded the needle back and forth through the folds in her quilt, or how they appeared, expert at their craft, as they crossed one another with long locks of the girls hair, and twisted them into braids. Then he thought of Margie's fingers, folded over in prayer, inside her coffin—puffy, wax-like, still. Herman stood, shaking tears loose onto his cheeks. He walked to the piles of wood in his front yard, and picked up the broken pieces of Margie's rocking chair. He took them into the tool shed and eyed his saws, nails, and hammers, and all kinds of other tools left untouched in their original organization. He piled the wood carefully in his wheelbarrow, a safe place to return to later. Herman took a long moment to survey the shed—where everything was, where things could be—then left the room and called across the farm once again for his old dog. Everything was steady, but the small, liquid motions of the wind. He drove his pickup slowly to Palmer's farm for dinner.

The next morning, Cindy woke early to make coffee. She served Herman his with extra cream and sugar, alongside homemade caramel rolls.

“Why don't you let us take you to the station?” she said, somehow rounder than the day before.

“You've been kind enough to this old man,” Herman said.

“No such thing.”

She handed him a brown paper bag with his lunch for the long train ride—two ham and cheese sandwiches, a bottled water, lemon bars, and two small apples from her orchard of just three trees.

“This should get you there,” she said.

“Too kind,” Herman said.

“I snuck in an extra lemon bar,” she said, and winked.

“My favorite.”

Palmer came down the stairs to join them.

“We’ll keep an eye on the place,” he said.

“And for Bear,” Herman said.

Palmer nodded.

“I suppose it’s getting to be that time,” he said.

Palmer took Herman’s suitcases out to his truck. He shook his hand at the door. Cindy kissed him on the cheek. They stood in the driveway and watched as Herman pulled away into the dark morning.

Herman rolled along to Fargo, and turned into the Amtrak station. The station was small and outdated, packed into the part of downtown that hadn’t seen renovation, dingy under the fluorescent light that blinded at four AM. Herman got out of his pickup, and took a suitcase in each hand.

He stood at the window. The woman behind it popped her gum, and took the ticket Cindy had printed from her computer.

“Train’s waiting,” she said, and pointed.

Herman crossed through the fingerprint-smudged automatic doors, and onto the platform. The train hissed smoke into an inky sky. Other passengers hurried past him. Herman stood for a long time with his bags on the ground beside him.

He had taken the train only once before, some forty years ago. He travelled with Margie to Seattle to visit a college friend of hers. He didn’t remember much else from the trip, besides the train. They sat close and looked out long windows, supposing about things they passed along the way.

“Look at that farm,” Margie said. “I bet it’s been in the family for over one hundred years.”

“And look at this little town, it’s new, brand new,” Margie said. “Look at the bell on the church tower. I’ve never seen one so gold!”

“And look at that truck, it looks like your new truck—but it’s got a little more dust under its belt, a few more miles travelled,” Margie said.

“That there’s a dairy farm, sure as day,” Herman said, trying to play along.

He waited on the platform. He waited until the last late passenger had boarded and the last horn had been sounded. And then Herman waited and watched as the train pulled out of the station, while the sky was still black and the air still cool.

His pickup bumped down the road out of the city and back toward home. The sun rose large and wide across the horizon behind him. Herman pulled out the lemon bars from the brown bag Cindy had left him, and ate them slowly, one by one. He licked powdered sugar from his top lip, and wiped it down his shirt where it had fallen, the sugar leaving small smears across the plaid. Herman rolled the paper bag closed. He would save the rest for later.

When he returned, the farm looked abandoned long ago, as if the damage to the house and trees and out-buildings was done slowly, over time, by squirrels and cats, and the steady pulse of prairie wind, and fierce winter. Herman parked in front of the tall pile of debris he and Palmer had built just the day before.

He began behind the house. Stepping over what was left of his garden—small green shoots and a couple twisted vines—Herman slowly made piles: things the wind had displaced, things turned to garbage, things to save, and all the rest. He found magazines, and books, and a box of old jeans Margie saved to cut into quilts. He found a broken lamp, and a dollhouse the girls kept for their own daughters who were now too old to use it. He found a wallet with no money in it, and a mess of shirts that no longer fit him. He found cedar wood pieces of Margie's buffet from the living room, not one bigger than a baseball bat. He found the china from their wedding that had been inside it, like a fine dust on everything. Herman was weary, his brow and back wet, but he continued working. He lingered long on each item before deciding where to set it.

Herman found a twin mattress from one of the girl's rooms. He navigated his footing and hefted his weight into tipping the mattress upward. It came easier than he thought. He pulled it across the broken platform of the house and then through the

exposed earth of his garden. The bottom dragged and dirtied. Herman kept pulling, the weight of the mattress wobbly behind him. He crossed his farm with it in tow and thought he must have looked like he were clearing the house of something recently quarantined, like when the girls had lice and all their toys had to be stored away for a week in black plastic bags. Then for a moment, he thought he might look like his own grandfather must have, dragging the bedding away from the house to be burned, during the influenza that came and stripped the county of its children, three of his own perishing before the fever-plague passed. That had been here, Herman thought, on this very same land—the foundation of his father’s boyhood home in solid stone underneath the flagpole that stood tall in front of his hay barn. Herman pulled the mattress through the doorway of his tool shed. Perhaps it isn’t like that at all, he thought and shook off the image, but like camping with a little extra padding. Herman had never been camping, but he thought it might be fun to try. I guess I’ll find out, one way or the other, he reasoned, and laid the mattress in the corner by the wheelbarrow.

Herman continued working. He picked up pace, piling things faster and higher as the morning sped by. An alarm clock, a gravy boat, a headboard. A box of crayons that spilled when he grabbed it, a photo album that sprayed pictures down into the open hole of his house, a bible. Herman moved wood, pieces of siding, and sheetrock, and concrete. The piles behind him grew, and the sun did similar work in the sky, heating the day as it moved, pressing down on Herman’s shoulders. He was tired, out of breath from the steady chores of gathering and moving and dragging and piling. He cinched up a blanket—with a pillow and a picture of Margie and Bear’s big water dish that he had

found underneath an open umbrella—then brought the sack to the tool shed and laid it on his bed.

Herman took the brown paper bag from his pickup, the door unnaturally heavy as he pulled it open, then shut it again. He sat on his front steps, and opened the bottle of water. He drank until there was no more at the bottom, thankful for the relief. He filled his lungs up with air, and then released it. He tried to steady his breathing, tried to calm the rapid pulse of his heart and the heat of the blood behind his ears. He let his feet rest on the steps, the pain of a full day of standing, stretching up his calves and into his knees. Herman felt sweat drip down his back and soak the elastic band of his underpants. He held the bottle to his mouth again and shook out a few more drops. Herman closed his eyes. Above him, the sun lit the sky as if in the hours that he worked, the earth had moved much closer to it. Its rays zeroed in on Herman in his exhaustion, so that, when he opened his eyes, he was dizzy with its heat and attention, his eyes blurry with sunshine and shadow.

Herman thought he saw a car move on the gravel road beyond, heading in his direction. And then behind that car, another. And behind that, another, yet. They lined the road for as far as he could see. They tossed up gravel and rolls of dust. They've come, Herman thought, like they had done in a caravan offering hotdishes and diapers and congratulations when Kathy was born, and again, not so long ago, when they arrived after Margie's burial, buns and bakingware heaped with desserts that they pulled from backseats and piled on his countertops. They've come, Herman thought, and closed his eyes once more, making a list of everyone in the drawn trail of cars: Mary Ellen and Rhet out ahead of everyone in her police cruiser, its lights flickering blue and red in the sun,

then there would be Palmer and Cindy behind, with their little one wrapped in soft bundle in her arms, the tuft of his hair barely visible above it, and then after them, his sister Charlene who lived in Minnesota, and his brother Del with his wife from Arizona, and his best friend Frank from all those years back, and all the farmers and farmers' wives and their children, and the children of their children, and his own children too, Kathy from Jacksonville, and Jenny from Oklahoma, and little Beth with a van full of grandkids on her way home from Wolf Point.

Herman listened through the soft twist of breeze for the hum of the cars on the road. His heart slowed. His breathing relaxed. And from somewhere inside the hum—the song of cars in motion that he felt louder now, closing in like a steady, familiar music—he heard a dog bark, just barely, the sound deep, and on its way toward him.

## THE REASONS WHY

I was seven years old the first time my mother left. My father, in his pickup truck, and me along beside him in my purple pajama gown, drove to where she ran, and brought her home in just three days.

The first time, she left a letter, a small thing, the nearly transparent paper folded in half and written in her careful hand. It lay on the dashboard all the way to find her, and all the way home, too, as she sat next to my father and looked out the window. I watched her face from the back seat and the hair that fell in front of it. Sunlight threw glare across the dirty windshield and lit it like on fire, so that years later I would remember it red.

My father and I were too long triumphant from our trip, and before long, she was gone again. The second time my mother left, she didn't leave a thing.

Overnight the weather changed. Leaves flutter on their branches, and that nostalgic smell of autumn—earth and wind and something else strong and nameless—blows through my open window. Nothing smells like the smell of fall. I light a cigarette and steer my car through Friday traffic on my way to pick up Grace.

Grace spends Monday through Friday on the other side of town in an adult daycare center called Four Winds, for those with memory loss and dementia. The building is stucco. On my way inside, I make a habit of dragging my hand across the

exterior wall. I let the crags and notches in the concrete scratch away the negative energy of work and my wandering mind so that I can always enter with a smile. Grace deserves a smile. And so do the rotating hourly staff of nursing assistants and receptionists and bed makers and bath givers and dietary aides, those who do the job I can no longer do during the week.

Inside it is warm. Inside the air smells of laundry and solvents and alcohol wipes and the elderly. Inside, I greet Jenna at the desk.

“Good day?” I ask.

“Always is around here,” she says, with an eyebrow lift to the sky and a worn smile that reads, *Praise His Holy name for it.*

I appreciate her belief in a higher power—it helps her give kindness and attention to those the world is weary with. My job does not promote kindness. My job makes me answer phones, and take appointments, and restock coffee tables with magazines, and hand out toothbrushes and floss to patients when their cheeks are swollen after teeth cleanings. It makes me waste hours counting minutes. It makes me multiply those minutes by individual dollars and pray to make it out ahead. It makes my stomach turn at the end of each month when the bills take over my living room floor. It makes me frown every day until the stucco walls force a smile on my face.

I find Grace at the dining room table with a puzzle spread out in front of her, the shape of a pony in wildflowers lifting up from the scattered pieces. I squeeze her shoulders the way I always do and kiss the top of her head where her hair is thin.

Grace no longer speaks. I've read all the literature. I know what that means. But she knows me still. I can tell by the way she takes my arm when she's scared, and the way she nods at me or squeezes my hand when I ask her questions, and the way her eyes look, like they've always looked at me. Like I belong to her. Like she's going to take care of me.

I am helping Grace fit pieces in place when I see Stephanie come out of the kitchen. Stephanie has beautiful brown hair with a wave, and a wide smile with white teeth. All the male residents flirt with her, which she takes, always, in good humor. Last week, she told me she was pregnant, nine weeks already, and I cried on the drive home. She'll leave in a few months on maternity and we won't see her anymore. Stephanie's the apple of my Grace's eye, sneaks her extra cookies after dinner, and besides that, she's a damn good nurse.

"I was wondering if you worked today," I say.

"It's been a wild one."

"That's what Jenna said."

"Did she tell you about our new permanent resident?"

"What do you mean permanent?" I say.

I look at Grace who is studying a green puzzle piece.

Stephanie whispers. "They call it "granny dumping."

I laugh out loud. I can't help myself.

“Shh!” she says, and giggles. She prepares a Dixie cup of pills from one of the locked cupboards.

