

FERNANDES, ANDRE, M.F.A. *Ten Thousand Miles Away*. (2012)
Directed by Holly Goddard Jones. 107 pp.

This is a coming-of-age novel about familial love, the flawed nature of memory, and the blurred line between self and body. It shifts between two perspectives: a young teenager named Julie who develops an exotic mental disorder, and her brother, Wolfgang, who struggles against the physical and mental barriers between them.

To begin, we learn that Julie's mother, father, and brother have gone missing in a deadly plane crash. As a presumed orphan, she is to be raised by her well-intentioned grandmother, Gerty, who must bridge a wide generational gap. Her brother, meanwhile, survives the crash and ekes out a living on an uninhabited island for over a year before finally being rescued along with his father, Vernon, with whom he constantly struggles for power and independence.

As Julie finally comes to terms with her family's death, her life suffers another shattering reversal of fate after the surprise return of her brother and father causes her to develop a mental condition which prevents her from seeing or interacting with them. As Wolfgang struggles to reach out to Julie, he finds himself sucked up by his sister's quest to find the long lost love of a man whose crippling and mysterious memory loss has left him trapped in the year 1968.

TEN THOUSAND MILES AWAY

By

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Ten Thousand Miles Away

Julie

When little Julie Young heard that her mother, father, and brother had all disappeared in the plane crash, her mind cracked. The top half slid four millimeters to the left under the pressure of its own weight and then sat there, lopsided and unwilling to pull itself back together again.

Grandma Gerty, for her own sake as well as Julie's, moved in to the empty house to care for her newly orphaned granddaughter. That first night, Julie would not leave her room, not even for dinner. She said the hallways were gaping and they made her feel as though she might tip over at any minute.

Gerty rapped her knuckles against the door. "Julie," she said, "Even if you don't want to come out, you still have to let me in. I am your grandmother."

"I don't want to be seen right now," she said.

Gerty said nothing, but let enough time go by that Julie asked, "Grandma?"

"Lemur," Gerty said. "You have to let me in."

Gerty called Julie Lemur because of her eyes, which were hazel, but speckled with so many yellow flakes that it seemed as though that were their color. That, and her late-night eating habits.

Julie opened the door to her room and at the sight of Gerty, she sobbed. If she thought of any of her family members, it quickly brought her to tears, but to think of them as a group left her dumbfounded, numb, unable to comprehend. Crying seemed insufficient to mourn the loss of the three most important people in her life, but she tried it anyway. She tried it for five consecutive

days, with no rest for sleep or supper, soaking her sheets, making soup out of every meal.

Grandma Gerty switched out Julie's drenched pillows every morning at six and learned to cook her food a little bit blander, making allowances for the salt content of her granddaughter's tears.

Aside from these little things, these small favors one does for the grieving, there was little Gerty could do but worry about her too-young granddaughter. Knit and worry, cook and worry, wringing her hands, crying in secret, feeling every ounce of her granddaughter's pain and then multiplying it by six for good measure.

The facts of the accident were dizzying, in part because a lack of information still begat hope. The plane had suffered some fatal malfunction over the South Pacific in the dead of night. An emergency landing was attempted in the choppy waters, but only half-succeeded, wrenching the plane and killing the richest half instantly. The search for survivors was ongoing. But none were expected.

Julie and Gerty watched every news show, read every article. Gerty even learned to navigate the web in their constant search for more information. She tried her best to keep Julie from the more lurid and speculative reporting. Turning the tv off was easy enough, but the tv was only half the problem. Julie was constantly on the computer, clicking. Red eyes fixed on the monitor. Picture after picture of pink, frothy waters.

Few things were certain. Though there were no survivors so far, many of the passengers had survived the crash, only to find themselves in the path of a great white migration. Serrated teeth three inches long made short work of the inflatable orange stairs and hungry mouths soon found things more substantial to sink their teeth in. The food glut sparked a mating orgy and more sharks came. The feast was in full swing by the time rescuers arrived seventeen hours later. They sprayed the water with chemicals, combed the sea in ever-wider circles in their search for

survivors, and later, bodies. Those were the facts, repeated at the top of every hour with short, brutal recaps in-between.

The fact was, Julie was eleven years old.

She was alone in a house of keepsakes, with memories in every square foot, on every surface and even in the air before her. There were memories in the orange afternoon light filtering through the dust in the den. There were memories in the pale white kitchen mornings. She recited them as they came—as if to make them real with her voice. She came up with elaborate mnemonic devices to help her store each of them away in some safe place. She had not known lean times were so near, and felt shamefully unprepared for the winter of her life.

On the fifth day of her tears, desperate to give her granddaughter something, anything, Gerty took Julie upon her lap. She no longer fit quite so snugly, and she shifted and shimmied with her head against Gerty's collarbone. The smell of talc was one of the few things that could still soothe her.

“Julie,” Gerty said, “You must have faith. God has a plan. For you. For us all.”

“God planned this?” she asked.

Gerty said, “I know it's confusing. Everything seems awful right now, but you're not alone. I'm here for you. God's with you. Even your parents and Wolfgang, they're with you too.”

“How can they be here, and there?” Julie asked

“Can't you feel them,” Gerty said. “Thinking of you? Watching over you?”

“Are you saying they're dead?” Panic was seeping into Julie's voice.

Gerty said, “No, I'm not saying that, we don't know that yet. I'm saying that they're with us, no matter what. Whether they're on some tropical island somewhere, drinking coconut milk around a fire, or with Grandpa, feeding the birds in some park in heaven—they're thinking of you,

Julie. Thinking of us. Can't you hear them? Listen.” Gerty put her palm flat on Julie's chest, as if she were rubbing menthol into the skin. “Can't you feel them?”

Julie nodded, but she couldn't. She couldn't feel much of anything except an overwhelming void where everything else had once been. Each day, a succession of every future moment she should have shared with her family and now never would raced through her mind. She mourned each of them, petty or momentous. She might spend a few minutes watching a tv show and everything would be fine until one of the characters punched the lights out of some boastful jerk to protect his little sister's reputation. She couldn't find a single movie or show or book or view out the window that didn't eventually tear her to pieces. Without her mother, who would take her for double-nut, chocolate-crunch ice cream after volleyball, then eat the other half? After a night in the city, who would carry her from the car to her bed when she fell asleep watching the landscape flatten from New York to Yonkers? Who would go with her to see the Grand Canyon? Who would watch this sunset with her? Or the next? Or the one after that...?

Julie listened to her grandmother with starving ears. Until that point what requests she had of life were the kinds granted by the sacrifice of loose eyelashes or letters to the North Pole. Her problems were now beyond the Santa she knew, who smelled of mothballs and Listerine and sat patiently before a Styrofoam gingerbread house.

Julie threw herself wholly upon belief. She prayed.

She prayed with the kind of devotion demanded only by dentists: immediately after waking up, prior to going out, and before and after every meal. Having never prayed before, she treated her prayers like conversations, free-flowing jam sessions with God, in which she plainly stated her case over and over and over again. Surely a mistake had been made, she'd say. She was not a bad person, nor were her parents. And her brother could be an ass, but he was still a good brother and she loved him. She loved all of them. Maybe something had fallen through the

cracks? Did he have a ledger? Couldn't he recheck it just this once? Let them be safe. Let them be found. Let them come home. Yours truly, Julie.

But she did not broach with God the thought that kept her up at night. Most nights, she lay in bed awake for hours, not because of the snoring of her grandmother—who often fell asleep beside her, a crossword dangling from her hand or a ball of yarn rolling quietly off her lap—no, what kept her up was this thought she didn't dare speak of to anyone, much less God. It was likely, or probable, that merely thinking the thought placed it within His sphere of knowledge, so Julie spent her hours of insomnia putting her most valiant effort towards suppressing the thought altogether. But since thinking about suppressing a thought led to thinking the thought, the only way she could accomplish this was to outrun it. She kept her mind racing, occupied, thinking of anything and everything. Often, this amounted to little more than a game of word association, with one word leading to the next, and to the next until, like sheep jumping a fence, Julie's vocabulary guided her into a fitful, restless sleep where one dream led to another, led to another, and she woke up the next day more ragged than the last.

Summer went by slowly. On days when it was too hot to go outside, when the air was so heavy that even the crickets fell silent, Julie would stand on the porch and watch the empty streets. The asphalt shimmered like a mirage and she would pretend that time was standing still. Then, she would will it to go back again. She'd walk back inside and check each of the empty rooms, half-expecting to see her brother watching tv, or her parents napping in their bed. But the house was always empty. With each passing day, the numbers of the dead increased and the missing grew smaller. But her family had still not been found one way or the other.

