

COMEDOWN

by

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## DEDICATION

To my parents, Paul and Debbie, who didn't always understand what it was I was doing out here, but supported me anyway.

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And to Melissa—I still don't know where you came from.

## ABSTRACT

These stories examine the private spaces we keep within ourselves, and the people we claim to know best. The characters are not connected by place or time, but rather their struggles to learn the same lesson: the body is bound to fail us. “Comedown” explores love and loss beyond what is expected and each story ends with the discovery that these emotions are not always visceral.

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## JAR OF FLIES

I knew there was a problem before I got the phone call. I hadn't heard from Gram in two days and she was due for a gallon of milk or a loaf of bread or coffee, according to my list. *Your grandmother is in a holding cell at town hall*, a voice on the other end of the phone tells me. *No, she isn't in trouble and yes, she is doing just fine.*

The clerk at Shopper's Choice had called the police on my grandmother because she was worried. The store is kitty-corner from my grandmother's house, and she had been coming for eight days straight at the same exact time to buy the same exact things. A seventy-something woman with a tall, fiery-red perm, always alone, purchasing two bars of soap, duct tape, a dishrag, and black licorice day after day can be alarming, depending on the situation. In a small town, this is reason enough to call the police.

In between projects at work, I duck out early to head into town. It's raining out and I'm not the only one trying to get out of the city a little early on a Friday. Bumper to bumper traffic swallows the 190 and the chorus of car horns vibrates my grip on the steering wheel. I come to a complete stop along the waterfront, right where the Niagara River sucks momentum from Lake Erie for its journey north, and watch a lady and her Weimaraner jog along the sidewalk, despite the rain and cool licks of wind coming off the lake. On days with heavy clouds and not a hint of sky, I



find myself imagining the lake is really an ocean and whatever land waits on the other side, I know nothing about.

When the traffic starts to breathe again, I call my girlfriend Lorrie and leave a message explaining the Gram situation. I tell her not to expect me for dinner. She'll be happy I didn't ask her to join us.

I eventually make my way from interstate to exit and back onto the roads of our town. Though it doesn't feel small when you're in it, West Seneca really only exists between the intersections of a few main roads. I've never minded the constriction much, which is probably why I've stayed.

Once inside town hall, I give my credentials to a lady at the front desk and a beefy officer escorts me down to the holding center.

"Jesus, did you guys put her in handcuffs too?" I ask when I see Gram on a bench in an empty cell. Behind the bars, my grandmother's seventy-eight years are starting to show. Gravity tugs at the skin underneath her eyes and her folded hands in her lap are tainted purple between her wrinkles and veins.

"No, sir, we only brought her here because she refused an ambulance. She looked real pale at the store and we wanted to make sure she was all right."

He adjusts his belt and holster—out of habit or instinct, I'm not sure. I step back.

"She got real excited to ride in the patrol car and said she'd rather wait for you here. We just had to hold her in the cell because she kept asking so many questions."

"Are you even allowed to do that?" I ask. I'm suddenly conscious of my own question-asking.

He leads me around to a desk where another officer sits prepping Gram's discharge papers. I ask if they are planning on charging her with something, and he assures me they aren't doing anything official, just strongly suggesting that I take her to get evaluated by a professional. He puts air quotes around the word *evaluated*.

I take Gram to our favorite drive-thru Chinese place before dropping her at home, hoping the activity will stimulate her memory. She sits in my passenger seat with no seatbelt, rubbing her temples.

"No, Gene, I've got nothing going on upstairs. I must have just really needed those things."

"You needed sixteen bars of soap? Are you planning on another project that you'd like to tell me about?"

She says nothing and keeps her eyes out her side of the windshield. I pause for a moment before my next question.

"Look, do I really need to take you to see someone? I think we both know how you get when you feel lonely."

"For heaven's sake, Eugene, I'm not lonely. It was just a joke!"

I order a number five and a number nine into the box outside my car window, but Gram says she isn't hungry and would rather share mine. I ignore her request. She'll change her mind when we get back to her place and eat most of my dinner.

You can love Gram, so long as you don't trust her. Slick jokes and slyness run in her blood and obviously skipped a generation. During one of my visits a little more

than a month ago, Gram called me into her bathroom to show me her newest project. She had taken a hammer to the granite tiles in one half of her bathroom and collected them in a yellow beach pail.

“There was a program on the PBS,” she’d explained while shaking the bucket to show me all the pieces, “it was all about mosaics and I decided that I should do something like that. I was always good at those card-table puzzles, remember?”

“Funny, Gram. You could have just told me you wanted new tiles before making such a mess.”

She smiled a crooked smile and her teeth looked like children’s teeth between her lips. Soon after Gramps passed, I’d become the man of choice for all things handy. I took Gram to Home Depot the following Friday to pick out new tiles and installed them myself that weekend. I had to agree that the new floor made the outdated bathroom fixtures less pronounced.

We eat our Chinese food to the five o’clock news, listening to stories of vandalism and early puberty. Gram finishes her meal before I’m done with mine and snaps her disposable chopsticks in half.

“Your mother called the other night. Says she’s really into this Chuck she’s been seeing. What’d you think of him?”

My mother moved to Detroit when I was five for a job promotion. Gram convinced her not to take me, worried that my mother wouldn’t be able to handle a legitimate job and being a single parent. They both assumed it would be a short-term thing, just until my mother got her feet planted. That was more than twenty years ago. To everyone’s surprise, my mother moved up the ranks in her company, which

prevented her from moving back home. When I was old enough to make a decision of my own, I stayed with Gram and Gramps, preferring to keep my mother and her wine-stained tongue distant relatives.

“I’m not sure. We spent most of our three days together at his kids’ soccer games. Him and mom did so much time screaming on the sidelines that you’d think they were the coaches. I think that’s how sports are these days.”

“I think he sounds like a dumb ass. How can you be fifty-five and have children under the age of ten?” Gram takes the already snapped portions of her chopsticks and snaps them into even smaller pieces. “It’s just irresponsible.”

Gram always puts up a stink over any guy my mother starts seeing, and she does it in my defense. She is almost certain it upsets me that my mother tries to build these lives with other men, and often other children, without thinking to include me. I have to remind Gram that it was my decision to stay here and I’ve never regretted it.

From my spot at the table, I can see seven rolls of duct tape stacked up on the counter. It bothers me that I didn’t notice them two days ago. I start to wonder if there’s anything else I’m missing.

I get home and Lorrie isn’t there. If I eat at Gram’s and we haven’t planned for it, Lorrie takes the opportunity to go straight from work to happy hour with the girls. It is Friday, after all, and this is typically what happens.

Lorrie misinterprets Gram’s eccentric behavior as signs of old age. Ever since Gram stopped driving, Lorrie has been an advocate for putting her in a home for the

elderly. I wanted to move her in with us, so we compromised with our current situation: me checking in on Gram every other day.

There's twenty minutes before the hockey game starts, so I take Lucy and Jude for a quick walk around the block, forgetting to grab poop bags. And of course, Jude decides to take a huge dump on the Walsh's lawn on the busiest street in our neighborhood. It's really hard to pretend that you don't notice your 120-pound Bernese Mountain Dog stopping and squatting, no matter how hard you tug at his leash. I feel bad for scolding Jude for just doing his business, so when we get home I give them each a knucklebone. Lorrie will be pissed I'm letting them eat the special treats on the couch.

I change into sweats and turn on the game. It's the first period and Buffalo is already down 2-0 and I'm glad I picked up a case of beer yesterday. At the fridge, I ignore the growing number of engagement ring clippings that hang from the magnets—I'm glad to have a night alone. Four years means different things in Lorrie's book and mine. She knows I have too much on my plate with Gram, but that doesn't stop her from making me feel bad about it. My phone vibrates in my pocket and I read the message from Lorrie:

*Leaving dinner. Headed to Flattery's. See you there?*

I don't even bother responding because she knows I won't step foot in that bar anymore. I used to frequent the place, back when my buddy managed it and ran a beach volleyball league in the back sand pit. I ran the scoreboard from a high lifeguard's chair and was delivered my own pitcher by the bartender in between games.

Four months ago, some scumbag kid Shawn inherited the property from his grandfather and the whole place has gone to hell. For almost a month straight, the men's bathroom door hung crooked in its frame before someone removed the entire thing from its hinges. Now, if you enter the bar from the front, you can see straight back to a line of men taking a piss. You can't even wear flip flops anymore because the scum that coats the floor suctions at the bottom of your feet and makes it nearly impossible to move smoothly from one end of the bar to the other. The thing that pisses me off the most though is that Shawn lets almost any woman with decent boobs drink for free. I don't have a problem with chivalry but when I try to buy a round for my girlfriend and myself, and he only accepts money for my drink, I kind of want to punch him in his peach-fuzzed face.

Lorrie calls me around two in the morning. She asks what I'm doing and if I can pick her up from Flattery's. I laugh into the phone and tell her I'm watching videos of title-winning chess matches. She sighs.

"You know, you've been spending an awful lot of time at that bar lately," I pause to hiccup, "I'm not sure how I should feel about that."

"Real nice, Gene, you're drunk too. Just forget it, I'll call a cab," she says, then hangs up on me.

Lorrie spent all night there and never once called to see how Gram was doing, even though I left her a message that my grandmother was *in jail*. And why is it so wrong for me to be drunk on a Friday too? Even though I've already purchased the ring without her knowing, Lorrie's selfishness is ultimately what convinces me that she's not ready for marriage. Whenever she pulls stuff like this, I have silent victories

with myself by only paying the minimum that month on the ring. If we keep going at our current rate, it will be years before I pay the thing off, even longer before I get down on one knee. I finish three beers on the porch waiting for her and line the empties along the railing.

When a truck I don't recognize pulls into our driveway, I automatically stand up. Shawn Flattery doesn't see me on the porch as he hops down from the driver's side to open the passenger door. When he holds out his hand to help Lorrie down, I feel the heat rise from my stomach and into a tiny explosion in my chest. I grab an empty bottle and hurl it in his direction. It misses him by a solid foot and rattles off the hood of the truck. They both look up and Lorrie starts booking it in my direction, but by now I've got the other two empties loaded in each hand. The next one nicks the fender as Shawn runs around the front to get back in. He puts the truck in reverse and the last bottle skids across his windshield and over the fence into the neighbor's driveway. I wish I had more bottles.

"Are you insane?" Lorrie has her hands on her hips and her blonde hair is pulled back into a loose ponytail. "You are literally insane." She holds my stare for a second longer and then walks past me.

I put my nose up to the screen door and watch her standing at the sink. She's wearing the same outfit she left the house in this morning: a white, lacy tank top tucked into a black pencil skirt. I can't remember a time when she wasn't this classy, though her air of sophistication is usually spoiled by her rough edges and dirty mouth. These are the things about her that turn me on. Lorrie holds her heels by their back strap and drops them in front of the sink to fill a glass of water. I shout an apology

from the doorway and Lorrie tells me to keep my face off the screen. I press my nose harder into it and stick my tongue out. It tastes like metal. She heads to the bathroom and shuts and locks the door behind her. She might be pissed or she might be pretending so I hurry to lock up the house and get into bed before she can make up her mind.

Gram calls me early in the morning to tell me there is a situation at her place. I nudge Lorrie and try to remember her coming home last night. I don't think we made love and the half-eaten grilled cheese on her nightstand confirms this. When we're both drunk we're either really horny or really hungry, but never both. Lorrie rolls over to face me and her hot whiskey breath catches me off guard.

“Let's go for a bike ride,” I say. “It's supposed to be nice today.”

Lorrie moans because she knows my intentions.

“Come on. Gram could really use the conversation. We'll bike to the basin after for lunch.”

Lorrie gets ready with few words to me. It isn't until I step outside and see the broken glass that I remember how last night played out. I get out the patio broom and sweep to thoughts of my girlfriend messing around with a guy like Shawn Flattery.

Gram sits hollow-eyed at the kitchen table, recounting last night's events for me. Thinking I was going to have to unclog Gram's toilet or snake the drains again, I'm relieved when I find out the situation isn't really a situation at all. There's something unnerving about rinsing your grandmother's shit off a plunger.



“The thing kept me up half the night, Gene. No, probably more than that.”

Gram has half-moons under her eyes that seem to be weighing down the rest of her face. She is still in her nightgown, a red and green thing with frilly lace across the chest that drapes down to her ankles. It looks like something to wear around Christmas, but I don't say anything. Gram tells me she is so tired that her eye is twitching and I can see it, I can see the damn thing pulsing at its corners, moving and retracting the skin around it.

In a long gesture so that Gram can see, Lorrie points to the red marks across the kitchen ceiling made by the red broom leaning against the closet door. I ask Gram if it could just be a rat or a bird up there and she tells me that it's much bigger than that, *heavier* than that. The last thing I really want to do is crawl up in the attic and disturb some hefty rodent, so I call animal control while Lorrie shuffles the Skip-bo deck.

Three men in black jumpsuits show up around noon with masks, traps, and nets and Lorrie makes an offhand comment about nuisance ninjas. I wait for Gram to offer the men coffee or sandwiches, like she usually does to workingmen before they start their jobs, but she doesn't. She sits in her chair at the table, the one with the spring that lets it tilt back, deciding which card to discard and murmuring, *You better get the damn thing*. Lorrie and I exchange looks and silently agree to let Gram win this round, and the next, and the next.

It can't be much more than an hour later that the men are back downstairs, sipping coffee and telling us just how big this raccoon was. The head of their crew

motions for me to follow him outside and shows me the trapped coon in the cage before putting it in his van and joining us at the table.

“No lie, had to been ten pounds, easy,” says one of the workers. He holds his hands apart for a size demonstration.

“I knew that sucker was huge,” Gram says in an I-told-you-so tone directed at me.

The men say they found a spot in the rafters where the coon got in and assure Gram that they have sealed it off. There weren't any signs of damage and it didn't look like the thing was holed up in there for very long, they tell us. I'm not sure how Gram feels, but she looks content and moves to the counter to make us all sandwiches.

When she serves us, the workers tilt their heads at the plates. I look down at mine and realize that Gram is using her holiday dessert plates for sandwiches. I'm shocked to see them in the first place, but I'm trying to figure how and when Gram got them down from the attic after I packed them away on New Year's. Lorrie nudges my arm and I pat her hand to tell her I know. Before I can pull Gram aside, Lorrie asks.

“Are we celebrating a special occasion, Gram?”

I hate when she calls her out or eggs her on because it's like she's trying to make a demonstration out of Gram. It's almost as if she's saying, *and here's reason number 137 why she needs to be put in a home.*

“You kids would be lost without me. Of course we are.” Gram nods to the garland hanging over the windows and the mistletoe suspended from the doorway.

“Christmas?” I ask. Again I feel foolish for not seeing the things that are right in front of me.

“Half-Christmas! It’s July 25<sup>th</sup>, my darlings.”

Gram either heard this on the radio or completely made it up. Either way, we’ve never celebrated “Half-Christmas” before. Lorrie gives me an eye roll.

“Lighten up, you two. I just like to keep everyone on their toes.”

And this is true—she’s always had a thing for making sure everyone was awake and alert. Before he got sick, Gramps would entertain friends and neighbors at the table like it was his office. While I’d keep to myself at the far end with crayons and books, Gram would burn my bare legs under the table with hot spoons from her coffee cups, always setting them on the same spot above my knee. I’d jump up from my concentration then, banging both kneecaps against the underbelly of the table, rattling the coffee cups. I’d apologize to everyone, saying I got excited or spooked, and Gram would just put her spoon back in her cup, add a splash of cream, and keep stirring.

After animal control leaves, Gram goes in for a nap. I tell her I’ll do the dishes and once I know she’s not coming out of her bedroom, I hand wash the plates and take them back up to the attic. I still can’t figure how she got them down.

“Look at this, Gene,” Lorrie says. I’m picking up sticks in Gram’s yard and Lorrie is watering the recently neglected garden. “She used to love gardening, remember? We couldn’t ever keep her out of here.”

I don’t agree or disagree because she’s just adding this to her list of reasons why Gram’s situation is getting worse. But what she says is true. There was hardly a

day in the summer that Gram could be found without dirt-caked palms and soiled knees.

“There’s nothing wrong with a change of heart,” I tell her.

Lorrie looks at me with high eyebrows, as if what I just said was a loaded statement. Though I didn’t intend for it to come off that way, I don’t offer anything to make her think otherwise. The fire from last night starts again in the pit of my stomach.

“Hey, forget the basin for lunch. I’d rather get a fish fry at Flattery’s,” I say, gauging her reaction.

Nothing. Her stubbornness usually gets the best of her.

Flattery’s is the last place Lorrie wants to show her face after my performance the night before. I know this because she tells me this several times on our way, but there’s not much she can do to stop me from biking myself there. Her only options are to let me go or come with, and I think she’s doing the latter with hopes of preventing any further conflict.

“He won’t even be there, you know. His uncle opens and works the lunch shifts. Sometimes Shawn doesn’t even show up until after happy hour.”

My veins bounce with blood as I pedal harder up Main Street, fuming over the fact that Lorrie knows this guy’s schedule. The sky has closed up a bit since earlier and the dark clouds that drag along the west side of town seem to swell with rain. My road bike is in much better shape than Lorrie’s beaten up hand-me-down, and I stop at the crest of the hill to let her catch up. Motorcycles rev by us on their way to the fairgrounds for the bike fest.

“Go home,” I tell her when she reaches me. I shout a bit to be heard over the throttled up bikes that rattle my ribcage.

Lorrie removes her feet from the pedals and scrapes her toes along the road. She doesn't want me to do this but she seems to realize she can't stop it. The hair along her temples is damp with sweat and she starts to say something but then stops.

“Lor, I won't do anything to embarrass you.” And for a moment, I really mean it. I have a vague notion that she senses I'm just a man trying to protect what's mine.

“Please,” she begs, “can't you deal with this like you deal with Gram?”

“How's that?”

“Just ignore it with the hopes that it will go away or resolve itself.”

Her face is blank in a way that isn't challenging or refuting me, the way we have been for the past few months. She says nothing else and pushes off from the road, coasting her way back down the hill. I watch as the canopy of trees that touches above Main Street swallows her from my view.

The parking lot of Flattery's is full for this time on a Saturday. All sorts of South Buffalo men are packed into the bar and cramming themselves around TVs broadcasting the Irish Open. I order myself a Guinness to fit in and tuck away at a sticky table by the dart machines. The whole bar reeks like stale piss and unclean beer lines and the table I sit at reminds me of the grubby roller rinks I used to hang out in as a kid where the counters were so scummed over that you could carve yours and your girlfriend's names into the layers of grime.

Ten minutes pass and I'm fairly certain Shawn isn't here. As much as I want to lay into him, and I might if I see him, it's probably best our paths don't cross. I need to stake my claim without embarrassing Lorrie—I need a win for the both of us.

I still have no idea what my plan is. The dart machine behind me won't quit beeping, so I decide to throw a round to warm myself up for whatever's to come. I lean forward on the table to dig into my pocket for quarters and the whole thing tips towards me and spills my beer right into my lap. I jump up and grab the glass before it drowns my phone, but just after it empties onto my crotch. I look around and no one seems to have noticed the episode. I kick the bar stool away from the table to take a look at the situation. One of the balance caps is missing from a table leg, creating a lopsided piece of junk when any weight is placed on the tabletop. What a fucking dump.

In the bathroom I blot my jeans with my zip-up because they seem to be out of paper towels at the moment, and probably have been for quite some time. I read the text message from Lorrie that vibrates across my thigh:

*Gram called the house. Needs you to call her back ASAP.*

I'll bet it's just as dire as the last time. Instead of putting the phone back into my pants' pocket, I slip it into the pocket in my shirt. I'm really starting to wonder what the hell Lorrie sees in this place. For a woman who prides herself on class and cleanliness, it seems almost hypocritical that this has become her favorite bar.

When I return to my dysfunctional table, everyone who hadn't been sitting at the bar is squeezed up there now, and I'm assuming the golf tournament is getting pretty heated. Instead of waiting to address Shawn and his face directly, it might be

even funnier to fuck with his pride, or his bar. With everyone's fingers wrapped around beer glasses and eyes on golf, I get on my hands and knees and make my way from nasty table to nasty table. Hardened chunks of gum push into my shins and clumps of hair cling to every table leg. Because I can't be certain of what is sticking to my palms as I crawl, I hurry to remove a balance cap from each bar table, creating the same sort of distorting imbalance that just took place in my lap.

I get up and brush off my knees, stashing the caps deep in my pockets. I try to rub the muck from my hands and notice Liam MacCarthy, the local drunk from a town over, staring at me, head cocked. He reaches behind him to the bar for his beer and brings it back around and up to his lips, all while holding my eye. I smile and try a small wave, picturing him telling all the guys what he just saw: me, crawling around like a toddler on the bar room floor, unscrewing balance caps and laughing to myself, all while wearing cargo shorts, a striped polo shirt, and Birkenstocks. Before he can say anything and before I decide to return the caps and run, I casually duck out the side door and into the late afternoon rain, hitting my shoulder against the doorframe as I make my escape.

Though riding home in the rain is not my favorite thing, I can't help but smile imagining all the spilled beers, wet crotches, and ruined outfits to come. Even if Shawn thinks it's all a coincidence, I still count it as a win.

When I get back, Lorrie is bathing with the bathroom door locked, something she does often and for long periods of time when we're fighting. In the kitchen, I take the

balance caps from my pockets and toss them into the empty candy jar on the table.

Then I call Gram.

“Gene, he’s back. Pete is back. I kid you not.” Gram sounds frantic.

“Who the hell is Pete?” My energy from the day has now worn thin.

“The damn coon. They must notta gotten him like they thought.”

I tell Gram again that the animal control guy showed me “Pete” in the cage after they trapped him. I ask if maybe it’s another raccoon or if maybe she’s imagining things. The fact that she named the critter really has me worried.

“It’s most definitely him, I can tell by the way he shifts his weight around. I think he needed to get out of this rain, and I don’t blame him, but I don’t know how I’m going to get any sleep tonight.”

I tell Gram I’ll call her back.

When Lorrie finally gets out of the tub, she doesn’t ask about my afternoon and I don’t bring it up. Her hair is twisted in a towel and she stands in the doorway inspecting me.

“You could use a haircut,” she says as she fluffs her fingers into my hair.

“What’d Gram want?”

I hate that she asks *that* instead of asking if Gram’s okay. I push her hand out of my hair and tell her I know it’s getting long. She puts her hand on her hip now, waiting for my response. This is like a teacher and pupil role-play, and I can’t help but be the good student. I explain how Gram thinks the raccoon is back and Lorrie scoffs in her I-told-you-so fashion. I ignore it.



“I’ll head over in a bit to check on things. I think she just needs to get out of the house,” I tell her.

“Gene to the rescue,” Lorrie mocks, spreading her arms out like a superhero in flight.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“If only you could handle every aspect of your life like you handle Gram, then you’d really have your shit together. Grow up, Gene, and start seeing things for what they really are.”

My walls come up but I force them back down, just to showcase my maturity. I suddenly want those balance caps back in my pocket.

“I don’t know what that means,” I say.

“That’s a lie, you know exactly what that means.”

“I’m not putting my grandmother into a home when she’s perfectly fine.” I’m using my hands now to make my point, strangling an invisible object in the air.

“Ha, perfectly fine,” she echoes.

Lorrie reties her robe and tucks her feet into her slippers before heading into the kitchen. She stands at the island and I watch her from the couch as she puts her hand into the candy dish, lifts out a handful of balance caps, then lets them rain back down into the dish with a loud clatter. She looks at me when she’s finished and I explain.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she says.

She locks herself in the bathroom again and I sulk on the couch, my pride and confidence slowly melting into the sofa with me.

#

I take Gram to bingo at Queen of Heaven on Wednesday night. I haven't seen her since Saturday evening when I came to rescue her from the returning raccoon that wouldn't let her sleep. I dropped her at her brother Frank's, who thought it'd be a good idea if he took her up to the lake for a few days. As long as it meant she was off my watch, and Lorrie's, for a bit, I couldn't argue.

In the concession line during intermission, I notice rashes on Gram's elbows and the backs of her forearms. Her hair, which is usually combed high in Marge Simpson fashion, is limp and lifeless. My first thought is that something happened at the lake—some allergic reaction to the water or the fishing or the air. Considering recent events, my second thought is she has stopped bathing, which quickly turns into a fear. After we grab hot dogs and return to our seats, I ask about the rash.