“It doesn’t mean what you think.”

“Granny dumping?” I am whispering, too.

“Someone dropped her off this morning.”

Stephanie nods towards an old woman in a recliner. The woman sleeps with her mouth open, a black hole. She doesn’t have teeth and doesn’t wear dentures. I can see where her lips sink in after the walls of her gums.

“When Tiff got here this morning, she was in the parking lot with a sign around her neck, said, *My Name is Doris*. There was a letter, too. Said she didn’t have anywhere to live or anyone to take care of her anymore.”

“People actually do that?” I ask, horrified, imagining Grace alone, in an early morning parking lot with a sign around her small neck. Then I picture Doris’ daughter, wiping tears as she drives away into the dark wide open morning.

“People do it. She’s sleeping proof,” Stephanie says.

“Where will she go?”

“The paperwork’s already moving for her to go to the nursing home on Division. It happens more than you think. And in this economy.”

I swallow hard.

“It happens here?”

“A couple times. None in a while. More often they’re left at hospitals or police stations, like women do with babies.”

I look at the woman in the recliner again.

“That’s terrible,” I say.

“That’s life. Or the end of it, anyway.”

The second time my mother left, my stomach ached to go after her. It wasn’t really that I wanted her back or even that I knew what it would feel like when she was gone for good. Instead, I wanted that time on the road with my father, the sunshine and the fall weather and the miles and miles behind us. I wanted the freedom of skipping school and I wanted to smell the trees as they passed and feel the air gritty and fast against my open hand.

But the second time she left, we had no grand adventure. My father buckled me into the back seat of his pickup truck, pinched between the cab and a suitcase of all my things. He didn’t play his music for me, the rock and roll booming from the dashboard. He didn’t buy me licorice and bubble gum and chocolate bars and spits. He didn’t talk to me like a grownup, or tell me things about my mother or his life before her, or about me when I was a baby and he was a brand new dad.

Instead he drove fast and with a hard jaw. He drove all the way to the Badlands and left me on a farm down a long gravel road that belonged to my Great Aunt Grace.

At home, I sit Grace in front of the old television and pop a VHS into the player. She likes to watch an episode of *Murder, She Wrote* at seven o'clock and then another before she goes to bed. By now, I've seen them all—each tape rewound a hundred times. Every mystery solved. Every chapter tapped out on the keys of that woman's typewriter.

I mix tunafish with ranch dressing and eat it out of the can. Grace has already eaten, for which I am thankful. The cupboards are deep and they are empty.

Two weeks ago, I saw a lawyer on my lunch break. I brought a double-bagged grocery sack full of bills and receipts and bank statements. I set it on his desk like I was delivering lunch.

*We have a lot of options, he said. Don't worry.*

By the end of our meeting, after the bag was upturned and the calculations made, the options were boiled down to two.

*Chapter 7 or Chapter 13?*

Grace likes to hold my hand while she watches her show. Her small hands are transparent, the veins lifted like smoky blue mountains underneath the mist of her skin. I look at my own. They don't look like hers. I have always wondered whose they look like.

"Ooh, this is a good one," I say. "A boating accident."

Grace looks at me with a worried brow.

"Don't worry," I say. "I won't spill the beans."

She lets go of my hand and pulls her palm across the texture of the couch as if collecting dog hair or pills in the fabric. She hurries herself next, dusting the coffee table. She gets up from the couch and goes to her room. I don't follow but know she is in there, taking clothes out of drawers and folding them, one by one, on her bed.

Grace had no children of her own, and no husband alive on the earth when I met her. The year after he passed and years before my father brought me to her, she had what the medical community calls a *pelvic exoneration*, which means they hollowed her out, took everything south of her navel and made room. Grace wore two bags, one on each hip that collected her piss and her shit. She didn't let this slow her down. She didn't let it harden her.

Grace taught me how to clean those bags when they were full—to empty them in the toilet, and run through with hot water. She taught me how to help her around the house with laundry and dishes and dusting. She taught me how to move hogs before sunup using only my voice and, occasionally, a stock prod. She taught me how to wean baby pigs from their mothers and how to slice off their testicles with razor blades. She taught me how to work hard. And she taught me to be kind, to be respectful. To call men sir, and women, ma'am.

Grace taught me about Jesus Christ and God and the Holy Ghost, and the Virgin Mother, too. She didn't anger when I lifted my eyebrows and asked questions instead of offering prayers. She didn't talk about my father or my mother, but she didn't stop me

from talking about them either. Grace taught me to take care of myself, to take care of my own. She taught me be thankful for the things I had, even when I didn't have them.

I help Grace dress for bed in a long nightgown, worn almost through. Once she's under the covers, I lay beside her and hold her hand, and we look at the ceiling. There we pray together—the same each night.

Hail Mary. Full of Grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women. Blessed is the fruit of thy womb. Jesus.

I was fourteen, an awkward, lonely thing, living with Grace in the country when her cancer came back, this time resurfacing in her breasts. I was young. I thought: what will *I* do if she dies this time? Where will *I* go?

But Grace didn't die. Instead, she let them cut off her breasts. She let the chemo take care of the rest. *I think God is hell bent on making me a man*, she said while chewing ice chips. *I shouldn't have worked so hard like one. I should have baked more.* When her hair grew back, it was different. Not like the dark brown curls she rolled up in a trucker hat when I was little. It grew back lighter, thinner, like she was someone else all together.

Not long after that, we moved to town. Grace sold the farm to pay for the mastectomy. She used what was left of her savings for the chemo.

After Grace is in bed, I spread the bills all around me on the floor. I already know the numbers, but I pen them on lined paper and scratch them out anyway. \$257 plus \$118 plus \$54.32 plus \$52.30 plus \$296 plus \$313 plus \$786. Plus \$1,800 flat for Grace's care, this month like every other. The dollars pile up and up. I reread the small text and due dates, some already passed. I do this every night as if somehow the numbers could change and even out, as if it was possible I miscounted, miscalculated this whole time, and all of this would be over and Grace and I could live in peace, and small comforts—a new nightgown, fresh episodes of her favorite show.

I light a cigarette. I let the ashes fall onto the paper next to me. I imagine the whole of it going up in flames with me inside the middle. I close my eyes and picture the fire consuming me, the house, my deadbeat car, the block, then leaping across town to the bank and to the lawyers and destroying all the paper there, too. When I open my eyes, I see the back door is open. I hadn't heard a thing.

By the time I get outside, Grace is halfway over the fence. She has propped up a weathered wicker chair against it and climbed. One leg is nearly over.

“Grace! Please don't do that. Don't do that, please!”

I rush to her, and stand below, deciding my next move, trying to calculate hers. She swats her hand at me.

“Grace, please come down from there,” I say.

I touch her back and try to pull her leg down from mid-air. She grunts at me. Her head and chest and one of her feet are above the fence, like a sideways split. I can't help but laugh about what it must look like on the other side.

“Grace,” I laugh and plead, “come down!”

The night is chill and quiet. Above us, leaves shake slowly on branches, still green from the attention of summer. Grace tries again to pull herself over, but can't figure where to move her other foot. I hold onto it.

“Sweetheart, come down.”

She spins her face around and looks at me wild, as if she weren't otherwise occupied, she would hit me square in the face. She tries again to hoist herself over, and her urostomy bag pinches between the fence and her stomach and opens, sending a deluge of urine down her side, and hot onto my arm still holding tight to her foot. Grace doesn't seem to notice. I'm afraid the same will happen to her other bag, and that I'll have to clean that too, so I change my voice.

“Look what you've done.” I say it loud. I make it strange.

She turns toward me, then back to her business.

“What are you doing? The hogs are loose—they ate through the fence again,” I say. “Grace, did you hear me? The hogs are out. I can't get them back in without you.”

Grace turns to look at me again. I strip any comfort from my voice.

“Well, are you going to help me or not? I don't know what you're doing that's more important?”

She searches my face. She's confused, and it kills me, but she relaxes her shoulders.

"Let's go," I say.

She relaxes her grip on the fence and begins to get down. I can see the fight has faded, the wild in her eyes wiped away by water.

"Can I help you?"

She nods.

"Come on," I say, softer now. "We'll get them back into the pen by morning."

I put my arm around her and guide her back inside, wash her in the bathroom, and then lead her down the hallway back to bed.

I hated the city. I missed the farm, and the open spaces, where I understood the quiet and wasn't afraid of it, where I enjoyed the easy distractions of nature. I missed the pigs, even if they stunk, even if they forced me up at five AM to feed. I missed the way the floor creaked so that anywhere in the house, I could tell where Grace was in it. I missed the section lines plump with plums, that bruise of a fruit that tasted better than candy, and the chokecherry bushes overflowing in red, their berries waiting to be turned into jelly. I missed the line of photographs that climbed the wall of the staircase and the one at the top, taken by a neighbor that Grace had sent out as a Christmas card the year after I came to stay—she driving the tractor, me standing tall in the scoop. It was lost, somehow, in the move.

I missed it all. And so did Grace, even as she pretended to have the highest spirits. In town, I felt smothered, watched. In town, I felt Grace's spirits sag, and watched as her skin did the same.

I struggled in high school. I was no good at English or history or making friends. When I was done, I was done. That's what I told Grace. And even though she argued, I could see the weight lift from her shoulders. She quit her second job when I began working at the dentist office after graduation. I've been there almost ten years now.

When I hear Grace stirring, I wake myself up. On Saturday mornings and on Sundays too, I perform Mass. Long ago we streamlined the parts Grace liked about the process—confession, and communion. After that, we celebrated the abridged ceremony on both weekend days, because they blurred together anyway, and because it was something Grace remembered, something she liked to do.

I move to the kitchen where I tear off a couple chunks of stale French bread and put them in the microwave. I pour a glass of grape juice from the fridge. I bring these meager offerings to her bedroom. There, Grace busily cleans the closet in her nightgown.

“Time for prayer,” I say.

She smooths her hair, then kneels beside the bed with little trouble. It amazes me how much her musculature remembers. How her body knows to kneel in prayer even as her mind forgets why.

I bring her rosary. She counts each bead, worn by her own fingertips, one by one in a circle. I say the prayers aloud as she counts. My memory works—while I say the Our Father’s and the Glory Be’s and Mysteries—I think of other things. I think about the cruel beast that is forgetting. And how I could tell Grace anything now and she couldn’t deny it. I could tell her that she was sweet, but that she barely knew me, that I was the day nurse and another would be by in the evening. Or I could tell her that she was my mother, after all. That her insides weren’t abstracted, but that for nine months, they grew me, and that I came out looking like my father. I could tell her that we were never farmers, or that we were but we didn’t have to leave, and that she never worked as a cleaning maid and that we were never too poor to send me to college. I could tell her we weren’t going to lose this house and this crappy car like she hadn’t lost her ovaries and her bladder and her breasts. That we could travel, if we wanted, or buy ourselves something nice. I could tell her that I was going to medical school in the fall and that I had met a nice man and remind her that she had met one, too. And I could tell her that when she couldn’t remember, it wasn’t because she was sick and it wasn’t because the folds in her brain were shrinking or expanding or that the synapses were tangling, but that the world itself fluctuated sometimes and that it would be over soon, and she would remember it all just like I said.

When I am done with my words and Grace with her beads, she bows her head to confess. She knows I am no priest. She knows I cannot absolve her. But long before she lost her voice, she whispered anyway, so I couldn’t hear her. Grace and I linger there, suspended in the moment of her confession, and I use the quiet to offer my own. I don’t speak it aloud. I don’t want Grace to hear this. But I let the words part my lips to see

how they might feel there—*It would be easier to leave you, than to do all of this.* After I say it, I know it isn't true. When Grace raises her head, I offer the bread and wine and she takes it, crossing herself. She chews the bread slowly, wetting it to mush inside her mouth with the grape juice wine.