She joined her grandmother's church. At first, it was just Sunday Mass and Wednesday's prayer circle, but she began asking to go on Saturday evenings as well, and then why not Thursday's Bible study? Before long, Julie was stretching Gerty's piousness to its grandmotherly

limit, dragging her to rallies and bingos, soup kitchen pot lucks and Monday night raffles. They went to every single event a church could possibly throw, arriving early and leaving late. In her ongoing negotiations with God, every soup Julie poured was payment rendered, and every raffle ticket she was given, a paper promise entwined with her parents' fate. That is, until one day, she won a toaster and nothing else and raffle night disappeared from their calendar altogether.

At least once a week, Julie called a twenty-four hour hotline the airline had provided for the bereaved families of Flight 181. She waited until her grandmother was asleep and tiptoed down to the living room where gentle voices told her: *We're so sorry, There are no new developments. Is there an adult to talk to?* Julie would hang up and climb back into bed, thinking of word after word after word until she fell asleep.

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The reason Julie was not on the plane with her parents was that she discussed Malcolm X during Civil War classes. When students were told to read *Girls Think of Everything: Stories of Ingenious Inventions*, she asked the teacher if she knew that ancient Chinese women had invented the dildo. The final straw came when the family received a letter from the principal, detailing how the school had been forced to evacuate the gym halfway through the science fair after Julie broke a vial of her synthetically created skunk odor.

The night of the letter, four weeks before their flight crashed into the ocean, Vernon and Olive sat at the same kitchen table where they had once decided to start a family. The same table where not so long ago, they had told Julie her hamster, Khan, had died and what it meant when something died. It meant they weren't coming back. That night, they told Julie to go up to her room and they sat at the table and had a long conversation about what to do with her.

As they walked the stairs, Julie lay under the covers, hearing them come, listing her arguments. Vernon came inside and Olive stood at the door, collecting a pulsing halo around her head that blocked the light from the hallway from shining in Julie's face. This image of Olive would be seared into Julie's memory, and she would remember it for the rest of her life, keep it in some mental safe box that she had no idea how to open or close.

Her parents watched her, but they didn't say anything at first. Julie sat up in bed. "I'm sorry," she said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so, so, so sorry. I swear it was an accident! I was just trying to open it, but the cork got stuck and everybody in school knows I should've gotten an A, but—"

"Forget the science fair," Vernon said, "It's been like this all year. We would've let you stay in public school if we had known you were going to continue acting out this way. What's going on, Julie? Are you still not getting enough attention?"

Julie crossed her arms and clenched her jaw. She leaned her head against the bedpost and looked at the floor. She shrugged.

"We don't get it," Vernon said. "You have everything. The world at your fingertips and it's still not enough. I guess it's our own fault for letting it get this far. For not teaching you that there are consequences to your actions."

"I didn't even mean to do anything," Julie said.

"But you did, Julie," said Olive. "It never seems to be your intentions that get you in trouble."

Julie said nothing. Vernon took a breath and his voice became less stern. He said, "We've decided not to take you to New Zealand and to enroll you in summer school instead." He put up a hand to prevent her from interrupting. "Let me finish," he said. "This wasn't an easy decision for us. We know it's been years since you've seen your uncle Waldo, but this time we're not going to

change our minds. Mr. Turner is very upset. Your scholarship might even be in question now and it's not because of grades, or intelligence, or anything you can't help, but because you won't stop acting out. How should that make us feel? You know how much we've sacrificed.”

A year before, when Julie was still flitting about aimlessly in the same school as her brother, her then-civics teacher, Mr. Peabody, put it to her parents as such: it wasn't that Julie was a troublemaker, she was just bored by the pace of public school. He thought that a private academy might be able to redirect her extra zest more productively. Julie remembered that word, zest, and repeated it on the drive home later that night, enjoying its breathy zuh and even using it later in her own defense, saying, “But I'm just *zesty!*”

Through his contacts, Mr. Peabody arranged for Julie to be tested at St. Andrew's, a posh private school where rebellious teens defied the dress code with silk Hermes ties and discreet Chanel skirts. He calmed her parents' financial fears by saying, “Let them test her. I have an inkling.”

The exam for St. Andrew's was unique in that it had no multiple choice, but a barrage of open-ended questions that required three professors to grade. One asked: List as many uses as you can for a single brick. And her list started simply enough:

1. *Break ground on a construction*
2. *Weigh down a picnic blanket on a windy day*
3. *As a barrier for very small, lazy things*

But the question asked for as many uses as she could think up and Julie's list went on:

17. *Drill 10 holes in it and make a Mr. Potato Brick Head [parts not included]*
34. *Put it on a stick and give it as a flyswatter to a bodybuilder*
35. *Put it on a stick and give it as an exfoliating shower brush to a Crocodile Man*
51. *Use it as a model for other bricks to aspire to*

She did well enough that they offered her an eighty percent scholarship, which was a huge amount of money. But then, so was the twenty percent left over. Her parents decided they couldn't say no, and Olive went back to teaching full-time. They told Julie they could find a way to keep her enrolled, if she kept her grades up and her nose out of trouble.

Vernon sat at the edge of Julie's bed. "Do you feel you've held up your end of the bargain?" he asked. "Be honest, now."

Julie's carefully planned arguments got her nowhere. Her suggestions for alternative punishments did not impress. Her parents agreed the punishment fit the crime and there is no wall more insurmountable than parents in agreement. Her classes would start the day after they left. But after the accident, everything got put aside. Julie never went to summer school.

Thinking about this made her shiver, as her mind once again began to wander to the thought that kept her up at night. The one that kept her fleeing. It had first come to her as she stood in the viewing room with her grandmother, watching the plane take off; tons of weight pushed off the tarmac in a heavy roar that made the windowpanes quiver. Julie was imagining a list of excuses to get her out of summer school, and her parents dying in a plane crash flashed through her mind so quickly, she could not bury it away in time. In some way, she believed her parents were only dead because of her insolence—God's severe way of transforming her life into a cautionary fable.

But if there was a moral, she couldn't see it. And if God had a plan, as her grandmother insisted He did, then she had to believe the story was still being told. She could only hope He was open to creative suggestions.

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One night, before their nightly prayer, Grandma Gerty told Julie that they had a reason to give thanks. Earlier that day, St. Andrews had called to offer Julie a full academic scholarship for the coming spring semester. They told Gerty that their prayers were with them in these trying times.

“I don't want to go to school,” Julie said.

“But you have to.”

“Well I'm not ready to go back,” she said.

“But Julie, who knows if they'll offer this again?”

“You could ask.”

“That would be obscene.” Gerty took a brief intake of breath. She said, “This is good news, Julie. You get to continue your schooling. I know it doesn't seem like much now but this is a big deal.”

“But it feels wrong,” Julie said. “Going back like nothing even happened.”

“It's not like nothing happened. Life has its way and that way is to move on. With or without you. And now it's my job to make sure that it's not without you.”

“Uncle Waldo put off his wedding indefinitely.”

“And?”

“And who decides what's disrespectful and what's moving on?”

Grandma Gerty, in her own contemplative way, looked at Julie and rocked in her chair. This chair was the only piece of furniture Gerty had brought with her from her own home. She said, “All we can ever do is our best. You'll have to trust me, Lemur, when I say that sitting in this big empty house for months without anything to do is going to do you any good.”

“Well, I don't want to go to school,” Julie said, “I don't want to have to worry about tests and homework and—and people staring at me. I shouldn't have to...I don't...I don't want to be the orphan girl at school.”

“Is that what this is? You're not the orphan girl, sweetie. You're just Julie. That's all you ever need to be. You tell that to anyone who teases you.”

“They're not going to tease me.”

“Then what?”

Julie shrugged.

“What?” Gerty said.

“In third grade, this girl, Maria, her mother ran away. She had a Foosball table and after class kids liked going there to play in her basement, but after her mom left, nobody went by anymore unless their parents told them to. Her aunt started to pick her up at school and everybody knew she was the kid whose mom left her. Nobody talked about it to her face.”

Grandma Gerty pushed herself up and sat on Julie's bed. She stroked Julie's cheek, pressing the moisture of tears back into her skin. “What about you? Did you talk about her?”

Julie shrugged. “I dunno.”

“Well, maybe you and Maria could be friends now?”

“She moved.”

“Well, no matter what people say about you, it doesn't change who you are, Julie. They only have as much power as you give them. Now go to sleep and don't fret. You still have a whole month of summer.”

Julie shut her eyes. Don't fret. Fret sounds like frat. Frat boys drink beer. Beer was invented six thousand years ago in Sumer, and not Egypt like everyone thinks. Sumer is an ancient civilization located in and around the Fertile Crescent, also known as the cradle of

civilization, which is present-day Iran and Iraq. The United States is at war with Iraq and maybe, later, we'll be at war with Iran too because now they're controlled by religious extremists who have outlawed beer there, even though they're the ones who invented it and then they call America the Great Satan and are there any Little Satans? Imps. Dwarves. Beards. Mountain men. Moonshine...