“Oh I've been washing the walls and ceilings lately. Spending lots of time on top of chairs and against walls must not agree with my skin. I'm almost finished, though.”

I scold her for doing something like that while home alone and tell her I'll finish the job myself after bingo. When I ask if she wants to stop at Rite Aid for ointment or lotion, she shakes her head.

When we get back from bingo Gram heads straight to the liquor cabinet. It's her tradition to be the “Martini Queen” on Wednesday nights, and I've played along since I was sixteen. She has yet to ask about Pete the raccoon, and I have yet to tell her that there was no raccoon. Before I make a bucket of sudsy water for cleaning, I

check the kitchen counter and junk drawers, but don't find any more duct tape, and nothing seems disturbed.

Gram tells me that the only room left is her bedroom, so I bring the ladder to the back wing of the house. A heavy stink hangs in the air and it's hard to believe it's from these walls and ceilings. Though things don't look dirty to me, I take my jacket off and roll up my sleeves. Working from the top down seems to make the most sense for a job like this.

I put towels down to catch the running water and start scrubbing the crook where wall meets ceiling. From my perch atop the ladder, something catches my eye: a capped mason jar on the nightstand of the side of the bed Gram doesn't sleep on. I head over and pick it up. It's full of flies. Bunches of them. Some buzz around and bust their bodies against the lid, others float lazily as if drunk off whatever the jar used to contain. And there's more still that litter the bottom, already dead or in the process of dying. The whole thing catches me off guard. Where did she get them? How did she catch them? Is she planning to keep them as pets? The lid is not punctured and there is no food source.

There is no way this is a part of one of her jokes or stunts, there's no logic, no motive or lesson I can make from the jar of flies. I want to confront her, ask her what the hell is going on, but I'm afraid of the answer. These flies—this *many* of them—have to be coming from somewhere.

I check room by room. I hear Gram in the kitchen, her shaker clinking against the countertop and her bangle bracelets keeping beat with the radio. The only room with the door closed is my old room, once turned office and now guest bedroom

because Gram insisted she'd need space to host her friends from Greece who never came. When I open the door, the stench that rises does more to my face than slap my face—it grips my throat and slips in through every open pore in my body, creating goose bumps so pronounced they hurt.

I head right to the dresser, the only piece of furniture in the room aside from the bed. The middle drawer is slightly ajar and a faint following of flies is making its way in and out. When I open the drawer all the way, the power of the odor seizes my vision for a moment and I step back. There, in the open drawer atop two stacks of khakis, sits a dried out, rotting fish. Although its fins have shriveled and the body has lost most of its color, I can make out a handful of dark, vertical stripes down its side. A yellow perch. The eyehole is hollow, the actual eye itself having dried out days earlier.

I've only ever seen dead fish in water where they don't decompose so much as swell. They balloon up and puff out, creating a slimy cloud of grime that coats their bodies. Seeing the perch this way, partially dried and festering, its scales peeling back to reveal more layers of decay, makes me wish it had never been removed from the water in the first place, so that when its time came, it would swell with the gasses of loss the way it's supposed to and float to the surface of the water, belly up.

I close the drawer and sit down on the bed. I should call Lorrie, I should talk to Gram, but both would make the situation worse and I can't bear another conversation about retirement homes or jokes or pranks or any of it. The only thing I can think to do is grab a handful of tissues, open the drawer, and wrap the fish up in the Kleenex robe. I crack the window and lift open the screen to toss the stinking

bundle behind a garden bush. I don't know when I'll get it or what I'll do with it. All I can picture is Lorrie with her hands on her hips shaking her head at me, and I realize that this is a secret I will have to keep to myself. I've never been good at silence.

I swat at flies and run through a list of explanations in my head. Gram wanted to prep it for dinner and got distracted. She heard something about fish oil being good for you and took it too literally. She was so proud of catching the fish at the lake that she wanted to be reminded of it whenever she needed it. It becomes obvious that whatever the reasoning is, whatever her explanation might be, it won't change the facts. And since I can't scoop her out of water and lay her in a drawer atop of khakis to speed things up, all I can do is try to make her content and watch as the process begins.

## VOCABULARY OF OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE

Prior to taking her class, these were the things Joy knew about Dr. Hannah Bens: she visited England once a month, the denim overalls she wore were not meant to be ironic, her left eye was a glass eye, and her dissertation was largely steeped in the history of psychedelics and poison oak. Joy wanted Dr. Bens to be an easy A, someone who wouldn't push her too during her last semester.

Joy was ten minutes late for her first class and prayed Dr. Bens wasn't strict with attendance. By the time Joy reached the classroom, all the desks had been pushed up to the front and were now blocking her entrance. She tried moving one out of the way without calling attention to herself, but her hands slipped and it scooted directly into the others, creating a series of metal clanks that echoed down the hallway.

"You must be Joyce," Dr. Bens said. She had everyone on the floor in the back of the room and most were sitting Indian-style, save for the two girls who looked extremely uncomfortable in their decision to wear skirts on the first day of class.

For some reason, Joy had expected Dr. Bens to be much older. The picture in her head was a cross of Jane Goodall and a middle-aged research scientist she'd recently read about in an Ann Patchett novel who left her office in Minnesota for an adventure in the Amazon. But Dr. Bens didn't look much older than thirty. Her hair

was silver and tied into a tight braid in front of her left shoulder, a style more practical than it was flattering. She looked like a woman of experience, but maybe more with London and drugs than Minnesota and monkeys.

“Joy,” Joy corrected. Joyce was the absolute worst.

Dr. Bens waved her into the circle and motioned for her to sit down. “Joy. I like that. I’m Hannah.”

Joy surveyed the circle—there was no way any of them were going to call her Hannah. She recognized two guys from her Fitness and Nutrition course and a girl from her Pilates class and realized they were all in the same situation as Joy—practically finished with their degrees but being forced to take credit hours outside their majors, which explained how they all ended up in Psychology of Optimal Experience with Dr. Bens. Light loads and good times were the only things on their agendas and they were assured by older siblings and fraternity brothers that Dr. Bens was perfect for just that.

“In this class, we will work to discover how our personal, pleasurable state can be controlled, and not left to chance, by setting challenges for ourselves—tasks that are neither too difficult nor too simple for our abilities,” Dr. Bens said. “With these goals, we will learn to order the information that enters our consciousness and thereby improve upon the quality of our lives.”

Dr. Bens didn’t read from notes or a PowerPoint and when she spoke, she kept both eyes closed and let a lulling tone settle in behind her voice. She passed out no syllabus because there was no syllabus. Grades in the class would be based on students’ willingness to be open, to explore, and to learn. Students were asked not to

stimulate prior to class—tobacco, coffee, booze, or anything of the like. This received a chorus of groans, to which Dr. Bens waved her arms.

“Please. If there are no tests and only one term paper, the least you can do is refrain from the stimulants.”

And to this, they had no response. She was right. Though it would be difficult for most of them to put down the cigarette and walk past the coffee pot, it was worth it, at least for these two days a week. And who knows, they said, maybe they’d be bettering their lives from cutting back on the things they should work on doing without. Joy thought maybe she’d start her days off with yogurt.

They spent the remainder of class answering prompts from Dr. Bens. There was no real homework, but she did send them off with a vocabulary sheet.

“I’m not requiring you to memorize these terms. I’m asking you to learn them. Use them. In order to achieve an optimal experience, you will need to live them.”

Part of Joy thought Dr. Bens was a nutcase. She reminded her of the Asian man who’d narrated the high school gym yoga tapes, the guy no one could take seriously because he paused too long between words and used phrases like *eye sockets* and *spinal crevices*. Joy pictured Dr. Bens home alone at her coffee table, a vegan loaf-of-something in front of her, seven cats beside her. It was easy to see her pop out her glass eye, drop it in a jar of saline solution, and pick up a joint to start journaling. What stake could she possibly have in the experience of their lives, the lives of last-semester seniors who just wanted to be done already?

But a small part of Joy, the same part that responded to Dr. Bens’ voice, the same part that couldn’t help but stare at her collarbones beneath the straps of her



overalls, believed the strange woman. Joy kept the list of vocab words folded up in the front pouch of her purse. If, for some reason she left the house without her purse, she made sure to stick the sheet in her pants pocket or tuck it under the strap of her bra.

***AWARENESS:** the pursuit of a goal that requires a person to concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else; closely tied to perception.*

Joy lived in a college town that reeked of grapes and canned dog food, thanks to the vineyards dotting the highway and the Purina factory they installed on the waterfront. If you were caught with your mouth open when a lick of wind came rolling off the lake, you could no longer say you'd never tasted grape dog food.

Despite the grunge that surrounded it, the school itself sat in the belly of a picturesque village: old Victorian houses with sweeping side porches, town hall with a bell that still struck the hour, trimmed sidewalks and park benches at every street corner. The seasons there were the most balanced of any place Joy had ever lived—spring started promptly in March and summer never ended sooner than September. This left plenty of time for the trees to lose leaves in marvelous fashion and collect snow piles at the base of their trunks. It was the kind of place that kept people long after they should have left and Joy was attracted to this sick sense of contentedness.

At that time, Joy was dating Ira, a twenty-eight-year-old “entrepreneur” and village native whose car was perpetually in the shop. He referred to himself as an old

soul, though this couldn't hide the fact he shaved his head to hide his terrible genetics and needed to be dropped off and picked up from his part time job at Starbucks. But Joy minded this less than she minded living with her underage roommates, so after eight months of dating, she moved in with Ira. Joy was also twenty-eight and still getting a bachelor's degree, but all she had to do was mention her four years in the Peace Corps and all the negative connotations fell away. No one ever did the math.

Joy met Ira at Old Main, a saloon-style bar known for proofing the college students. He was short and sweaty but passionate about his plans: plans for tomorrow, plans for the weekend, plans for the future. Without knowing much about him at all, Joy could already see all the places he could and would go wrong. But she liked that, and she liked knowing he'd probably be here a lot longer than he thought.

They connected over the fact they were both almost thirty and couldn't say they were happy with almost anything in their lives. From there, they became absorbed into the routines of each other and let everything else fall away. Ira found Joy endearing, he'd said. He liked that she was taller than him and told her her brown hair was perfect, though he'd like it even longer. And Joy liked that he told her this, so much so that she pledged to never wear a ponytail around him, in an effort to make it seem longer. Joy started to love things that were his: crappy dinner omelets, his stupid Siamese cat, mediocre sex with their socks and shirts still on. Things that weren't hers in the first place were always easier to love.

*ATTENTION: the psychic energy needed to control what happens in consciousness moment by moment; each person has to achieve it on the basis of his or her own individual efforts and creativity.*

Joy had been a skeptic the first two weeks of Psych 212, though she'd stuck around longer than others and wasn't sure why. Most of them dropped the class after the second day when Dr. Bens asked them to do trust falls in the quad. *It's too silly*, Tammy had said when it came time to do hers. Others echoed her sentiment the next class when they had to sit in absolute silence and stillness for the entire hour and a half. *I think there's still room in Dr. Sullivan's scuba diving class*, Tom said, and so they went. And although Dr. Bens never addressed the obvious hole in the roster, Joy was convinced she'd done those exercises on purpose—to weed out the weak, or the weak-minded. Joy had to admit, it was a clever strategy.

For two days a week, Joy and the remaining students would meet Dr. Bens for class at nine in the morning and often get so invested and involved in the conversations they'd stay well after noon. Dr. Bens said establishing a routine was important, so she always brought lunch for everyone: store-bought potato salad, herbal tea, and hot dogs they sometimes broiled on the Bunsen burner in the biology lab down the hall, sometimes ate straight from the package. To everyone's surprise, Dr. Bens was not a vegetarian and often ate a sleeve of five weenies herself. If they stayed after lunch they would do ballet exercises to Beatles records and after that, they'd sit around on the bare floor and meditate. Though she still wasn't totally convinced by the class, it was worth it to Joy to see Dr. Bens change into leggings.

The first real assignment from Dr. Bens required students to make a detailed but working list of personal goals. All Joy had managed to do since she brought it home was number her paper one through ten.

Ira and Joy sat at Ira's desk, the one they were forced to share in the tiny room he had deemed his office. He sat in the chair "crunching numbers" for his business proposal while Joy pulled a stool up to the side, her knees rubbing against the unfinished wood panel. The only other flat surface for writing or working was the kitchen counter, but it was fitted with fat tiles and grout lines so deep they always caught Joy by surprise and sent the tip of her pen straight through her paper.

"Hon, it isn't like they're set in stone. Besides, you definitely have goals. We have goals," Ira said, perhaps more to himself than to Joy.

Dating in your late twenties suddenly meant you could absorb each other's life goals. Joy could see how he would think that.

"I can only think of bucket list stuff." And it was true—visions of swimming with dolphins and seeing the earth from outer space flashed through Joy's head.

"Those are things you can *make* happen," he said. "Goals are things you have to strive for."

For a second he sounded like an echo of Dr. Bens herself, though much less convincing. Joy wrote *Graduate with my degree in Environmental Science* and then put the pen down.

With Ira's two-cents and the clacking buttons of the calculator, she couldn't focus. Perhaps if she were alone, perhaps if she had a glass or three of wine to loosen up, this might be easier. Joy closed her eyes and pictured her own office, a bigger

office with windows that opened to an ocean and a chair in every corner. She pictured Ira there, maybe, upstairs in his own office or in the kitchen botching some recipe. Then she pictured Dr. Bens in her overalls, elbows deep in homemade pasta or steeping tea to bring up to the study. Joy wondered if Dr. Bens was married, if she was the type to marry. Then she wondered why she was wondering these things.

By the time Ira was finished balancing his books Joy had managed to record nine goals she could truly see herself achieving, or at least spending the time and effort to pursue. The list included some clichéd things like *Donate to a charity* and *Change someone's life*, though she could really see herself doing things like that, just like she could see herself in the Peace Corps before she'd even filled out the application.

From over her shoulder, Ira urged her to include their move to Seattle as number ten, something they had discussed doing for his business plan. He wanted to run a tech start-up company in a place where it would have a chance to get going and Joy wanted to be near an ocean again, so Seattle was the compromise. She wrote *Make a move to Seattle with my boyfriend to start our professions*, capped the pen, and kissed Ira on the cheek.

When he'd packed up his papers and numbers and retreated to the couch, Joy stayed at the desk for a moment longer. Dr. Bens had asked them to be truthful and write the first things that came to mind without mulling them over, so she crossed out number ten until it was no longer legible and wrote *Stick around town for longer than I'm welcome*.

That night Joy dreamt about Dr. Bens in her bedroom. She startled herself and Ira awake and did not want to go back to sleep. With Ira's arm draped over her chest and his breath hot on her neck, Joy forced herself to stay awake.

***PERSERVERANCE:** the ability to transform hopeless situations into challenges to be overcome.*

Of the seven students who remained, at least four of them were full of it. After only a month in the class they discussed seeing changes in themselves, but Joy didn't think these were the changes Dr. Bens had intended. Jamie said her resting heart rate was lower, and she'd gained a considerable amount of patience. Stuart and Sandy both said they'd lost weight, though Stuart's face was still pudgy and Sandy's thighs were thick as ever. Half of them had even stopped smoking during the week altogether, stopped drinking on the weekends. Joy wasn't buying it. She started counting her beers from the weekend when Dr. Bens entered the room. An older man followed her.

"Today is the day we push ourselves, take things further," she began. She set her canvas bag on the front desk then leaned on it, crossing her feet at the ankles.

The man who accompanied Dr. Bens stood to her right holding a briefcase. His hair was thick and white and stuck out in clumps, giving the impression he'd just walked in from a windstorm. He wore a brown sports jacket over a white-collared shirt and army pants with boots strapped up his shins. He wore a pair of tortoise shell glasses so low on his nose that they seemed more an ornament than an aid. A gold

band adorned his ring finger and as he watched Dr. Bens speak, Joy searched his face for signs of affection.

Joy's cheeks flushed as images from her dream the night before flooded her mind. The overalls, the braid, Dr. Bens' cheekbones—seeing these things before her now in the classroom with harsh lights and cobwebs tucked into corners made Joy feel silly. She couldn't help but think the traces of her night were visible on her face, so she pulled her hood over her head and yanked the strings tight.

“With trust in one another already installed and personal boundaries already mapped, it is imperative that you assign all inhibitions to the outer regions of your mind,” said Dr. Bens. “If you cannot be willing, this will not work.”

She introduced the man as Dr. Wilson, a specialist in hypnotherapy, then went on to explain they would be experimenting with levels of hyper-attentiveness, a study in the three stages of hypnosis that allow the mind to bypass its critical conscious and speak directly to its unconscious in a language which it understands: pattern, association, and metaphor. Dr. Bens assured her students it was safe and meant only for relaxation. She'd be participating as well.

Dr. Wilson had the eight students stand at the front of the room with their backs to the board and limbs loose. He instructed them to close their eyes and open their minds, asking them to be sincere in their thoughts. First he got them breathing deep in a rhythm he controlled with snaps of his fingers. Then he went on in his low, even voice about keeping the eyes closed, about believing the eyes were really closed, clamped shut beyond any power to open them.

He told the class to focus, but Joy was too paranoid to focus. She could not be hypnotized because she was too worried about the things she'd say if the hypnosis took hold, the secrets she might let slip if the trance took her over. When Dr. Wilson's voice drifted to the other side of the room, Joy peeked through tiny slits of her eyes at the others. Everyone stood with their eyes still closed, their bodies slack, and Joy hoped she looked as convincing as they did.

"We're going to take a journey," Dr. Wilson said, "but you have to be open to my suggestiveness to really make the trip."

Dr. Wilson led them across a desert, through a meadow, and into a cave and though Joy was doing her best to picture all the sounds and smells he relayed, she could not shake the image of Dr. Bens' mouth—small, taut lips that met at dimples in the corners. Before Dr. Wilson gave the next set of instructions, a hand touched Joy's shoulder and she opened her eyes to Dr. Wilson gesturing towards the seats. Three other students were already awake and seated and Joy was surprised she hadn't heard them sit down. She started to think perhaps she had been hypnotized.

As Dr. Wilson's narrated journey continued, more students were asked to retreat until all that remained under Dr. Wilson's voice was Dr. Bens. He had moved her to a lake in the dead of winter with winds gusting and snow falling around her, wetting her hair. He was trying to convince her to swim in the lake.

"It's too cold. I'm not going in there," Dr. Bens said.

"You need to. You need to feel the cool grip of the water—you need it to prick your skin."

"But I can see my breath," she said.



“You need to feel it in your bones.”

Again, Dr. Bens refused. It wasn't until Dr. Wilson told her the lake was her refuge, the holder of her sanctuary, that she began to coax herself in. The students watched as her teeth chattered and she explained the numbness that was overcoming her. Then Dr. Wilson instructed her to leave this state of mind and open her eyes at the snap of his finger, and all at once he snapped and the scene stopped.

Dr. Bens opened her eyes as her colleague coached her through a debriefing of sorts: where she had been, what she'd been doing. Though she did not speak, Dr. Bens nodded her head in affirmation when Dr. Wilson asked if she remembered it, if she remembered all of it. He explained to the class it would take a few moments for Dr. Bens to come out of it all, and during those minutes Dr. Bens looked straight at Joy.

While the other students conferred with one another, sharing experiences about their hypnosis and what they saw and felt, Joy said nothing. She didn't believe a word they said, simply because they had words to say. Joy stared back at Dr. Bens, watching her professor piece herself back together and wondering how someone could concentrate and trust so fully, transcend their conscious so deeply to be taken into another world. Joy believed Dr. Bens had been on that journey—she had jumped in that lake. There was an endlessness to this woman that was both enchanting and terrifying, and it dried Joy's throat and pinched her gut. Joy was the first to break the stare, unsure of what it all meant, or if it meant anything at all.

***PURPOSE:** a goal that is challenging enough to take up all energies, a goal that can give significance to life.*

Joy skipped her next class with Dr. Bens. Instead she convinced Ira to call in sick to work and stay in bed all day, making love in between re-runs of Austin Powers movies and packages of Top Ramen. In the bed and at the stove, Joy remained close to Ira at all times. She wanted to feel the texture of his stubble against the smooth of her own cheek, wanted to smell the musk that enveloped him and wanted it to envelope her too. And in the moments he left her, peeled himself from her to grab a beer or use the bathroom, Joy found herself fingering the things that were his: the Rockwell painting hung above the bedframe, the guitar in the corner of the room, the rocking chair that held his work apron and two pairs of dirty socks.

As the afternoon sun gave way to a brief dusk, Ira opened the windows and let early spring air into the room. He stood with his bare ass to Joy, facing the fading light outside the second-story window.

“Soon enough we can trade this view for the ocean,” he said. He stretched his arms straight up, then let them fall slowly to his sides.

From her spot in the bed, Joy stared at him until he turned to face her and when she didn’t respond, he waved his hands.

“Hello? I’m talking about the ocean,” he said. He cupped his hands to his mouth. “Earth to Joy.”

It was obvious he was saying this to please her—Ira himself had never been to a coast. He didn't know what it held or what it had to offer, but he knew she wanted it, which meant he wanted it too.

"I'm here," she said.

"You sure? You seem somewhere else."

But Joy wasn't anywhere else. She was right there with him, picturing the Pacific with its salt and waves and gurgling seagulls sounding before any morning alarm. She told this to Ira, told him she was here, she was hyper-attentive and in fact using this free will to harness extreme suggestibility and heightened imagination. These were the words she used.

"When you talk like that you make it sound like it's out of our reach," Ira said. "Like it's an impossibility."

"I do not. I'm assessing the situation." She pulled the comforter up over her bare chest.

"You're starting to sound like that kook of a teacher."

Joy shook her head.

"Listen to yourself! For god's sake, it sounds like you're part of a cult."

Though she wasn't sure whether it was the reference to god or cult or both, Ira's saying this triggered a flurry of memories buried in Joy: Catholic church services throughout her childhood, the bible girl scouts she remained a member of until high school, and the entire reason why she'd signed up for four years of teaching English to children in Morocco who cared more about the lipstick she wore and the shoes on her feet than the words that came from her mouth.

Ira wrapped Joy's bathrobe around him and stepped out on the balcony with his pack of cigarettes. When he'd returned, Joy had brushed her teeth and dimmed the lights and asked if they could please not fight, it was silly and unnecessary stress. Ira agreed and after he'd brushed his teeth, Joy let him kiss her lips, then her neck, then her chest, and eventually let him mount her from behind the way he liked while she gripped the headboard and breathed into a pillow. He didn't shed her robe and she told herself she didn't mind.

Long after Ira fell asleep, Joy stood before the mirror braiding her hair in the near dark. In the reflection behind her, the light from the TV outlined Ira's shape under the sheets, rising and falling with his silent breaths. When she crawled into bed, Joy lay on top of the comforter. She adjusted her pillows and turned her back to Ira's and as she drifted off, she wondered what it meant when someone fit so easily into your life that you could lay awake at night in those finite moments before sleep and almost, just almost, forget about them entirely.

Some time around midterms Dr. Bens required students to meet in her office to conference about their term papers. They knew she would be assisting in the "experience" and whatever research or set up they needed to get there, but that was the extent of the assignment. Prior to their meetings they had to submit a list of their strengths, fears, and a few things they wished they could improve on.

Because class was cancelled in favor of these conferences, Joy treated herself to a cup of coffee and a quick smoke on the walk to her office. It was hot out for mid-

April—snow had come then gone, allowing the sun to pump life into the dirtied lawns, tree branches to sprout their smallest of buds. With the pavement reflecting the new season's warmth, girls on campus were already sporting flip-flops.

Dr. Bens' office made Joy feel like she was underwater. A cerulean tapestry hung where blinds should have been, filtering the room into hues of blue. The windowsill was crowded with plant life and the floor was dotted with stacks of books higher than Joy's waistline. Dr. Bens' desk, however, remained empty. Joy sat down in the only other chair in the room, a yellow felt-covered thing whose arms looked as if they'd been used as a cat's scratching post.

"First things first, Joy, how do you feel about your progress in class?" Dr. Bens folded her hands on the desk, then moved them to her lap.

Joy took a moment to respond. "Honestly, it's hard for me to say. I feel like I'm learning, or growing, or whatever you want to call it, but I don't know how to really show you that."

"I see. You seem nervous."