Later, I throw my hair up in a pony tail, then comb through Grace's. I put on my uniform, black pants, a black tuxedo shirt with the white clip-on bowtie and my name tag that reads: *Marcy. Welcome to Reel Deal Cinemas.*

I drive Grace across town to Four Winds. They have different staff on the weekends and I don't know them well. The weekend staff rotates out more quickly—queasy high school students or the occasional college nursing major with a too-busy schedule, or people who think they could handle the job, but find out they can't. This must be how they all work, I think, so that even homes around the area I visited back before I found Four Winds wouldn't know Grace, not on the weekends. They wouldn't remember me.

I help her get settled in front of the television where a few residents are watching old TV shows.

“Hi, Agnes, sweetheart,” I say and wave. “Bob.”

They look at me lazily. Grace stands up, agitated and tries to follow me out the door.

“I'll only be a few hours,” I say. “Picking up a short shift. I'll be back before you know it.”

One of the new nursing assistants helps me resettle Grace into a big recliner. She looks like a child inside it. I scan the room for the woman who was left in the parking lot on Friday morning, but can't find her anywhere. She must be already moved, already in some other place new people will tell her is home.

Back in my car, I light a cigarette and smoke it down. I let it cartwheel out my open window. I drive on Division, and pass the movie theatre. I keep going. I drive all the way to the edge of town where a small park is surrounded by bushy evergreens. I sit on the empty swing set, my ass squeezed between the metal chains and buoyed by the rubber swing. I light another cigarette.

I lost my second job at the movie theatre job four weeks ago to a girl named Jessica who was in the tenth grade. They were downsizing. They were sorry. I thought, who isn't? That first Saturday, I got ready and dropped Grace off like usual and was in the parking lot adjusting my bowtie before I remembered. The second Saturday, I had errands to run and I thought it a perfect excuse, a good time to get a few things done for the week. The third Saturday, I took myself to a coffee shop and slowly sipped a cup of cappuccino that cost \$4.95. It had a foamy design on the top. I closed my eyes and relaxed my shoulders and stayed there, sipping the same cold coffee for hours, all by myself. I watched the patrons, watched the dates and the singles, watched teachers grade papers and students write them. I watched a mother come in with her teenage daughters and buy them anything they wanted—extra large coffees and rice-krispy bars the size of my hand.

I snub my cigarette out on the sand, then put the butt back in my pocket. I kick my feet onto the ground and swing. I kick again, swing higher. I pump my legs, out then

back and out again until I'm high on the swing, the wind moving quickly over me, my vantage point climbing higher and higher. I close my eyes and fall back, still holding tight to the chains. I soar above the ground, and open my eyes to the sky above my face, in motion. I feel dizzy. I feel that I have been shaken loose, that I am moving now, in some, in any, direction. I feel weightless. I feel free.

When I was twenty-one years old, I left Grace. I didn't know where I was going and I didn't get far. I put twenty dollars of gas in her car and when ten dollars was gone, I turned back around. Grace didn't ask me why I ran away or why I came back, either. I was furious with her for not asking, for not expecting me or encouraging me to explain myself. I wanted so badly for her to accuse so that I could explode with every irritated thought I had been building and bottling for the last thirteen years, every mean thing I could think to say to her.

But Grace held her tongue and somehow, so did I. And I came to realize, slowly, over the course of that rough year when her back hurt too much to continue working and her memory started slipping enough for me to notice, that it wasn't Grace who I wanted to hurt. So I burned it up, that irritation, or I snuffed it out. I got a second job, then after another round of tests, and no more cancer, I got a second mortgage too.

The first thing Grace forgot was how to wear her bra. She had worn one religiously after the mastectomy, even as the small cups puffed out, and held nothing. She wore it to cover the scar that crossed her chest that looked like a train track. Grace snapped the clasps around her back each morning before lifting her cleaning rags and

sprays and solvents into the trunk of her car. Soon, she had no memory for the movements, how to link the two sides behind her, and she would struggle, confused, in the morning, before setting the bra aside. That one was easy to ignore.

The second thing Grace forgot was my mother. I asked her to retell the story my father told about when they first met—how my mother turned him down at small-town Fourth of July dance and the refusal lost him five dollars in a bet with his friend. I asked sometimes, even then, in my early twenties to hear Grace’s version of the story, because even though she heard it secondhand, and even though I knew it by heart, she told it different every time. Sometimes my mother wore a red dress. Sometimes it was black. Sometimes her eyes were soft and gray like mine. Sometimes they were done up in bright makeup like a movie star. I asked Grace to tell me while we waited at her oncologist’s office to hear more results.

*What do you mean, your mother?* she said. *What mother?* I let that hurt me. I let it punch me in the gut like I would never do now, not with anything she said, even if she said it. I didn’t know then that she said things, not intending to hurt, just trying to remember. *Where do you think I came from?* I said. *What, do you think, I’m yours?* Grace didn’t have an answer.

I stay on the swings until the sun has set, and it’s too cold to stay longer. Grace has nodded off with her head at an odd angle in the big recliner as the TV plays *The Lawrence Welk Show*. Lawrence and his guests dance and sing across the stage.

Grace looks just like Doris sleeping in that chair, except she still has her teeth. I think about her in the parking lot with a sign around her neck and a short, simple letter. I think about waiting nearby in the car, watching just to be sure someone finds her.

At home I help Grace ready for bed. We change her out of her clothes and into her nightgown. She is groggy, goes easily. I know she'll probably wake again in a few hours, but right now, she wants sleep and I don't argue. I want sleep myself. I help her under the covers, then tuck her in. I shut off the light, and lay on the bed next to her, hold her hand and pray.

Holy Mary. Mother of God. Pray for us sinners. Now. And at the hour of our death. Amen.

That night I have a dream, or maybe it's a memory or maybe something else all together. A thought cloudy with sleep and fluxing between awake and something other. It takes the shape of a question. I wonder: if Grace knew, if she were here as an observer in her favorite coveralls with her thick, brown, beautiful hair tumbling out of a trucker hat, instead of the observed, instead of the woman with thin hair in the recliner, would she tell me to go? Would she tell me to do what I had to do?

Grace could be so hard sometimes, and strong. When I was nine years old, she made me watch as she set her own finger after she broke it against a rotted door. She made me promise not to look away, but to learn and to listen. *Don't make me say it twice*, she said the first time I cringed and closed my eyes. She didn't have to.

Grace could be so soft sometimes, and kind. When I was nine years old, she hid with me under the covers during a thunderstorm that shook the old farmhouse and lit up the bedroom, even under the quilts, so that it played above us like a rainbow. *It's a gift*, she said. *A show God put on for us*. I didn't believe her, but I loved her there, in that moment for holding me, and shielding me from my fears and the sound of the thunder.

When I wake up, I don't prepare the bread or the fake wine. Instead, I pack a few of Grace's things while she's still asleep—her warmest sweater, her favorite socks, a picture from the dresser of her and her husband on their wedding day.

When Grace wakes, I hurry her together, comb her hair quickly. I beg her to eat some eggs and drink a bit of milk and she looks at me confusedly, like I've forgotten something. I can't help but stifle a laugh. Somewhere, she's remembering our Mass, just not quite remembering enough. There'll be no confession today, no rosary, no grape juice, no absolution.

I help Grace into the passenger seat of my car and put her suitcase in the backseat. We set out on the road, the sun shining down on us, hazy then bright, already warming the spirited fall day. The road is open. It welcomes us.

Beside me, Grace stares out the window as we leave the city and the fields open up on either side. She watches combines cut down crop. She watches as we speed by farmsteads. She watches tall stalks of corn and sunflowers sway lazily on wide acres. She puts her hand up to the window and follows along all these images, as if she could remember just how it would feel to touch them again.

We drive for hours.

I never read my mother's letter. Never read the thin transparent paper that sat on the dashboard for our whole trip. I used to regret that. That used to be my biggest regret. I had all the time, all the possibility, even though I was young and the curiosity wasn't deep because there was no question that she would return. No question that she would stay.

I was envious of her, for years, my mother. After I was angry, I was envious. She got to leave. She got to turn away from responsibility, a husband, a child, and leave without one more word on the matter. I imagined her, when I was young, and then again when I was too old for such fantasies, in some other faraway place, smoking long cigarettes and sipping slow coffee. I imagined her beautiful and carefree and always smiling and always laughing and always with a twinkle in her bright gray eyes.

I'm glad now that I never read it. It's an unopened question from the part of me that is past, just like she is. Just like the reasons why she came back and left again are unopened and the reasons my father did the same, and the reasons why Grace got cancer, and the reasons why she got it again. And the reasons why some people are rich and some people are poor and some people are free and some people are burdened. Or some people are healthy and some people are sick, or why some people remember and some people forget. None of these questions matter. None of them need opening.

I pull into a long gravel drive. I look at Grace and wonder whether she remembers the way the rocks feel underneath the car, the way they sound, pinging up against the bottom.

We pull past the farmhouse and I park the car. I keep my eyes on Grace. I open the backseat and retrieve her sweater, then help her out of the car and wrap it around her.

“We’re home,” I say.

I lead her past the house where she used to live, where she raised me those first five years. There’s a light on in the living room. I can see a shadow move in front of it. I walk Grace toward the barns. They look different, some even missing, but she doesn’t seem to notice. I keep watching her eyes for some kind of recognition.

“Remember here,” I say and point to the water pump. “We used to haul those buckets full of water two at a time for feeding in the barns? Remember? And you told me that one time, your cousin from Chicago backed into the pump because he couldn’t drive the loader and you didn’t have water from this well for a week? Do you remember, Grace?”

She reaches out to touch it. We keep walking.

“Remember here?” I say, “Where the nursery was? We’d come here first in the morning and feed the sick babies with bottles? We held them like footballs and they suckled down the formula?”

Grace smiles, but I know we’re not there yet.

“Remember their tails, so long and curly before we cut them?”

“Or over here?” I kick the dirt.

“This is where you piled them when they were too sick and the little ones died, like that one spring so many had pneumonia? Remember, here?”

Grace looks confused, but she keeps walking and touching things, old fences and the cracked paint on the buildings. This is good. This will help.

“Remember that,” I say, and point.

Grace follows my finger.

“That’s where you parked the dead truck, and the weeds grew tall and came through the engine and we always talked about starting a garden there, growing tomatoes where the radiator would have been?”

I can hear a voice far behind us, but don’t look back. I take Grace’s hand, and quicken.

“And the chute, do you remember the chute? Where we loaded pigs for sale and that one summer I was so sick of how it looked and I painted it bright yellow? And I painted all those flowers on it but all the flowers faded and there were only stems and it looked like I had painted weeds or prairie grass?”

“Do you remember here?” I say. “This is where I rode my bike and that’s where I fell off the one time and sprained my ankle.”

I am shouting now and almost crying and waving my hands in the air and waving Grace’s too.

“And you made me get on again and ride over that spot, shouting *You cannot stop me! I am victorious!* And my foot hurt so bad, pedaling, but I did feel it, I did feel unstoppable.”

I pull her along faster, away from the voice as it gets closer.

“Excuse me? Can I help you?”

“Remember this, Grace? Do you remember this? This is where the lightning struck, right there, when I was eleven. It burned the small barn down in a moment, before we could even see it up in flames from the house, and it was going to take the whole farm. Do you remember?”

I point, kick the ground.

“Do you remember, Grace?”

“And you wouldn’t let me get close. All I could do was run back and forth with the buckets, back and forth with three, then four, carrying as fast as I could. And it was still raining and thundering and there was lightning all around us. And you fought the fire by yourself, Grace. Do you remember that? And you won! You put it out. You saved us.”