The next day, Julie walked to her local library. Ashamed to talk with the librarian, she wandered the aisles until she found what she was looking for in the self-help section, wedged between books on becoming a better you and books on becoming a better handyman. She liked that there was an entire aisle devoted to people who wanted to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.

Julie read about the phases of grief, and tried to place herself on a timeline. She couldn't help wondering if her prayers to God were denial or bargaining. The step between the two, anger, puzzled her. She felt angry a lot, but she still slipped into denial sometimes, when it made life just a little bit easier. The anger came like the tide, throughout, alternately controlling her life and then abandoning her to the mercy of stage four: depression. None of it felt as orderly as the book made it seem. Her gaze slithered down to acceptance. She wasn't sure she'd ever feel that way.

Some of the books were illustrated, often just with black and white pictures. A lot of long shadows on concrete. Empty doorways, trees in winter, rocking chairs with nobody on them. One book had a picture of a vacant room with a woman looking out a floor-to-ceiling window. Looking at what? Julie found a book called *Motherless Daughters* and discovered that the first few pages were filled with testimonials written by adult women, now mothers and grandmothers themselves, who wrote about how they still felt like incomplete women; like part of them would always be the age they were when their mother died. Julie closed the book and left the library.

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There was a picture at the foot of the stairway that Julie could stare at for hours.

Julie was three or four, and Wolfgang was five or six. He stood behind her, his arms wrapped around her torso as she held a spool of thread with a line extending up into the sky. Wolfgang held onto her hands (gently, thought Julie, patiently) his mouth open as if to give her some crucial piece of advice. Julie's then-blonde hair was in a bowl cut and bangs covered most of her forehead and much of her eyes as she squinted up past where the line was cut off by the frame. In the background, lying on a blanket and fuzzily out of focus, Vernon propped himself up on an elbow and smiled. Olive was almost always the photographer for family events: birthdays, holidays, vacations, and picnics such as these. At her worst, she was a talented amateur. At her best, she was a woman with a gift unpursued.

As she looked at the photograph, Julie tried to piece together an image of her mother crouched down to take this picture. She imagined her mother kneeling on a patch of grass to avoid getting any dirt on her jeans, half-smiling in concentration, one eye squinted nearly shut, the other covered by the camera. But it was a Frankenstein compilation constructed from the dozens of memories she had of her mother focusing the lens, leaning back to get the perfect angle and waiting for the right moment with her finger hovering over the shutter. It wasn't actually her as she had been in that moment.

Julie clung desperately to her memories, afraid they would be lost, or worse, warped into an unrecognizable fiction. Memories, she knew, weren't like photographs. Julie once had a clear memory from the second grade of a runny-nosed boy with ruby-red lips who stomped on her foot while they stood in line to put up their coats. She hated that boy and his chapped mouth, his constantly flicking tongue, and she remembered him as a bully. She had recently asked her mother if she remembered why teachers didn't stop him from torturing her. Olive smiled and said,

“Of course I remember Ian. He was such a sweet boy, but you were knee-deep in your 'I hate boys' phase and you wouldn't give him the time of day. He had such a crush on you.”

Farther up the staircase there were other family photos with the entire family, Gerty included, all of them smiling. These were less interesting to Julie in their ordinariness. They lacked the beauty and honesty of those pictures taken by Olive herself. What Julie saw was a sheen of smiling faces that glossed over the previous moment's hushed demands to sit still, and the ensuing hustle of movement as she and Wolfgang joyfully removed constricting ties, hair bows, and shoes. In a way, Julie's memories felt like pictures bereft of Olive's artistic touch, lacking an ability to capture things as they truly were, or would always be. Looking at these other pictures made Julie feel scared that she might have missed the point. Did Olive surrender being an artist to start a family or had motherhood always been her true calling? Was Wolfgang just another rebellious teenager or a revolutionary in the making? Who was her father, really? If told to rebuild her family through her memories, how would she fail them?

These are the things Julie thought about as she looked at the picture at the foot of the stairs. Then she would walk into the kitchen, where her grandmother kissed her on the forehead and set a plate of cookies before her. “And what are you going to do today, Lemur? It's a gorgeous day, you should take out your bike and get some exercise. Fresh air!” Gerty said the words exercise and fresh air as if they were delectable items on a restaurant menu, but they sounded like wet spinach.

Julie took a bite out of a cookie and shrugged. She said, “Tell me about daddy as a little boy.”

And Grandma Gerty smiled, wagged a carrot for emphasis, and said, “Well, when he was just a little younger than you are right now, your father was just a terror...”

And Julie listened.

On Julie's first day back in school, it felt like everyone had rehearsed for a play, starring her against her will. There was definitely a script, and she heard a lot of the same lines. At times, they even expected her to play along. Her trigonometry teacher, Dr. Winslow, took Julie aside after class and sat her down for a conversation. As he spoke, Julie couldn't help but to stare at his thin, khaki-draped knees as he crouched in one of the students' desk-chairs.

He looked at her intensely and said, "Look at me, Julie."

Julie looked up at him with a tight-lipped smile, and he said, "Julie, my father died when I was ten years old. Not much younger than you. So I know how tough things must seem right now."

Julie looked back down at his knees, scrunched against the bottom of the desk. Dr. Winslow was a very thin man.

"Julie, look at me."

And Julie looked back up again with that same smile, which was a mistake. Because Dr. Winslow said, "No, Julie. Really look at me. Right in the eyes," and Julie had to stare at Dr. Winslow's ghoulish, bearded face as he told her his whole life ordeal and how he understood and how she could always talk to him, while Julie felt like she barely even knew him, except that from the smell of him he really liked peppermints and cigarettes.

In the hallways between classes, the play called for a hushed silence whenever she walked past. Everyone moved so deliberately that Julie felt like highly volatile explosives. Mostly, she was comforted by people in groups. There was safety in numbers and it felt like even teachers avoided being left alone in the room with her as she trailed behind her classmates at each bell.

Principal Turner, however, called Julie to his office to stare at his perpetually surprised eyebrows. “Julie,” he said from the comfort of his plush swivel-chair, “I hope you know that if you ever need anything—anything at all—you can come to me.”

The words came from Julie's mouth ready-formed and with barely any need of her consent or cooperation. “Thanks,” she said, “I appreciate it. Everything you've done.”

“How have you been holding up?” he asked.

Julie wanted to be smart but instead she said, “Okay, I guess. Just really, really hungry.”

Mr. Turner nodded solemnly, as if she had just confided all her insecurities to him. He stood up and walked Julie to the door with one hand squeezing her shoulder. “Well, you should get out of here,” he said, “while there are still burgers to be had. Please, come by any time. No problem is too small, okay?”

Julie put her head down and hurried to the dining hall. She took her tray to an ignored corner in the back of the cafeteria, careful not to look up from her quivering Jell-O lest some pitying face offer her a seat. Nobody bothered her as she ate.

After school let out, Julie took the train home and arrived to an empty house. A note on the fridge told her Gerty was at the grocer's. Julie threw her backpack on the floor, grabbed one of the cookies on the counter (if there could be said to exist a silver lining in her new life, it was a constant supply of freshly-baked cookies) and she sat before the television:

War in Iraq;

Excessively excited vacuum cleaner salesmen;

Dogs prancing about an auditorium, their owners flashing beauty pageant smiles;

Young, lithe woman cooking recipes that called for entire sticks of butter.

Julie settled in to wait for her grandmother's return.

Four o'clock came and went. Then it was five, and still there was no sign of her grandmother. Around six, Julie was checking the clock every few seconds and she had begun to panic. Gerty didn't have a cell phone, so Julie called their nearest grocer. "Have you seen a nice old lady come in today? Gray hair, blue eyes, a little bit of a stoop?"

She could hear a slight chuckle on the other side, "Miss, you just described half our customers."

"It's my grandmother. She left hours ago and hasn't come back home yet. Please. She was probably wearing a gray scarf." Julie yanked jackets and sweaters from the coat hanger in the entrance way to see if she could spot any other missing articles of clothing.

"Oh, well, I'm sorry. I don't know if your grandma came in. Would she have used a credit card?"

"No. She doesn't use those. Goddamnit!" Julie hung up the phone and sat on the floor surrounded by a soft matting of coats and scarves, hats and gloves.

Taking deep breaths to keep from breaking down in tears, Julie looked up another grocer, one in her grandmother's old neighborhood that Julie knew she liked. "Lee's is a real neighborhood grocery," Gerty had said, "not some corporate megalodont." The receiver clicked and before they could say anything in greeting, Julie asked, "Have you seen my grandmother? Please, it's an emergency!"

The lady on the other end seemed more sympathetic than the man from the previous grocery store. She said, "Calm down. What's your grandmother's name?"