Joy was nervous. Her heart was beating in places she knew it shouldn't—her temples, her neck, above her ankles. She felt as if Dr. Bens could see the coffee sloshing around her stomach or smell the nicotine on her breath.

"Do you feel as if anything is holding you back?" Dr. Bens asked.

Joy raised her eyebrows at her professor. "Holding me back?"

"Preventing you from growing, from learning, from challenging yourself. A stasis of sorts?"

Joy's mind instantly moved to Ira. To her, stasis was the definition of their relationship. It wasn't his fault because in his mind, he had goals. And Joy had to admit that his lofty ideas were what had attracted her to him in the first place—his inability to realize he did everything he hated and wanted everything he could never have. She enjoyed knowing better, being the keeper of the secret and pretending she wasn't.

“I don't know,” Joy said. “I feel like a lot of things are coming to the surface.”

“What kinds of things?”

“Things I don't really understand.”

“No worries, that's a response I hear often from students in this class and it's completely natural.”

Joy wasn't sure if she and Dr. Bens were talking about the same kinds of things, so she let her professor continue.

“Hopefully your final project will force you to take action, noticeable action, so you'll have an easier time articulating your learning come the final paper.”

Joy swallowed audibly and Dr. Bens went on assuring her.

“This isn't to say that everything you've done up until now wasn't worthwhile. We're just looking for those specific characteristics we've discussed.”

And Joy recited them back to her. “We're looking to feel strong, alert, in effortless control, unselfconscious, and at the peak of our abilities where a sense of time and emotional problems disappear.” Ira's words of cults and kooks echoed in and out behind Joy's ears. But sitting here in front of Dr. Bens, Joy was surprised by how much she grasped these concepts and how much she believed she needed them.

Dr. Bens took out Joy's lists of fears and things she wished to be better at and told her that her final project would combine two of these, in the effort to create the most optimal experience through which she could grow and cope with these feelings. Joy suddenly wished she hadn't been so trivial in her answers.

Joy's final project was to combine her fear of heights and her wish to be better at baking. Dr. Bens told her they would be baking on the roof.

At first Joy thought she was joking. Or maybe not joking so much as not being literal. Baking on a roof could mean tanning or smoking before it actually meant baking, she thought.

"I have some experience with baking in high elevations, believe it or not. And I make a pretty mean pastry," said Dr. Bens. "Your project is one I feel really good about."

***THE PARADOX OF CONTROL:** Lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is often typical in many situations of normal life.*

Joy had a lunch date in the city with Ira after her conference. Over P.F. Chang's Pad Thai and a Diet Coke, she filled him in on the circumstances of her final project.

"She can't legally make you do that," he said.

"Legally, no. But this isn't the first time she's taught the class. People must go through with these experiences and actually feel different coming out of them." She

couldn't technically picture herself on a roof, or baking on a roof, but the fact that Dr. Bens could see it gave her hope.

"I still don't get how no one's caught on, how no one's said anything. She's not even tenured, is she?"

His logic made sense to Joy, but from what she was learning that semester, logic wasn't going to get her anywhere.

"I never put Seattle on my goals list."

He raised his eyebrows in confusion and put his glass down on the table. The straw spun around the glass edges once before coming to a stop.

"The goals list I had to do. At the beginning of the semester. Remember?"

"Is it not one of your goals?" he asked. His chin touched his chest when he said it.

"It's one of *our* goals, yes, but I didn't feel right putting it down."

Ira moved his gaze from Joy's face to the window in one swift movement. Phrases from her meeting with Dr. Bens rang in her head: control is addictive; the self becomes captive of a certain kind of order.

"I'm too aware of the entire situation, you know? Like, why we're really going there," she said.

"We're going there to start our lives. To be together when we do that."

"I just don't know if I'm ready for that."

"Joy, seriously? Are you ever going to be ready?"

She didn't answer. She couldn't imagine telling him she had no faith in the move, she'd had visions and nightmares about his job, her job, and everything in



between. His work ethic, his spending habits, his cynicism—these were things that wouldn't survive in a place like Seattle, and neither would she. Joy could have taken the blame and claimed cold feet or bad timing. Instead, the only thing she could tell him now was this: she could only love him here, in this town, in the tiny cramped village he so badly wanted out of.

***SELF-TRANSCENDENCE:** a feeling that the borders of our being have been pushed forward.*

Dr. Bens lived in an upstairs apartment, above an old pack-and-ship that didn't attract much foot traffic. They could access the roof from the dormer window in her living room. She had decided on her roof because she lived further out of the flat village, higher up in the hills.

The first time they went up to the roof was at night, with no baking. Without the sunlight to reveal how high above things they really were, Joy would be able to gain the confidence she needed to do it during the day. Dr. Bens wanted to familiarize Joy with the movements and motions.

“Optimal experiences occur within sequences of activities that require the investment of psychic energy and cannot be done without skills. This is how we will practice them both,” she said.

Joy followed Dr. Bens at a safe distance over the window ledge and onto the flat porch roof. Each time Joy planted a foot higher than the other, she'd bounce once,

then twice on the toe, to confirm her grip. Up the sloping part, the shingle texture pushed into her palms, making the insides of her hands raw by the time they reached the top. The knocking in her knees was normal, Dr. Bens told her. A healthy response to a fear, she said.

The shaking never entirely left, but the movements became routine. They'd climb out onto the roof that covered the Postal Plus entryway, then up the short ramp of shingles to the highest part—two pack mules making their way along the slanted ceiling of her living room. The slopes of all four sides met and revealed a flat spot at the top, a design Joy didn't think was practical for a rooftop in a region that recorded snowfall. The levelness wasn't extensive—maybe big enough to do two full cartwheels—but she still couldn't see how it wouldn't cave in under the snow it was bound to collect.

That night they spent on her roof was the night Dr. Bens told Joy about her accident, how she lost her eye. She'd been nine and on a family vacation to Portugal with her mother, father, and younger sister. After stuffing themselves full of custard tarts and smoked presunto, the family retreated to Corvo Island, where they spent the remainder of their vacation camping amongst sheer cliffs close to the coast. The two girls played between the water and dirt, convinced the earth here was the strongest they'd ever smelled. Together they made mud pies and mud balls and took to coating each other in the soupy film that smelled of old shoes and spring worms, letting it seep into the corners of their eyes and mouths until they could not stomach the stink. So when the parents discovered the eye infection, they didn't think much of it, given

the mud game, until they got back to the States where they discovered it was not an infection but instead a parasite, a bug feeding on her cornea and eventually her vision.

“So you lost your eye to mud?” was the only thing Joy could think to say.

“I like to think I lost it to the earth,” her professor said.

Dr. Bens wrapped her thumb and forefinger around Joy’s wrist and squeezed lightly. At first Joy thought she was taking her pulse, but when Dr. Bens slid her hand over Joy’s, the breath left her chest and made a brief white cloud under the streetlight.

***EXHILARATION:** a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and does not come through passive, receptive, relaxing times.*

The semester ended before Joy felt like she’d accomplished her goal. Dr. Bens agreed to give her an extension on the paper and Joy stayed on through the summer. This of course meant she received an “Incomplete” in Psychology of Optimal Experience and had to postpone graduation another semester.

Joy hadn’t seen Ira since the end of April, since he’d transferred from the Starbucks in the village to the Starbucks downtown, though he still lived in his loft. Neither of them ever said the words, spoke about a break up or a departure, but once she got her things from his closet, they’d both closed that book. She’d see him every now and then at Old Main, sitting in the same spot at the bar like he always did, holding his bald, sweaty head with his hands. Her heart ached each time she saw him, but with what, she couldn’t be sure.

With the start of June came a heat wave, the exact situation they needed to get Joy's optimal experience started. The first time they set out to bake on the roof, Joy panicked. She forgot the steps, the moves it took to get her from living room, to window, to rooftop. Her teeth mimicked the jittering in her knees and the saliva left her mouth. Hannah gripped Joy's stiff upper arms.

"You've got this. You've been waiting for this."

She loaded her arms and Joy's with the utensils: bowls, spoons, a rolling pin, measuring cups, a wooden panel, bottled water, tin foil, flour, and so much butter. Joy followed her at a slower pace to the roof and stood still, hugging her armful of supplies, not sure where to put what.

Their first two pastry attempts failed. They waited around for hours after they knew the dough wouldn't rise and the pastries wouldn't make it. They stayed on the roof until dusk settled in and then launched their failures into the evening sky, not giving a damn where they ended up. When they ran out of pastries to throw, Joy kissed Hannah on the lips. Hannah kissed her back.

***RESOLUTION:*** *carrying a goal through to meet its challenges.*

It was a long process, baking on a roof, and required an immense amount of patience—waiting for the weather to be right, waiting for the dough to chill, waiting for the roof to heat up. But Hannah was correct, Joy eventually became open to the experience, found herself looking forward to it.

Every so often the clouds would make way over the hills and open up right on top of the women. Instead of panicking or trying to salvage what they could, Hannah insisted they go on—pastries were a sensitive thing, especially in high elevations. They both knew the baked goods wouldn't survive the slightest of storms, but there was something satisfying in pretending there was no rain as it came pouring down around them. It was only after they'd gone through all the motions and set the dough out on the foil as if it could still bake, that Hannah would invite Joy down to her kitchen for tea. Sometimes they'd continue baking inside, sometimes they'd read poetry, and other times they would simply sip tea, soaking wet. Joy never spent the night.

Most times, the weather worked in their favor. For Joy, the best part of a baking day was watching Hannah knead the dough. She'd start off in a delicate manner, neatly making dimples in the dough's center. Then she'd get rougher, folding the dough in on itself and creasing it at its wrinkles. That's when she'd let Joy take over, being sure her student's hands followed her gestures precisely. Joy would smear the dough with the heels of her palms until the entire pile was flattened. Then Hannah would roll all of it back into a ball, wrap it with plastic wrap, and stick it in the cooler.

The late morning sun stuck to Joy's neck while they waited for the dough to chill. If she was wearing a shirt, her lower back was always damp with sweat. If she wasn't wearing a shirt, her skin was slick. Hannah liked to take ice cubes and trace Joy's hairline, then her hipbones.

"You're not what I thought you'd be." Joy said this to her one day as Hannah ran the ice cube along the inside of Joy's thighs.

“Preconceived knowledge isn’t always the best knowledge.”

“So what are we? What are we doing?”

“We’re concentrating on the task at hand,” she said. She replaced the ice cube with just her hand.

Hannah always spoke like this, rehearsed and well measured. Textbook talk that made sense, regardless of context or situation. It was one of her many skills Joy never tried to understand.

***INNER HARMONY:** achieved when an important goal is pursued with resolution, and all one’s varied activities fit together into a unified, optimal experience.*

Here they are again—an Indian summer in full swing. Hannah sets up the kitchen on the rooftop and begins dicing raw potatoes with a butter knife. The process is long but soon she gets enough cubes to line the pan. They’ve increased the difficulty of their recipes over time: croissants, Napoleons, samosas. Though the dough gets tougher and the bake times have increased, they keep on.

Joy can’t say she loves Hannah and she has yet to write her term paper. Love coincides with happiness, and happiness is something that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended. Because they are still baking, because Joy is still learning, she is still experiencing.

They’ve tried the rooftops of Hannah’s neighbors, of the tall buildings downtown, of the rich people who live even higher into the hills. Though they would

hesitate to say they've perfected anything just yet, the secret to a good pastry, they've learned, isn't love or butter—it's altitude.

## FATHER BAKER PROTECTORY

Had we been given the choice, Father Baker Protectory is not a place we would have picked to work on our behavior modification. Boot camps or prep schools, we begged of our parents, send us to detention centers or give us up to the court—they can do with us as they please. Though our offenses were minor, we wanted to go someplace harder. We wanted the ex-military buffs screaming in our faces, the slop-served-on-trays kind of reformation. The scared-to-close-our-eyes-in-bunk and, you-better-get-a-grip-on-that-soap kind of reformation. After all, we must be acting out for a reason.

We all got here in roundabout ways: Stuart for punching out his P.E. teacher, Harold for stealing a pickup and driving it to Utah. Randy was a truant and his twin brother Rickie was an addict, and Sam got hauled down after he fondled a homeless woman on the boardwalk in front of a security guard. No matter what got us in, we spent most days talking about what would get us out.

The only boy we ever knew who escaped was Jimmy Tucker. He made it all the way home to his parents' house in Moody to find the family golden retriever dead in her crate, having strangled herself trying to squeeze her head between the bars to reach a tennis ball gone adrift. The image spooked him so good he came back before they ever knew he was missing. He still has the tennis ball.

But Father Baker doesn't like us to talk of death or destruction. We think he doesn't want us getting any ideas. All we have to keep busy is a collection of jigsaw



puzzles with waterfalls on them and a radio in the corner of the rec room that sometimes speaks the weather. Knowing this, you can imagine how a group of boys on the cusp of puberty, a group of young men with violent tendencies could get so riled up over a snow storm.

It happened one night after sermon. The sky stretching over Father Baker Rectory clotted with storm clouds and burst along the horizon: rain, sleet, snow, fog. And we watched it all—whooped and hollered at the loud whacks of thunder, the blinding flashes of lightning. We cheered on the wind whipping our windows and put our faces against the panes to feel the cold.

But had we known the same storm would steal all driving visibility from Father Baker as he drove home from sermon, perhaps we would have paid him more mind. Had we known his car would be swept off the road and into a telephone pole at the exact moment the snow-covered tree branches broke from their trunks and took down the lines, encasing Father Baker and his sedan in a mess of electric tentacles, then maybe instead of flicking each other's ears and sticking our tongues out when he asked us for a moment of silence, maybe we would have bowed our heads and prayed.

### FIND A PENNY, PICK IT UP

Kate's first instinct was intruder, as she and her boyfriend Manny lay awake in her bedroom listening to shuffles and creaks from the lobby. No rooms were booked, which meant no customers were staying at the motel. Kate's second instinct was Grace, but she kept this one to herself. Manny did his best to hush her with soft reassurances and a hand on her bare chest, until a loud crash brought them both rushing out of bed. Kate wrapped her robe around her and passed Manny the baseball bat she kept behind her door.

Kate instantly regretted not contacting the elderly man who stayed in room 4 last week who forgot to check out, taking the room and lobby keys with him. Changing the locks was always an expensive ordeal, and, Kate figured he'd get back to where he came from, realized he'd taken the keys, and call her about returning them. Even if he didn't and he kept them forever, Kate never thought he'd be so upset over them not serving decaf that he'd return in the middle of the night a week later to ransack the motel lobby as revenge.

From their spot atop the stairs overlooking the lobby, both Kate and Manny were surprised to find no intruder, no old man, just Grace, Kate's seven-year-old daughter, elbows deep in the fish tank. Manny grabbed Kate by the shoulder before she could descend a step. He put a finger to his lips, indicating they should watch for a bit.

Grace was wearing her favorite nightgown; the one that she had outgrown years ago and now only covered her to the tops of her knees and the crooks of her elbows. Kate had tried many times to replace it, but Grace's attachment to the original was so strong that Kate was forced to give in. Grace at least allowed her to remove the elastic from around the wrist cuffs so that she didn't wake up with red-ringed indents along her arm that kept her itching at them all day.

With dripping sleeves, Grace hopped down from the chair she had pulled up to the tank and made her way toward the open china cabinet. She grabbed plates, bowls, and teacups, stacking them on her forearms in an upside-down pyramid that teetered and screamed of unbalance. The top dinner plate was the first to go, sliding quickly off the bowl it had been placed upon and crashing to the floor. Grace remained unfazed by the clatter and didn't break her concentration, even after the two bowls fell to each side of her, cracking upon contact with the ground and spitting shards up both of her legs.

Kate worried about the glass, about her daughter in her bare feet and jammies, about the broken porcelain that wasn't hers to begin with and she didn't have the slightest idea how to replace, but she remained motionless, hypnotized by the strangeness of her daughter and the remoteness of her actions.

Grace had always been odd, or unique as her father used to call it, ever since she could make decisions on her own. She went through phases, he said, which was completely normal for children, especially for an only child with few friends. At age four, she'd insisted on eating her spaghetti for breakfast and her cereal for dinner, which didn't sit well with Kate but Max said was just fine. Shortly after being potty-

trained, Grace found it perfectly normal to squat over garbage cans instead of toilets to pee, a habit they were forced to break because her favorite potty garbage was the short black one in the motel lobby where guests had their coffee and ate their doughnuts. Max said he did the same thing at the same age and none of his doctors were able to break the habit; he just stopped on his own.

Grace's oddness continued even after Max's death, her most recent obsession involved wearing her clothes inside out, and for reasons she wouldn't disclose. Once she started at the school in town, the teachers convinced her to wear her clothes the right way. Kate didn't know where she had gone wrong.

With her arms full of whatever dinnerware remained, Grace climbed the chair to be eye-level with the top of the fish tank. She paused for a moment there and Kate was sure they'd been spotted.

"I'm glad, but let's not be hypocrites" Grace said to no one in particular. Then, one by one, she dropped each piece of china into the water, giggling like mad as they created bubbles of fizz that enveloped them all the way to the gravel.

"Don't most kids sneak snacks in the middle of the night?" Manny whispered. He was in just as much awe as Kate, though for different reasons she was sure.

She wanted to tell Manny to stay put but she didn't have to. He stood with his hands on his hips, his head slightly askew. Before Grace could get her hands on any more dishes, Kate intercepted. As soon as she reached her, Grace fell limp into her arms and feigned sleep. The goldfish in the tank reacted to their new ornaments, swimming through the handle holes of the teacups and rubbing their bellies across the planes of the dinner plates and saucers. Instead of leading Grace by her wrists back

upstairs like she knew she could, Kate scooped her up in the hammock of her arms and bounced her once or twice for effect. As she made her way up the stairs with her daughter, Manny made his way down with the broom and nodded, as if he understood it all.

Life in Liquid District wasn't all that bad, so long as you didn't mind living in a rundown, flyover town whose legitimate name on a map was Liquid District. Kate always had a feeling that the place had been named something more proper like Alden or Amherst or Getzville in the beginning, until they realized how the town was meant to work. Liquid District was tucked tight between two rivers: one full of water, one full of watery muck. The only thing that came in and out was liquid, regardless of form.

Most townies were made aware at an early age that Liquid District was one big contradiction of a place. On one river, they preached water energy and power projects, resulting in a hydroelectric power plant that generated enough electricity and employment to light the lives and bulbs of towns more than thirty miles away. The other river, much smaller in size, was simply a line of sewage, a runoff for commercial and industrial businesses that needed a place to dump. If you weren't specifically looking for it, the polluted waterway was hidden from view, tucked behind a thick forest of southern magnolias, evergreens that were planted to reduce the amount of leaf litter in the river water.

Town Motel, fittingly the only motel in town, was situated farther from the highway than Kate would prefer, but there wasn't much she could do about it. The motel had been a gift from Max's parents. Not a wedding gift because they were never married, but more of a "here's something to get you guys going" gift.

Kate and Max had dated in high school and stayed together ever day after. Neither of them pursued college or other legitimate reasons to get out of Liquid District. They sort of floated for a few years—him working at the only gas station in town, her waiting tables at the family diner—until they got pregnant with Grace.

Max's parents thought the motel would be something good for them, something that could be run around raising a family, something they could call their own. And they were excited, too, Max and Kate, but mostly to stop topping off the gas tanks of their old science teachers and to quit waiting tables on old friends with their wedding bands and sedans and their lovely, lovely families. While Kate was pregnant, Max did enough work on the motel with what he had, just enough to make it feel like it was theirs. From there, things were fine. Things were always fine with Kate and Max.

Since Manny spent the night, that meant Manny would be coming to coffee, which made Kate queasy in parts of her stomach she couldn't pinch or rub to relieve. The motel only served coffee and the morning paper. When they first started out, Max and Kate got donuts and pastries from Bella's down the street, but the more options you give people the more they complain, they learned, so they quit the breakfast gig

almost as soon as it started and simply ignored the requests for decaf. The only weekend customers the motel could expect used to be Max's parents, but now just his mother Libby since his father passed. As Kate tied her dark, thick hair into a bun that hugged her neck, she wished hard that it wasn't Saturday.

When Kate and Manny came down the stairs, Grace was already up, sitting next to her grandmother and eating a banana with a fork. Kate could instantly feel Libby's glare heating up her backside as she poured coffee.

"Slow weekends often mean busy weeks," Libby said, her hands wrapped tightly around her mug of coffee. She used the same one every time—brown rimmed and oddly short—said it reminded her of a honey jar.

Kate and Manny slid into the other side of the booth. The door to the now almost-empty china cabinet was slightly ajar and Kate shuddered. She wasn't in the mood to talk doctors. Or therapists. Or hypnotists.

"Libby, this is Manny," Kate said.

"Hi Manny, I'm Kate's mother-in-law. You can call me Libby." She stuck her hand out and he took it and shook it slowly and obediently, as if reading a script telling him what to do.

Kate didn't correct the in-law part.

Last night, Kate told Manny that if he spent the night, the introduction would go something like this. Though it had been almost two years since Max's accident, Libby held on tightly to the memory of the two of them together, everything as how it was, how it should have been. Kate had a feeling this was a way of grieving her own

husband's death, this keeping the family together stint, but Libby had to realize that Kate was only human and humans have needs.

"You look tired, Gracie," Libby said. She took the fork from her and peeled the banana down before handing it back. "Late night?" She raised her eyebrows at Kate.

"Actually—" started Manny.

"It wasn't that late," Kate said. She was glad their view of the fish tank was hidden by the front desk and filing cabinets.

Manny tilted his head a bit in confusion, but then shuddered and rolled the discussion off his shoulders. Kate wasn't trying to hide anything from Libby. There was nothing to hide from her. If anything, it was Manny that Kate wanted to keep out of the know.

"I take it you haven't gotten anyone out here for an estimate," Libby said, referring to the plumbing issues they were having in the west wing of the motel. She shifted, crossing then re-crossing her legs under the table.

"What does an estimate matter when we already know we can't afford it?" Kate didn't mean to sound defensive or condescending. Money issues always made her nauseous. She shifted too.

"Ma'am, I know I just met you," Manny said, addressing Libby, "and Kate, I know I haven't known you for too long either, but have you ever considered selling the place? You know, like getting your money and getting out while you still can?"

Kate's eyes met Libby's at the same time Libby's met hers. They held the stare for a long moment, neither one addressing the question. Manny tried rephrasing



the whole thing, explaining what he knew about real estate and why right now was the right time.

“It’s just not an option,” Kate said.

“She likes it here,” Libby said.

And if their tones and straight faces weren’t revealing enough, Grace chimed in.

“You can’t put a price on memories.” She said it without lifting her head from the empty banana peel, which she was now filling with tiny balls made from ripped up napkins.

Libby took the banana peel from Grace, paper balls and all, and put it in her empty mug.

In an effort at apology, Manny offered to take a look at the plumbing himself. He had his own company, and, though he’d explained it to her, Kate wasn’t sure what they did exactly, something that made them carry around dusty toolboxes and drive trucks that took up two parking spaces. The two had met a couple of months earlier, when Manny and his crew rented rooms at the motel to work on a dam project on the “good” river. He was from a few towns over where they had little leagues and strip malls and direct routes to the city. He continued to see Kate even after the dam project was finished.

The motel was nothing special, anyone in town would say. It was wrapped in a white paint that had warped and chipped away over the years, revealing the wood siding

underneath. Rustic, that's what Max always said. Kate thought it looked like the bark of a dying birch tree. Inside the lobby was a host of orphaned odds and ends: the china cabinet that belonged to Libby, the fish tank, an old poker table that had been converted into a front desk, two matching arm chairs, and a group of three booth and table sets that had been donated to them when the family diner went out of business. The orange laminated vinyl matched nothing other than a few of the goldfish, but Max said retro was meant to stand out. This also probably explained his obsession with his mustache. Their living area upstairs was more or less a two-bedroom apartment. The only change they made was turning the kitchenette into a cramped kitchen when Max replaced their hotplate with a full-size stove.

The motel had eight rooms total, four in the west wing and four in the east. Each room had its own problem and each time it was fixed, another was born. At the moment, the tile grout in 7's shower was stained a shade of pink that wouldn't come out no matter what chemical you used or how hard you scrubbed. 4 had a mold ring in the toilet bowl that returned every two days. The desk chair in 5 had a broken seat back, but this was only noticeable if it was being sat in. And 1 was completely out of commission because the last customer that had occupied it had been shaving while heavily intoxicated, nicked the hell out of his face and then passed out on the bed. He bled through the comforter, sheets, and protector, all the way down to the mattress. Kate had other bed linens, sure, but new mattresses were expensive.