The burned down barn wasn’t there anymore, just a patch of dirt between one new nursery and another. I get on my knees and try to uncover what I know has to be there somewhere, even if it was deep. The fire had scorched the ground, blackened it so that we saw it, changed, every day after. I dig fast in the dirt.

“Help me, Grace,” I say and tug her down so that she is kneeling and padding at the soil beside me.

“Who are you?” I hear. “Hey! Can you hear me? What are you doing here?”

“Remember, Grace. Please help me remember,” I say, tears spilling over my eyes, making a mess of my vision. I can’t breathe. I continue digging.

“Remember?”

Then again, close enough to touch me, “Hey? Who are you?”

I can’t face them, not yet. Through my blurry eyes, I can see Grace and we’re so close that we’re almost there. And then I scrape back another crust of dirt and I see it. Something twists in her face like recollection. A memory or a thought or a dream at the edge of her eyes, then dropping into them. She remembers. She remembers. She remembers. That’s all I need. I can stop now.

## INTERSTATE

We had been talking about David. It was a topic of conversation I couldn't escape the past few days, no matter how much I tried. We drove fast and north. The last of Fargo disappeared behind us, and the highway narrowed between wide green fields. We were off from a morning roll at Dakota Magic Casino south of Fargo, Carla fetching three-hundred dollars to take home with her. Me, leaving with an empty wallet and a stomach ache.

Around us, the country knotted up like a rope unraveling—the long, loose stretch of Interstate 29. The land lay flat, filleted to compete with the ever exposed sky. It made a constant horizon line. Late July was heavy with a heat that had Carla hiking her skirt up her thighs, and me sweating under the cold current of the air conditioner. She had been talking about David, and I had been chewing my cheek and listening.

She said, “He doesn't kiss like he used to. Something in his mouth has changed, like after braces, or oral surgery.”

I said, “I have a sour tooth.” I found it with my tongue.

“You better get that checked or it'll rot right out of your head. Believe me, I've seen it happen.”

Carla worked part-time as a secretary in an orthodontist's office. She restocked coffee tables with magazines and handed toothbrushes to patients as they left. I taught

graduate courses in cultural anthropology and Indigenous Studies. I was a year away from making tenure.

“David never had braces. He never needed them. But something’s different now, with the kissing.”

“Different?”

“More crowded.”

Outside, the wind picked up. Trees waved from section lines. I lived in Winnipeg, but the two of us were bound halfway, to Carla’s home in Grand Forks where she lived with her husband, David. It was my unfortunate secret—which I kept close, and for a long time even from myself—that in the last hard, lonely year, I had fallen in love with David.

Carla said, “It’s not just his mouth, either.

I thought about David’s mouth.

“He smells different too. Something about his body. Pheromones, right? Don’t those smell?”

“Are you pregnant?”

“You shut your mouth!” she said.

She made the sign of the cross, and we both laughed.

Carla and I grew up in Pembina, the small border town between her home and mine, where each local business had both an American and Canadian flag blowing tall in the sharp prairie wind. Carla was my half and younger sister, a date-stamped product of

our father, his second wife and the year 1981. Carla wore: candy-apple red nail polish, a manicured up-do and faded blue jean cut-offs or a short skirt that hugged her small excuse for hips. I wore my own mother's curves and inattention to material detail and flat-line of a mouth.

“He smells like oranges, kind of. Citrus fruit,” she said.

“New cologne?”

“New something.”

My father's third wife, Danielle, raised the both of us, as well as her own brood of bark-knuckled boys. My father favored their roughness and encouraged it, so that more often than not, as the boys grew older and found their muscles and their fists, Carla and I would have to join forces to fight off bruises and beatings. Even though we weren't close then. Even though we preferred to keep our distance.

Carla said, “He does this weird thing with his feet, too.”

“With his feet?”

“He rubs them together in bed like he's trying to make a fire or something.”

I laughed at her.

“It's not funny. He rubs them together and they're dry, and they make this dry and crackly sound, and it stirs up all this electricity. There are sparks. I'm afraid the bed's going to light on fire.”

“You're serious?”

“And not in a good way, either,” she said.

Carla stretched out, pulled her skirt northward, and opened her legs towards the air vent. The tires tugged against the blacktop. My palms were damp and I wiped one, then the other, on my lap, then readjusted them on the wheel. Above us, the clouds built, and blended, stacking smoky dark colors on top of brilliantly bright sky.

It was easy to love David. It wasn't easy to be *in love* with him. But David was easy to love. He was smart. He was kind, too—always remembering birthdays and haircuts and new shoes, and other things. I hated mushrooms. He didn't cook with them. I drank Diet Coke like it was water. He kept the fridge stocked. He was comfortable and he was complimentary, even to me, his sister in-law, someone he could have so easily overlooked, someone a lot of people did.

I don't know when exactly, but somewhere in the mid-week overnights and long weekends at their home this last year, I found myself thinking about David, and all his attention. Attention I had never received before, even if to others, it was simple or common, or nothing, really, at all. Before long, I had given into the crush, or the fantasy, or the infatuation. Before long, I pictured David's face in the dark of my bedroom at night, and it was David's fingers I imagined, doing the work when I made myself come.

Carla said, "I mean, don't get me wrong. I'd welcome change if it was something like David going to the gym more often, yeah. That'd be nice. But when he decides to start drinking protein shakes for breakfast and then tries to kiss me with wet powder chocolate breath, no. Hell no."

"Maybe he's having a mid-life crisis?" I offered.

"Mid-life? Hardly. He's not even your age."

I left home when Carla was thirteen. I didn't make it back to the Midwest, or the Great White North above it, until a couple years after David and she had married. Even then, I didn't see them much, or care to, except for holidays with the big family—our father always cutting the turkey or the ham, and passing out pie, his boys still running wild. Last year, when my mother got sicker, I travelled south often to see her, and Carla invited me to stay, so I stayed.

The horizon was changing fast. In the distance, long cracks of lightning lit up the deep blue dark. I turned on my headlights. They cut ahead of us through the beginning of the rain.

“I don't know. Maybe he's having an affair,” Carla said.

“David would never cheat on you.”

I said the words slowly to make sure they didn't curl up at the end like a question.

“Who knows a thing about what David would never do?” she said.

There were a few years, after her mother and before Danielle, when it was just the three of us. My father, Carla and I. During the week, the neighbor lady would watch us while he worked, but on the weekends, we had grand adventures. We drove into the woods, and searched for Indian burial grounds and ancient artifacts in the forests. We wore fronds and ivy in our hair like Native princesses, and my father carried us on his back, two at a time. He cooked us epic breakfasts with bacon, and fat pancakes, and butter, and real maple syrup, gooey and sticky on everything, and he didn't make us wash our hands afterward. This is the kind of man my father was—why his life was filled with women that loved him madly against their better judgment.

I said, “I can’t believe you won so much money today,” trying to move the conversation elsewhere.

“Just a little something,” Carla said, her attention on the sky as it darkened.

“Right, not too much,” I said.

We were down in Fargo on account of my mother’s death—Carla kind enough to see it through with me for the trip and the end of it all. My mother had exhausted herself slowly with cigarettes, and cheap whiskey, and little food, and eventually, unenthusiastic attempts at chemotherapy for a cancer that had eaten pretty much everything.

But even at the end, she asked about my father. Is he here? she said, and I knew there was no other *he*. There never had been. No, I said, resisting any small bit of generosity even though she couldn’t see, couldn’t know for sure who was in the room with her and me and all those machines. No, I said, and she turned over in her bed and stared blankly at the wall. Carla had been in the cafeteria, getting us four-dollar bagels with slimy cream cheese in squeezable tubes, and Diet Cokes, a little sustenance for the afternoon stretch. When she returned, she held my mother’s hand while I ate.

Hours later, when the monitors stopped beeping and her body was removed below a beige bed sheet, we made swift plans to gamble. My mother would have liked that kind of farewell. We hit the slots hard the next morning, Carla ticking her long red fingernails over and over on the “BET” button, with me beside her, sipping fountain soda between mouthfuls of salty popcorn, and taking my time.

There wasn't much traffic for a Friday evening. Nothing left coming south, and we passed most of the cars headed north. The wiper blades swished back and forth in front of us.

Carla said, "You can get lucky too, big sister."

I said, "Not lately."

She pinched her forehead in concern.

"Well, you know if you don't use it, you lose it."

I laughed.

"Is that a fact?"

"It's true. Take it seriously. I just read this thing about re-virginizing, re-virginization, or whatever. If you don't have sex for like five years, it grows back."

"Your flower?"

"Yes, your flower."

"Your pearl?"

"That's what David calls it."

We both burst out laughing.

I didn't date in high school, not like Carla. I went with two guys in college—both of them named Brian. Brian number two was my first time. I didn't like him but I was twenty-two by then, and didn't want my virginity hanging over me anymore like a neon sign of just how undesirable I was, so I offered it quickly after a night of too many beers. He wasn't much interested in me after that, and I guess that went both ways. I dated even

less after college. I let graduate school take all my energy, and then my doctorate took even more.

I went on one date in Winnipeg, this year. He was a friend of a coworker of mine and it was a blind date. He was nice enough, wore a button-down shirt, bought me three beers and himself one glass of wine, asked to see me again. But there was nothing there for me, nothing reminiscent of the feelings that were building for David. So I told him I wasn't ready to see anyone, which wasn't a lie, I guess. I was accustomed to a life alone—the portions of pasta for one person, the steady rhythm of a night by oneself, exactly how many beers I could drink and still drive myself home.

The wind moved strong against the car and I swerved back into my lane, barely avoiding the rumble strip. I was thankful not to catch it. I hated that sound. Carla pulled her eyes back from the windshield.

“If I was single,” she began, and I had heard this before. “If I was single, I'd get my boobs done.”

“Jesus.”

“If I was single, I'd get my boobs done, and while I was in recovery—I looked into it, it's about three full weeks—I'd eat an entire box of cherry nut ice cream in one sitting and watch soaps all morning, every day.”

“That sounds like something you'd do if you were unemployed,” I said.

“One and the same,” Carla said.

I was still sweating, so I turned up the air conditioner. I wore too many layers, all black, a testament not of grieving, but self-consciousness. Carla put her legs up on the dashboard and stretched her toes against the glass.

“If I was single,” she said, “I’d have sex with my landlord.”

“Slut!”

“I would. He’s not old. He’s just a little older than me and he’s damn good looking. Sometimes I call him up and tell him the toilet’s broken or the fire-alarm won’t quit beeping just to watch him fiddle with stuff when he comes over.”

The rain quickened. Fat drops streaked across the windshield at a perilous angle. I clicked the windshield wipers to the third notch. They gave a short delay before smearing the water, then flicking it away.

“You should meet him. You might hit it off.”

“Carla,” I said.

“What? You might like him. I don’t think he’s married.”

“Oh, well then. That’s a deal breaker,” I said.

“Come on. What’s the harm in looking?”

“I can look for men who live in my own city, thank you.”

“But you just said you don’t. And I’m jealous of you,” she said.

My gut tightened.

“You get to look all you want. You aren’t tied down to anything.”

“It’s not like that,” I said.

“I mean, I’m twenty-eight years old—”

“—Ha, you’re thirty,” I said, my jaw still tight.

“Bite your tongue. I’m *twenty-eight* until I say otherwise. I’ve been with David forever, for ten years! Forever! I don’t even remember what it was like to be single. The last time I was single, I had to let Danny Petrach see a boob so he would buy me six-pack of Budweiser.”

I laughed. “You liked it.”

“It wasn’t worth it.”

The rain dropped faster than the wipers could clean, so I clicked to the next notch. The blades sped, arching quickly across the glass. Even at the highest speed, they were too relaxed.