"Her name is Gertrude. She used to live around there, went there every week, but then she moved away."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Gertrude?" Julie hummed a quick confirmation. The phone made a knocking sound, and the woman's voice began again, away

from the camera and growing fainter as she walked away. Someone else picked up, an elderly lady with a crack in her voice. “Hello?”

“Hi, was Gertrude Young in there today?”

The voice paused a moment. “Is this Julie?”

Julie almost laughed. But then, she almost cried too. “Yes!” she said, “Yes, this is Julie. Was my grandma there today?”

“Oh dear. Well, yes she was here, Sweetie, but she left almost three hours ago.”

The arm holding the phone went limp and fell to her leg. The phone clattered to the ground. Julie watched it happen as though to somebody else. From a distance, Julie heard the lady on the other line. She had heard about Julie's parents and she was sorry. Her grandmother loved Julie very much and would talk about her to anyone that would listen. Did Julie know that? Julie only picked the phone up so she could hang up, then she looked at it blankly. Then she dialed 9-1-1. Then she hung up again.

With a shriek, Julie put an arm behind a rack with two rows of shoes that belonged to her disappeared family: their rain boots, her brother's cleats, her mother's jogging sneakers. She jerked her arm as hard as she could, flinging the shoes out in every direction. One boot left a dark black streak on the wall. Another, her father's, backfired and slammed against the side of Julie's head. She grabbed this boot by the tip and began to slam the sole against the floor, yelling, yelling, yelling.

The phone began to ring and Julie looked at the caller I.D. It was the police, and though Julie did not want to answer, she thought it best that she do, lest they trace her number, find out her address, run a background check and discover her every petty offense.

“Hello?”

“This is 9-1-1 emergency, we received a call from this number, is there something to report?”

“Yes, maybe. My grandmother is missing.”

“When did you last see her, Miss?”

“There's nobody else here,” Julie said.

Julie answered the operator's questions to the best of her abilities, gave the family's address, the address of the grocer that had last reported seeing her grandmother. She gave the woman her name and number, then sat in the doorway and watched the shadows grow long. It was now nearly seven, though it felt like six o'clock happened centuries ago. Through the sidelights by the front door, Julie watched as parents arrived from a day of work in the city. Fathers and mothers parked in driveways, left their car doors unlocked and strolled up walkways.

“God,” she said, “you're an asshole.”

Julie closed her eyes and waited for something. She wasn't quite sure what. A lightning bolt came to mind, but since she was indoors, maybe a rotted ceiling beam would make more sense—kill her instantly. But nothing happened. Their house probably didn't even have ceiling beams. “Didn't you hear me?” she yelled. “I said you're an asshole! Go ahead and smite me! I'm being blasphemous, don't you care? Don't you care about anything?”

Julie considered then a chilling possibility. That God was neither as kind as Jesus, nor as vengeful as the Old Testament would have her believe. But rather, that He was impassively neutral, surveying the American people and their vast fields of corn and wheat, not benevolently, but with a decidedly inhuman neutrality.

Julie had heard once that if you helped a butterfly escape from its cocoon you were condemning it to death. If the butterfly didn't struggle for itself, its wings wouldn't get the necessary blood flow to uncurl themselves, and they atrophied, killing the butterfly as surely as if

you swatted it with your own two hands. Is that all this was? An emotional obstacle course? Why was hers set to extra hard?

Sometimes, she knew, a butterfly died trapped in its cocoon.

Julie buried her face in her hands, so deep in panic that she could no longer cry. Julie said, "Please God, please, if you're listening, don't take my grandmother away. I need her. Leave me something. Let me keep something, please. Please."

Julie heard a key slip in the door. She jumped up, flung the door open and stared at her grandmother. Gerty held a large brown grocery bag against her body. Her key was still in the door, yanked out of her hand. "I'm sorry," she began, but Julie threw herself down at her feet and hugged her legs, crying.

"Julie, honey, what happened? Why are you crying? I'm sorry. The bus broke down. Get up, baby, let's go inside. Is this about school?"

But Julie wouldn't get up. She cried as she had not cried since those first days after she heard about the crash. It was not long before they saw the flashing lights of a police car pulling into their driveway.

Wolfgang

Wolfgang was alive.

And thanks to him, so were Vernon and Olive. Wolfgang's athleticism, his quickness, and video-game instilled hand-eye coordination had proven critical. He was adaptive and flexible to the realities of day-to-day survival in ways that Olive and Vernon simply were not.

They had survived the first two days, however, through sheer dumb luck, perhaps what some would call fate. Two days and nights marooned at sea, clinging to soggy seat cushions which doubled as flotation devices. And though nothing could match the horror of that first night, they had not foreseen the deadly tediousness of two days at sea. They slept poorly, in shifts, covering their heads with soaked shirts to protect themselves from sunburn. When it rained, they looked to the sky with mouths open wide as though they were screaming to the heavens. Wolfgang cupped his hands around his mouth and licked his palms, kicking hard to stay afloat as he funneled water in his mouth.

It was nothing short of a miracle that they arrived on this island, small and long, built upon the bones of a duodecillion corals. It was a miracle that came not a moment too soon, with Olive falling seriously ill the night before. She was barely able to keep her head above the water and her body trembled so violently that even her coughs came out shaky. Wolfgang and Vernon propped her up on the cushions and buckled their arms around her to keep them from drifting apart. It was little relief, but all they could offer. Olive's fever worsened and she became delirious, reaching to the skies and calling out her daughter's name.

In the morning, they awoke to the cawing of curious birds and they saw the island out in the distance. Vernon and Wolfgang kicked as strong and steady as their bodies would allow and watched as the water turned from dark emerald to a clear blue sapphire.

Their feet finally settled into the pure white sand, and Wolfgang suddenly realized he wasn't wearing his shoes. He had a vague recollection of removing them while half-asleep the night before. He hooked an arm under one of his mother's armpits and Vernon took the other. They tried to hurry, but their legs were jelly and they'd both trip and fall, then push their hands and feet against the sand as they got up trying to keep momentum, heaving and dragging Olive ashore.

“Water!” Vernon had said once they had her lying on her back. “She needs water.”

He began undressing her and Wolfgang ran. He did not know to what, but for the moment, there was only one direction. They were at the tip of an island shaped like a crescent moon and he ran on a hard ridge of sand partially submerged in water. Further inland, pure white sand met with sparkling aquamarine. At first, Wolfgang's legs wobbled from the two days at sea, but as his feet pumped against the ground, his movements became almost mechanical and he felt a rush of energy that surged through him as though he were a conduit.

In the near-distance, Wolfgang saw a lopsided coconut tree and its small, dwarfish companion. The larger tree seemed as though it were leaning away from him, and he recognized it instantly as a familiar vision from beer and rum commercials. He forked right when the beach split in half and as he drew nearer to the trees, he saw that his way was blocked by gnarly shrub trees with roller coaster branches that sprawled low to the ground. Small, broad leaves grew straight from the branch and flapped against enormous thorns. The island was battered by an intense wind which Wolfgang only noticed now that it was no longer at his back. As he cut through the undergrowth, he winced as thorns cut into his feet like they were fleshy white tomatoes.

The tree grew at such a bent that the canopy was right overhead from where he stood a good seven feet out from the base of its trunk. Wolfgang felt he could almost jump up and grab a

coconut from the canopy, but his legs had started trembling again, worse than before, and now his feet were bloodied. He looked around and saw dead coconut leaves and stems with dried husks scattered all around him. A couple of coconut saplings sprung up from the shriveled-brown coconuts. He picked up a dusty palm stem that had long lost its leaves and used it to pull close the nearest stem, which had two brown-green coconuts and many shriveled brown nuts the size and shape of prunes. Wolfgang yanked it off and felt the mature coconuts slosh with the promise of water.

Wolfgang picked his way back to shore, trying to avoid thorns, but still getting scratched and pierced on his feet and legs. He fell to his hands and knees and crawled the small distance left to the beach, then stumbled back to where he had left his parents. He found Olive shivering naked in the fetal position with Vernon's body enveloped around her, also naked. Their clothes were thrown haphazardly around them and their underwear lay in a bundle at their feet. Wolfgang looked away and began to search for a rock to slam the coconut with.

“Hurry,” Vernon said.

All around him, there was nothing but sand and water and here and there, a seashell. He waded into the ocean, which stung the wounds on his feet and legs. He scoured the sea floor for something that might fit the bill. Bits of knobby rock cropped up beneath the sand, but nothing would come loose. Finally, he found a hard bit of coral and hurried back to shore. He stabbed at the coconut, but it was slow work and Wolfgang often had to stop to pull back layers of fiber. The coconut sank deeper into the sand with each blow, making the job harder, so Wolfgang took the coconut, ignoring his father's cries and ran to the shore, where the wet sand was packed more tightly together. A few blows later, Wolfgang reached the hard nut interior and had to use both of his hands and the weight of his body to crack it. He ran to his mother and held both sides of the

coconuts as it dripped into her open mouth. White foam collected at the edges of Wolfgang and Vernon's mouths. They ran their sandpaper tongues up and down cracked lips.