Kate didn't invite Manny to spend the night on Saturday. She told him she had a tickle in her throat and she didn't want him catching it. This wasn't a lie, really, because she wasn't quite feeling herself, which often made her feel unwell. A solid night of heavy sleep was what she needed, though she had a feeling it was not what she was going to get. At some point after midnight, Kate shuffled herself down the hall to the bathroom. A light coming from under Grace's door lit the way through the dark. Kate paused there for a moment, just outside the door, to listen. What she could hear sounded like the opening and closing of book after book and when it stopped, silence. On her way back from the bathroom, Kate heard the same noise, but for longer this time. When it stopped, there was a brief silence, and then Grace spoke.

“You're a good girl, Penny, and I've never told you that.”

Either Grace was housing an animal or some other homeless thing, or she was talking to an imaginary friend. Both hypotheses seemed harmless enough and Kate returned to her own room.

Kate never felt particularly close to Grace. Max was the one who had befriended her, took her oddities and episodes as a window into her world, which wasn't unlike that of his own childhood. Max applauded Grace's phases: meowing instead of speaking, wearing no clothes around the motel, refusing to sleep in her bed on Tuesdays and Thursdays. If she acted out in public, he wouldn't correct her the way Kate did. He'd simply remind her that not everyone understood them and their world, and sometimes it was best if it was kept a secret. Coming up on two years without him, she couldn't tell if she missed Max her husband, or Max her mediator,

investigator into all things strange, all things Grace. That was the kind of parent he was, and that was the kind of parent Grace needed.

Of course Kate loved her daughter, that was never a question. Grace was strangely beautiful, with eyes an empty shade of blue and long hair that curled around her neck in the palest of waves. There was a glow about her that suggested sincerity; at least that's what the motel regulars always said. It was the kind of beauty that could take your breath away, and Grace was always the one to leave Kate feeling breathless. Grace was also a huge help around the motel, even for a seven-year-old. She knew how to brew coffee, make hospital corners, and type in confirmation numbers from credit card receipts, something Kate always forgot to do. Grace took a certain pride in the mundanity of motel routine and it was hard for Kate not to envy her because of it.

Later that night, after she'd returned to her own room and hummed herself back to sleep, Kate woke to what sounded like Grace in the living room, rearranging the furniture, giving instructions to no one in particular. It seemed next to impossible that Kate and her imaginary friend, even an army of imaginary friends, could move both the couch and the bookshelf, but somehow they had managed. First thing in the morning, Kate moved everything back to its original spot before Grace woke up.

Late Sunday morning, Manny brought his truck, toolbox, and overnight bag to the motel with a box of donuts to share with the girls. Kate sat on the living room floor with her legs underneath the coffee table. She cracked her neck from side to side and Manny, sitting on the couch behind her, put his heavy hands on her shoulders.

"Feeling any better?" he asked as he pressed his palms onto the outside of her shoulders.

Kate nodded, her mouth full of too much Boston Cream to answer. They'd only been seeing each other for a little over a month, so she thought the donuts were a sweet gesture.

“Sleep the whole night?”

She couldn't tell if this was a reference to Grace's fish tank episode or a genuine question, so she stiffened up. She told him of course she slept the whole night; she has always slept the whole night.

Manny moved his hands from her shoulders along her collarbones and slowly up her neck, kneading her skin with his thick thumbs. Kate thought his hands smelled like grease, but only faintly. She relaxed.

“How do you spell humungous?” Grace asked. She had licked all the powder off two donuts and now stacked the naked rings on the arm of the recliner.

Manny laughed a belly laugh and spelled the word out for her slowly, letter by letter, as if she was writing it down. He asked her about what was so big, but she ignored the question.

After a minute of her rocking in the recliner, the sticky donut tower moving with her, she said, “Let's play checkers.”

And they did. Grace brought the checkerboard out to the living room and played Manny game after game and beat him fair and square more times than not. Manny teased Kate that the only reason he kept coming around was to play with Grace, which made Grace giggle. Manny and Grace didn't do much in the way of communicating; they both had quiet personalities, but Kate appreciated the calmness they gave off. Though it was bothersome there were no customers to care for, no

reason to be downstairs, Kate was content with a Sunday afternoon like this one. She refilled her tea mug three times during the games.

Kate was certain Manny and Grace would have played checkers all day if they could. Libby stopped by around three to take Grace to Sunday school, something she'd insisted on enrolling her in. She must have not been in the mood to shame Kate about Manny, the motel, or Grace, because she stayed in the parking lot and laid on the horn.

With Grace gone, Kate dove into a pile of paperwork and Manny set off to inspect the plumbing problem in the west wing. It took him less than two hours to deliver the news that would dismantle the motel budget: the plumbing repairs would cost more than twice what Kate could afford, even if Manny and his crew did the job themselves. Kate stopped her work and cradled her head in her hands.

“How? How is this even possible?”

Manny tried to explain. Something about water supply. Something about surface water. Something about Liquid District being a sick, sad, Podunk town. Something about filthy water, faulty plumbing, and irreparable damage. But Kate wasn't listening. Her entire world was coming down around her and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“I know you don't want to hear this, but it's just gonna get worse,” Manny said. He came around to her side of the desk and crouched down to be eye level with her. “You oughtta think about selling, Kate.”

Selling the motel meant abandoning the family business, and abandoning the family business meant leaving Liquid District for good. Kate knew there were

endless possibilities outside of this place, but she never wanted endless. She wanted normal, she wanted just fine, and she told Manny this.

“But this place isn’t normal, that’s the point. Don’t you know what else is out there? You could do anything. Grace could do anything.”

Kate thought about shaking her head, but instead shrugged her shoulders. Grace was the whole point—she was the glue to this motel that reminded Kate she needed to stay. She couldn’t uproot Grace like a garden flower and plant her somewhere else and expect her to thrive. If anything, she’d shut down more, close her petals to the sun and shrivel into a brown existence. Grace needed this place more than she needed anything else, and if that was the only thing Kate was sure of, it was enough.

“Just think about it,” Manny said.

But Kate didn’t have to think about it. She opened the bottom drawer of her desk and then went upstairs, leaving Manny to look through the pictures. In every drawing Grace had ever brought home from school, a motel was the backdrop. Whether it was a drawing of her favorite animal (octopus), her favorite food (eggplant parmesan), or what she wanted to be when she grew up (motel keeper), they were all drawn into or around a motel, *their* motel.

Kate woke the next morning realizing she’d slept the entire night with no disturbances. Her muscles relaxed instantly, letting go of their grip on whatever anxiety they were trying to choke out. She’d been tense the entire day yesterday: teeth

clenched, joints tight, unsure as to what Grace and Penny had up their sleeves and how she would go about explaining it, explaining Grace. And, despite the inevitable bad budget news, Kate was feeling relieved.

It was early and still dark and Manny hadn't stirred. Kate dressed quietly in the dark, groping around for her slacks and flats that she liked to wear on Mondays. The next reservation wasn't until Tuesday morning, but she needed to get a hold of her handyman before then. As she left, she was careful to shut the door lightly. She liked her mornings to herself.

Kate felt along the wall for the light switch in the kitchen and flicked it on. From her spot in the doorway she could see straight into the living room, where Grace sat Indian-style, facing the wall, a piece of sidewalk chalk in her hand. Both of the walls Kate could see were covered in tic-tac-toe boards drawn in chalk.

"Grace!"

Grace whipped her head around.

"What are you doing?" As she walked closer, she could see Grace also had a flashlight and a tally sheet, which was divided into a "G" and "P" column.

No response.

"You need to talk to me."

Grace dropped the chalk into her lap and rubbed her hand on the carpet.

"We need to talk about Penny." Kate hated doing this, being so confrontational. She was always worried about Grace shutting down even more.



Kate picked her daughter up by her armpits and put her in the recliner. She brought her a glass of chocolate milk, maybe as a bribe, maybe as a peace offering. Then she knelt down on a pillow next to the chair.

“How did you even reach up there?” Kate asked, not expecting an answer. She was taking in the entire living room now, noting that the game boards reached higher than what Grace could reach on her own. The situation was starting to disturb her.

She made Grace stay put while she scrubbed up the chalk work. To reach the higher boards, Kate had to dip the Swiffer into the bucket and extend it up the walls. When she finished, she turned on all the lamps in the living room (there were four of them) to inspect her work. Then, she turned back to Grace in the chair.

“Tell me about Penny.”

Again, nothing. Grace’s face was expressionless and Kate wondered if it were possible to sleepwalk and drink chocolate milk at the same time.

“You do know a Penny, don’t you?”

Grace took the cup from her mouth and paused, and Kate imagined she was consulting her friend, devising a plan to best handle the situation.

“The motel has lots of pennies,” Grace answered, pulling a handful of copper coins from her pocket and smiling.

“I’ve heard you talking to her. Late at night. In your room. Out here. By the fish tank.” Kate had no strategy in this. Grace was weird, yes, but never exactly defiant, and never destructive. “You’re not in trouble, Gracie.”

Grace was quiet for a while, but Kate was determined and never moved, never even broke eye contact. The fire hall siren was sounding, stirring all the neighborhood dogs into action.

“Fine. I know a Penny and that Penny knows about you. She is my friend. She is a private matter.”

A private matter? What did that even mean? Kate was so taken aback by her daughter’s answer that she didn’t speak. So Grace did have an imaginary friend. That was normal enough. But Penny herself wasn’t normal. This wasn’t the kind of imaginary friend that could be found at tea parties or ice cream outings, Kate knew that much. It was the kind that did things, things that made Kate question if Penny wasn’t imaginary.

“There are conditions,” Grace said.

“Conditions?”

“Yes, like rules. You are not allowed to address Penny. That makes her nervous. You also aren’t allowed to ask where she is, if she’s here, or how she’s doing. Capiche?”

Grace pronounced the Italian slang wrong, meaning she must have read it somewhere, but still understood its context. All Kate could think to do was nod. Grace got up from the chair and left the room and Kate stayed there, kneeling on her pillow, trying to figure out how that conversation turned around on her so quickly.

That evening, Kate thought about holing up in her room with a bottle of wine and a bowl of popcorn and calling it a night. With Manny away at the hardware store

haggling prices for the repairs, she felt alone and unprepared for her Monday night routine with Grace.

They got Chinese food like they usually did: an order of orange chicken, pork fried rice, and French fries. The Chinese restaurant in town had to double as a burger joint to stay in business. Sometimes, instead of the orange chicken, they'd get a cheeseburger and split it, and it wasn't half bad.

When the food came, the girls spread out their work on the front desk downstairs and got to it. Grace started on her homework while she ate and Kate busied herself with the logbook. After dinner, Kate handed Grace the list of reservations for that week and Grace started making welcome cards for the guests. When she was a bit younger, this had been Max's idea to help Grace learn the alphabet, and, despite Kate's doubts, it actually worked. Last year in kindergarten, Grace was the only student who could spell her own name, her teacher's names, and all of her classmates' names, though she was rarely asked to do so.

There were only four cards to make this week, and Grace took her time on them. She concentrated hard on her E's—her first instinct was always to make them backwards—and she didn't mess up on a single one. Kate had the template out, the example card Max had made when they started this routine, but Grace knew the entire greeting by heart. She had even memorized the map of town she liked to draw for guests on the back. And, scale aside, the motel was still the biggest and most practiced picture.

“How did school go today?” The silence was something Kate always struggled with.

“It went well,” Grace said.

“Learn anything you can teach me?”

Grace looked at her, but didn’t answer. She knew right away that was one of Max’s questions and Kate was out of line to ask it.

“Is there anything you want to do this weekend?”

“I’m doing everything I want to do,” Grace said, smiling to herself.

For some reason, Kate knew that had something to do with Penny. She wanted to ask Grace to clarify, to explain what she meant, but she was afraid that would be violating the rules that surrounded Penny.

On edge, Kate cleared the table and brought the dishes upstairs. When she came back down and Grace was still smiling, Kate felt the need to survey the area. She didn’t trust this Penny, regardless of her existence, and she didn’t trust Grace with Penny. Kate checked her chair, the floor surrounding her chair, and her general area of the table. Nothing seemed disturbed, but Grace kept on smiling. Penny was here, Kate could sense that, and she was doing or saying things that were not privy to Kate.

More than a week had passed and Penny was still around. Kate was coming up with every excuse to keep Manny’s visits short. So far, she had succeeded in finding all of Grace and Penny’s games before Manny caught wind. Even on the evening Manny stayed over, Kate managed to wake herself in the middle of the night and untie all the things that Grace and Penny had taken to tying into bows: shoe laces, shirt sleeves,

extension cords. Anything tie-able, they found it and turned it into a knot with two loops.

The day Manny approached Kate with an armful of phonebooks from Grace's room is a day she should have seen coming. In an attempt to give Kate more time with a decision, Manny was doing what he could to jerry-rig the plumbing problems. He had to look at the pipes in Grace's room, which led to the phonebook discovery. He set down what he was carrying and took Kate by the hand up to Grace's room.

In her double-closet, Grace had removed all her toys, books, winter coats, and extra bedding and had built some kind of house or fort out of phonebooks. They weren't the local ones that were delivered by the Lion's Club every year. They were legitimate yellow pages, two and a half pounders. It was astonishing, really, complete with windows from which she had hung baby blankets as curtains. Eye-balling it, Manny said there had to be more than seventy or eighty there. Kate was struck by her typical contrast of awe and utter confusion at her daughter's actions.

"Where could she have gotten these? How could she carry them?" Manny lifted a book to demonstrate the weight.

"Maybe someone was recycling them? Maybe school was giving them away?" Kate tried to grab onto anything logical.

"But this many? It's almost impossible. She must have been at this for weeks. Or she had help."

Penny was not real, Kate was almost certain, but she had to agree with Manny: how could a seven-year-old even manage something like this? And how could Kate have been so unaware of her daughter dragging up pounds and pounds of

phonebooks? She felt her eyes filling with water and put her tongue between her teeth to hold it all in.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. We’ll just ask her when she gets home. I’m sure it will all make sense.”

“It won’t,” Kate said through a mouthful of saliva that wouldn’t go down, “it never makes sense with Grace.” She felt guilty as soon as she’d said it.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. She’s just been acting out lately and it’s making me stressed.”

“Acting out? How?” He held the phonebook up as an example. “Like this?”

“Just acting strange recently, that’s all,” Kate said. She felt bad about the recently.

Manny stood silent, looking at the fort. “Do you think it’s because of me? You know, being around so much and stuff?”

Kate assured him it wasn’t. It was impossible, she said, since Grace’s behavior started before he came around. She avoided revealing any specifics. Manny then asked if it might have something to do with Max’s death, some alternate form of grieving. Kate assured him that wasn’t the case either.

“Have you ever thought about taking her to see someone? Maybe not a grief counselor exactly, but just someone to help her express herself?”

“It wouldn’t do anything Manny, just trust me.”

Maybe he would understand the whole Penny thing. Imaginary friends weren’t all that weird for girls of Grace’s age. But if she told him that, she’d have to tell him it all, everything down to her motherly guilt and inability to bond with her

own daughter. Kate wanted “normal” so badly and she knew her life was anything but that.

“It might help. You never know until you try.”

But they did try. Libby forced Kate to take Grace to a counselor after the accident, something Max swore he’d never do to his own child. Maybe it helped, maybe it didn’t, Grace was too young and too aloof to tell.

“It won’t.”

Kate didn’t tell Manny about Penny. Grace had made it clear that Penny was private, and even if that meant Kate couldn’t be a part of it, she still felt privileged to be on Grace’s team for once.

To relieve Kate of her stresses, both motel and Grace related, Manny took her out for a date night, or date day, as he called it when he picked her up at ten in the morning. He told her that the only way she was going to have a good time was to get out of Liquid District, even if it was for a few hours.

He picked her up in his truck and took what he called the scenic route to downtown Potsdam. As Manny narrated, Kate watched rivers give way to farms and farms turn into towns with streetlights and crosswalks. She had been out of Liquid District before, but more as a child than as an adult, and mostly to visit family in Massena or Lake Placid, one time even Albany. Nothing she had seen ever impressed her enough to stick in her memory, nothing to make her long for what she didn’t already have. The only memory that stuck with her from outside of Liquid District

was skating on the Olympic speedskating oval. That was the Christmas she broke her arm in two places.

A light rain started to fall. The passenger side wiper didn't clear the windshield of rain so much as smear it, but Manny didn't appear fazed. They drove right through Norfolk, where Manny was from, and he rushed to point things out to her: his barber, his bank, the best sub shop in northern New York State. He promised to bring her back one day soon, her and Grace, so they could meet everyone he always talked about them to.

It surprised Kate to see Manny so giddy over what she considered the little things: tattoo shops, college campuses, yoga and Pilates studios. He didn't even care that it was raining, or maybe he was too distracted to notice. His eyes got so big taking everything in that they reflected entire buildings in their glaze. Manny's ridiculous excitement made her curious but she couldn't quite absorb his buzz. The lights, the noise, the smells, they all made her dizzy.

Over dinner, Manny confessed his childhood obsession with going to a big city for college and his grave disappointment for never even trying to apply. Kate was half way through a bottle of wine herself and thought Manny was being foolish if downtown Potsdam made him think of a big city. She was born and raised in Liquid District and even she knew the difference. If she was any deeper into the wine, she might have said those thoughts.

“Isn't it impressive?” Manny asked, referring to the entire town.

Her wine tongue wanted to say not really, but she bit it instead. “You know I'm not looking to be impressed, Manny.”



“No I know, but doesn’t a place like this give you hope? Make you think that maybe you haven’t done everything you were meant to do?”

Seeing people on the sidewalk that she didn’t know but who knew each other didn’t make her hopeful, it made her homesick. She liked knowing her neighbors, her regulars, her friends, and everyone in-between. Kate didn’t want much out of life, but she knew she didn’t want this and she knew she didn’t want *nothing*.

“Honestly? It’s a bit much for me.” She blotted her face with her napkin, then returned it to her lap.

Manny reached across the table for her hands, and she gave them to him willingly. He rubbed his thumbs along the ridge of her knuckles and signaled for the check. They skipped dessert and the movie without having to discuss it.

On their way home it seemed the smaller the town line they crossed, the harder the rain came down. They held hands over the center console, Manny’s palm on bottom, cradling every bit of hers. He talked a bit about rivers, rain, and water levels, but eventually gave into the silence that so badly wanted to cushion them.

Back at the motel, they pulled into the private drive, the one that ran along the side of the motel and back to the storage areas. And, even through the dark, through Manny’s smeared windshield and the rain, they both knew what they were looking at as soon as his headlights hit it: Grace, who was supposed to be down the road at Libby’s, sitting on the roof of the shed. Manny put his truck in park and they both ran to the girl, leaving the doors open behind them.

She was wearing her too-small nightgown that was soaked through several times over by the time they reached her. Both Kate and Manny shouted up to her

from the ground, but her back was to them and she didn't turn. Kate circled the shed trying to find a way up. With no luck, Manny ran to get the ladder from inside.

He returned with it, running at full speed while lifting the entire thing above his shoulders and over his head. With the ladder held high, he looked like an old biplane with double-stacked wings trying to get off the ground. Manny held the ladder against the shed while Kate climbed up. Grace turned her head to watch as Kate tried to find a grip on the shingles.

Once she was up, Kate noticed the many stacks of pennies along the apex of the roof. They weren't high, maybe five or six pennies per stack, but there were so many stacks that Kate knew Grace had been coming up here for quite some time. Kate sat identical to her daughter, with her knees pulled up under her chin and arms wrapped around to keep them in place. She didn't know if she should scold Grace or question her or hold her until they both stopped shivering.

After a long silence, Kate said, "Sure is raining out here."

She knew as soon as she said it that she would get nothing in return. Grace didn't need anyone to humor her or state the obvious. She was a smart girl who knew what she wanted. She'd always been that way and Max had always known it. Though she was nervous about breaking the rules, about upsetting Grace and setting them back instead of forward, Kate knew what Grace needed.

"I hope Penny knows I'm not mad at her."

"She knows, Mom, she knows the way a soul knows."

There was, inside of Kate, a very modest collapse. Not a faint but a sort of falling, a light-headedness that struck her fast in the forehead and reverberated down

the rest of her body, leaving her toes and fingertips with a tingle. Kate wasn't sure what it meant, as she usually wasn't, but something in Grace's tone told her that the stalemate was over. There was no surrender, no resignation, just a sincere understanding that underneath it all, they only had each other to hold onto.

Manny tried to offer up handfuls of towels and jackets, but neither mother nor daughter made an effort to respond. They both sat there with knees tucked up under chins, content to be only in each other's company, despite the rain.

## FRICTION

I dance with people who are older than me. Someone told me years ago never to try it, but here I am, cooped up in ballrooms and dance clubs cavorting with people often three times my age. I can't stop, and I don't want to stop.

I used to hide it, back when I didn't want to risk what was left of my name. So I would go to school, sign my name in on the tennis roster, then leave. No one ever noticed, and if they did, they never asked. I knew about Ronnie not graduating because of it, and Jean too. Actually, I think Jean probably graduated, but got absorbed somewhere into the nothingness of the habit soon after.

When I first started, I only went to Teddy's Lounge. The place was dimly lit and elegant, and there were always two older men there that I could count on for a Rumba Hour partner. The taller man, the one who wore the velvet vest and smelled like a cob pipe, had a firm grip and large hands that straightened my slouching shoulders. He adjusted his stride to mine to make the hip sway more natural. It seemed something of a fatherly gesture, like he was shortening an old golf club for me. When we got close enough, I could read this in his eyes. The other man was completely bald and would wipe his halo of shining sweat with his forearms, then press them against my lower back. That dampness became familiar and loosened my limbs. I began to miss it once he passed.

The better I got at managing my stigma, the more places I frequented. When the heat died out at Teddy's and the crowd retreated to the bar, I would go next door to Havana. Things were all a bit sexier there, so I never hesitated to shed my cardigan. The smoky atmosphere helped darken my virgin glow and hide the logo on my tennis uniform. I danced the Mambo there, sometimes the Salsa. There was always a woman by the door who reminded me of my mother, minus the stale liquor under her breath. She was of dark complexion and called on me by simply tapping the nape of my neck. Even though the dances we did together made me sweat, I got goose bumps every time her fingernails dug into my hip bones. I didn't mind the marks she left. I looked at them like trophies when I was home and wishing I wasn't.

Sometimes men took my hand, other times women, but it was always someone older than me. If it wasn't my hand it was my hip, if it wasn't my hip it was my waist. No matter what, there was always contact, an embrace that was meant for me. In dance, it was appropriate.

When I first started, people would stare. I would walk past dropped jaws and sharp fingers all the way to the floor. My age was obvious. The black and blue around my eyes made everyone murmur, yet no one ever turned me away. I was new, I was different, and I didn't have much to lose.

Nowadays I find myself at more and more venues: festivals, receptions, anything of the sort. And I guess you could say I have regulars. They wait for me to show up, backs against the wall until I enter. They approach me. I don't know their names and they don't buy me drinks. Few words are ever exchanged between us. We simply dance on those wooden floors we've come to call home. They are mature and

I am still small. Their fists are tight but not cocked, the pressure around my hand like an instinctive protection from any harm in the wild. Their mouths are open but the only thing that comes out is the hot breath of a stranger on my neck. With my gaze to the hardwood floor, I put my feet in the path of theirs and watch the trail we make catch fire from the friction created between our bodies.

## SUB ROSA

Lana never intended to hide her pregnancy from her husband. This year was going to be the year they sold their house and moved to Ontario—the year they renovated the cabin at the lake to make it their forever home. A baby would complicate things, maybe even compromise them, and Lana needed time to decide which she wanted more.

In the beginning of their relationship, Lana and Jimmy had marginally discussed children. They would mention it after watching a mother and child share an ice cream cone on the sidewalk, or when they left Jimmy's sister's house after a night of babysitting his nephews. Then they'd giggle about the idea of little versions of themselves running amuck—Lana saying how she hoped they would have Jimmy's deep blue eyes and Jimmy saying how they better have Lana's straight teeth and from there the conversation would spawn into faces and chests and asses and they sometimes wouldn't make it out of the car before they took to complimenting in other ways.