Carla said, “Eventually, I guess, you come to wonder if any of it is worth it. You think about what it’d be like to do something different.”

“Something different, like not being married?”

“Like not being married, like being alone or being with someone else or I don’t know, lots of things. A different life.”

“What about David?” I said.

“David’s a big boy,” she said.

The sky was black, now, but for the lightning. I looked at the green clock on the dash—it read 4:57 PM. I eased my foot from the gas.

“Nasty, looks like,” Carla said.

“It is,” I said.

She turned on the radio and hurried crackling voices came to, warning of what was ahead.

Carla said, “I mean, imagine what’s out there.”

“I don’t need to,” I said.

I kept my eyes forward as we entered a wall of rain. I gripped the wheel hard. Thunder cracked above us and lightning split open the sky. My stomach turned. The windshield clouded. I maxed out the air conditioner to combat the fogging windows. I could feel the cold sweat spread out far underneath my arms.

“You should pull over,” Carla said, sitting stiff in the passenger seat.

“Where?” I said. “There is nowhere.”

I lost track of our progress, but knew we passed the last exit with a gas station long ago. The only option for safe stopping was the underpasses, and the last three shielded small cars with their headlights shining out into the rain from their temporary shelter.

Rain clattered against the car. It surrounded, dense like a carwash—the water spinning in my vision. For a second, I thought about David. For a second, it was almost peaceful. But the panic crawled back inside my belly, and I remembered my foot was on the pedal, and my hands on the wheel. The rain blotted out the sound of the crackly radio.

Carla had gone quiet, too. I turned my eye quickly toward her and saw that she was sitting with her head down, her hands folded and her lips moving, as in prayer.

I almost laughed, but looked again and saw that she was serious.

She continued in a steady rhythm, a whisper, just barely audible.

“Lord, keep us safe. Keep us safe. Please Lord, keep us safe.”

Outside, I couldn't see past the hood of my car, and then another torrent of rain descended, and I couldn't see the hood either. There was no way to tell what was in front of me, or how close anything was behind. I fought with the wheel to keep it steady but couldn't see the lanes, couldn't see anything white or yellow, just dark, and between that, bright flashes of light.

I edged toward the rumble strip, the only thing that would tell me for sure we were still headed forward on the road. It hummed deafeningly loud inside the car, and I held the wheels there, letting the sound fill my head. I could still hear Carla next to me, the rhythmic drone of her offerings, her pleas for safety.

“Lord keep us safe, Keep us safe, Lord. Keep us safe.”

Then there was more rain, somehow, and more thunder and, in a moment, we were inside of it, the worst of the storm. For a second, I considered joining my sister, considered sending my voice out into the abyss with her. But I knew it wasn't God that would hear it. It was Carla. I pressed my tongue hard against my sour tooth and a bolt of white pain shot through the root and rattled around in my spine, and through my brain. I wouldn't join Carla. I wouldn't let her hear my worried words or know my fear. It was mine, if anything was. And she had everything else—David, and beauty, and a mother

who wasn't dead. I didn't want to give her this, too. I hadn't prayed for my mother as I saw her skin turning gray. I just held her hand and waited.

The repetition of Carla's prayer slammed back and forth, louder in my head than the thunder and the rumble strip, until I could no longer keep quiet.

"Shut the fuck up!" I screamed at my sister.

And Carla was quiet. And the storm didn't feel so powerful anymore, or so frightening. The rain poured down, but the tension knotted up inside my stomach lessened along with the thunder. Small bolts of light still ripped through clouds, but I could see the sky splitting up ahead, bringing blue far across the horizon line. I could see the outline of her city and feel the rain slow as we made our way closer.

I pulled off the interstate and down the wet exit ramp. The sounds had quieted, but neither of us said anything. Carla unclasped her hands and sat with her arms folded across her chest.

I pulled onto her deserted street, and decided that I wouldn't stay, even though I knew Carla would ask me to, even though I knew she would dissolve her hurt feelings and silence, and beg me to stay the night. I wouldn't stay. I would drive on. I would keep north through the rest of the rain, and wind, or whatever was left for me out on the road, alone, in the wild weather.

## THE DOWN

My mother is immersed in membrane when I find her. Eggs cover her body, some cracked and spilling their spoils, some whole, resting on her belly, her breasts. White flecks of eggshells gravel her skin and the runnings of yellow yolks have dried, look like the peelings of a summer burn. Her head is underneath this mess when I look over the side of the tub.

“Mom?”

She surfaces, wipes film back into her hair, the glossy middle of the egg from her cheek. She blinks.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

She looks at me as if it’s quite obvious, which I guess it is. She is taking a bath in chicken eggs, dozens and dozens of them.

“I heard it’s good for your skin,” she says.

“Um...for your hair, maybe. Egg *whites* are supposed to be good for your hair.”

“Hmm,” she says, inhales a big gulp of air, and sloshes down under the eggs, the water beneath them. She waves her hand up at me. Eggs spill over the sides of the tub and drop onto the bathroom floor, cracking open.

“Mom.”

She emerges again, acts surprised to see me still there. “What’s going on?”

Her eyes are not with me anymore. They close. Her body is small, curled, her hip against one side of the tub, her knees sticking just inches above the bath. Her short dark hair slicked back.

I give up, leave her. Go to the kitchen, following a trail of egg cartons, awkwardly stepping over the cardboard. I open the refrigerator. Find nothing. I imagine my mother in the grocery store, piling the shopping cart with dozens of eggs, stacking the cartons higher and higher. They barely fit in one cart. I imagine the clerk, the same-as-always old, blond clerk, as she rang up the purchases. \$1.79. \$1.79. \$1.79. \$1.79. I imagine my mother, eyes glazed, telling the woman she is making French toast for an entire elementary school, or planning to egg her ex-husband's new mobile home, or maybe just offering the same blurry excuse she gave me. *I heard it's good for your skin.*

I make myself a peanut butter sandwich. Listen for sounds from the bathroom. I could say all of this started when my dad left, but that would be giving him too much credit. And I remember baths before then, in the winter when the sun stayed behind gray clouds for days, and after my grandpa's funeral, and sometimes unexpectedly, in the middle of a perfectly normal week. But those were water baths. Just water, at first.

When my dad left, left and didn't call and didn't write and didn't come back, my mom stayed in the bathroom for two full days. My brother Ryan was a senior then and when he eventually coaxed her out, her fingers and feet were peach pits, every crease a

cavern. Ryan could always reach her in that place that no one could, always draw her out of the sickness, the funk, the beast, the whatever, the down.

Ryan went to college in Chicago that fall and my mother started to experiment with the water. First, it was merely temperature. Ice-cold to blistering, her skin red and blotchy for hours afterward. Then came the additions. Fizzy bath balls and all manner of bubbles, extra-strong exfoliates and scrubbing soaps. Some days I would come home from school and find her in the bath, sit at the hip of the tub and tell her about my day. Smells reminiscent of solvents and the stinging cleanliness of lemon and mint drew up from the water as I talked about classes and homework and the boy I liked, always the same boy. Books and magazines laid just outside the tub, slightly curled at their edges, and I would flip through them, sometimes reading her passages, pages. My mom didn't say much, just closed her eyes and listened and sometimes turned the knob with the arch of her foot to add more hot water.

This wasn't every day. Sometimes when I came home she would be in the kitchen, kneading bread or mixing iced tea or vacuuming or paying bills. Or there would be a note, a client she took last minute. A five-dollar bill for supper.

After a while, she got bored with the cleansers and began using her massage oils, the ones she drizzled on the shoulders and backs of clients before their sessions. Lavender and rose and patchouli and sandalwood and lilac and jojoba and, and, and. Sometimes she would stay in these baths all night. I would come home from school, watch TV, make myself dinner and put off my homework and, still, she was in the bath. The only sounds: the drain sucking water down and the faucet pouring new water into the tub. After the oils, it was whole flower petals. After the petals, milk.

A few months ago, my mother poured twenty gallons of two-percent into the bathtub. The milk must have been cold, even after sitting out at room temperature all morning, so she turned the heat up in the bathroom to sauna-like conditions and settled in. By the time I got home from school, the sourness had reached the front door, but not her tipping point. I walked in the bathroom and saw her forehead sweating beads into the milk bath, her eyes closed, asleep. I gagged and went to my room. I stuck my head out the window.

I get on the phone to my brother, put my dirty knife in the full sink. It takes him four rings to answer. When he does, I can hear people loud in the background.

“Something’s up,” I say.

Before I can get any kind of response, one of his friends grabs the phone. There’s a loud shuffle, a clunk.

“Ryan?”

“Is this Ryan’s *little sister*?” a tipsy voice asks.

“Put him back on,” I say with no patience.

“How old are you, little sister?”

I hear another shuffle, then my brother’s back on the line.

“Sorry, Jane. That’s Calvin. He’s an ASSHOLE.”

“Agreed.”

He laughs, too happy, too loud.

“Something’s not right with Mom,” I try again.

“Huh?”

“I came home today from school—

“Freshman year. Big time.”

“Yeah. Focus. So I came home today and Mom was in the bathtub, only the bathtub was full of eggs, tons of eggs on top of the water.”

I hear Calvin shout something at my brother and Ryan yell, “*FUCK OFF.*”

“She doing some sort of holistic cleansing thing or something?” he says.

“I don’t know what she’s doing, but I think you should call her.”

“I bet it’s some new thing she’s trying out for work.”

“I don’t think so. I mean, she was just lying in them when I got home, whole eggs, smashing them all up with her knees and elbows, holding her breath and dunking her head underneath like she was at the lake or something.”

“Aren’t eggs supposed to be good for your skin or something?” he says.

“For your hair. Egg *whites* are good for your hair. Like one of them.”

“I’m not worried.”

Big surprise, I think. Typical.

“What if she has Salmonella poisoning?” I say.

He lets out a puff of a laugh.

“Seriously, Janie? You get salmonella from raw chicken.”

“Where do you think eggs come from genius?”

“I’m sure she’s fine,” he says.

“She’s sick Ryan. You need to call her.”

“Don’t worry so much, little sister. I’ll give her a call,” he finally concedes.

“Soon,” I say.

“Soon,” he says.

I fall asleep on my biology book to the drone of reruns. Wake around ten-thirty. I go to the bathroom and find the makings of my mother’s bath still sitting in the tub. It looks even stranger without her in it. Like an enormous omelet gone awry, like a porcelain bird’s nest filled with broken babies. I go into my mother’s room. She’s asleep, half covered in blankets and lamp light. I can see the eggs still thick on her skin, caked in her hair. I wet a washcloth and take it to her face, her feet and arms and legs. She doesn’t stir. I re-wet, wash, re-wet, wash. Again. Again. Clean as much of it from her hair, her naked body, as I can manage. I push her to the other side of the bed, the one she never sleeps on, and return to the bathroom.

I know the egg shells and watery middles won’t go down the drain with the water so I scoop. Scoop the guts of it into an ice cream pail kept under the sink for scrubbing floors. I can’t imagine throwing it into the garbage bin to rot inside the oversized tin can

for days until pick up, so I pour it on the garden patch in the backyard, still wet from the sudden spring. When I finish, the garden looks like the inside of a garbage disposal. It is late and I am exhausted, but I want to shower in the morning without making scrambled eggs with my feet. It takes me until three AM to finish. I hit my bed hard, wrap my blankets tight around myself.

The next morning, my mother is still sleeping when I leave for school. First period is PhyEd and my arms ache, so I make up some excuse and sit on the bleachers with my biology homework. I watch Sunny and the other boys crack rubber balls with wiffle bats across the gymnasium. *Thwack. Thwack.* Sunny is a foot taller than me with wavy brown hair to his shoulders. He likes all the sports in PhyEd, even swimming, but isn't on any of the school teams. He's best at science, the worst at English. He has one older sister whose name is also Jane. I've been in love with him since the sixth grade when we rode the same bus to our elementary school. I'm not sure he knows I exist.