“Spread our clothes out to dry,” Vernon rasped. Wolfgang kept his eyes averted and did what his father said.

Vernon ministered to his wife while Wolfgang scratched a key against his flint arrowhead necklace. When a spark caught on his coconut husk kindling, he fed the fire and called to his father to bring Olive over.

Vernon sandwiched her against the fire and, for the first time since they'd washed ashore, he looked away from Olive and at Wolfgang. “She's going to be alright,” he said.

Wolfgang stood to go open the second coconut and Vernon stood to put his clothes back on. They drank the sweet, syrupy dregs of Olive's coconut, then half of the other, relishing each sip, before giving the rest to Olive.

“They let you get through with that?” Vernon asked, pointing at the arrowhead.

“It's not metal,” Wolfgang said.

“But you could hurt somebody. I mean, a person could've if they'd wanted to.”

“Yeah, well, nobody said anything about flint.”

At the kiosk—impossibly, just three days before—the attendant had suggested they check in any sharp metal objects or liquid containers bigger than a hotel shampoo bottle along with their luggage, and Olive looked at Wolfgang suggestively. He admitted that yes, he had his Swiss Army knife on him, but that it was a multi-tool, not a weapon, and that the whole point of having a multi-tool was to have it on you at all times and, by the way, who ever heard of a fourteen-year-old American terrorist, anyway?

The lady at the desk smiled and said, “That may be true, young man, but you've probably already learned at school that for rules to be fair, everyone has to follow them.”

And Wolfgang cleared his throat and said, “Tyranny? Yeah, I learned all about that.”

He had looked back to Julie, but she was in her own world, seated on a bench across a couple locked in a long, intimate kiss. Wolfgang held his Swiss Army knife in one hand and with the other pulled on the retractable string which held keys to his belt loop. “What about these? They're sharp. They're metal. You going to start taking everyone's keys, too?”

Wolfgang fit the keys between his fingers like wicked brass knuckles. Then he wrapped the string around his hand and held it like a garrote. “And look at this,” he said. He mimed strangling somebody, possibly a pilot.

Vernon had grabbed the Swiss Army knife from his hand, though Wolfgang could have prevented him from taking it if he had wanted to. Vernon glared at Wolfgang and handed the knife to Olive, who quietly slipped it in her suitcase and smiled at the lady behind the desk.

“Not now,” Vernon said.

And Wolfgang had shut up, though he had thought to say, And when would be a more convenient time to stand up for our civil liberties?—but there was already the drama of Julie not coming with them, so he let it go. He looked back at his sister but she was still watching the couple, and he wondered why she even wanted to go anywhere—she was always in her own head.

At the Empire State Building, Julie had wasted all her quarters trying to read the lips of people who were on the roof with them. At the Statue of Liberty, she became convinced of a Conspiracy and began to find clues on the walls and in the fine print of her dollar bill. Growing up, they had been accomplices in these adventures, but for the past few years, Wolfgang had grown too old for those games, and while his imagination focused—on girls, on skating, on drawing—Julie's only to grew, ever outwards, like a red giant engulfing world after world, and the question in his mind was: when would she implode?

At Olive's urging, Wolfgang sometimes still played with her, but everything had changed in his absence. The molten lava ditch behind their home had long ago hardened into the bottom of a primordial ocean where nitrogen-rich currents had fostered the creation of new and exotic life. The island fortress from which they'd warded off multiple invasions by zombies, goblins, and people from New Jersey had long been abandoned for an evolutionary experiment. Julie informed him that it was now overrun by a lush jungle inhabited by creatures like the hideous Snorg or the Dumbo Bee. Wolfgang went gamely along, but he got the impression that Julie was just going through the motions herself, sometimes blushing as she explained the rules to all her new games. The truth was that she had moved on as much as he had. The day Olive stopped asking, Wolfgang stopped playing with his sister.

Wolfgang sat on the sand and watched Olive shudder beside the fire he had made. He took off his shirt and set it by the fire. He shared wordless glances with his father.

In a night filled with the sounds of Olive's sickness, Wolfgang thought about what it would mean to lose his mother and then chided himself for such thoughts. He thought to say something to his father but dissuaded himself each time he thought of Vernon's likely response.

In the middle of the night, with no idea as to whether or not his father was awake, Wolfgang said, "I'm scared."

Vernon said nothing. After what felt like a very long time, or at least time enough for Wolfgang to feel satisfied that Vernon had been asleep, his father said, "She's going to be okay."

Wolfgang stared at the star-drenched sky. "You don't know that," he said.

"I know," said Vernon.

Julie

The following Saturday, Julie was woken up early by her grandmother, who was already fully dressed, in a smart two-piece dress suit and a gaudy mustard-colored hat. The suit was a Chanel knock-off, really, but Julie had always loved it. It was a rich color, a personal favorite: a royal blue bordering on purple. Like all of Julie's favorite colors (magenta, turquoise), it straddled a color barrier perfectly, one color by day and another by night. She loved the feel of the cloth, too; a soft, nappy velvet which Julie never got tired of stroking. Even its dangling, brass-backed buttons were fuzzy, and when she was younger, Julie would play scratch and sniff with them. They smelled of her grandmother's perfume.

“Come on, up and at 'em, Lemur!” Gerty said.

Julie took in the dress and turned her head away, burying her face under the pillow. “I said I don't want to go to church, can't you go without me just this once?”

“It's Saturday, not Sunday, and you're coming to church tomorrow. But today we're going to the city!” Gerty clapped her hands in a reserved demonstration of excitement, then clasped them together when Julie did not stir. “And you better hurry, because we have a full day planned. We're going to the Guggenheim, then the Museum of Modern Art, grab some lunch at this hot new restaurant, Chez Modé or something or other, and then I thought we could have a stroll in Central Park.”

Julie groaned over the pitter-patter of droplets at her window. “But it's raining!”

“Barely a drizzle,” said Gerty, but Julie did not budge. Gerty pursed her lips and pulled the covers off of Julie, who shrieked and pulled her pillow down to hug it. “Give that back!”

“I’m afraid not. Whenever I’m feeling down, I find that a brisk walk can do wonders. And we’re just a skip and a hop away from the best place in the world for a pedestrian! So I decided—”

“What?!” Julie shrieked, finally opening her eyes to glare at her grandmother. “What have you decided? What’s the best thing for poor old Julie now? Maybe we should drop by an orphanage so I can see just how damn lucky I am!”

Gerty stared at Julie, then reached down and picked the blanket up from the floor, folding it across her chest and taking it out with her. “I’ll be downstairs. Breakfast is on the table.”

Julie growled and turned over to try and go back to sleep, but found that she could not. She fidgeted, kicked the air. Finally, she put her pillow to her face and screamed as loud as she could, then got up and stomped to the bathroom, then yanked the door shut behind her.

After getting dressed, Julie came downstairs and sat at the table while Gerty sat in the adjoining room clicking slowly on a computer mouse. Julie ate a few bites of oatmeal and a sausage that had gone cold before she got up and walked to her grandmother. Gerty kept clicking the mouse, and did not face Julie until she sighed and said, “I’m sorry.”

Gerty made a few final clicks and then turned around in her chair. “So, the rain is supposed to let up by mid-afternoon, and it’s a nice sixty-eight degrees outside. Not so bad, but we can decide about Central Park once we’re there. Did you eat enough?”

Julie shrugged. “Not very hungry,” she said.

Gerty shook her head. “I’ll heat it up,” she said. “You have to eat now because I’m not buying you some ten dollar museum sandwich with nothing but bologna and cheese.”

“I was just there for school,” Julie said. “They have turkey and arugula paninis now. With Havarti cheese.”

With a raised eyebrow, Gerty asked, “And how much are those?”

“Eleven dollars.”

“Eat your breakfast,” Gerty said with determined finality. She carried the oatmeal back into the kitchen and reheated it.

They took the train into the city. During the ride, Gerty began to fumble with her large tourist's map. She unfolded it slowly. Gerty had owned this map for so long that small holes had begun to form where the map folded into corners. A void of non-existence had taken over a two-block section of Harlem and part of the Upper West side. Julie looked over her grandmother's shoulder and smiled. “Is this from when the Indians still owned Manhattan?”

“Oh, ha-ha. Look who's suddenly got a sense of humor,” Gerty said.

“Was King George on the nickel you used to buy this map?”

“That's enough, young lady. I'll have you know this map was free as a bee when I got it. I'm sure nowadays you'd have to pay twenty dollars for something like this.”

“An antique?”

“I said that's enough.”

Once they arrived at Grand Central, Julie convinced Gerty to replace the Guggenheim with the Museum of Natural History. They took the subway and had a time looking at dinosaur bones and dioramas of Neanderthals and Galapagos penguins. When they arrived at the Hall of Ocean Life, Julie stood directly underneath the giant blue whale hanging from the ceiling.