As their friends married and started having babies of their own, Jimmy had asked Lana if she could see herself having kids, really, and Lana had said she guessed so, but having kids should feel more like a decision than a guess. Jimmy tried to marry Lana more than once during those years, but Lana wanted to wait until being married didn't feel like a phase. And once they did wed, the following five years

brought the house and cat and cabin and loans and somewhere in the middle of it all, they forgot to continue the conversation.

At the end of spring, Jimmy was let go from the construction company, and because Lana's job at the university only churned out paychecks until the end of the semester, he got a job at Geico to make ends meet for the summer. Lana understood his selling insurance as a sacrifice—the last time Jimmy wore a shirt and tie was on their wedding day. And though the job benefits were good and Jimmy wasn't the worst salesman, this sequence of events only accelerated his desire to move. They scheduled a meeting with a realtor for the first Monday in July, which left them a little less than a week to get the house into shape for showing. They'd tackled everything inside, saving the last day for the garage and yard.

“Oatmeal or toast?” Jimmy asked Sunday morning. He opened both sets of curtains in the bedroom, allowing the light to swallow the bed from every angle.

Lana pulled her face from the pillow and looked at the clock—it was past ten. “I overslept,” she said.

“Again. I tried waking you at eight.”

Lana had no recollection of this. Before she was pregnant, Lana had been a light sleeper and often woke with the birds and the smears of light that rubbed the horizon. Now only nine weeks in, her sleeps were so deep, so absorbing she didn't feel Jimmy leave the bed in the mornings, didn't hear the coffee grinder or the shower. She imagined herself in the remaining thirty weeks more comatose than conscious, the growing thing inside her making it harder and harder for Lana to leave the bed before the sun had warmed the hardwood floors.



“I’m sorry,” she said. “You’re upset.”

Jimmy wore an old pair of carpenter jeans and a white T-shirt ringed yellow in the armpits. The cat weaved figure eights between his legs.

“I just thought you’d be more excited about the projects, about the move in general.”

The garage was their project this weekend—cleaning, organizing, getting rid of things they’d forgotten they owned. The less they had to pack and ship over the border, the better. When they’d first discussed it, evaluating the essentials had excited Lana. She thought it would be a nice change to her mornings and afternoons she’d been spending glued to the computer screen, reading forums and blogs by mothers who resented their babies, who were sick of their lack of sleep and their clothes always smelling like breast milk, who longed for their pre-baby lives when they didn’t have to schedule childcare to take a fucking bubble bath. She needed a project, a distraction to keep her from calculating diaper costs or seeing stretch marks in the mirror where there were none. But now the thought of the stuffy garage in a northeastern July and the humidity sucking at her bones was enough to remove her from the bed sheets and bury her head in the toilet. Lana passed on Jimmy’s offers of oatmeal or toast and instead scrambled herself five eggs over Jimmy’s leftover steak from the night before.

When she joined him in the garage, Jimmy had already lugged tubs down from the storage above the rafters. Christmas tinsel, hand rakes, and old magazines littered the ground in piles. The patio furniture they’d been forgetting to pull out the last few summers was set up in the middle of the driveway—chairs pushed in at the

table's four sides, the unopened umbrella sprouting from the center. At the curbside, Jimmy ripped at the pull cord of an old lawn mower, the chokes and gurgles echoing under the canopy of willow branches in their front yard.

"Piece of shit." Jimmy kicked at the engine with his heel. "I knew that guy was bullshitting me."

"Guess that's the start of the junk pile then?" Lana said.

He pushed the mower to one side of the driveway as the metal slap of Violet Tate's screen door sounded. A second later Tammy the Chihuahua was at the fence, barking at Jimmy through the diamonds of chain link separating their yards.

Violet Tate was a retired research scientist who'd transferred her observation skills from the lab to the neighborhood and Lana often felt she and Jimmy had become her new research subjects. Often, when Lana woke parched in the middle of the night, from the window above the kitchen sink she could see clear into Violet's living room—lights on, curtains open, Violet in her recliner with her dog asleep on her kneecaps, staring straight back. Jimmy told her to ease up, the old lady might be sleeping, and if she wasn't then who cared, she was probably just lonely and there was no harm in that. She'd been a widow since they'd moved in.

"Hello Hensen family," Violet said from her front porch. "Oh Tammy, no no."

Lana's mouth went dry. Though she'd kept the news of the pregnancy from Jimmy, Violet had known for two weeks. Lana hadn't planned on telling Violet at all, but she was left with little choice when in the garden, a groundswell of emotion Lana could not identify or cap took hold of her body and her knees gave out and she dry heaved until she cried and the only one around to pick up the pieces had been Violet.

And despite Lana's distaste for her nosey next-door neighbor and her general mistrust about the woman, it had felt good to have cool hands cup her face and in that moment, Lana would have told her anything. She'd since asked Violet to keep quiet, and any interaction between her neighbor and husband put Lana on edge.

Jimmy greeted Violet in return. Lana said nothing and instead tried to brainstorm reasons to abandon their weekend project and go inside. Before she came up with anything, Violet spoke her way.

"Hello, Miss Lana. How are you feeling today?"

Lana knew she was referring to the morning sickness they'd discussed the day before, so when Lana responded, she spoke through gritted teeth. "I'm feeling fine, Violet. Thank you."

"Starting spring cleaning a little late, Hensens." Violet phrased it as more of a statement than a question.

"Actually, we're getting ready for a move," Jimmy said.

And though she already knew this because Lana had told her, Violet shrieked and clapped her hands. "Exciting times!"

She pressed Jimmy for details and Jimmy obliged. As he filled her in, Violet made her way toward the fence. She wore a straw hat tilted down over her eyes and a pink cardigan, despite the sun and humid air. In her hand she held a spray bottle of weed killer and her nails shined pearly, like the inside of a snail's shell.

Lana moved closer to monitor the conversation, until a burst of vanilla musk hit her nose and turned her stomach in an instant. She retreated to the patio furniture and sat, the sun already warming the black iron and wire mesh of the chair, doing her

best not to look exhausted. A box of tangled holiday lights sat at her feet and Lana busied herself undoing the knots.

“Quiet places are good for raising families,” Violet said. “A lake is perfect.”

Lana shot a glance at Violet and Jimmy, but Jimmy was only nodding, taking in Violet’s advice politely like he always did.

“Here, I didn’t know if you had some,” Violet said. She passed the bottle of weed killer over the fence without explanation.

“Oh, thank you.” Jimmy palmed the bottle.

“Pill bugs are bad this year. And they like your weeds. Now they are liking your tree.” She pointed to their willow tree whose leaves brushing the ground were beginning to spoil. “They don’t like my tree, see? No weeds, no bugs.”

Lana pursed her lips. Aside from her constant surveillance, Violet also gave consistent side-by-side comparison of their yards. Hers was a riot of color—purple fountain grass tucked under her planter boxes, red-and-yellow dahlias around the border of her fence, a sidewalk lined by white flowers clustered like butterflies atop tall, greening spikes.

Lana and Jimmy’s garden was edged with a brick border and robust boxwood bushes desperately in need of a trim framed the front porch. The few dandelions that breached the grass line didn’t bother Lana much. Growing up, her mother had called them fairy clocks and as a young girl Lana spent many of her summer mornings picking and drying the golden sprouts before they turned into tiny white globes that could blow away with the wind.

“But don’t use that around her.” Violet gestured from the bottle to Lana.

Lana jumped up before Violet could say any more. “Oh he won’t,” Lana said. “He’s always so careful about chemicals.” Lana rubbed the small of his back.

Jimmy applied the weed killer while Violet tended to her own yard and he kept at it long after she’d gone inside, digging at the taproots of weeds with the garden tools Lana was trying to organize. By the time he’d finished the sun had tucked behind the house and Lana lay on her back on the driveway, allowing the day’s stored heat to lull her in and out of sleep. The yard looked better in the glow of the sunset than it had in the bright afternoon, free of the crab grass and creeping thistle now sitting in bushels near the trash, golden eyes of the plucked dandelions peeking out from the piles of green scrap.

The next morning Jimmy was up and gone to work before Lana woke. She was certain she would have slept until noon had her stomach not wakened her. Though she showed no visible signs of the pregnancy yet, Lana assumed it was only a matter of time before all the extra calories started to show somewhere, but even her bouts of paranoia couldn’t keep her from the fridge.

Because their garage project yesterday had been overtaken by the yard project and Lana’s sudden exhaustion, after breakfast Lana went out to continue sorting. An old mattress stood in the far back of the garage blocking buckets and containers of softball gear and car washing supplies. Lana slid the mattress down until it slapped the ground, upsetting a cloud of dust and leaf litter that swirled around her nose. In

need of fresh air, she pressed the button to open the automatic door and when it retreated to the ceiling of the garage, there stood Violet Tate in her driveway

“It’s supposed to be a hot one,” Violet said when Lana stepped outside. “I was just coming over to say you better hydrate. These are fragile times.” She gestured at Lana’s stomach.

“Please don’t start,” Lana said.

“But I’ve been having dreams lately,” Violet said. “They mean something.”

Since Lana had shared her secret with Violet last week, the woman had taken every opportunity in Jimmy’s absence to saturate Lana in old wives’ tales and superstitions about pregnancy. No eating crab, she’d told her, unless you want the baby to be born a thief. No attending weddings, unless you want to gamble the baby’s luck. Home improvements guarantee the baby will be born with a facial deformity. And lastly but certainly not least, a pregnant woman must guard her thoughts, for what affects a woman’s mind will also affect her heart and, in turn, the baby’s. Lana wondered, was there any truth in what Violet was saying, if her baby would be born with Lana’s distaste for nosey neighbors.

“How can you believe in all of this?” Lana asked. “You’re a scientist.”

“I was. But I’ve since found my spiritual side,” Violet said.

“Lovely. Please keep your incense and Ouija boards away from me.” Lana turned her back to her neighbor. She stacked piles of magazines into the wheelbarrow, then stood behind to hoist it onto the wheel.

“Careful,” Violet said.

Lana shushed her and wheeled the unbalanced load out of the garage and down the driveway toward the recycling bin. Outside the high noon sun was bright and hung alone in the azure sky, and its bright rays felt like arms reaching to pluck the pupils from Lana's eyes. As she pushed, her arms ached and her stomach churned and a breathlessness made home in her chest. Lana blinked, trying to clear away the dizzy but before she could understand what was happening the wheelbarrow tipped to the right and fell, scraping its side along the driveway as it burnt out its momentum. Lana fell too, a quick drop to her knees that put holes in her sweatpants and scuffed both palms of her hands.

"I told you not to overdo it!" Violet yelled as she tended to Lana.

Lana nodded and brushed small stones from her scrapes, blocking out Violet's other advice concerning heat exhaustion, hydration, and whatever else she thought was relevant. Lana did not break easily, not when she finished her first Half Ironman, not when she snapped her radius clear through her skin, not even when she backed out of the driveway without looking and rolled over the napping body of her German shepherd, and then scooped him in the cradle of her arms and blew breaths into his open mouth until his body went limp. And now here she was, losing herself to a quick trip down the driveway. It was as if her body was betraying her, stealing her hard earned composure and stamina to make room for something she wasn't yet sure she wanted to be a part of her.

Lana cracked her neck side-to-side, then rose to her feet. She accepted Violet's arm for support and allowed the lady to lead her inside. Violet sat her at the table and had her drink two glasses of water, then inquired about the hydrogen

peroxide. As Violet cleaned out Lana's scratches, a car door shut outside and Jimmy entered the kitchen. Lana snapped out of her haze.

"What happened? Are you okay?" he asked. He squatted at his wife's knees to inspect the damage.

"I'm fine, just a klutz," Lana said. She explained the wheelbarrow, the heavy load, the hot sun, refusing to share the morning sickness and low blood pressure.

"What are you doing home?"

"It's Monday. The realtor should be here any minute." Jimmy pointed to the calendar where Lana herself had written the appointment.

Lana jumped up and apologized. She thanked Violet for her help and made sure to watch her leave before taking a shower.

By the time Lana returned to the kitchen, the realtor was already seated at the table with an iced tea in front of her, telling Jimmy about her daughter's cheerleading competition in Orlando. Jimmy picked at his fingers but still made eye contact.

After Lana introduced herself, the three of them did a walkthrough, the realtor noting things on a clipboard she carried close to her chest. Then she sat them down with a list of homes comparable to theirs that recently sold in the area. Her strategies for effectively marketing their house included hosting an open house. And because presentation was already being addressed in the form of the Hensen's cleaning, they scheduled the first open house for the following Friday. Lana felt like everything was happening too fast, though she had no reason to say so. Jimmy had to leave shortly after the realtor and Lana walked him down the driveway. He kissed her cheek and told her he'd see her at five.



“You haven’t told Jimmy yet.” Violet stood on her porch crossing her arms. Tammy yipped from inside.

Lana told her no, she had not. She just wanted to understand what was happening first, what her options were. If Jimmy found out, her options would be fewer because Jimmy’s excitement might swallow her too. Violet moved to the fence.

“Don’t you think he has a right to know?”

“Jesus, Violet, of course I do,” Lana said. “It’s not that easy.”

“Not that easy?” Violet said. “You’re the one making it difficult!” She raised her voice, setting off Tammy who was now perched in the bay window watching them.

“The idea of having a baby scares me,” Lana said. “It changes everything.”

Above them the sun dimmed, shifting their shadows ever so slightly, but when Lana looked up there were still no clouds.

“Maybe the baby isn’t the scary part,” Violet said. She bent down over her dahlias and spread a petal between her thumb and forefinger. “Maybe becoming a mother is.”

But Violet herself had never been a mother, never given birth to any children of her own or forced into a corner that was anything like Lana’s, and Lana told her this. Violet had no right offering her advice or insight because she’d never gone through what Lana was going through.

“You don’t want to listen to me? Fine.” Violet stood from her crouching position and headed toward her door. “Call your own mother then.” She opened her screen door and shut it behind her, then shut the front door too.

Lana had not spoken with her mother in five years. Her mother had made it clear at an early age that she was not one to come around uninvited and Lana had made it clear at an earlier age that she was not a person who needed. The circumstances of their pregnancies bore no resemblance. Lana's mother had been one of those girls in grade school who played too much dodgeball—too loud, too messy to be real girls so they'd have a lot of sex later to make up for it, at least that's how she'd explained it to Lana when she got old enough to start asking those questions. So what advice could she possibly have to offer a married, stable woman who was in a perfectly good position to have a child? But, despite the fact they had not spoken in so long, there were no grudges between them and there never would be. Lana knew her mother carried no guilt, harbored no regret, and kept Lana as close to her as she could until Lana started drawing her own lines in the sand.

Since the day she snapped at Violet, Lana lived like a recluse. From behind closed curtains and turned blinds, she feared Violet would come stumbling out the door with her superstitious nonsense at the exact moment Jimmy decided to mow the lawn or grill dinner in the backyard. The only way she could think to prevent it was to keep Jimmy inside as well. It was simple at first—she made sure to have dinner ready before he was home from work and enticed him with movie evenings or time in the bedroom to keep him from tending to the yard.

And on the days she could not avoid trips to the store or bank, Lana tried to make her comings and goings as soundless as possible. But, because Violet seemed to

intuit Lana's intentions before Lana herself, she'd often find herself face-to-face with her irrational neighbor who waved olive branches at her still-flat stomach and shouted gender guesses across the lawns.

On the rare occasions she could slip out of the house unscathed, Lana found it difficult to concentrate on her errands. Her days of tunnel vision and focus behind her, Lana couldn't help but be more aware of the world around her, the world she could soon be adding to—teenagers at the skate park smoking cigarettes they were obviously too young to buy, and toddlers at the grocery store throwing temper tantrums, wrapping themselves around their mother's ankles when they didn't get what they wanted. With Violet's accusation still ringing in her ears, Lana wondered how to avoid such events, if it was even possible as a parent to prevent those things.

The closer they got to their open house date, the more difficult it was to keep tabs on Jimmy. There were few foods Lana could now stomach, let alone cook, and Jimmy was getting sick of brown rice and strawberries and cheese quesadillas. Her breasts had grown so tender that taking off her bra at night was painful enough, and when Jimmy cupped and gripped at them during sex her eyes watered. And Jimmy's impatience with his job seemed to be growing at the same rate as her symptoms and Lana knew something had to give before her belly button popped and her feet swelled to look like dinner buns hung below her ankles.

The evening before their open house, Jimmy came home from work with a milk jug full of purple sludge in his hand.

"What's that?" Lana asked.

“It’s for you, from Violet,” he said. He set it on the table with the day’s mail and shuffled through the letters.

Lana tried reading his face for signs of the news before responding. “What is it?”

“A juice cleanse or something. She said you’re supposed to drink it all in one day for it to work.”

“Okay,” Lana said. She paused to consider her next words before deciding not to say anything more. On the table, drops of condensation slid down the jug’s curves. Lana reached for the container and put it in the refrigerator. Holding her breath, she grabbed a dishtowel to wipe up the ring of sweat. She emptied her lungs in one low stream when Jimmy spoke.

“You two seem to be getting along,” he said.

“Me and Violet?”

“You’re at least tolerating her more,” Jimmy said. “I mean, she was in our house last week. If that’s not progress, I don’t know what is.”

Lana said sure, perhaps she was warming up to the woman. Jimmy said it probably had to do with the fact she wouldn’t be their neighbor much longer. He’d opened a beer and held the bottle’s neck between his fingers, tilting it at Lana. She shook her head.

“Come on, let’s celebrate,” Jimmy said. “To tomorrow’s open house.”

When she hesitated to return the cheers, Jimmy asked what was wrong. Earlier that day, Lana had noticed a scheduling error on her part: her ten-week checkup was during the open house. She told Jimmy there was a staff development at the school

tomorrow and she needed to go, to keep her doors open and bridges unburned, she said.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he said. He pointed to the calendar.

She apologized, told him she hadn’t noticed the schedule conflict until that morning, which was the truth.

“First you forget about our projects, then the realtor, and now you forget about the open house? I’m starting to think you don’t want to move after all.”

“That’s not it. Everything’s just happening so fast,” Lana said. “I feel unprepared.”

“Unprepared? We’ve been saving forever for this,” Jimmy said.

And he was right, they had. A pang of guilt struck Lana in the gut. She didn’t want Jimmy to think she was inconsiderate or indecisive about the move they’d been planning most their marriage. But telling him the truth worried her more. The last conversation they’d had about children, he’d called her selfish for not wanting them, for not wanting to upset the course of their lives. Inconsiderate was better than selfish, for now.

“Are you sure there isn’t anything you want to tell me?” Jimmy asked.

Lana’s panic from earlier crept back up her throat. She wondered what Violet had said when she handed Jimmy the jug, what kind of baby nonsense she might have slipped along with it just as revenge for Lana’s hurtful comments.

Jimmy stepped closer to her. “Something that will help explain all these changes of heart so I don’t feel like a fool?”

Lana hung her head and said nothing. Though he hadn't had more than a couple sips, Lana could smell the beer on Jimmy's breath and her stomach swirled.

"If moving to the lake is no longer a we thing, now is the time to say it."

But Lana couldn't say anything and instead retreated to the bathroom and threw up the three quesadillas she'd had for lunch. Jimmy stood outside the bathroom and spoke to the closed door.

"Maybe we won't even have the open house."

Lana woke first the next morning and did her best not to disturb her husband, snoring amongst the couch cushions and empty beer bottles. Without getting up, he mumbled about secrets and her dragging her feet and all Lana could think was, *if only you knew*.

Lana shut the door quietly behind her and hustled down the driveway. In her rush she dropped her purse, the contents of which scattered along the pavement and she could not retrieve it all before she heard the slap of Violet's front door.

"Sneaking off?" Violet said.

"Do you just sit at the window waiting for me to come out?" Lana said. She was on her hands and knees grabbing at lip balm and sticks of gum. "You need to mind your own business."

"Did you drink the juice?"

Lana ignored Violet and continued her cleanup. She grabbed the last of her pens that rolled down the driveway and unlocked the Jeep.

“Did you drink the baby juice?” Violet asked again, this time louder.

Knowing the ruse was coming to an end soon anyhow, Lana went on ignoring her neighbor. She sat down in the Jeep and closed the door behind her, watching Violet come closer to the fence, her mouth open and still moving. Lana backed out of the driveway and once in the street, rolled down the windows.

“This is all going to catch up with you!” Violet yelled after her.

In the waiting room of the doctor’s office, Lana watched the other patients, trying to sort out who was here for their annual and who might be pregnant. Two women with bellies protruding over their waistlines sat across from one another and talked quietly. Lana wondered if they were friends or maybe sisters or if being pregnant gave you a free conversation starter with strangers who were also pregnant. A busty teenager with big eyes and bouncing legs sat close to her mother, who was more interested in her magazine than in her daughter. Other women in various forms of disinterest dotted the chairs in the seating area, not a single man accompanying them.

The door chimes jingled and a gray-haired woman held the door for a mother with her newborn swaddled in a sling across her chest and a little boy of maybe two or three. They sat down across from Lana and she smiled. As soon as the mother put down her black tote, the boy reached inside and pulled out a stuffed dragon. He squeezed it and it squeaked, making him giggle. The more he squeezed it, the longer his giggles lasted, eventually weaving into a carpet of throaty laughter that had the entire waiting room smiling. Lana wondered if the dragon was a dog toy.

She watched the mother watch her son as she held the infant close to her bosom. The boy put the stuffed animal down and crawled up in the chair next to his mother.

“Be gentle with the baby,” she told him.

And he was. He stroked the baby’s head with the tips of his fingers, looking up at his mother for her approval. When she nodded, he smiled and reached his hand up to her bare neck to stroke her and she tilted her head to the side to let him.

Watching the tender moment unfold in front of her, Lana couldn’t help but wonder if this woman ever went through what she was going through, weighing the pros and cons, trying to decide what kind of shape she wanted her life to take and if a child would be a part of that. It would be a silly thing to ask her now, Lana thought, while she held in her arms what had likely become her whole world.

The receptionist called Lana’s name and took her through the door and to the wing of the office opposite her usual doctor’s. When Lana asked why, the receptionist told her a nurse would be seeing her today—Dr. Collins only saw patients after the twelve-week mark. She left Lana in the exam room with the paper gown and papered table and a flutter in her chest she could not settle.

The room was identical to the one she usually saw Dr. Collins in—a counter, a stool, a lamp, a computer on a cart with wheels. The models of lady parts and wall posters depicting uterine cancers and wombs were the same, too. Lana sat herself atop the table and kicked her legs back and forth over the edge. Sitting straight up, her back and bare bottom were exposed, so she leaned on the partially recline back, not wanting her ass to be the first thing the nurse saw when she entered the room. Lana



had always been modest, another reason she thought she wasn't cut out for motherhood. It seemed some women were born with the air or the confidence to strip down for doctors or let their children see them naked and just the thought of such things made Lana blush.

The nurse knocked before entering and closed the door behind her. Her name was Phyllis and she was a large, old woman, much larger and older than Lana's usual doctor. She wore black Sketchers and glasses and her lab coat was not buttoned but instead flared open to reveal a white shirt and pockmarked chest. She checked Lana's vitals and asked about her personal and family health history, clacking away at the keyboard as Lana provided answers. After, she inspected Lana's breasts for lumps and performed a pelvic exam.

"That's it?" Lana asked. She'd expected something more definitive to happen, like an ultrasound or a sonogram, something to show her proof of what was taking root inside of her.

Phyllis told her there wouldn't be much to see until the start of the second trimester and that Dr. Collins would administer the tests at her next appointment. From there, she asked Lana how she was doing, what her symptoms were like, then lectured her about nutrition and prenatal vitamins. Lana nodded, letting the nurse go on the way she often let Violet go on, not really absorbing the words being said. It wasn't until Phyllis asked her if she would like to discuss her options that Lana tuned in.

"Options?"

She explained that Lana was nearing the end of her first trimester, which meant she had options as far as continuing or terminating the pregnancy went. These were the things Lana wanted to know about, she wanted to hear the facts and numbers and have someone give her a deadline of when she needed to make up her mind. In a few weeks her options would be fewer, Phyllis said, and Lana would be strapped in. Something about the worry wrinkles in Phyllis' forehead and the calmness in her tone made Lana want to confess that she had yet to tell her husband. After Phyllis had snapped off her gloves and tacked papers to her clipboard, Lana wanted to tell her she had yet to tell her husband because she had yet to make up her own mind, and she thought that was something she needed to do first.