At lunch I sit with my best friends Sara and Meagan. It is BFL Day, or Breakfast-For-Lunch, and my stomach turns at the sight of cheesy eggs and sausage chunks on Sara's plate. I chew on a Snickers bar with zero interest. Meagan rattles on about the coming weekend, even though it's Tuesday, and we make plans for Friday night. A girl's night. They all are.

In English class, fourth period, Mr. Poole has us do this exercise where we close our eyes and meditate and write down whatever it is that first comes to our head. Stream

of consciousness. I think of Sunny just across the room, his hair, almost as long as mine, his straight-tooth-smile, the way my skin would burn up if he touched me. I think of shopping and how I hate it but need new shoes, and how Meagan loves it and has more money than I do. I think of my mother in a bathtub full of poultry product, of milk, of lavender. The sun stretches into the classroom through dilated blinds and it reminds me of when I was little and the sunlight arched through our bay window in the afternoons and illuminated a square blanket on the thick carpet. My mother would pick a quilt off her bed and wrap us both tight inside it until our skin felt compressed, hot, and we would sleep there, together—our eyelids on fire and faces flushed—until the shadows stole across the room and left us cold. The bell rings and I stop writing.

I walk home. My mother is in the kitchen stirring something in a large wooden bowl.

“I’m making cookies for you,” she says, and actually smiles.

“What kind?” I ask. I drop my backpack.

“Chocolate chip with oatmeal.”

The dishes from the sink have been washed, returned to their cupboards. I hear the whirl of the washing machine cycling a large load. I take a seat on a stool beneath the counter and watch her.

“You’re feeling better today.”

“Much,” she says, “I talked to Ryan this morning in between classes. Have you talked to him lately?”

The stirring is getting faster, faster.

“I think that’s good enough,” I say.

“He’s so busy. It sounds like this semester’s been a little rough on him.” She smears her finger up the side of the bowl and licks it. “I know it’s been tough on all of us.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes.

“I talked to Ryan last night, actually.”

“Yeah?”

She offers me the spoon, covered in a thick layer with cookie.

“I called to tell him about your little episode,” I mumble, licking the metal bend.

“What’s that?” she says and begins to dollop heaping tablespoons of dough onto a greased baking sheet.

“You, the bathtub, Eggs Benedict,” I say.

She puts the pan in the oven, doesn’t look up.

“The cookies will be ready soon. We could watch a little TV before you did your homework? If you have any?”

“Never mind. I’m tired,” I say, set the spoon on the counter.

“Just a couple more minutes,” she says.

“I’m tired,” I repeat, and go to my room.

Wednesday is normal—except for a weird look I get across the cafeteria from Sunny’s friend, Luke. He must have caught me looking at Sunny because when he turns towards me, his eyes go huge and he sticks his tongue out and waves it around like he’s trying to French kiss the air and then rehuddles with the boys. I am too mortified to check if Sunny is looking, but Meagan says he’s not, and they all get distracted when another boy drops his lunch tray on the way to his seat. Their whole table erupts in loud clatter of cheering and clapping. The boy’s face is brutally red.

Thursday I leave school early for a dentist’s appointment. My mom wants to make sure I don’t need braces and that, if I do, I get them while under my father’s insurance. “Make him pay,” she says. As if at any moment, he’ll take that away too. It’s around one when I get home and my appointment is at two. She’s not in the living room or kitchen when I come inside, set my bag down. I check her bedroom. Nope. I hesitate before opening the bathroom door. She’s there. Only this time, it’s not eggs in the bathtub with her. At first glance it doesn’t seem too much unlike water, settled just so around her body. Until I get closer and realize she is lying in a bathtub full of salt.

“Mom.”

Her eyes snap open.

“Are you seriously doing this again?” I ask.

“It’s good for your skin,” she says. “Exfoliates.”

“I have a dentist appointment in an hour, you know.”

She looks clueless.

“I told you about it on Tuesday.”

“I’m sorry, honey, I forgot all about it.”

“Obviously.”

“Salt is very inexpensive,” she says. “Surprisingly inexpensive.”

“Oh yeah, that’s the issue here. How expensive it is.”

“I thought it was interesting.”

“Well, I don’t. Are you going to get up? Are we even going to go? You’re the one who made the appointment. You’re the one who wanted to make sure to get in as soon as possible.”

She slowly shakes her head.

“Fine, that’s fine,” she says slowly, her speech drawn, and leans her head back.

“If we are going, you need to get up now.”

Still nothing.

“Get out of the tub,” I say, louder.

My mother opens her eyes and stares at me. She takes the sides of the tub with her hands. Salt spills. She stands and sways, her body woozy, her eyes unfocused. Salt tumbles off her skin like dust, out of her belly button, off her thighs, back into the tub, onto the floor.

“Look at yourself,” I don’t stop myself from saying. All of a sudden I want this to hurt. I want her to feel this. Cut her deep so the salt burns more in the wound of it.

“No wonder everyone leaves,” I say. “How can you blame them?”

She drives me to the dentist. Both of us silent. The salt still trickling down from her hair, underneath her clothes onto the driver’s seat, the console between us. The dentist digs in my gums with his metal hook tools and I clench my teeth, taste iron.

When we get back home, I go straight to my room, head under my covers, and fall asleep. I wake in the middle of the night, my bladder stinging. I can’t stomach the idea of using the bathroom, the floor full of salt, scratching and sticking to the bottom of my feet. Instead, I slip outside to the back yard and squat behind a thinning bush. There’s a mound of salt, brightened by the heavy moon, piled high on top of the eggs. This disposal heap, this compost-disaster grows taller and taller. The salt will leach into the soil and nothing will grow there, where the garden used to be.

I call Ryan, even though it’s late and two hours later in Chicago. He answers with a slurry *Hello*. I listen for loud music and people in the background but hear none.

“It’s Jane. We need to talk—are you sober enough to talk?”

“This about the old man?” He chuckles.

“What?”

“Super Dad’s visit to The Windy City.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Didn’t I tell you? He came into town, a quick overnight on his way to...somewhere. Even bought me dinner and ordered a couple drinks. Splurged a little, surprisingly.”

“He came there? To see you?”

“Just passing through.”

“But you saw him? He just came to town and you two had dinner and drinks, just like that?” I say.

“Relax, Janie. He asked about you, too, school and stuff.”

“And what did you tell him about me? Huh? Did you tell him I’m losing my fucking mind? Did you tell him that mom’s losing hers? Like he’d give a shit.”

“Why are you getting all worked up? What time is it, anyway?” The slur is gone from his voice, replaced with agitation.

I can’t think. I feel like at any moment all of the anger in my stomach will boil up and squeeze and squeeze until it collapses my chest and I won’t be able to breathe. I take short, quick breaths to prepare.

“Ryan, Mom broke her leg,” I say, the words spilling out before I have time to think them.

“What?”

“You have to come home immediately. She needs surgery.”

“What do you mean she broke her leg?”

“She slipped. Getting out of the bathtub after she filled it with salt,” I lie, close enough to the truth.

“Is she in a lot of pain?”

“Salt, Ryan. Listen, she’s not doing good. You’ve got to come help me. You’ve got to come help me take care of her,” I plead, my anger deflating, replaced with weary desperation.

“What can I do?”

“You can talk to her. You can make her feel better.”

“You can’t talk better a broken leg.”

“Who cares? I just need you to do something. I can’t keep on doing somethings and nothings over and over again here all by myself.”

“About the leg?”

“There is no leg. No broken leg, I mean. But it’s serious, big time sick serious. I have no idea what she’s going to do next, or any idea of what will help. Please come home and help. Please,” I beg.

He doesn’t say anything for a long time. I can hear him breathing on the line.

“Real nice, Janie. I can’t just *come home*. I’m in college, remember? I live in Chicago now, remember? Be a fucking big girl and deal with it,” he shouts. Then pauses again. “And you’re a bitch for lying about the leg.”

He hangs up. I call him back. He doesn’t answer. Again I call him. Again. Again.

I am exhausted Friday morning. In PhyEd, Sunny throws a basketball to me and I miss it, have to chase it half-way across the gym. His friends laugh at me. I can't focus. I'm thinking about my brother, and how he's a total asshole. And I'm thinking about my mother. My mother in a bathtub of rice noodles, a bathtub of olive oil, a bathtub of raw meat, of cow manure, of soft balls, or mayonnaise, or India ink, or vodka, or gasoline, or, or, or.

In biology, I fail the test. I know it. I get to the second page of the scantron and realize I have been marking everything since question six off by one number. I don't even care enough to go back and change it. By English, I'm a wreck. I need sleep. I'm thinking about raising my hand and pretending to go to the nurse and instead going to my locker and leaving early. I can't imagine even going shopping with the girls and am about to bail when Mr. Poole matches us up with a partner for the last few minutes of class, and my partner is Sunny.

He comes to sit in the desk next to me and I open the book. Try to locate the right page, but can't remember it.

"I heard you and Meagan are going to the mall after school today? That's what Luke said she told him." His eyes are like milk chocolate chips up close, and his hair has small strands of blonde with the brown.

"Yeah," I say, still scrambling with the pages.

“Me too. The boys and me, I mean,” he says and turns a few pages in my book, finds the right one, our fingers almost touching.

“I need new shoes.”

I immediately hate myself for saying this. Sunny looks down at my shoes.

“I like those ones,” he says. My cheeks ignite in a hot blush.

“Thanks.”

“I need some new shoes, too.” He flashes his busted black Converse at me.

“I like yours.”

“We might go to Brandon’s afterward. He’s got a pretty cool basement. He lives down there, has his own back door. Comes and goes, pretty much whenever. You should come over if you want? When you’re done shopping.”

“Sure,” I say, my knees quaking under my desk.

“So what’re we supposed to be doing right now?” Sunny asks, tucking a tuft of hair behind his ear.

I have no idea.

The bell rings. We both laugh and shuffle our things together.

“So, see you later?” he says.

“Definitely.”

He joins his friends and leaves the classroom. I hurry to Meagan’s locker to tell her everything.

I'm in a rush to get home and change before the girls pick me up in Sara's car. I have to stop myself from running the four blocks from the school to my front door. I burst in, toss my bag in the living room and b-line to my bedroom. My best shirt is at the top of the closet. It's purple, my favorite color, and shows off my boobs, even though they aren't as big as Meagan's. I am obsessing about a zit on my chin in the small mirror on my dresser when I notice my hair. I charge to the bathroom, thinking I'll have to rewash it quick, and dry and straighten.

I don't even see her right away, too consumed with locating the hairdryer. I hear her first.

"Janie, help me please."

I turn and see my mother in the bathtub. In the bathtub with what looks like thick black tar and smells like burnt maple syrup.

"Help me, please," she repeats and I see that her face is covered with it and a smear across her eyes glues them shut. It's molasses. Molasses. I am frozen, holding the hairdryer.

She opens her mouth to ask again and black ooze slips in, stops her tongue. I have no idea how she got it into the tub, how she got gallons and gallons into it. I have no idea how long she's been sitting, sinking into the black liquid.

She emits a small noise like the wanting of a yelp. And I am so close to turning away from her. So close. She may be my mother but she got herself into this—

somehow—and I am going to the mall. Going to the mall and going to see Sunny there and then over to Brandon’s to hang out. He invited me to hang out. And she has no idea. No idea what it means to me. I could leave right now, go with the girls. I could leave, maybe not come back. Maybe I’ll go find my asshole father. Or take a bus to Chicago and show up at Ryan’s dorm room door and take a beer out of his mini-fridge and drink the whole thing down and then he’d have to deal with all of this. I begin to leave, wrapped tight in this thought, when I see her try to pull her left arm from the tub. It barely moves. She is so weak within it.