“It's so crazy,” she said.

“What is?” asked Gerty.

“How small we are.”

The MoMA, as always, was an experience in other womens' breasts; painted, sculpted, and photographed in extensive detail. The temporary exhibits were practically unchanged since Julie's last visit, so they opted to simply browse the museum's permanent collection. In an out-of-

the-way wing filled with photographs and light on foot traffic, Gerty split off from Julie, claiming little interest in the medium. “If I want to see a bunch of old pictures I can just look through my albums,” she said.

Instead, Gerty went down the hall to see some Rodin statuettes and told Julie to feel free to go anywhere so long as she stayed on the same floor. As she wandered, Julie found a piece that had escaped her notice during previous trips, a picture entitled *Fright*:



Julie thought it was lucky that she was alone. Gerty probably wouldn't think much of her extended admiration of the piece, but something about *Fright* felt very real to Julie, but also eerie and strange and her grandmother tended to disdain strange things with words like “common,” and “inappropriate.”

Julie also looked at another series of pictures beside it, with smaller photographs of other people making likewise abhorrent faces.

A young woman with a loop in one of her nostrils and a sleeve of tattoos walked up beside Julie and smiled in a strange way. She said, “You like this?”

Julie looked up at the woman. There was a lot of make-up on her face, blue and violet on one half and red and pink on the other, with heavy doses of black throughout. Asymmetrical, but beautiful in its contrasts, Julie thought. The woman looked as though she should have been on display, not walking around. Julie floundered. She said, “It’s...”

“Unsettling?” the woman asked.

“Yes. Unsettling.”

“Do you know about Duchenne?” she said.

Julie glanced upwards and saw that the artist to whom the piece was attributed was called Duchenne de Boulogne. Both the pieces on display were a part of a larger work called *The Mechanism of Human Physiognomy*. “Not very much,” said Julie, who didn’t want to seem like a complete rube.

The lady smiled, and Julie saw that her teeth were jagged and unpredictable; a top canine jutted out past her incisors like a fang. “Well, this is my favorite kind of art. Art that was never intended to be art. Duchenne was a nineteenth century neuroscientist. Like most doctors back then, he was just fu—just nuts.”

Julie laughed a little nervously. “You can say fuck, it’s okay. I’ve heard it before.”

The woman smiled again, and this time Julie noticed an explosion of light bouncing off gold glitter around her eyes. “Well, Duchenne, he got it in his head that by using electroshock he could alter our facial expressions, because, well, we’re all just closed circuits when it comes down to it. And ethics wasn’t really a thing back then, so, naturally, he takes these electroshock probes and starts zapping the—fuck—out of anyone’s face that he can get his hands on.”

Julie laughed, and the lady laughed along with her. “True story, I swear. This guy, this one right here,” she said, pointing at the photo, “was just some poor old schmoe they picked off the street.”

Julie said, “What does it mean that we're closed circuits?”

“Whoa, talk about a loaded question.”

“What?” said Julie.

“It can mean a lot of things, but in this instance, it means we run on electricity just like everything else, but we're not plugged into a socket so we have to make our own. So we're a closed circuit. Your brain,” Here she tapped Julie’s scalp. “Everything that makes you, you, is held in the flashes of electricity between your synapses. Have you ever heard of electroshock therapy?”

Julie nodded slowly.

“Well it only works because we're electrical beings. We have our own set of internal wiring and voltages.”

“And ohms?” Julie said.

“Exactly,” The woman said, “ohms, too. So Douchenne, he brings all these people into his laboratory and starts using electrical shocks to change their facial expressions and maybe even alter their moods.”

“Did it work?”

“It certainly changed their mood, but maybe not in the way he had hoped. This guy,” she said, pointing at *Fright*, “was one of his favorites subjects. He was a homeless fellow Douchenne found on the streets, and supposedly, the reason he liked him so much was that he was so plain-looking. And probably he worked for bread crumbs or whatever. Anyway, Douchenne, he gets good enough at this stuff that he can recreate certain expressions with the right setup, so he starts

taking pictures of it. He made a happy woman look miserable and this poor old shmoe look happy.” She pointed at another picture, of the same toothless old man, except now he was grinning, ear to ear. “They say happiness is temporary anyways.

“Douchenne said he was exploring man's God-given language. He thought that facial expressions were a window into the soul. And somewhere in there, he discovered that when we give a genuine smile—” here she flashed a great big grin to match the picture, “—we also smile with the muscles around our eyes. To this day, that's called a Douchenne smile. So happiness is named after some mad scientist playing God with a taser. Doesn't that just make your day?”

Julie laughed again, mostly because the lady was also laughing while locked in intense eye contact with her. Then, Julie looked up at the picture again. “Maybe he was right,” she said.

The woman got suddenly serious and looked up along with Julie. “Right about what?”

“About the soul stuff.”

They stood quietly and looked at the man's face. They stood like this for a good while.

Gerty came up on them standing side-by-side like the oldest of friends. “Hello there,” she said.

The woman threw a hand to her heart and turned around with a start, “Oh, hi! You snuck up on us. Sorry, I was just admiring this piece with your er...granddaughter, here.”

Julie briefly touched Gerty's hand. “She's my grandma. Grandma Gerty.”

The lady smiled again. She seemed nervous. “You never know these days, right? People are having kids older and older...”

Gerty nodded, but did not really smile. “I'm Gertrude, pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The lady stuck out a splayed hand. “My friends call me Beetie.”

“I'm Julie.”

Beetie shook hands with Gerty and Julie. “Pleased to meet the both of you.”

Gerty smiled then, but only to say, “Well, Lemur, we should probably get going. We have a reservation in half an hour.”

Julie glanced at Beetie, then looked to her grandmother. “Could Beetie come along?”

“Well...I don't know. Have you asked your new friend if she wants to go? I'm not sure if there's a dress code...”

Beetie shook her head, “Thanks for the offer, Julie, but I've got to get back to work.”

“What do you do?” Gerty asked.

Beetie shrugged. “I'm an artist, most of the time.”

Gerty said, “Well, that's nice. Do you come here for inspiration?” She glanced at the photograph behind them.

Beetie smiled. “Something like that. I should get going. It was very nice meeting you two. Here's my card,” she handed a card to Gerty and, with a wink, another to Julie, “if you ever need someone to paint you a portrait...or your walls. Whatever, really.”

Julie tucked the card in her pocket and waved good-bye.

As they left the museum, Gerty said, “Well, that Beetle lady seems like quite the character.”

“Beetie. I like her.”

“Hmm. What was that strange photograph you two were looking at?”

“It's called *Fright*. They used electroshock to make that man's face look that way.”

Gerty frowned. “Well, that's just awful.”

Julie shrugged and looked down at the steps as they walked to the street. “Hey Grandma, I don't want to go to Chez whatever. Can't we just grab a hot dog?”

Gerty smiled and rested a hand on Julie's head. “Of course. Anything you want.”

Julie pressed her advantage. She said, “And if I don't want to go to church tomorrow?”

Gerty sighed. “Well, I suppose it's up to you. Why the sudden disinterest?”

Julie shrugged and slipped an arm around her grandmother's waist. Subtly, hoping Gerty wouldn't notice, Julie began to pet the soft fabric with strokes of her thumb. “I love you, Grandma.”

Taking a soft inhale of Julie's sweet-smelling scalp, Gerty said, “Well, don't you know it—I love you too, Julie.”

Wolfgang

At dawn, Olive's eyes fluttered open and she asked, "Where are we?"

Vernon hugged Wolfgang and would not or could not stop saying thank you.

They fed the fire and huddled near Olive in the high wind of the early morning. As the sun rose and warmed them into goose-pricked flesh, they looked out in silence at the open sea. They listened to the soft *chua* of the waves and the pitiful chatter of Olive's teeth. Once, they saw a plane in the distance, heard its distant rumble a good five or ten seconds after first spotting it, but the wind made light of their work to build a plume strong enough to climb into the sky. By the time they had enough kindling to get the fire strong again, the plane had long flown out of sight.

Olive, who wore all three of their shirts, broke the frustrated silence. "I'm hungry," she said. Wolfgang stood up.

Wolfgang got them more coconuts. They fed on its meat and chewed on its husk to stave off their hunger. They tried and failed to fish or to crab. Wolfgang winced every time he walked on land or in the sea as sand rubbed in his raw wounds. There were five ripe or near-ripe coconuts left.

It wasn't until later that night that Olive brought up Julie. She said, "How do you guys think she's doing?" It had been four days since they'd last seen her, but they both knew who Olive was talking about.

Vernon took Olive's hand and said, "We need to get rescued."

Wolfgang asked, "How many survivors do you think there were?"

Olive said, "I just wonder how she is."