After the nurse left, Lana dressed and exited the room in a hurry, trying to keep the crescendo of tears from spilling over the rims and down her cheeks. She walked right by the receptionist, right through the waiting room, giving only a glance in the direction of the mother, son, and infant. She thought of them as she left the building, as she climbed into the Jeep and turned the keys over with shaking hands. For a better part of her life, Lana had felt like she lacked the compassion to be a mother, the innate love most women seemed to be born knowing. But when she thought of the family in the waiting room, it wasn't the tenderness of the mother that struck her—it was the tenderness of the child.

As she merged onto the highway home, Lana tried to picture her stubborn self as a young girl and wondered if she'd ever been sweet enough to tickle her mother's arm or stroke her silken black hair. She wanted to remember those early moments where she cared nothing about who her mother was or the things she did to get by and

instead loved her for her butterfly kisses, her strawberry pancakes, and the space between her arm and her side that was always left for Lana to fill. How quickly those moments had faded, how quickly Lana had outgrown her mother. With these thoughts swimming through her mind as cars whirred past her in the fast lane, Lana wondered if perhaps her fears had less to do with a baby, less to do with becoming a mother and more to do with a child becoming her child, and then choosing to outgrow her the same way she'd outgrown her own mother.

The appointment hadn't taken as long as she'd guessed and it was still early enough that she might be able to catch the end of the open house. She wondered if Jimmy had cleaned up his empty beer bottles, if he had remembered to take down the wedding pictures and put the cat outside like the realtor had asked, or if he'd even bothered to host the event after all. She wondered if maybe the open house was already over because someone had wanted it right there and then. Maybe she'd come home to a FOR SALE sign already propped on the front lawn, Jimmy on the stoop with a bottle of champagne, waiting for her to get home to open it. Maybe Violet was there too, in her straw hat and pink cardigan, drinking Lana's share of the champagne because oh, silly Jimmy, women cannot drink when they are pregnant. Or maybe it hadn't gone well and Jimmy was alone at the kitchen table, his head hung and his hands in his hair, wondering when Lana was coming home. Maybe Jimmy wasn't there at all.

As she drove past their exit without a single look in her rearview, Lana knew she wasn't going home yet. She drove on, past the high school stadium, the driving range, and the Indian reservation. At the county line, wooded areas gave way to

vineyards not yet in season and winds tumbled across the fields to rap at the Jeep's doors. Lana knew she had hours before the sun would set, hours before she had to turn back, before she had to make up her mind.

## OLD BONES

A knock on the door came at quarter to nine, the exact time the landscaping boy was to be dropped off. Cora opened the door to two men standing on her porch. The son was an anomaly: all red-headed and freckled with precious looking skin, yet almost the size of his father, short a few inches in height and girth. Cora bought into the stereotypes of redheads with glasses and stacks of books, but this boy looked like he'd prefer a tower of steaks before he'd ever crack a book. The father, a burly, dark-haired man with even darker hair on his face and arms, stood with his hand on his son's shoulder. He wore a short sleeved button-down with his name embroidered into an oval over his heart: Bert—the same name as Cora's late husband. Cora also bought into omens.

With a double-slap on his back from his father, the boy stuck out his hand. "Hello, ma'am, I'm Andy."

Cora shook his hand but made eye contact with the father while introducing herself. She felt slightly embarrassed that she hadn't changed out of her bathrobe, or at least put socks on.

After his father confirmed the five o'clock pickup, Cora invited Andy in and gestured for him to sit down at the table while she put a pot of water on for tea. Without his father around for comparison, the boy looked even bigger sitting in the old chair, the only one with arm rests. It had been Bert's chair, the one he'd sat in to

patrol the neighborhood from his perch at the window, calling out the young families from behind the glass who didn't know how to properly mow a lawn or shovel a driveway. Bert used to sit there before dawn broke, watching the horizon with one leg crossed over the other and a stiff stare, as if the sun couldn't rise without him to bear witness. Even at his healthiest, Cora couldn't remember Bert ever looking that large in his chair, though it had been a while since she had a man's presence in the house.

Many things had come to an end with the death of Cora's husband, and the decline of these things occurred in a natural order. The yard went first—the season of dry heat and hot spells after the funeral quick to dry up the un-watered lawn. The television went next, useless after the switch from analog to digital, the rabbit ears now trusses for spiders' webs. Then the smaller things, which started to add up once she took note of them: the medicine cabinet handing off its hinges, the burnt out light bulb in the dining room, the overflowing glass recycling bin that was too heavy to drag to the curb, but too humiliating to add to the trash.

None of this particularly bothered Cora. As a woman in her seventies, she'd spent the bulk of her life adjusting. And now with Bert gone, Cora had taken to working around the things that had fallen apart in the two years since he passed. She enjoyed the new quiet and the privacy, the fact that no one was here to judge her when she slept until noon and decided to wear her nightgown all day, or when canned soup for dinner sounded good for the third time that week. Being in charge was refreshing, and, after fifty years of being married to a hardheaded traditional man, Cora thought she deserved it.

But when Cora's daughter-in-law called yesterday to say she and the kids would be spending Easter with her, Cora began to reevaluate. Since Bert's death and Bert Jr.s' deployment soon after, Janice had taken to calling Cora every day to check in. And because she didn't much care for these checkups, Cora often told Janice what she wanted to hear: *Yes, in fact I've got a casserole in the oven right now, and, I'm a grown woman and I can take care of things myself.* And now, in less than a week, Janice would learn the fabrication behind these statements and insist Cora move west with them. Once she saw the dusty picture frames, Cora's un-scrubbed tub, and the dishwasher full of clean dishes that hadn't been unloaded in months, she'd say a woman Cora's age couldn't take care of all the little things, and she wouldn't have to if she moved in with them. Cora knew if she wanted to keep the freedom she felt she had rightfully earned in her many years as a housewife, she would have to get the house and yard into convincing enough shape, which is why she'd hired Andy.

"So, Andy, your father says you have a knack for landscaping, even at your age," Cora said. She had tried to book with a landscaping company and when no one had availability on such short notice, she accepted Bert's offer of his fifteen-year-old son on spring break, looking for some experience.

"Yes ma'am. He's had me and my younger brother helping out since we could walk. Picking up sticks, raking leaves, stuff like that. If we did a good job, he'd give us the weekends off."

"Learning to work at a young age is never a bad thing."

The teapot whistled and Cora got up to quiet it. She poured the hot water over two bags of chamomile tea, never stopping to ask if the boy wanted one.

“Honey?” she asked with her back to Andy.

“Yes ma’am?”

“Oh no, not you. I mean honey as in do you take honey in your tea?”

He told her no thank you and when Cora brought a mug to him, he was red in the face, as well as the neck and the top of his chest she could see above the collar of his T-shirt.

They chatted for half an hour about Andy’s school, family, and hobbies. Discussing the whims and worries of adolescence was refreshing for Cora, and a welcomed reprieve from the conversation topics she had with her next-door neighbor: taxes, church, things they couldn’t get back, and the *American Idol* program Cora couldn’t watch anyways.

After their tea, Cora set Andy to work on the yard while she tidied up things inside. She scrubbed the tub, unloaded the dishwasher, took out the trash. Cora washed her linens and the guest linens and used fabric softener for the first time in ages. Anything that needed dusted, which was practically everything, was wiped down twice over, just for good measure. She organized the medicine cabinet and tossed half the contents—most of the prescriptions and ointments having expired over a decade ago. The bathroom mirror that had concealed her reflection from the nose down in a white cloud of spittle was finally wiped clean. Cora smiled at herself in the mirror. Her teeth were still her real teeth and they still looked good.

Throughout the house, a spring breeze slipped in through the windows Cora had cracked—cool and wet, but stimulating nonetheless. She felt fresh, she felt light, and she clipped her toenails on the front stoop while she watched the face of her



house change colors in the drifting sunlight. For the forty-two years Cora and Bert had spent in this house, it had always remained in the tidiest of states. Cora had been quite the housekeeper. And though she was good at it, Cora never much liked the role. It was her duty, she felt, to keep the house Bert built as clean and orderly as he had imagined it. But in the two years without him, Cora had become much more honest with herself. The folding and the ironing, the washing and the waning, the polishing and straightening and presenting—these were the things that bored Cora, that set her teeth on edge with tedium and made her feel like the world was revolving without her.

When Cora checked in on Andy he was covered in sweat and dirt down the front of his shirt as he worked under the sun. Though it was only spring, the humidity hung heavy this time of year and Cora knew he'd be thirsty. She rooted around in the refrigerator for something cool, something refreshing, but had only milk and orange juice, neither of which would do the boy any good. She checked the pantry to find nothing but prune juice and applesauce. The garage, however, held more promise in the form of malted liquor. Sure it was warm and sure it was alcohol, but it was lemonade flavor and over a glass of ice it would sparkle and pop real nice. She brought it out to him and set it on the wicker table, then returned inside to watch him drain the glass. Content with herself for contenting him, Cora brought out a refill.

It was well into the afternoon when Cora called Andy in for lunch. It wasn't much, she told him, but they both needed to feed their appetites if they were going to keep cleaning house like this. Together they split a peanut butter and banana sandwich and a Pizza Lunchable, a meal Cora ate more often than she should because

the corner store often had them on sale and that's where she did all of her grocery shopping these days. While they ate, Cora's phone rang. It was Janice, calling to hash out the details of the upcoming trip.

"Hon, can I call you back around dinner?" Cora said into the phone. She looked at Andy. "I got myself into a project here and don't have the seconds to spare."

When she hung up, Andy had his head cocked to one side in confusion, the way their old spaniel used to put one ear to the ceiling, one ear to the ground whenever they asked if she wanted to go for a walk. Cora could have sworn she'd explained the situation to him, though apparently not. Having nothing to hide from a fifteen-year-old, and nothing she felt particularly ashamed about, she filled Andy in.

"So you want her to think you've taken care of the house all on your own? The lawn included?" he asked after she'd finished explaining.

"Maybe she'll assume I've hired someone, I'm really not sure. All I know is that if Janice sees how I let things go, she'll start to think I've let myself go, too."

"Sounds like a lot of pressure," Andy said.

Cora finished her half of the sandwich and Andy insisted on showing her his progress. He walked her out to the back patio that was now clear of leaf litter. He'd mowed the lawn, weeded the garden, even turned the soil. The front yard looked just as neat with hedged sidewalks and trimmed bushes. He'd also cleaned the gutters, a task Cora remembered Bert hating.

Cora complimented his handiwork and told Andy it would certainly pass the Janice test. “Now, I could use your help inside for the things I can’t reach or lift. Give me a hand?” She linked her arm into his.

For the rest of the time she had him, Cora and Andy managed to finish everything on her list, even the things Janice would never notice. When Andy’s father came to pick him up at five, he didn’t ring the bell or even get out of his truck. He pulled up along the curb and sat there idling. Cora dug around in her purse for the dollar coins she knew would still be there from her and Bert’s days down at the marina—parking meters only gave coins as change. She had no idea what the going rate was for young men who landscaped, or if she was expected to pay him at all. One thing she’d learned over the years was the older your bones got, the less people expected from you, and the more they wanted to do *for* you.

But hell, Cora wasn’t handicapped and she’d enjoyed Andy’s company, so she tipped the purse upside down and collected the eleven dollar coins rolling about the table. She wanted to give more though, so she told him to wait one minute. She couldn’t give him the booze to take with him and she wasn’t sure what it would say to send him home with the food in her house, so she went to the bedroom to look for something more appropriate. A box of Bert’s clothes sat atop the bed where she had left it earlier after finally getting around to cleaning out his side of the closet. She was wondering how in the world she would get it to the Goodwill before Janice arrived, and this was the perfect solution. She closed the flaps and brought the box to Andy.

“Here. Eleven dollars certainly isn’t enough, so take this. There’s some good stuff in there.” She put it into his arms at a quick pace, hoping the extra force would make it hard for him to give it back.

Andy was polite and didn’t even ask what was in it. Instead he said thank you and that he wouldn’t mind doing yard maintenance for her on a regular basis. Cora said she would like that and took his number. She’d be in touch, she said.

Tipping a young boy with her dead husband’s clothes didn’t bother Cora one bit. Instead, it relieved her of another obstacle to take care of, another hurdle to jump before Janice arrived in two days. Things were coming together and Cora was feeling confident that she and Andy had pulled it off. Tired from the day’s work, Cora retreated to the sofa where she snacked on black licorice jellybeans and rested her eyes. It was difficult to imagine her grandchildren running around her quiet space. The last time they’d visited was for Bert’s funeral, and then they’d been quieted by the event and stayed tranquil in front of the television for hours. Now, with no looming death and no television, Cora wondered what racket they’d get into trying to entertain themselves here. She dozed off and woke to her phone ringing, the sun outside getting ready to go down.

“Mom, are you trying to give me a heart attack, making me sit here thinking *you* had a heart attack?” Janice went on scolding Cora for taking so long to call her back. “And before you go, write this down just so you have it,” Janice said. “We land at 5:15 on Saturday, so leave your house around 4:30 just to be safe. I’ll check in on you tomorrow. Love you.”

Janice hung up while Cora still held the phone to her ear. The click to disconnect echoed in her head, followed by a silence thicker than the accumulative quiet of the past two years. Janice expected Cora to get her and the kids from the airport, but Cora hadn't driven in over a decade. Janice didn't know that, of course. And it's not that Cora couldn't drive—she had her license and everything—but Bert had done most of the driving. Cora had always preferred to be the passenger anyhow. Driving required her to focus in a way that shut her out from the world in front of the windshield—the storefronts, the sidewalks, the rolling hills that stretched across the dashboard and shuttered along the windows.

Cora grabbed the car keys out of the junk drawer, then opened the front door and stood on the porch. The sedan sat parked in the same spot Bert had left it, after his last trip to the hardware store to fix the doorbell, the repair that never happened. Not because he passed before he got around to it, but because he couldn't fix it, no matter how many rig jobs he performed. Cora tried to tell him it didn't matter, they didn't need it, they had a doorknocker after all. But Bert planned on fixing it and made the doorbell his project up to the day he died, which happened to be the last day the car was driven.

In the driveway past dusk, the black sedan looked more like a dump truck or a gorilla mass than a four-door voted best in its class for size economy. Like many other things, driving as a means of transportation had never occurred to Cora until after Bert's death. She knew she'd need a lesson, a reminder of sorts before taking it out alone, but with Bert gone she felt she'd missed her opportunity. It was this realization that had confined her to the two-block radius she now lived in—buying

groceries from the mini mart, pulling money out at the corner ATM that charged her three dollars for every transaction.

Cora walked around the car in the driveway, dragging her fingers along the coat of dust and grime that covered the body. She opened the driver's side, leaving the keys dangling in the door once she'd opened it. Then she sat down on the leather seat, surprised at how quickly it'd cooled after the day's sun. Waiting for a moment of recollection, Cora stared at the buttons and levers, even palmed the stick shift and held her foot lightly over the gas. Nothing came to her. She knew from that moment forward if she didn't figure this out, all the car would do was mock her from its parking spot in the driveway, taunt her through the window above the sink when the ladies from church forgot to pick her up for bingo, tease her when she'd need spaghetti sauce in the evening, a few hours after the corner store had closed.

Frustrated with herself for the first time in a while, Cora pounded the steering wheel, surprised when the horn sounded and echoed off the garage. She grabbed the keys and slammed the door, then went inside to phone Andy.

When he answered, Cora apologized for it being so well into the evening and then asked if he could come by tomorrow for help with some last minute things. She mentioned no specifics and Andy agreed to be over at noon.

Sunlight came sooner than usual for Cora, and brighter, as if someone knew she had big things to do today and was giving her a spotlight in which to do them. She busied herself with the morning paper and painting her nails until Andy showed at noon. He

stood on her front porch in work jeans with rips on both sides and a red plaid button up that Cora knew had been Bert's. It was a little short in the arms, but functional nonetheless, and Cora was pleased with her decision to give the boy the box of old clothes. In one hand Andy held kneepads and in the other, a bottle of water. Cora frowned at both.

"I should have been more honest on the phone last night," she started. Then she explained the situation while pointing at the car. "Now I don't need you telling me what to do. I know how to drive—Bert taught me when I was twenty," Cora said. "I just need support, someone there in case of emergencies."

She looked to Andy but he gave no indication of his willingness to take part, so she continued. "I know you're young and don't have much experience yourself, but men are practically born knowing how to drive."

Andy said nothing still, but followed Cora as she moved past him and off the porch. They went outside to the car, its color a little less black, its menacing look a little less intense in the high noon sun. Cora got into the driver's seat while Andy stood by the passenger side door.

"It's unlocked," Cora said.

He opened the door but still didn't get in. Then he spoke. "Not that I don't think you're a good driver or anything, but how far are we going?"

Cora opened her own door, paused, then shut it. "You're nervous. Do you need a minute?" Cora asked, though his hesitation was beginning to make her nervous too.

"Maybe. Do you have anymore lemonade?"

Cora wondered if he knew about the alcohol or if this was just his way of stalling the inevitable. She was fine with either, really, because she doubted he would tell his parents if he wanted it to continue. And Cora was happy to oblige. Cleaning and comforting were her strong suits, and though she often tried to tally the hours she'd wasted doing both, she had to admit it was good to be needed.

Cora didn't drink herself, so she watched Andy down the fizzy drink while she told him her plan. "We're going to the plaza," she said. "Sears has a good deal on a television and I'd like to have it before the kids get here."

He nodded and said okay. His shoulders relaxed the same way Bert's had after a shot of whiskey or two. Cora wondered if the boy was already versed in alcohol.

In the car, Cora put the key in the ignition and turned, the starting engine more familiar to her ears than she had expected. With her foot firmly on the brake, she pressed down the clutch and shifted the car into reverse, backing out in slow, jerky movements. Cora pretended Andy was Bert in the passenger seat, not so much coaching her as testing her, waiting to see if she would make a mistake so he could correct it. If she had to be honest with herself, she was never the smoothest driver—Bert always told her she was too touchy.

When she tried to accelerate she held the clutch too long, missing her window for a clear transition. The car shot forward when she released it and instinctively she slammed on the brakes, lurching both her and Andy forward against their seatbelts. Andy offered no correction, no motivation, just sat in his seat rubbing both his brows hard. On her next attempt Cora did the same thing and in the third try she stalled the car.



With her heart bumping against her chest and Andy practically panting in the passenger seat, Cora waited for a reaction out of him—a yell, a sigh, a dramatic shaking of his head. That’s what Bert would have done, had Cora failed so many times in front of him. But Andy wasn’t Bert—he was sweet and now offered her a sideways smile.

“I don’t know what I’m doing wrong,” she said.

“I’m not sure I can be much help, ma’am. I don’t know the first thing about standard.”

Cora hadn’t expected Andy to know the ins and outs, and his confession reminded her she was in fact on her own. She took a deep breath then started the car again and accelerated with no issue. Cora made it to the end of her street and onto the main road like a pro, the shift from first to second gear posing no problem. After she made the third green light in a row, she rolled down her window, letting the loose strands of white hair that escaped from her bun lap against her cheeks, stick to her wetted lips.

They took the back roads and avoided the busy highways and managed to pull into the Sears’ parking lot with no issue. After searching the store for an associate for close to twenty minutes, Cora said forget it and they should just head home.

“What exactly are you looking for?” Andy asked.

Cora told him, took the folded ad from her purse and showed him. Andy took the paper from her and headed for the electronics department, checking every now and then to be sure Cora was following. He squatted in front of the display of televisions all showing the same hockey game and explained their receivers, how

Cora wouldn't need bunny ears or a box or any of it. When Andy asked what size she wanted, Cora pointed to the nineteen-inch, saying she wanted her television to be modest. He told her the old one she had now was at least a twenty-four and talked her into getting a thirty-two.

"I hope I don't regret bringing you with me," Cora said to Andy at the checkout line. He carried the box out to the trunk and Cora thanked him. She could picture all three of her grandchildren sprawled out on the floor, her and Janice on the couch, all watching a program on the PBS after Easter dinner. Their visit wasn't starting to sound all that bad. She started to imagine what else they would do.

While they were out, she'd like to make one more stop before they headed home, she told Andy. To Emmie's, the candy shop with the best sponge candy in the region. The grandkids loved it and Cora had stopped sending it after Bert passed. It'd be nice to have something to give them as soon as she picked them up, something to help alleviate the awkward stiffness of young children thrust into the arms of an elderly woman they'd only seen a handful of times in their short lives. The sponge candy would be the perfect icebreaker.

There was no easy way to get to Emmie's, no back roads or cut-throughs or ways to avoid the commercial plazas and busy intersections. It was out by the mall, closer to the city than Cora ever liked to be. With every light they passed, the trucks got bigger, the horns got louder, and traffic seemed to be multiplying. The fumes from construction crews laying down new asphalt gripped her throat and Cora rolled up her window and turned on the air instead. The ventilation smelled damp and

musky and reminded her of dogs in wet woods. Cora put herself behind a school bus, thankful for someone doing the speed limit.

Andy had never been to Emmie's and therefore could not help her with directions. She was sure it was in a lot with a big mattress store and a coffee shop, and she was correct, but a thick median prevented her from making a left turn into it. Andy pointed to the sign ahead, the one that said she could make a U-turn at the light, so she did. She slowed down enough to make the turn successfully, though she didn't cut the wheel fast and turned wide into the bus lane. The cars now in her rearview were coming fast and she would need to get over before the bus lane ended. Without thinking she accelerated, hard enough to get an expletive out of Andy, fast enough to forget about the clutch altogether, and stalled out directly in front of the bus stop where an old woman with a push cart full of clothes and balloons sat on a bench and stared at her, shaking her head.

Cora took the keys out of the ignition and put her head in her hands. Traffic swam by them, the car at the head of the pack laying on its horn. Her wristwatch said it wasn't yet two in the afternoon but she was hot and so was the car and she didn't understand why everything everywhere was so busy.

"You like this car?" Cora asked Andy.

He looked at her funny and then checked over his shoulder once, twice.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Do you like this car?" she asked again.

"Sure?"

“If you like it, then it’s yours.” She put the keys in his lap. It was becoming obvious that she didn’t need the thing. “Stay here,” she said.

Cora unbuckled and grabbed her change purse from the center console. After a break in traffic she opened her door. Andy unbuckled and opened his door too, but Cora put her hand up, motioning for him to stay put. They would have to get home in that car no matter who was driving. If he could do it, that was fine. If she had to do it, that was fine too.

Cora walked across the rest of the bus lane, through the parking lot and up to Emmie’s storefront—she certainly deserved something for all her troubles in getting here, a reward of sorts. Bert had never cared for sponge candy, despite how many times she’d made him try it. Gets all in my teeth, he’d said. That’s the point, she’d said. The grandkids liked the milk chocolate so she’d get some of that, and a box for Andy too because he was so sweet. It was a good idea. Janice wouldn’t complain so much if Cora got the orange flavor for the two of them to share—they both loved orange chocolate. Cora couldn’t remember the last time she’d had it herself. It was still a good idea.

## WHERE WE CAME FROM

Remember the time we had dinner at that Indian place? We took my new truck and you insisted we drive through the plaza to see our reflection in the long windows. You said we looked good in gold.

We didn't agree on the restaurant. The way I remember it, we'd been lying on my living room floor, smoking from a Dr. Pepper can we passed back and forth—you had dropped my pipe down the fire escape the night before when we perched ourselves on the windowsill to get high. In between hits I told you I wanted to take you to dinner. You pulled out the phonebook and with delicate fingers and manicured nails, flipped to "Restaurants and Dining." You made me close my eyes as you placed my index finger on the book.

You said, "Flip the pages and drag your finger until you feel a good one."

I did what you said. When I opened my eyes and saw the Indian place, I started to go again, but you stopped me. You told me no re-do's.

Because we couldn't keep our lips apart at red lights, our hands out of the other's lap at stop signs and slow turns, we were twenty minutes late for our reservation. The host explained our table had been given to another party of two and we said we understood. Then he gave us an over-practiced speech about being punctual and we both laughed at him, but we didn't mean to. Maybe that's why he

seated us by the kitchen. When I said his bow tie was classy, I really did mean it. You were convinced there was something moving in his shirt pocket.