I grab a towel from the rack, kneel by the tub, careful still to make sure not to get anything on my purple shirt. I begin to peel away the molasses from her face, slowly, her eyes, her mouth. I have to wet the towel three times to get enough removed before she can open her eyes, talk.

“I’m stuck,” is what she says.

“No shit.”

She tries to smile.

I strip my pants, my favorite shirt. I’ll wear it on Monday and think of some excuse to tell Sunny about the mall. Maybe I got sick or I decided I liked my shoes just fine, didn’t need new ones after all. I climb in the tub with my mother, one tentative foot at a time until I am straddling her. The molasses makes me sick, so unstable and sticky between my toes, oozing up my calves, my knees, between my fingers, as I reach in to lift my mother. The syrup is heavy and I pull up hard. Wrench against the back of her ribcage, yanking her small body out of the blackness.

I hold her up, the two of us statted there. Molasses sludges up my legs as my mother wraps her arms around me, tighter, tighter, the dark syrup running the slowest of rivers down my naked back. She holds me and I can't move and I remember: driving through the winding country roads with her when I was little, the windows wide and the cold spring air blowing in, dusting our hair, making it smell like the country. We drove for hours on old cracked highways listening to fuzzy country music. My mother's hair was longer then, and it blew behind her as we hummed along. The sun was high and enticed our eyes downward, toward sleep. I would blink, my eyelids ever-heavier and look at my mother doing the same thing. *Mom*, I'd say, not too loud at first and it would bring her out of it, back to the road. I watched her eyes like this, sometimes for hours, flutter open and closed against the brightness of the sky. Eventually, my eyes would sting hot, and I would take turns, calling out to my mother, shutting my eyes, calling out to my mother. *Mom*, I'd say. My lids like closed doors. *Mom*, I'd say. Again. Again.

## THE HARVEST QUEEN

It was early September, the air cooling from the burn of summer sun, when Priscilla Fischer, that bag of a woman, drove her car into a dry ditch, and after hours, and the inability to pry her bulk from the seat or call a car down the empty road, died behind the wheel from overcooking her heart, the meat of her settling into the driver's seat for as long as she would come to know of forever. Priscilla was our schoolteacher.

Her funeral was held at the Presbyterian Church, and Pastor Mark was kind enough to keep it short. The children stayed home for less than a week, running whirlwinds around their mothers' kitchens, and trampling trails through their fathers' lawns. Then, with the urgency only a farmer's wife can wield, the call went out—over the long electric lines and into the city—seeking a new teacher for the Haley Township School. Our school had just enough chairs to hold the behinds of the last generation of Haley. And it was our lone teacher's work to build these small minds until the age of fourteen, when they would drive off to the next county, in car loads of their inattentive friends, and either die around a sharp bend in the road or graduate from high school.

Besides our school, Haley has little. One street crosses one other. On the first sits a line of churches—the Presbyterian, the Episcopalian, the Catholic, and the Methodist—three of which have silenced their long-rung bells and locked their windows. Unless there is a funeral, Sunday service is held at the Presbyterian, the church with the strongest roof. As a concession to our dwindling congregations (and the accidental hanging death

of our priest, Father Ivan), when one of us passes from this life into some other, Pastor Mark does the dead respect, and lays that soul to rest in scripture under the roof of their own church. Every other Sunday and the days in between, each erected stand of rubble is inhabited only by squirrels, and mice, and the souls of the dead if they decide to stay awhile. Beyond the churches, an old bank lays barren and wishing repair of an antique window. The cross street leads past the burned down bar to the grain elevators, their cylindrical steeples reaching ever high. Train tracks like stitched wounds pass between the elevators and cut on through the flat land.

It was early September and harvest had begun. Semi-trucks of wheat—sprung from fields all over the county—dumped their spoils, and trains long as winter nights took them away, whips of dust trailing behind them as they rolled.

Shortly after our call was made, it was answered, and Rabina drove to the city to collect our new teacher. Rabina, known for her sound disposition and rigid self-composure, took to her just blushing at first. Only after settling the woman and her meager belongings into the upstairs apartment where she was to board, and inviting her down for a late dinner of beef stew and biscuits, did Rabina lose her poise and give in to the gossip she so stoutly despised to telephone her sister and tell her everything she knew about the beautiful stranger.

Word travelled how word does in small towns. Soon, we all knew her name was Gloria. That she was young—how young we didn't know—and quiet, and something about her made Rabina, a woman who refused a handkerchief at her own lover's funeral, talk so quickly she had to stop to catch her breath.

On Monday, the children returned from school and barely ate dinner, every vegetable and forkful of hotdish pushed away, even dessert abandoned for words in their hurried mouths.

*We love her, they said.*

*What did you learn today? we said.*

*We learned Miss Gloria's hair is the color of snowflakes or rabbit fur or fresh milk.*

*No, lightning strikes, said Mary.*

*No, the moon in all its fullness against the blackest sky, said Maryann.*

*What did you learn in math? we said, a subject they suffered through.*

*Miss Gloria has over two thousand hairs on her arm, said Henry.*

*Miss Gloria has two beautiful eyes and two beautiful ears and two beautiful lips and two beautiful legs and two beautiful—*

*—Tell us about science class, we said.*

Han thought for a moment. *You see, the chemistry of love is a complex thing. It first begins with pheromones, with smell.*

*Miss Gloria smells like apricots and prairie plums, said Lonnie.*

*No, like honey and fresh water.*

Our resolve wilting, we said, *And in English class? Did you learn anything in English class?*

Rory smiled and held his fork in mid-air, signaling a pause. *When she reads to us, her voice sounds like harpsichords and heaven-made music.*

*It sounds like lullabies,* said little Johnny.

*It sounds like the sounds dreams make in your head when you're sleeping.*

Annie took a dreamy drink of water. *It sounds like the quiet whistle of prairie grass in the springtime when you lay naked on the soft earth, the flowers stirring above you, and the sun white hot on your skin, and in the distance you can hear the train's steady rocking rhythm and the whole world feels for the first time electrified and alive in that moment, and moving in every atom and in every direction and in every cell of your bare body. It sounds like that.*

The children nodded their heads and cleaned their plates and floated off to bed. We stayed up late and frowned at one another.

After two days of this mysterious spell, afraid it would break but also afraid it wouldn't—curious to know the cause, and mildly concerned for the educational wherewithal of the children—the rest of us set out to be introduced. A meeting was called at the Methodist, the church with the largest hall, to meet this infamous Miss Gloria. The whole town showed, even those without children. Hamil Grates, the hermit, even left from his hole and joined us, sipping iced tea and leeching lemon bars. We arrived early and she was late. The rest of us grew agitated in our anticipation, checking and rechecking the door.

Our anxiety dissolved when Gloria descended the stairs to join us. Our world was magnified, altered forever. Those of us sitting, stood. Those of us standing, moved

instantly toward her. Rabina, in her late night phone calls, had done her no justice. She was everything the children said and more. She was pale as the moment before fainting, her blond hair like the white-star of a welding flame. She was walking magic—pink lipped and vibrating light. She quickened something in each of us that blushed our cheeks and dried out our mouths. We hurried to hear her speak her name to us. Gloria—the name, a round thing that forced the tip of our tongues to the back of our teeth before releasing wide, like a mouth parted in prayer. Gloria. We rushed to extend our hands to her like a gift we hoped she would accept.

Gloria made her way around the room, her hand delicate as any flower. And most of us lingered there, her hand in ours, happy to be attached to her in some way. We begged her to drink coffee, to try desserts we cursed ourselves for not making better, and she thanked us, graciously nibbling on some of everything.

By the time the evening was through—the rest of us willing to stay all night, but the mistress of our attention tiring—Gloria had received the first of her proposals. Delmar, the soft and impatient fool he was, wouldn't let go. He asked for her hand in marriage while he still held it. And Gloria laughed, a laugh that sent electricity down the cables of our spines, and heat into the most private parts of our anatomy. A laugh we wished would linger, a steady vibration against the drums inside our ears. But she pulled her hand away and thanked us all and declined everyone but Rabina from walking her home.

We stumbled home and laid awake, bodies buzzing, minds replaying each moment in the hall, each possibility of a life with Gloria in it.

Delmar turned up the lights on his combine and mowed down his ready field, writing a relief of Gloria's name like a crop circle in his spring wheat. Betty hesitated, too, as she stretched the blankets above her. She looked across the long bed at her husband, and for the first time in their forty-four year marriage, imagined sharing that space with one extra person. Even Pastor Mark was moved. Gathering a group of the children together, he unlocked all four churches and timed them to pull the long ropes one, then the other, until a loud chime jangled throughout the town for everyone to hear. The bells rang loud and long into the night as if to thank God for what he delivered to us.

In the weeks to follow, there was a pulse in Haley like we had never known, a current that perhaps even those the longest dead did not remember. We ransacked packed closets, shook out discarded suits and skirts. Found ties and scarves and pantyhose. We cut and shaved and waxed and styled our hair. We fogged our living rooms and bathrooms with sprays of old perfume and cologne in hopes of finding the most alluring scent. We washed laundry, and ironed and mended too. We raked our yards. We trimmed hedges and burned barrels of cut branches, and mowed long lawns. We painted on lipstick and dabbed on aftershave. We made up our faces and then our beds. We groomed. We preened. We scoured.

In the mornings, those of us with children walked them to school and lingered, only returning when Gloria's kind words sent us home. We joined her after classes—the children crowding around like ducklings, not one of them running on ahead. We took turns bringing gifts to Rabina's home (fall flowers plucked from gardens, rich chocolate desserts, embroidered handkerchiefs, and rings,) and asked to call on Gloria on Friday

and Saturday nights, along with every other. She was generous with her time at first—answering or shyly deflecting our questions, softly asking her own in return.

By the end of September, Gloria received eleven marriage proposals. And three more from Delmar who returned from the city one afternoon with her name inked across his hairy chest, under which pumped his idiot heart. One of the proposals was from George Hill—who called upon her through an open window, surrounded in the dark by candles that spelled out his question. His brother Davis used the last scraps of his inheritance to fill Haley with the music from ten orchestras from the city, playing day and night the *Cannon in D*. Pastor Mark asked her during his Sunday sermon. Billy dressed up like his son Rory and took her hand during science class, asking for elopement while his wife Barb waited for them outside in the honeymoon getaway car. Rose proclaimed herself on hunger strike until Gloria answered—wasting her body away in the center of town so that we could all see her love and her anguish and the bones of her chest.

To all, she declined. But there was, however, one person with whom Gloria chose to spend her time. For some unrecognizable reason, she developed a fondness for, and quick friendship with, Hamil, the hermit. Hamil had closed his front door to the world after his wife and young daughter were found at the bottom of a stock-pond in early spring some ten years prior, and we were, for the most part, happy for it. He withered away on his own and the rest of us didn't have to watch. But somehow, it was Hamil, the old troll, who won Gloria's affection.

Betty passed word that she had seen Hamil with his cane and Gloria, slowly along, walking the train tracks early one morning. Barb concurred. Out her window one afternoon, she saw the two in the hermit's neglected backyard in conversation over

coffee. Word spread like infection, that Gloria herself had said she *treasured* the old man. As if he were some kind of companion. As if he were some kind of prize to win.

Soon, Hamil would join Gloria after school for a stroll and she would all but ignore the rest of us with our white teeth and our combed hair and our perfumed collarbones. He didn't bother to shave his foul beard, nor comb his wild hair. He invited her to his unkempt home, and dined at Rabina's more and more each week, picking at his teeth at the end of every meal. The current that sparked like a live wire through the cross streets of our small town was dimming, glowing ever fainter, and we, all decorated in our new desire, could feel it ebb.