Wolfgang looked to his mother, expecting her to be on the brink of tears, but she stared into the fire with a gentle calm. She gazed at him and gave him a small half-smile. She always had this look when she was thinking about Julie. It was something like worry, or at least some kind of concern that he didn't warrant. Julie had always been the gifted one, the special one, and Wolfgang had been fine with that; he didn't need the extra attention, or want it, but that look had always rubbed him strangely. He felt a mixture of pride and envy both, pride for being above whatever weakness it was Julie had, and envy because, well...

“She'll be okay,” he said. “I gave her a pep talk before we left.”

Vernon slapped Wolfgang upside the head. “You think this is a joke?”

The first few days were the most trying. Olive was a city girl and Vernon had never been a do-it-yourselfer in any sense of the word. The only experience they had to draw upon was Wolfgang's twenty-one merit badges—the exact number to reach Eagle—many of which did not apply to the situation at hand. He had one for playing the guitar, one for carving, and another for conservation. They were all fairly bad at fishing (despite the fact that Wolfgang *did* have a merit badge in that), and the island had no real resources outside the two coconut trees.

On their fifth day stranded, a dead sea turtle missing its back legs and half its shell washed ashore and the family sat around it in pensive study. It was covered in sand and smelled like holy hell, like the worst kind of seafood that had already begun to turn. Olive retched, more so at the prospect that they might have to eat it than the actual smell of it.

“Shark did this,” said Wolfgang, but neither Vernon nor Olive responded.

Finally, wordlessly, Vernon tied his shirt around his face, and Wolfgang did the same. They bent the two front limbs up against their joints until they snapped, then they used sharp-edged shells to painstakingly saw each of the meaty, slippery legs off. It was slow work with no tools and Wolfgang glared at his father.

“Would've been great to have my Swiss Army knife right about now.”

Vernon retched. Wolfgang nearly followed suit.

“What?” Vernon said.

Wolfgang took a breather from the corpse and Vernon stood up beside him. Wolfgang wiped his hands off in the water, then tied his shirt around his mouth and nose. He silently went back to work.

It took nearly an hour and Wolfgang finished his leg first, then went to help his father with the other. They washed the bloody, jagged fins in the sea before cooking it over a fire for a very long while. Even charred, the meat had not tasted as bad as they had feared and before long, they had eaten both flippers down to the bone. Wolfgang began to talk excitedly about what else on the carcass he thought was salvageable and what could be fish bait.

Wolfgang said, “There's a whole head there. Maybe we can eat some brains tomorrow.”

Vernon groaned and said, “Jesus, Wolfgang. Let our stomachs settle first, please.”

As the only fruit-bearing plants on the island, the coconut trees were harvested meticulously. The dwarf bore coconuts almost as big as its mother, and they even found a third tree near the opposite shore which had only just begun to develop the brown, ribbed trunk of its elders. Olive would touch its leaves and in her gentle voice, say to it: “Soon, soon.”

As her health improved, Olive took it upon herself to nurture the half-dozen or so coconut tree seedlings she found, relocating them to well-spaced out plots free from their mother's slender shadow. She even made mulch out of dead plant matter to encourage their growth.

They all agreed it was a worthwhile project, since they didn't know when they'd be rescued. And though they all hoped they would never come to need these future trees, Olive still poured her heart into the work of tending for them, propping them up against the wind and negotiating limited mulch resources as fairly as she could. Sometimes, when Wolfgang watched

his mother at work, he saw her looking over them with that worried, absent-minded look on her face.

She stroked their lithe trunks and said, "Soon, soon."

Julie

Four months to the day after the crash, official recovery operations for Flight 181 were terminated. Four months of creeping downstairs, getting on the phone, then creeping back into bed. Four months of search and recovery, of remains found, identified and shipped to grieving families, but never to Julie. Four months of ever-reduced search parties which turned up no survivors, and each day without news hitting Julie like a nail to the head: thud, thud, *thud*.

There were still forty-seven people missing. Not dead. Not alive. Just missing. And barring the advent of fate or chance, that's how they'd remain. Could she hold out hope for another year? Two? Should she continue to distract her too-real grief with elaborate fantasies of her family's survival into her twenties or thirties? The frequency of Julie's calls to the hotline began to wane at the same rate as her trips to church.

Summer had gone and it was now that miserable time of year when fall made its chilly, bleak transition into winter, replacing the color of the season with bare, spindly branches. The crunch of dead leaves underfoot was replaced by a soggy, unsatisfying squish. It was that time of year when families begin to plan for large gatherings, football games, turkey stuffing and cranberry sauce. It was Julie's twelfth birthday.

Gerty took a chunk of funds from her own savings account, refusing to touch Julie's inheritance, and set up what amounted to a circus in the backyard of their house. Without Julie's knowledge, she invited all the neighborhood kids and a few of Julie's classmates. As Julie ate a couple of hot dogs, she found herself asking if her voracious appetite was a tribute to life, a testament to her continued will to live, or a sign that she wasn't grieving enough. It had been nearly five months since the accident. What stage of grief would they call this?

Watching her classmates as she rode a pony, Julie wondered: what if she began to like somebody? Began to send him folded up notes in class, slipping things into his locker? Liking someone seemed somehow more disrespectful than falling in love, but disrespectful wasn't the word, exactly. She had found the word *flippant* in the thesaurus and settled on that. Inside her stomach, two hot dogs and a cupcake churned. She was sad but she was still hungry; should one preclude the other? She felt sometimes like her body was rejecting her brain, or maybe it was her brain rejecting her body, like how she had read sometimes happened when people got skin grafts or transplanted organs or limbs. Julie wondered if that sort of thing happened because the person getting the leg and the person who gave the leg wouldn't have gotten along if they had met in real life. Like how the new owner might want to go left at an intersection, but the leg is still thinking it's attached to the last guy, who would have wanted to go right, instead. There is such a thing as muscle memory, after all. Julie only noticed she was back on the ground when a black lady in clown-face asked her if she had fun.

"I loved it. Thank you." Julie never bothered to tell her grandmother that she was about five years too old for the circus. She didn't even notice when the girls from her school snickered as she rode past them on her pony. Her indifference caused a stir. What if the maturity of circus-themed parties was cyclical, like playing doctor or wearing diapers? Though it seemed hard to fathom that they might cycle back to liking animal balloons and watching sad elephants fondle peanuts with their wet, bristly snouts.

Losing her parents had left Julie quieter and more sullen, characteristics easily confused with maturity at that young age. The wealthy girls at her school felt that Julie lorded her maturity over them at every turn: when she rejected their offers to play a game, or talk about boys, or to go behind the dumpsters to smoke a cigarette. Julie had always been kind of nerdy, but now she was

a nerd who put on airs, which, they hated to admit, was kind of *in* right now. Even naysayers had to concede that Julie rode that pony with a kind of quiet dignity.

Julie left her party, went upstairs and locked herself in the bathroom. Her straight brown hair had been curled for the occasion, and her slim nose seemed to beg for the return of freckles hidden under a layer of make-up. Her lips were shiny with pink, bubble-gum flavored gloss. She had put the make-up on herself from a kit her grandmother had given her earlier in the day.

“Now, Lemur, I’m not sure when your mother planned on letting you wear make-up,” Gerty had said, “but I understand girls are a lot more advanced at this age than they were in my time. You know, my mother didn’t give me my first make-up kit until I was eighteen. Well, anyway, do you want any help putting it on?” Gerty looked at her hopefully, but Julie shook her head.

“I’ll be okay.”

Looking now at her face, Julie felt foolish. She had not even bothered with rouge, which she thought made her seem like some creepy porcelain version of herself. But her face was a different hue from her neck, and her cheeks felt dry and powdery to the touch. She constantly forgot she had make-up on, and went into a miniature panic each time she scratched a cheek or rubbed a finger against her eye.

Julie washed her face then looked in the mirror again. She was too skinny. She wondered when she would grow breasts. She wondered if she would grow breasts. She knew she’d never have big, luscious monsters like Leigh Anne—breasts so heavy that Leigh Anne often “complained” about having to wear two sports bras—but Julie wanted *something*. She heard happy shrieking outside and looked out the bathroom window. As if by popular demand, Leigh Anne was jumping on the trampoline with another girl. Around them, boys watched, some openly gawking, others more slyly, sneaking a peek, then nudging a nearby friend. Julie turned back to

the mirror and saw what seemed to be bags under her eyes. She dried her face with one of the nice hand towels, then redid her eyeliner, darker than before, with an Egyptian flourish at the ends, like she had seen on Beetie.

Julie walked into her brother's old room and closed the door. She said, “God, this party sucks.”

She sat down on Wolfgang's bed and closed her eyes. She looked at the empty desk chair where he'd draw muscled superheros and fiery-nostrilled stallions. “I guess I should be embarrassed, but really I just want it to be over. It's not that I don't appreciate what Grandma did, but she really should have asked what I wanted.”