Though I wasn't fond of curry and you weren't crazy about naan, we ate everything on our plates and then ordered more. With bus boys jogging past us and dishes rattling behind us and beside us, I asked you to be my girlfriend. You stuck your leg between both of mine under the table and said yes. I'm not sure how much of this you would remember now.

It was a week after that night when we first did mushrooms together. The whole thing was your idea but you were nervous because you'd never tried them before, so I took you over to Mick's. Though he'd been my friend since high school and got me the job at the ad firm downtown, I told you I didn't know a whole lot about him. At that time he was dealing drugs to our neighborhood, writing comic strips, and breeding hermit crabs for hobbies.

Mick's house was packed with more people and paraphernalia than usual that night, making the stakes for us seem higher. The black lights in all the lamps turned your blonde hair fluorescent—an unnatural color better fitted for a highlighter. You smiled and your teeth were yellow compared to the glowing white V-neck you wore beneath your jacket. To me you looked uneasy, though I've never been good at telling uncertainty from curiosity. I still kick myself for being so naïve.

Tucked into a corner by the sink and the microwave, the two of us held the mushrooms in cupped palms.

“You don't have to do this, Al,” I said.

You scanned the room with wide eyes, as if you were the only one who was up to no good. “Maybe other people want to do it too?” you asked more than suggested.

Mick ended up making a batch of hot tea with the shrooms and we shared it with a few others. You said drinking drugs from a mug made you feel classy yet rebellious. Then you popped a mushroom from the bottom of the teapot like it was a vodka-soaked berry from a pitcher of sangria. The trips started soon after. Mick and his girlfriend stacked all the pillows in the house. Rob retreated to the closet, closing the door behind him. A bearded man watched his own fingers, as if they were worms that had been stitched to the tops of his knuckles.

Though you didn’t say much for the remainder of the night, each time your voice left your mouth everything in the room took on a violet hue. If you whispered, it was a soft purple, like the lavender lotion you rubbed on your neck before bed. If you were talking to someone across the room, it was a sharp purple, the exact shade of the octopus you had tattooed up your left thigh. And if you were talking to me, the lights bled into the walls and the floors fell away from my feet and all at once, I was hit with every purple memory I’d ever encountered: the orchid farm in Hawaii, Mardi Gras 2005, milk thistle, sea urchin, Lent celebrations in church.

I wanted to tell you all of this, tell you how high you made me and how you colored my world in the most literal of senses. You were everything I wanted right then and I knew this, even if I wasn’t in my right mind. But, all I managed to say was, “You are the queen of purple.”

You nodded as if you knew what it meant and made yourself a crown out of aluminum foil. That night we adopted a hermit crab and Mick painted her shell right there on his kitchen table for us. When he asked us which color, we said purple at the same time.

We'd been dating five months before you said it was okay to move in together. I was ready four months before that. We found a small place on the south side of town—near the river and everything. It was two stories and came with all the fancy amenities we couldn't afford when we'd lived separately: a balcony, a dishwasher, a laundry chute. Our lease said no animals, but I said Madge was more of a reptile and you said technically a crustacean, according to your degree in zoology. We didn't think our landlord would mind.

It wasn't long before we established the routines couples do. Yard work on Saturdays, brunch with the neighbors on Sundays. We even started doing crosswords together in the mornings. I was working my job at the ad firm and traveling one weekend a month and you were working part time at a zoo, part time at a diner—the same one we met in. Our favorite way to unwind after long days at work was to pack a pipe and head down to the river, sometimes with bathing suits, sometimes without.

But my favorite things were the little things. I loved how you folded my T-shirts the way retail workers in department stores were trained to fold. I loved the way you let Madge roam the bathroom counter while you fixed your hair. I loved your almond milk next to my soymilk in the fridge, your shampoo next to my shampoo in



the shower, your body next to mine in our bed. But even when you were sober you always said details didn't matter to you, which explains why you didn't notice when I brought home the purple dish set and the magenta placemats, or when I switched out our white comforter for a maroon one. So when a year later you noticed the vase of flowers on the table but not the ring tied to them, I told myself maybe another time.

The second time we did mushrooms was after you learned of your father's leukemia. The third time we did mushrooms was after your father passed away from leukemia. You hadn't come home from your late shift at the diner and I went looking for you. It was some time after two in the morning and I found you in your car in the parking lot, red-faced and puffy-eyed. I moved you into the passenger's seat and got behind the wheel.

I couldn't tell which was in worse condition, you or that crappy Neon of yours that sounded like a choking dog every time you started it up. The seats were stained with mustard, the cup holders had been turned into ashtrays, and the back seat was a recycling bin of all the beer cans you'd been meaning to take back. Its most redeeming quality was its paint job, made to look the shifting blues of the sky, but even that was beginning to rust at the edges.

With you half crying, half moaning in the seat next to me, I drove us up to the ridge. You took the shrooms from your apron pocket, which made me think this wasn't the first trip of your night. I wanted to talk but you wanted to do anything but talk, so I said nothing and ate what was offered.

I killed the car lights and as we waited for our highs, we watched the city settle beneath us. From there we could see everything—brake lights along the interstate, jets leaving and landing, the downtown spotlight dancing across the face of the night sky. You did your thing with the nervous flicks on your lighter while I added beer cans to the beer cans in back. We didn't talk because there wasn't much to say, but I needed to hear your voice to see the color.

I'd met your father only twice before he passed. "I'm glad I got to meet him," I said without looking at you.

You were sitting up, making sure your back didn't rest against the seat. Then you turned your stare from the windshield to my face and flashed your glazed eyes.

"Your father, I mean. He was a good man." Of course I didn't know this for myself—I only knew how much he meant to you.

"He wasn't always good," you said.

I didn't press you to explain and you've never come forth with the truth. After you'd said it that night in your car, you rocked back and forth in your seat for some time. By then I was used to your trips where you simply melted into the furniture and hummed songs from deep in your throat. Now the humming had turned to a tongue clucking against the roof of your mouth and your knees started bouncing, as if the ground was too hot and keeping your heels to the floor was an impossible task.

"Where are you?" I asked.

And again your eyes flashed.

"Where did you go on me, Alice?"

You said nothing for what seemed like forever, then responded with a question of your own. “Where did you come from?”

Even though your words made no sense, they came out in sound waves of purple, pulsations of color tiptoeing across the dashboard and into my lap. Beetroot. Fireworks. Cartoon hippos and summer lightning storms. I tasted cake and lost all control to stay upset with you. I kept thinking that it should have been raining. That was the last night we made love.

I’d figured you lost your diner job after that night. Through Mick’s girlfriend I came to find out you’d actually lost it two weeks prior for smoking pot in the bathroom. When you’d put on your white button up and apron and said you were headed to work, you were really headed to Mick’s place. You weren’t cheating on me and I knew that, but you still lied—the first lie I ever caught you in. And I felt so damn bad about your father’s death I decided not to bring it up.

The first time I thought you might really have a problem was when you lost your job at the zoo soon after. Your boss called and said something about missing money and missing prescriptions and said I should come get you before the police did.

When I picked you up, I took you to get drive-thru burritos. That was always my way of telling you I was mad, but I still loved you. You put your hand over mine on the stick shift and sobbed. Your skin was dry against mine, so dead and flaky it felt like you were scratching me. Your nail polish was mostly chipped and your

fingernails were chewed down and scabbed over and all of a sudden I felt like the fool. That was the last time I took you to get drive-thru burritos.

At home, you wrapped yourself up in blankets and couch cushions and told me you were embarrassed. I told you I knew about the diner job too and you tried to sink deeper into the furniture. I didn't understand how our hobbies together could turn into habits of your own.

Our conversation went from questions to apologies to hypotheses to blame. You blamed your stress at work, your father's death, our lack of sex. You just needed to feel *something*, were the exact words you said. I blamed you, but inside I was blaming myself. And when you told me you knew right from wrong and could get this figured out, I believed you.

I started to realize how we were actually having a conversation, despite the subject matter, and how long it had been since we'd had one. You were listening and responding and participating and those were the little things that made me think we'd be all right. You got up to brush your teeth and say goodnight to Madge, then returned to the couch.

I actually prayed that night before I went to bed. I prayed for you and for us, but mostly I asked for forgiveness for myself. You slept on the couch for the entire week, until you found a job at Subway.

You'd put in a solid two weeks at Subway before I left for my business trip to New York City. Sometimes I'd stop by to visit you on my lunch breaks, coming more for

the sandwich and a kiss than to check in. At least that's what I tried to convince myself I was doing.

It's funny because even then I knew that was the weekend that would make or break us. It's funnier because I left you my itinerary and you still couldn't manage to clean yourself up before I got home.

I recall pulling up to a car I didn't know in the driveway. Because I was blinded by my emotions, or so my therapist says, my first thought was a friend from work, or maybe a relative was visiting. Maybe somewhere in my mind I thought lover, but I never expected to see a bearded man on his knees doing lines of cocaine off our coffee table and you on the couch in a ball, wrapped up in your purple blanket.

In my fit of rage, the only thing I broke was the coffee table. I didn't realize how light it was when I flipped it. Your drug buddy left without me having to ask, which, in retrospect, was kind of polite. I remember I ripped the blanket off you and yelled at you to get up, to stand up and show me it wasn't what I thought it was. And you did stand, though you swayed, and you yelled back, and the more we argued, the more your nose bled.

It's true what they say about blacking out when you're overcome by anger. I can only recall small portions of the night after that: you wiping your nose with the arm of your sweater, me picking you up and putting you in the bathtub. Once I was sure you were coming down, I turned off the water and threw you an afghan. The next morning I packed my things and left you my key. I've never been back to the apartment.

#

After the night I moved out I saw you around town and every time I did, I was launched into a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions that would consume me for the rest of the day. I doubt you'd believe it but I could not bear to sleep anywhere but the couch because the floor and bed were too empty, and empty spaces only reminded me of you. There were nights where I was so plagued with guilt after seeing you at the supermarket with bags under eyes so dark they could have been bruises, that I couldn't even cook the potatoes I'd been there to buy. I couldn't stand at the stove and add spices to mash without wondering where you were and if you were safe. Other nights all I could do was pinch myself for not giving you a ride when I saw you walking down Union Road in a downpour. My boss asked about the blue and purple marks dotting my arms.

Yesterday was the most haunting image of you yet. I was walking Stanley, the golden retriever I got when Madge died after the move. We were cutting across the baseball diamonds in Centennial Park when I saw you up there on the high dive. I have no idea how you managed to break into the town pool in autumn, but then again, I've never known what you're truly capable of.

From the edge of baseball diamonds only a parking lot separated us, but I didn't dare move a step closer. You looked content up there, like maybe you'd just stay and soak up what sun was left of the season. Your knees were bent, moving you slowly up and down on the board with a cigarette in your mouth. Your hair was

longer than I'd ever seen it and braided down the middle of your back. The yellow sweater you were wearing used to be mine. You kept rubbing your nose.

Your bounces got higher and louder and their springs echoed out of the empty hole of concrete beneath you. You let the cigarette fall from your lips, then raised your arms to push the bangs out of your eyes. Before your feet could leave the diving board, I started to run. I dropped Stanley's leash and sprinted across the blacktop, running through memories while running to you. When I threw my arms up and screamed to you, this is what I was trying to say:

The way our relationship unfolds in my memory is through short scenes and snippets—kind of like a montage. Sometimes they span a few hours, other times it's weeks or months. They hit me like the highs I used to experience with you: loud, fast, and full of color. It's the vibrancy that always gets to me. But then the loneliness sets in, the black-and-white that became our life and I can't help but cry. You've never once blamed me, but I still feel responsible. This is my apology, Alice. My sorry for meeting you and loving you and leaving you.

I ran to you, and regardless of what was in front of me and regardless of Stanley behind me, all I could picture in my mind was you, on that diving board, the damage of the past two years eclipsed by the changing leaves behind you, showcasing your beauty in that old sweater of mine.

## COMEDOWN

Since the day I met my wife, she'd slowly been dying. I knew this, of course, when I married her, though somewhere in my thick-headedness and newlywed bliss, I didn't believe she'd ever succumb to the disease, or, if she did, it would be years beyond the doctors' prognosis, because Dana was a good wife and a better mother and there was no way I could raise our son without her. It was selfish, sure, but at the time I honestly believed it. Sometimes I still do.

It started with her legs, the muscle spasms and then the stiffness, making her seize up or stumble at random. The same symptoms moved to her arms, which was when we thought it might be something more than dehydration, and took her to see a doctor. The diagnosis came—a neurodegenerative disease—and we married and moved and vacationed and conceived long before I believed any of it. Dana gave birth to our son and had a healthy four years with him, and when you spend that much time watching your spouse love her child more than she loved life, it becomes hard to separate your dreams from reality.

The day Dana dropped Eddie on his head and cracked his toddler skull was the day that broke her. It was as if the sights of the accident—the bloodstain on the driveway, his blond locks shaved away for surgery, the neck brace he was forced to wear—had stolen what precious time she had left because afterward her muscle



spasms increased and spread to her mouth and tongue, which caused difficulties eating and speaking, and eventually breathing.

During her three final months, Dana did most of her dying in the hospital. They had her hooked up to so many tubes and machines I couldn't help asking what they were all for. But Eddie was a champ through it all, said his mother looked like a robot being recharged, which meant she was getting ready to battle. He was like Dana in that sense, always suited up and ready for the task at hand, willing to do what needed to be done in order to move on. And had I not been so caught up in my own fear and disbelief, maybe I could have learned a lesson or two about grieving from my son, a lesson that would have saved a lot of heartache in the year that followed.

Eddie and I were both in the room when Dana took her final breath, the machines unplugged and the cords rolled away. With her bedding pulled up to her neck, all we could see of her was her head, and had I crawled into bed next to her it might have mirrored the same image I'd spent the last fifteen years of my life waking up to: her brown hair swept around her round face, sleep creases imprinted into the cheek closest to mine, morning on her breath. When I moved toward her in that hospital bed I tugged down the sheet, tucking it in around her waist. She opened her eyes and met mine and in that moment I knew to hang onto her stare, the image of those hazel rings locking into mine, because it would be our last. Then I took her hand and Eddie's and we sat like that for some time after she'd left us. Eddie and I moved to Denver a month later.

It seemed wrong to return to our house without Dana, and though every family member in town offered up their guest bed or foldout couch, I pulled Eddie out of school and we stayed in a motel for three weeks while I dealt with the formalities of death: the funeral, the insurance, the death certificate. But in time everything else seemed wrong too, like shopping at the same Costco and filling up at the same gas station as if nothing had changed. But everything had changed and between the sad eyes from the bank teller and the mail with her name still on it and the fucking flowers and casseroles, I packed up the house and moved us west. I'd told everyone the move was sudden and rushed because of a job opportunity, though in retrospect I can admit I was running.

In the six months it took me to find a job in Denver and get Eddie enrolled at a school, summer had already left us and Eddie and I had both developed habits we were not proud of: his was wetting the bed, mine was whiskey. And I discovered the two did not mix well one night when I was more than four fingers into a bottle and found Eddie's bed empty only an hour after bedtime.

Out of habit I went to check under his bed and in his closet, Eddie's go-to retreats when he didn't get what he wanted. But he couldn't have been under the bed because his bed at our new place was a mattress and a box spring we'd bought off Craigslist once we got here, because it didn't make sense to pack up his Hot Wheels bed and haul it five states west only to have him outgrow it a year later. And he couldn't be in his closet because his room was the only room without a closet and instead came with an armoire built into the northern wall, a crappy job of unfinished wood and sticky paint that made it impossible for Eddie to open the drawers and

doors himself. But he'd picked the room nonetheless, insisting he wanted the same view my bedroom had of the creek out back.

In my own room the queen-sized bed was stripped of sheets and blankets now in the wash—naked, save for an amber outline of my son's piddle in the exact center of the mattress. I'd left the window cracked and the air in the room was cool with the tonic licks of autumn evening. Both my closet and under the bed were void of a five-year-old, which let a worry creep up my back and settle into the spaces of my ribcage. I went to the window overlooking the backyard and cupped my face to the glass, unable to make out the deck directly below me. All I could hear was the Jacuzzi heater kicking on and the breeze tickling Dana's wind chimes, the only things of hers I'd unpacked since the move.

Images of Eddie in the creek at night flashed through my whiskey-fueled mind and I hurried out of the room for a flashlight and shoes. At the end of the hall, the bathroom light was on and the door was slightly ajar and when I pushed it open, there sat Eddie on the toilet with his pants at his ankles and a pillow in his lap. He was hunched over, his small head not even reaching the pillow, fast asleep.

"Hey pal," I said. I shook him lightly by the shoulders. "Whatcha doing?"

Eddie stirred and sat up straight. He pawed a wisp of blond hair out of his face and stared at me through squinted eyes before closing them again and going for sleep.

Tonight was the first night Eddie was made to sleep in his own bed. *Like a big boy*, I'd pleaded. Though I didn't mind his company in the bed newly void of my wife, I couldn't stand to wake up in a warm puddle of my son's piss for a night longer. I'd tried everything the Internet had suggested to curb his bed-wetting—

bladder training during the day, no liquids after dinner, waking him up intermittently to go to the bathroom, regardless if he had to go or not. Nothing worked for more than a week.

“This is no good. Let’s get you into bed.” I reached for the pajama bottoms dangling above his bare feet.

“But I don’t want to keep wetting the bed,” Eddie said. When he opened his eyes again they were glassy, bubbles of tears not quite breaching the rims. “Dad, can I just sleep here? In case I have to go and I don’t know it? ‘Cause I really don’t want to wear diapers,” he said. A solid sob started as he stretched out his last syllable.

Earlier in the evening I had threatened to put diapers on Eddie when he made a fit about sleeping in his own bed. I didn’t even know if it was normal to buy diapers for a five-year-old, but to him, the threat still loomed. I wasn’t always proud of my parenting approach, knew I should be more patient and understanding like Dana, who had made potty training him look like a breeze. But I never signed up to do it all on my own and I spent more time than I probably should reminding myself of this. Eddie’s effort to fix the bed-wetting problem the only way he knew how absolutely killed me, and the ache in my heart because I loved him so much reminded me we were doing alright. I scooped him up in my arms, bare butt and pillow, and tucked us both into the Batman sheets of his new bed.

The next morning I woke early with Eddie in the crook of my arm, rubbing his hand against my stubble. I’d been in and out of sleep for most the night and woke with a

headache. Booze or no booze the night before, I never slept well when I dreamt about Dana, which happened more nights than not. And I hated dreaming about her, hated having to wake up feeling like someone took something from me all over again. Even if they were good dreams, I'd wake up knowing they were only dreams and feel cheated by my own conscience.

When Eddie saw my eyes open, he whispered reminders of my promise of bacon and eggs and pancakes from the morning before. He always asked for the most elaborate breakfasts on weekdays, meals I could never sling while getting myself ready for work and him ready for school. So I'd pinky-swore to grant his wish on Saturday morning, not realizing we had neither bacon nor eggs.

“How about toast?” I said.

“French?”

“Can't. No eggs, my friend. We could do cinnamon sugar.”

“But you promised bacon and eggs *and* pancakes.” Eddie puffed out his chest.

“And a promise is a promise.”

*A promise is a promise* was a line I used on him weekly when he refused to clean his room or take a bath after promising to do such things only hours before. And though he echoed me often, hearing my own words coming from my son's mouth was always a strange experience, equal parts proud and terrifying.

“You're right. How about we make a deal?” I said and Eddie sat up straight and faked a morning stretch. “If we can avoid a trip to the store, we can adventure down the creek. How's that sound?”

Eddie's most recent obsession was with bodies of water, the creek in our backyard being his particular favorite. Most days when I got off work we spent the last half hour of daylight exploring that creek.

"Sounds better than bacon and eggs!" He jumped out of bed and when he reached the end of the hall he shouted, "but you really need to brush your teeth."

I knew he didn't mean much by it other than morning breath, though the stench of stale alcohol was so strong I wondered if it was coming from my pores. As I rolled out of bed I put my knee in a damp spot and jumped straight up. I was angry with Eddie for wetting the bed again, for the hour and a half I'd have to spend washing and drying his sheets and scrubbing at his mattress like some scene out of Cinderella, but I was more frustrated with myself for drinking so much. I slid out of my sweatpants and left them in a heap on Eddie's floor, not wanting to deal with any of it before I showered.

In the kitchen I fixed oats for myself and a bowl of Marshmallow Mateys for Eddie. He spun around in his stool at the breakfast counter, spilling milk and bombarding me with information on creek beds. He told me I was wrong in calling it a creek when actually it was a stream, a perennial stream that flowed year round. He knew all about the stream load and the gradient, where the gauging station was and how far up we'd need to walk to see the confluence. Though I loved his enthusiasm for learning, I often had a hard time keeping up. I always told him he got his smarts from his mother. As my oats sat untouched on the counter, I poured my coffee into a travel mug and, when my son wasn't looking, added a dash of whiskey. I put his sheets in the wash before we headed out.

Our backyard was a little shorter than a football field, outlined by box elders in full blush, their samara littering the lawn underneath their branches. The end of our property butted up against a creek of moss and crayfish that smelled like mud, regardless of the season. Eddie had it in his head we would walk up the creek by walking *through* it, and when I told him I'd rather not because it was October and all, he retrieved my old pair of Wellies from the garage that covered him far past his knees and insisted he'd keep dry.

We walked the creek along our property and headed west, Eddie in the water and a little ways ahead of me. When I passed the last of the box elders and cleared our yard, Eddie had stopped in the middle of the stream and was pointing to a woman around my age standing in a garden box, her blonde hair tied up high on her head and a bucket of beets in her arms.

“Who are you?” Eddie asked.

“My name's Trudy,” the woman said.

Like a teenager trying to hide a bottle of beer, I tucked my coffee mug behind my back and gestured at Eddie to put his finger down. Then I hopped up the small embankment and stuck out my hand. “Sorry about him,” I said. “I'm Cliff. This is Eddie. I think we're your next door neighbors.”

In the half-year we'd been here, Eddie and I had met the neighbors on each side of us. The folks to the east were retired and rich and hosted garden parties I was never invited to. I couldn't stand the old lady's cackle, or the old man's wheezing, or their calico cat always jumping my fence to shit in our yard. The family to our west used to be the Gilberts—Mrs. Gilbert was an obstetrician and they'd moved at the end

of the summer to be closer to her office. I'd liked the Gilberts. They had a daughter in junior high who spent most of her time in their driveway shooting hoops and blasting Nickelback and a son a couple years older than Eddie who was kind of nerdy and played video games all day, but both kids were polite and let Eddie hang around. In our sadness surrounding the absence of the Gilbert's mega swing set and Mr. Gilbert's homebrew, we hadn't paid much attention to who had replaced them next door.

"I believe you are," Trudy said. "We've seen you coming and going and were meaning to drop by to introduce ourselves." She whistled and I searched behind her for a husband or child but instead a giant mastiff came galloping off the back deck and down to lick my fingers. "His name's Chip."

Eddie, being a sucker for all things living, sloshed through the water and up the embankment, reaching for my hand when his oversized boots didn't catch traction. Instinctively I put my arm out across Eddie's chest to keep him from spooking the dog.

"Oh it's okay, he loves kids," Trudy said.

I released Eddie's weight from behind my arm and he rushed to the dog and kneeled, letting it lick his face and hair. Eddie giggled and fell backwards and Chip took to licking him all over.

"Sorry we haven't been over to introduce ourselves either," I said. "Seems like just yesterday we moved in ourselves."

"In that case, these could be a housewarming gift." She held out her bucket of beets, offering us some. She said she wasn't the biggest fan of them herself, but she'd



found them overgrown and ready for harvest when she was pulling the last of the weeds.

I declined, explaining Eddie's distaste for purple food, and besides, we were on our way downstream on an adventure. But maybe I'd pop over sometime to pick some up for myself, I told her. I always had a thing for the earthy taste of beets. We said our goodbyes and headed back down the embankment. Eddie left me hopping on rocks along the side to be in the middle of the water.

Before we'd even cleared Trudy's property, he looked over his shoulder at me and said, "Aren't you glad I told you to brush your teeth?"

His plain-speaking manner caught me off guard in the same way Dana's bluntness always had. I stumbled over my own feet before catching myself on a sapling, then asked Eddie to explain.