The dead, too, must have felt it and grown greedy. For, on a chill night in early October, Hamil fell down a steep staircase in his own home and died there, at the bottom, his neck crooked as his useless cane waiting at the top.

Hamil's funeral was held at the Catholic, the church with the longest aisle, and Gloria cried the entire length of it as Rabina walked her down. Pastor Mark extended the ceremonies, offering her time to say goodbye and allowing us to bear witness. Hamil was buried next to his wife and, like the rest of our dead, in the cemetery that grows ever wide on a green hill overlooking town. We tried to offer comfort, first with our shoulders and hands, and then with fistfuls of dirt over the coffin for closure. But Gloria was rigid, cold. She rejected our hands. She didn't accept shoulders. She turned her wet eyes away from our gesture with the earth. Gloria walked home alone, and we trailed behind her, broken and consumed by our loss.

Not two days later, Gloria tried to leave Haley. She convinced Rabina to drive her back to the city, and the dumb woman could find no way to refuse her. Before they

got far, Rabina's car proved unreliable and when she pulled onto the stretch of blacktop that ran away from town, the engine lolled, then hummed, then failed altogether. It was fortunate that in his dimness, Delmar was on an afternoon drive to nowhere in particular and happened upon them. He was able to bring them safely home.

That night, the wind rose and the trees shook and the weather rumbled in the clouds and sent down lightning the color of Gloria's hair, and sent down rain, too. The storm took the phone lines out, and they weren't swiftly repaired. Two days later, Gloria was discovered tired and tangled in a high barbed-wire fence on the Hill's forested land, a bag of her clothing already thrown over, free on the other side.

Gloria withdrew. She began to wear heavier clothes, scarves around her head and neck, and hats, bracing herself for a cold that had not yet come. She cancelled afternoon classes, then days of school. She stopped attending Sunday service. It wasn't long before Rabina refused to open her door, refused to take any more dishes of squash soup and our homeopathic remedies, or return empty crock-pots.

By mid-October, we hardly saw our Gloria. Our kitchens were dusty and yards cluttered with leaves left unattended from the storm. Rabina, too, stopped going out. She stopped her late night phone calls. She became selfish, conspiratorial. She had been overheard saying that Gloria lived with her on the main level of the house, suggesting even, that Gloria reminded her of her long dead love, the way he walked, the way he brushed his hair. The old woman was not to be trusted. There was no way to know what she was saying about us. No way to know if she was filling Gloria's fragile head with lies and turning her against us all, the level-headed and in love.

We called an emergency meeting at the Episcopalian, the church with the tallest tower, and looked down upon Gloria's open window. This was our first glimpse of her in days—our beauty lying face down onto her pillow. We jostled each other for a longer look.

*I miss her*, Jim said, and his wife, Dotty, agreed.

*She could be ill*, Billy said.

*We wouldn't know*.

Davis nervously smoked the tobacco in his pipe.

*That witch is keeping her locked away*, said Rose, skeletal, almost rabid in the dim light.

*Let's break the damn door down!* yelled Delmar.

*Shhh, you dunce*, said Betty. *Now listen here, I know just what we can do*.

Betty came up with the plan. We would throw a party, a harvest party, in Gloria's honor so she would have to attend. There she would see that we meant her no harm, that we loved her only. That we wanted her to be happy here, with all of us.

For a week we prepared with the singular vision of greatness: to create the most beautiful evening Haley had ever seen. Farmers came in from their fields, halted harvest—their wheat still tall, and susceptible to the first frost. The men built an elaborate bandstand and cleaned up the town—fixing the bank's broken window, painting the church walls and repairing their roofs, tearing down the rest of the bar and taking away its debris. Their wives enlisted older children in baking—sweet breads and honeyed muffins and caramel rolls with buttered pecans. The children had a special job,

too, trying each day they were with her at school, and each day they were not, to convince Gloria to come out of her nest to attend.

The day arrived and our insides were tight like balled fists. Each one of us spent hours in front of the mirror, fixing our clothing and hair, and practicing all we would offer if Gloria would listen.

The party began at dusk. Pumpkins orange as traffic cones lined the street, their bellies hollowed and carrying fire. Cornstalks and strings of woven leaves stood tall against street lights and mailboxes. Cornucopias overflowing with garden goods sat atop hay bales. In the center of town, where the two streets met, a long table held pots of beans, and dishes overflowing with stews and creamy soups, boiling sauces and generous heaps of meat. All the yeast breads and sweet breads and baked treats joined the table. On one end, a wash bin of apples bobbed in spirited water, next to boiled sugar candies and apples covered in caramel and drizzled with chocolate, for the children. On the other end of the table, for the adults, bowls of cinnamon spiked cider and jugs of pumpkin pie red eye waited for thirsty cups.

A few of the men gathered dried wood and built a bonfire on the street, but waited to light it. Pastor Mark and the Hill Brothers practiced making noise on their music machines, filling the air with honks and strums and a caucus of unattached beats, but hesitated to begin a song. Everyone slowed themselves—took drinks but didn't touch the food. Not yet. Gloria was missing and we, all of us, waited. Time slowed, then quickened, then crawled again. People grew anxious and sipped more cider. Little Johnny kicked over one of the corn stalks, and no one stopped him when he kicked another.

Finally, someone whispered, *She's here*, and we inhaled—all the air of our little town a swift intake of breath. When we saw her, our heads were dizzy without oxygen or consequence. She was wearing a winter coat and long dark pants, but she looked adorned in a gown of fading horizon light, all pink and orange and blue, wrapping its way around her softly. Rabina walked beside her, and her eyes were quick darts on everyone she passed, as if at any moment she would strike and swallow up one of the children. Gloria nodded as she passed, and we exhaled.

The children ran to her and circled all around, telling her of the feast we had made. The band began to play and some of us danced, looking toward Gloria to see if she was watching. The children helped her make a plate, rushed to serve her bread pudding and pork roast and sweet potatoes with burnt marshmallows. She sat with them and we gave her space. Billy brought her a drink but didn't linger. It was important, Betty made sure we all knew, not to burden her with our love and our eagerness, but to allow her to come back slowly into our waiting, open arms.

We served ourselves and ate and drank and laughed, the first time in a long time the constriction of our insides relaxed to make room for laughter. The food was delicious, the best we'd ever done at potlucks or funerals or celebrations of any kind, and the drink intoxicating, wet down our thirsty throats. For hours we ate and danced and warmed our hands around the fire and the children joined us. It was the happiest Haley had ever been—from the beginning of its history to the little left it had—and the dead must have felt it, too, for they spirited the wind, which made all our clothes dance, and made the fire wide and tall. The men played their songs, drunk as they were jubilant, and Gloria got up from her chair to join the children. She held the hands of the littlest ones

and we all watched her, her hair like flames, her eyes bright, and then a smile on the soft sculpture of her face.

We thought: this was the perfect time, if any. Barb and Betty, with all of us behind, brought forward the harvest crown they had woven from leaves and twigs and flowers and every grain of their artistic faculty. We presented it to Gloria in the center of the circle just as the music stopped.

*Will you be our Harvest Queen?* Barb said, pushing the crown into Gloria's unexpected hands.

She held it awkwardly, and looked at us. She looked at the band, who were quietly watching, and then at the children, whose eyes were upon her face.

Gloria placed the harvest crown on the top of Lonnie's head. It was too big.

*It's for you, Miss Gloria,* she said and took it off. *They made it just for you.*

*I can't,* said Gloria.

*Please wear it,* Delmar said, pushing from the back of our hoard toward her.

*Please wear it,* echoed Jim and Dotty, too.

*Please wear it,* we all said together.

*No,* said Gloria. Then again, she said it louder. She unwrapped herself from the children and began to back away.

*You don't understand,* said Betty. *We made it just for you to wear.*

*No,* she said.

*I won't wear it,* she said.

Gloria continued backing away. She backed past the pots and stews, the breads and the bobbing apples. She backed up more quickly now, past the place where the bar had been. She kept going. We followed her, imploring in all our goodwill and affection that she could be our only queen. She quickened past the first of the grain elevators, and didn't slow. Soon she was running without looking back and we were fast after her.

*Gloria!* we called.

*Come back!* we shouted.

*We love you!* we screamed. *Don't you see how much love we have?*

Gloria was far ahead when we saw it. In the distance, the train rolled toward our elevators for its overnight rest and early morning haul. We were behind her, the quickest of us, that dumb beast Delmar. We were running as fast as we could to catch her, to stop her and make her understand, make her our queen, the queen of our hearts and all the parts of our bodies, and the queen of our dying prairie grass town that only she could reignite, only she could take from the hands of the dead and bring back to life.

The train blew its whistle, splitting open the night with its music, and our hearts were pounding the same thump thump thump rhythm as wheels on the tracks, and everything in the whole world was in motion, only beautiful and slow.

Gloria looked back once more, and Delmar reached out his clumsy hand to grab her, but missed. She ran up the tracks and then with a moment's pause, turned toward the train, her legs so fast it looked like she was flying. The train again, blew its loud, long horn, and then hit her. It hit her. And all we saw was everything, and all we heard was deafening.

Those of us far ahead, collapsed—our knees split open on the sharp rocks. Those of us behind, turned to shield the children. We cried, and carried them away in the dark night towards the light of the fire.

*What happened?* said Mary.

*What's going on?* said Henry.

*Let me go,* said Johnny, kicking at his father's chest.

There were those of us who lingered. Rabina climbed the tracks and laid down, screaming at the dead to take her, too, but the train was stopped and would be until someone could clean up the mess, and all Rabina did was get dirty. Delmar sobbed, big, huge stupid cries that echoed off everything in the motionless night. Pastor Mark bent his head and slowly began to pray. He spoke the words as if he were saying them in that steady rhythm for the very first time.

Besides Rabina, there were others who thought to leave the earth that night along with Gloria. Davis stood in his living room with the barrel of his gun next to his temple for one hour, smoking his pipe and trying to make up his mind. His brother George tempted fate by trying to slice open the wrist of his left hand, but slipping, he cut an orange instead. He sat at his kitchen table and ate it, piece by piece.

By morning, that current that ran wild through our town had faded. It was dimmer than when Gloria had chosen Hamil as her companion, dimmer than when she locked herself up in Rabina's home. It was barely there, registering only slightly in our heads and on our skin like the small electric shock from the tip of a finger. Even that first day, we reminisced in small groups, trying to recollect her.

*Her hair was the color of straw, right?* asked Barb as she flipped through a beauty magazine.

*I think you're right,* said Betty.

*Maybe we could take turns teaching at the school?* said Dotty. *I'm good with numbers.*

Delmar was the only one who couldn't let her go, his small brain incapable of evolution. In the following week, he took beautiful hat boxes that had been his mother's, and fought off the birds for what was left of Gloria. He stacked them tall and convinced Pastor Mark to speak over her. Because Gloria had no religion that any of us knew, and because the boxes were beginning to smell, we held her funeral in the cemetery. Pastor Mark was kind enough to keep it short. When it was time, we covered the boxes with dirt and wiped our hands clean on our jeans and t-shirts.

Delmar was kneeling near her grave and couldn't bring himself to offer the handful of earth he held. He wiped snot from his nose on the sleeve of his finest shirt.

*But she was magic,* he said.

*She was made of electricity, and love,* he sobbed.

Rabina laid her hand on his shoulder in a small, kind gesture.

*There, there,* she said.

*There, there,* we said and soothed him too, one by one.

Then we turned, and walked together down the hill to our small town, the children running on ahead through the wildflowers.