"All I'm saying is she's pretty." And he waved his arms out parallel to his shoulders and walked on.

Our adventure downstream continued through the muddy woods that surrounded the creek. Muck splashed up my jeans from stepping in hidden puddles and tree branches reached out to scratch me when I wasn't looking. The day was overcast and cooler than I'd initially thought and though my headache was gone, my stomach had started to reel. I talked of grilled cheese and hot cocoa, but the boy was intent on seeing the confluence. When the trees began to thin out and the spongy grass gave way to rocky shores, Eddie picked up his pace. He shouted things about the confluence, pumping his arms and moving his big boots through the stream, and I hollered after him to slow down and be careful.

The confluence wasn't much to see, just a place where our stream joined another stream that had been running parallel to us and created a bigger stream with small currents and white-topped surges. But it was more exciting for Eddie, who pointed frantically with both hands and rambled through vocabulary without stopping to explain what it all meant. For him, the chance to apply what he'd learned was thrilling, and that was enough for me.

But of course, Eddie threw a fit when I wouldn't let him walk in the faster stream and then another when I said we were turning back. All anger was lost, however, when a toad leaped in front of him and he caught it in the cups of his hand. Of course he wanted to keep it, and though I knew it would die in a few days, it was better than fighting him about the creek.

When we got home I tried finding Tupperware suitable for our new pet. Then Eddie recalled the terrarium he had a couple years back when we won him a green anole at the Ohio State Fair. I knew I'd packed the terrarium because I'd packed everything from the old house except Eddie's bed. But the thought of finding it now was daunting and I was half-tempted to tell Eddie no, he couldn't keep the toad because it was too much of a hassle. I wanted to sit, I wanted to eat, and I certainly thought about refilling my coffee mug. Had the toad not been sitting in my son's hands, I would have driven to the pet store and bought a whole damn tank, anything to avoid the project of the basement.

When I'd packed for the move, I had refused everyone's offers to help and shoved things in boxes and taped them shut, without bothering to label anything. When we got to the new house, I hauled most of the stuff to the basement, not

wanting to unpack the memories those boxes held. We found most of our essentials within the first month, and rather than sifting through boxes and tubs for non-essential things as we gradually needed them, I simply went out and bought new stuff: summer clothes, Halloween decorations, a cake tin.

In the basement I opened the first few boxes closest to me and found only books, dinnerware, and the old kitchen clock. As Eddie stood behind me giving his guesses as to which box held the terrarium, I felt my anger from that morning's bed-wetting inching up the back of my throat.

"I think it just peed on me," Eddie said. He held his palms up to the ceiling and looked underneath them. Then he put the toad closer to my face than it needed to be. They both smelled like algae and winter cold.

"Why don't you put him somewhere so you can help me look?" I asked.

Eddie pulled an empty glass vase from a box as if he'd known it was there. He blew inside it before setting the frog there.

"How about you check those tubs over there?" I said.

"I think that's all picture frames."

"You won't know until you check," I said. "I might have thought a terrarium went good with picture frames."

Eddie wiped his hands on his jeans and started stacking the boxes I'd emptied. Then he ran into them, knocking them over and giggling to himself. He stacked the boxes up again and bulldozed them once more before starting a search of his own.

"Why do we even have all this stuff?" he asked.

"Because it's ours," I said.

“Not this stuff.”

I turned around to him holding up an old purse of Dana’s, then a high-heeled shoe, then another. He put the shoes down and lined them next to each other, sizing his own feet against them.

“Because it’s Mom’s,” I said.

“But she doesn’t need it anymore.”

I was bent over a box and stood straight up when he spoke. It hadn’t even been a year since his mother’s death and already he seemed to be moving on. I rubbed at my temples as Eddie slipped into the high heels and dragged one behind the other as he scooted across the cement floor.

“It’s not hurting anyone by being down here,” I said.

“But shouldn’t somebody have it who needs it?” He strapped the purse over his shoulder and held it tight to his torso. “We could have a yard sale!”

I shook my head at my son. Though most of the stuff in the boxes was sellable, I could not imagine neighbors holding up Dana’s dresses to their wives, the women saying those heels were just what they were looking for. “We can’t. We can’t just sell your mother’s things.”

“It’s not like she can ever use them again.”

“I said no.”

“You can’t be sad forever, Dad.”

“No means no!” I shouted louder than I’d intended and my voice echoed off the concrete walls and shot back at my face. At the time I didn’t think I was keeping

Dana's things because I was sentimental about them—I was simply ignoring them. It's only now that I realize I would have been better off not packing them at all.

When Eddie began to cry I sent him upstairs with the toad and continued the searching myself. As I was elbows deep in all of Dana's things I'd been hoping to avoid, a pulsing anger washed over me. I wasn't sad, I was mad—mad at her for dying, for leaving me here to clean up messes like this one, with a child who had better emotional rebound than I did. And I knew my next thought was selfish before it had fully materialized in my mind: I wondered if I'd be handling Dana's death better if it were only me.

The last time I'd felt this greedy was the night Dana and I talked about the possibilities of having a child. This was before her symptoms got real bad, but after her diagnosis, after enough appointments for us to understand where things were headed. I still think she understood it better than I did.

It was the evening of the Fourth of July, after a day spent in our backyard grilling for family and watching my nephews enjoy the Jacuzzi we'd turned down as a wading pool. That night we lay atop our sheets listening to the fireworks from the fairgrounds a mile out of town.

“Don't you wonder how we'd be as a family? With a little one running around, keeping us on our toes,” Dana said.

“What are you asking?” I said.

“I'm asking if you think it's a good idea, if it's worth a shot.”

The grand finale boomed in the distance, the chorus of salutes vibrating the bed frame. I held my breath low in my chest and waited for the fireworks to end. We

weren't even sure she could conceive, or, if she could, whether she'd carry it full term, granted she was still breathing, or if the baby would have to be delivered prematurely or if it'd live long enough to gain a heartbeat. The hypothetical baby was not my biggest concern.

"Your health isn't something I want to gamble with," I said.

"I need you to start thinking long-term, Cliff. That's what I'm asking you to do here."

But Dana's life was long-term to me and it would continue to be until she wasn't in bed next to me, the humidity sucking our skin together, her short breaths hot on my neck. I'd seen enough movies and read enough books and it all felt predictable and clichéd, like I knew exactly where we'd end up: Dana on her deathbed, the newborn baby wailing in my arms, and I'd look at the baby and then at Dana and then back at the baby and have some sort of epiphany, like this was fate and the baby would live out the life Dana wouldn't get the chance to. But it would all be for nothing because I'd never feel that way, and I told her that.

"What if something happened to you during it all?" I said. "How could I look at the baby and *not* think it was to blame?"

"We're supposed to be going through this together," Dana said, echoing the words of our counselor who was coaching us through the timeline stamped on Dana's life. "I just wish you would stop deluding yourself so we could have a real conversation."

And stop deluding myself I never did. Even after she'd passed and I'd read the letters she'd written to remind me about moving on, about doing what's best for

Eddie, everything in her memory. Though we agreed to have a baby, to give Dana a glimpse at motherhood and a child's love, I was never prepared to steer a family without her at the prow. And those letters never told me what to do if what was right for Eddie felt wrong for me.

When I finally found the aquarium it was in a box with Eddie's baby blanket, Dana's hairbrushes, and a half-empty bottle of lizard pellets. I took it upstairs and found Eddie asleep at the table, the toad still in the glass vase. Goldfish crackers littered his lap and when I moved the toad into its new home, I peeled a moist cracker from its underbelly. Afraid my son's urine on the couch would be harder to clean than his urine on the beds, I moved Eddie to the living room floor with a blanket and a pillow. Already feeling drunk on memories and old ghosts, I skipped the whiskey and took myself to bed.

The next weekend I woke to the sounds of my son crying. Eddie's bedwetting had continued every night that week and he was becoming frustrated with himself, more frustrated than I was with myself for the empty whiskey handles. I thought maybe nightmares were the cause of Eddie's problem, like perhaps something had spooked him and he couldn't stop obsessing over it. But Eddie said no, he'd be dreaming he was standing at the toilet peeing, and then he'd wake up in his bed and actually be peeing. I wondered if maybe this was his subconscious way of dealing with Dana's absence but was afraid to bring it up for fear of his pointing out the holes in my own grieving process.

Eddie had been sleeping in his own bed because of the deal we'd struck: if he agreed to sleep in his own room, I would allow him to keep the terrarium on his nightstand, the terrarium that held Frank the frog who had miraculously survived a whole week on lizard food and soggy lettuce. At the sounds of Eddie's sobs, I peeled out the sheets of my own bed and jogged toward the bathroom, where I found him naked from the waist down, standing in the tub with the water running, scrubbing himself with a washcloth.

"Hey bud, rough night?"

"I just don't get it," he said through throaty sobs. He squatted to clean the space between his thighs and his groin.

"Not too rough, you're gonna rub yourself raw." I said it with a stifled laugh.

"This isn't funny!" he screamed. Then the tears continued and he sat down in the tub. The flowing water bounced against his knees and shins and splashed up the front of his red thermal shirt.

I leaned over the tub and turned off the water. "You're right, it's not funny," I said. "Dad's not laughing at you."

I took his robe from the back of the door and once he'd forgiven me, Eddie stood up and I wrapped it around him and carried him out of the bathroom. In his bedroom I put Eddie down to search for clean clothes. When I turned to dress him, he was staring at the ring of urine on his Batman sheets, crying again.

"Hey, don't get upset. We'll clean it up and it'll be good as new."

"Until I wet the bed tonight."



I opened my arms and he entered my embrace, wrapping his own arms around my neck and burying his face in my shoulder. When he pulled away, a line of snot connected his nose to my shirt.

“Maybe I *should* start wearing diapers,” Eddie said.

His words stung me. Even if I was thinking the same thing, which I probably was in that moment, I did not let him see it. I shook my head and wiped his nose, all the while shushing my son and his surrender. I should have known his request for bacon, eggs, and pancakes was coming and when I told him we still didn’t have eggs, the tears started up. He asked again about a yard sale and, in the effort to keep him from crying himself sick, I agreed.

To be honest, I’d given the yard sale some thought since our basement argument the previous week. Clearing things out would be good, *a fresh take*, as I imagined my and Dana’s counselor back in Ohio saying. And besides, I didn’t think anything in those boxes could be a more painful reminder of Dana and our memories than having to look at our son every day, playing a constant reel of her quirks and habits back to me as if he’d studied them.

Because we’d only just decided to do it, I didn’t think we’d get much traffic at the sale, so there wasn’t much sense in making things presentable. By noon Eddie and I had moved all the boxes from the basement to the garage and unpacked the stuff on two folding tables and my workbench. I left him with a stack of Post-It notes to price tag things while I stapled signs advertising our yard sale to telephone poles at each end of our street. When I returned, Eddie had organized the tables and things in an order that made sense: kitchen stuff, bathroom stuff, kid stuff, Dana’s stuff,

electronics, and knick knacks. I was surprised at how good I felt, seeing all the markers of our old life out and on display like trophies. And I was surprised at how ready I felt to give it all away. Eddie had labeled items in coin amounts and though we didn't have much in the way of change, I was prepared to give things to anyone who wanted to name their own price. Regardless of the sudden flow of confidence, I spiked my coffee again for insurance.

The first customer drove up within our first hour and parked their Buick along the curb. A lady about sixty or so exited the car and cut across our lawn to the driveway. She wore a bubble jacket with fur around the hood and pastel purple pants tucked into Ugg boots. The sunglasses she sported covered more than her eyes. She looked like an insect with a bad perm. She perused tables and hovered over the section of Dana's clothes and jewelry.

"My, this is a lovely selection," she said without turning to me.

I muttered an affirmative in her direction as she fingered the dresses and blouses. She moved through them rapidly like she knew what she was looking for and pulled a maroon sweater from the pile. She held it up to herself and looked down—the exact image I couldn't picture anyone doing the weekend before. Eddie sat in the corner of the garage on the ground, letting Frank hop around an old set of jacks he'd found.

"These prices, my goodness. Why such a bargain?" She finally turned and met my eyes, or at least what felt like meeting my eyes through her dark sunglasses.

"Just trying to get rid of stuff," I said. I wasn't prepared for questions.

“And your wife doesn’t mind you selling them for so cheap? I mean this sweater is from *Bloomingdales*.”

“I guess she doesn’t really have a say.” I wasn’t sure where this was going and I was getting ready to ask the lady if it would make her feel better if I asked her to pay more than whatever Eddie’s Post-It was asking.

“Oh hon, I know how that goes,” she said and nodded. “I’ve been divorced more times than I’m willing to share, and when they leave stuff I can’t use, I pawn it. That’s where the money is, that’s how you win.” She reached for Dana’s old derby hat and tried it on. “Do you have a mirror?”

“My wife died,” I said. My response came out monotone and haunted.

The woman took the hat off her head and returned it to the table. “I’m so sorry,” she said, stumbling over her words. “I just assumed. You poor thing. Was it recent?”

But I wasn’t about to talk about the whole experience with a complete stranger and had half a mind to tell her to buzz off. Just then Eddie poked his head up from the ground and told the woman it had been six months, and that it was sad, but that his mother wasn’t in pain anymore. The woman nodded and clucked her tongue as if she understood it all. She moved to the table of kitchen stuff, then retreated to her Buick without making a purchase. I went inside to refill my mug.

In two hours we’d sold books, a shower rack, and our old kitchen appliances, all thanks to Eddie. He was kind and amiable and quite the salesman, but he was also five and people loved that. Around two he grew bored and hungry, so I took him and Frank inside and fixed noodles, then left them in front of the TV watching Batman.

The only thing of Dana's that was purchased was her purple blow dryer, the one she'd convinced me to get her for her birthday because eighty bucks was practically a steal, she'd said. Some women handled Dana's jewelry and one asked if I knew what size a tag-less dress was, but when they inquired about my wife like the first customer and I explained, no one went through with it. I was beginning to regret the entire thing, wondering if maybe when I couldn't picture women buying Dana's stuff it wasn't because it would break my heart but rather that people didn't want to knowingly buy a dead woman's things, as if leaving with her hat or scarves would rob me of her memory. But I was past that, beyond the sympathy of others and on the other side of it all. I just wanted the stuff gone. The longer Dana's stuff sat with me, the longer I was sure to have to explain myself. I headed to the end of the driveway with a marker, where I'd stood a piece of cardboard on Eddie's toy easel. With the marker cap between my teeth, I flipped over the advertisement for the yard sale and on the back of the cardboard I wrote DIVORCE SALE.

Though no one asked any questions about the sign, those who trickled in after my edit seemed to harbor a general mistrust about the entire thing, always looking over their shoulder to me when they picked something up, as if waiting for my approval or gratitude for taking it off my hands. I'd only made thirty bucks so far and most of the stuff still sat on the tables. After his lunch Eddie joined me again with Frank in the terrarium in his left hand, Dana's purse in his right. I made sure to keep him in the garage and away from the sign, embarrassed to admit to him what I had done.

“That red coffeepot used to match our whole kitchen, our kitchen in Ohio,” he told a man with the machine tucked under his arm. “The walls were red and so was the teapot.”

The man smiled politely before turning the other way. Considering my recent change to the sign and Eddie’s unfailing charisma, this entire thing was starting to look like a circus.

“Divorce sale, eh?”

I turned to see Trudy walking up the driveway, then immediately shifted my gaze to Eddie to see if he’d heard, though he was busy showing off Frank to the man with the coffeepot.

“Trying to get rid of things, make some room,” I said.

“I’d been curious about your situation,” Trudy said. Her blonde hair was in two braids draped over each shoulder and she wore overalls cuffed at the ankles and splattered with white paint.

“Well, now you know,” I said.

“I do, and I know how they go. My husband and I divorced but it’s not really something I’m proud of. I’m just saying I know how they go.”

I was sitting on a bucket behind the table of knick knacks, my mug of coffee at my feet. Trudy palmed a Precious Moments boy kneeling at the altar.

“Well this is tacky as all hell,” she said. She looked over the rest of the table. “Matter of fact, these all are.” The table was full of more Precious Moments collectables, glass dolphin figurines, and Dana’s spoon collection.

“You’re telling me. She always had bad taste,” I said, though I didn’t know why. Never once since we married had I ever considered divorcing Dana, disease or not. But something about her death, something about her being taken from me felt like a divorce, a one-sided culmination to the best chapter of my life and I didn’t get to weigh in on the matter.

“Sounds like you might be better off then,” Trudy said.

“Maybe,” I said. “But *she* left me. Left all her junk too.”

Trudy moved to the table of Dana’s things. She explained the same thing had happened to her—he’d left her for someone else without so much as a word. She’d gotten the car, but material things didn’t help the hurt, she said as she slipped on the turquoise ring Dana had gotten from a Navajo gift shop during our cross-country road trip after college. “Fuck ‘em, right?” Then she reached for the hat, the same floppy hat the elderly woman tried on hours before. She placed it on her head and tilted it, running her fingers along the frilly brim. “How do I look?”

Eddie rushed over and pointed to the hat. “That’s my mom’s! She wore it to the horse races! But I didn’t go because I wasn’t born yet.” He tucked his chin to his chest as if this fact truly saddened him.

“How do you think I look in it?” Trudy asked Eddie.

He looked her up and down and she twirled for him, the white and red of the hat bleeding together in motion to make a blur of pink. “You look beautiful,” he said with a nod of his head before wandering back to Frank.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. Eddie was right—Trudy was beautiful. She was tall and slender with a warm voice and blue eyes that matched the light denim of her overalls. There was a glow about her olive skin, a healthy radiance.

“What are you painting?” I said. I gestured to the paint splatter.

“Funny you should ask because I was really coming over to ask a favor,” Trudy said. “I'm trying to redo the living room but I've really just made a mess. And now that I know about your situation, I don't feel so forward asking for your help.”

I had a chance right then to stop it all, quit the act and come out with the truth, but this was all headed in a direction I needed to explore and somewhere in my conscience I must have sensed this. I poked fun at my situation again, or my situation as it appeared to Trudy. I told her I could drop over after I wrapped things up here, if it was all right if Eddie came too. She said of course, Chip would love to have him.

Before we headed to Trudy's I stripped Eddie's bed and wiped down the mattress protector before dressing it with clean sheets. I hadn't eaten anything all day and was close to polishing off the whiskey I'd opened the day before, so I grabbed a granola bar and showered before we left the house. Eddie insisted on bringing Frank and a bag of Cheetos and because I was running low on both energy and patience, I couldn't say no to either. And besides, I hadn't fixed anything for dinner.

“Excuse the mess,” Trudy said when she opened the door to us.

Trudy's house was an exact replica of ours—stairs across from the entryway as soon as you walked in, dining room to the left, living room to the right—and it all

felt a bit trippy. The couch and an armchair had been pushed into the dining room and clear tarps lay across the living room carpet. The place smelled like a mixture of Home Depot and cinnamon potpourri. We followed her into the back family room where Chip was fast asleep on his dog bed until he saw Eddie. His tail slapped the hardwood at increasing speeds until Eddie kneeled by his bed and Chip showed him his belly.

“Oh he’s asking you for a belly rub,” Trudy said.

“How old is he?” Eddie asked.

“We’re not sure because we adopted him from the pound. We think maybe three or four.”

I wasn’t sure if the “we” in her response referred to her and the dog, or if she still referred to herself as plural out of habit from the marriage.

“This is my toad,” Eddie said. He held it up for Trudy’s inspection. “His name is Chip Two. I found him in the stream.”

Trudy told him how handsome his amphibian was and I didn’t mention the toad’s sudden name change. Eddie set Chip Two on the coffee table and took to cuddling Chip the dog in his dog bed. Trudy gave him the remote and then showed me to the living room.

“See? It looks like crap,” she said. “I don’t know why it’s so streaky.”

“Have you painted before?”

“Nothing this big. Not on my own.”

The lap marks were obvious, even at a distance. It was clear she’d tried to paint large sections from top to bottom, which dried as she moved to the next section



and caused any inch of overlap between the two to show. I explained to her the strategy of painting in small sections and Trudy listened intently, nodding her head as I spoke.

“That makes complete sense. You want to merge the sections, hide the breaks.”

“Exactly,” I said. In order to fix it now, we needed to spread a second layer as evenly as possible. We both grabbed rollers and got started.

Up close to the wall I could really see her handiwork—it looked like the paint job a landlord throws up when he’s on a tight schedule between two tenants. Paint had dripped and dried in bubbles, and some sat in the crevice where wall met molding and overflowed the wood at random. From the corner of my eye I watched her work, her tongue between her teeth in concentration the same way Dana looked during the tense part of a novel. Trudy’s lips were red and her face was flushed as she dipped the roller into the pan of paint then pushed it up and down the wall. I sensed her next to me the entire time, a feeling that put me on edge.

Trudy was slender with little muscle, almost the opposite of Dana physically. She worked in a frenzy and I worked in a daze. Her braids swung as she pumped her arms up, a grunt of effort escaping every now and then. By the time we’d finished I was feeling flushed myself, my “coffee” refills from the day finally catching up to me. With all the lights on in the room it was hot and the backs of my eyes hurt, making me dizzy. Trudy stood back to admire our work and bumped her backside into me. When she turned to meet my gaze, she flipped over into the grip of my arms

and I leaned down to kiss her lips. She returned the kiss for a moment before pulling away.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I think I’m drunk.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay. We just don’t have to do this right now.”

I didn’t know what she meant by that and my face warmed. “We should open some windows, get some air moving,” I said as I moved to the wall to busy myself. I felt stupid and rejected and woozy and for some reason like I needed to defend myself. I turned around to face Trudy, who still stood where I’d kissed her. “My wife didn’t leave me.”

She said nothing and only glanced in the direction of the back room.

“She died. Six months ago.”

Trudy met my eyes but still said nothing. From the opened window behind me a rush of wind hit my neck and sent goose bumps down my body. I shrugged another apology her way, then moved to the family room where Eddie was fixated on a cartoon movie. He and Chip shared one cushion of the couch and I sank down onto the other end and rubbed at my eyes. Neither Eddie nor Chip acknowledged my presence.

Trudy appeared in the doorway. “Let me get you something for that,” she said. She disappeared then returned again with a glass of water and a bottle of Aspirin.

“Thank you.”

“You look like you could use some sleep,” she said. She tucked herself into the recliner and pulled an afghan around her shoulders.

I told her I did need sleep, and explained Eddie's bedwetting issue in terms of abstraction as to not upset him. As I spoke, I struggled to open the pill bottle.

"Here," Trudy said. She got up from the recliner and gestured at the bottle, then unscrewed the cap and shook three pills into my hand.

Her gesture was neither romantic nor sentimental, but it caused some kind of release inside me. I'd spent that last half of the year being too proud, too hurt to accept help or advice from anyone, and now something so small, so simple was breaking me down. My eyes glassed over and I offered another apology to Trudy.

"Don't be sorry," she said. "You're just having a comedown of sorts."

But I wasn't, not yet. I sucked it all in and we talked for a while longer about jobs and dogs and kids and the weather. When I noticed Eddie starting to doze on the couch, I shook him awake. I did this a few times until he said he was tired and asked if we could go home. Trudy thanked me for the help painting, and I thanked her for the aspirin, though I think we both knew I was thanking her for a lot more.

As I fumbled with my keys at our front door, Eddie spoke. "Can we walk the creek tomorrow?"

"If it's not too cold," I said.

"I want to let Chip Two go," he said.

I hesitated before asking why, afraid he'd say he needed a dog instead.

"Because he's supposed to be in the wild, not in a cage," Eddie said. "If he could talk, I bet this whole week he woulda been saying 'Let me out and let me go.'" He did the toad's voice in the tone of a cartoon character.

I laughed. "I bet you're right," I said, forever baffled by the conclusions he came to. "We can do it tomorrow."

Later that night I had what I know now was my first comedown. As I tucked Eddie into the clean sheets of his bed, he asked me to please not be mad in the morning if it happened again. I told him I would do my best, then went downstairs and drained another flask until I was met with a fit of shoulder-shaking sobs and a sleeve full of snot and a fist through the drywall. I kept waiting for Eddie to call for me, or to appear at the top of the stairs asking what was going on. But he didn't, and when I checked on him he was asleep, sheets still dry. It wasn't until later when I sat on the couch with my knuckles under a bag of frozen peas and SportsCenter on mute that I realized breakdown and breakup were connected and I couldn't have one without the other.