She sat in silence a moment, trying to imagine what her brother would say. Likely something along the lines of, quit whining, eat some cake. There were worse things in the world than getting a bunch of presents.

But he wouldn't have said that to her if their parents were both dead—if they were orphans together. He'd understand where she was coming from. He wasn't without his moments of caring. But what would he actually have said to her? Julie strained, but she couldn't come up with an answer. She would have given anything not be an orphan alone. She supposed this was bargaining, though she no longer knew who she was bargaining with and what she possibly had to offer. But Wolfgang could be their father and she could be their mother, and they could raise one another, alternately fleeing then seeking each other out.

But Wolfgang was not there, and Julie had to be both, alone, and there was no running away from herself.

Julie thought back to their final interaction. The night before the flight, Julie was in exactly the same place, lying on Wolfgang's bed as he packed his suitcase.

“Tomorrow is the longest day of the year here, but when you get to New Zealand it's going to be *their* shortest day of the year. It might even be snowing.”

“That's cool,” said Wolfgang.

“Shut up. You don't care.”

“Hey, don't get pissy with me. I told you to just make a stupid plaster volcano like everyone else.”

“Then we could both be C+ students together!”

Wolfgang kept packing his things, but didn't say anything, so Julie said, “Sorry, that was mean.”

Wolfgang slammed the suitcase shut, sat on it, and motioned with his head. “Come help me zip this thing up.”

Julie crawled across the bed and zipped it shut. She said, “I mean, it's bullshit isn't it? That I don't get to go to New Zealand? I didn't even do anything wrong, really.”

Wolfgang shrugged. “Well sure it's bullshit, but then what isn't?”

Julie rolled her eyes. “I mean it,” said Wolfgang. “Have you been paying attention to the news? Halliburton's no-bid contracts? Now *that's* bullshit.”

“I'm not talking about Halliburton,” Julie said, “I'm talking about me, Wolfie. Try and save some empathy for your sister, jeez.”

“I'm just saying. You've been moping about all week trying to get Mom and Dad to change their minds, but look where it got you. Life's just wave after wave in a big ol' sea of bullshit, and if you open your mouth to complain, it'll just go right down your gullet.”

Julie got up and left his room. She said, “Thanks, big bro. As usual, you were a great help.”

“Anytime, Sis!” he screamed.

It was hard to believe that had been their last conversation. They had said good-bye at the airport, of course, but it was different when their parents were around, they played off each other more than they talked. Julie lay down on Wolfgang's bed and listened to the zoo sounds in the backyard. Quietly, she asked, "You said anytime. Where are you now?"

"Right here," Wolfgang said.

Julie jumped up with a start and looked at his empty chair. "Who's there?" she asked, but all she heard were the sounds of the party outside.

"Wolfgang?" she said.

Nothing.

Over the bray of a donkey, Julie heard her grandmother outside, "Julie! Have any of you seen Julie?"

Julie didn't respond. Instead, she got up and walked to her brother's closet. She clutched the doorknob, then swung the doors open. It was empty. She pulled one of his favorite lumberjack shirts from the hanger, smelled it, then put it on, buttoning it slowly, enjoying the click of her newly-lacquered purple nails against the marbled brown and white plastic buttons.

She heard the back door open, then swing back shut. "Julie?"

"Up here!" said Julie. She left Wolfgang's room and closed the door.

Gerty called up to her, "What are you doing up there? We're about to sing happy birthday, come down!" The screen door swung open and shut again.

Julie she walked down the stairs. "I'm coming!" she said.

The cake was a monstrosity. Gerty had obviously gone overboard, ordering the cake with the most gumdrop trims and the fattest globs of icing. It was too busy, a gigantic mess of colors and textures the size of a gingerbread mansion. Gerty had positioned herself on the opposite side of the cake so that when Julie came out the door, she could see her granddaughter's face. Cameras

flashed. Julie tried her best to put on a face of joy for her grandmother, and she hoped that her initial shock and horror hadn't looked like anything other than surprise.

Candles were lit and the birthday song was sung. When it came time for Julie to make her wish, there was absolute silence, almost religious. Everyone held their breath while Julie, eyes shut tight, took in a breath and made sure to blow out all twelve of her candles. There followed strong applause. Julie kissed her grandmother, noting that they were now the same height, which had not been the case when Gerty first moved in just a few months before. Then Julie looked around at the gathered crowd and for a moment she thought she saw her mother and father smiling at her a good head above everyone else. She blinked and looked again where they had been, but now there were only balloons. She steadied herself with her hands and the applause died down. Her grandmother took the knife to cut the cake and gave Julie a kiss on the top of her head. Julie smiled as best she could and looked at all the people; the most she had ever had for a birthday party, strangers nearly one and all.

Julie kept her balance with her hands on the table and as her grandmother cut into the cake she reminded herself of everything that she had learned: that wishes didn't actually come true for the people who deserved them most.

Wolfgang

They began to set up a life, of sorts, as they awaited rescue. In the mornings, Vernon went out to forage and collect water from their traps while Wolfgang went hunting. Olive marked the passing days on the bark of the mother coconut tree, careful not to dig deep enough to draw sap. They celebrated day one hundred with palm leaf streamers and gifts they had made or hoarded. Vernon had found a cheap plastic flower washed ashore which Olive put in her hair. Using a piece of driftwood, Wolfgang had carved out two pairs of misshapen flip-flops with the help of sharp but fragile seashells. For the thong, he carefully bored small holes through the soft, waterlogged wood and ran through slips of rope which he made from the braided husks of discarded coconuts. His parents were amazed and wore them all the time for the first few days, but then wood began to splinter and they put the sandals aside, leaning them against their shelter like some kind of decoration.

Olive noticed her pair one day, many, many days after they had stopped wearing them. She cocked her head as she looked at it and said, “Well wasn't that clever.” She put her sandals back on and walked over to Vernon and Wolfgang, then kind of plodded in place. She said, “Seriously, tell me this isn't just the coolest thing.”

Wolfgang said, “Come on, Mom, take it off.”

She frowned. “I believe these are my sandals. I'll wear them if I want.”

“You're gonna get a splinter.”

“I don't care,” she said. She walked away in careful steps as though wearing snowshoes.

There was never very much to eat, but most of what they put in their mouths was Wolfgang's doing. There was a steep learning curve to survival, and Wolfgang, it turned out, could climb it. Mostly, he hunted for small crab, which lived in the shallow waters around the

island, especially around the craggy northern end. The rocky formations in the shallow water would form pools during the low tide and Wolfgang walked from pool to pool in search of the crab. They were beige and nearly indistinguishable from the sand when they lay flat against the sea floor. But through some fluke of evolution, whenever they sensed his shadow, the crabs would flee and immediately betray themselves. Wolfgang discovered that if he moved slowly enough, they would stay put, kind of like how he had heard that if you slowly boil a frog it won't leave the pot of water. He corralled a crab in with his hands as though he were strangling the water, bringing them as close to his prey as possible before striking. Their claws didn't hurt too bad, and his hands really were the best tool for the job. Wolfgang tried to teach this strategy to his father and mother, but they were each equally inept in their own ways. His father lacked the patience or the coordination necessary to set the trap, often startling the crabs, and his mother, though great at setting the trap, never quite succeeded in springing it quickly enough. Olive joked about her failings, but Vernon was more short-tempered and his frustration built over the course of a day strung with failures. He tried again every so often, but the results rarely changed.

On one such day, as they walked back to the shelter, Vernon had clapped Wolfgang on the back and said, "Good hunting today. I just wish I wasn't such an old klutz at this."

It wasn't pride exactly, that Wolfgang heard in his voice, but perhaps a gamely attempt at sportsmanship. Wolfgang said, "I guess you were right, Dad, to make me stay in Scouts till I reached Eagle."

His father smiled and left his arm around his son's shoulder. He sagged against him and said, "Your old man knows what he's doing at least half the time."

Most often, though, Wolfgang hunted alone. He enjoyed it best that way. It was an opportunity to clear his mind, to dedicate himself to a task with complete abandon. It was sport.

He stood at the water's edge and peered into the aquamarine of one of the rocky pools that formed during the low tide. Tangled knots of hair hung over his eyes, but he stared through them as though they were not there. He had begun growing a wispy beard on his chin and upper lip, and Olive had begun calling Wolfgang "Captain," as in Captain Jack Sparrow. Besides, as she sometimes joked, they were all sure to get scurvy now.

Wolfgang spotted his prey: a large beige crab spooling the flesh from Wolfgang's bait onto his claws like cotton candy on a stick. It was only half a foot across, but that made it nearly twice the size of the juveniles Wolfgang usually caught. This was the alpha crab, and Wolfgang was his apex predator.

Wolfgang thought of the crab on a spit. In a boiling pot alongside three smaller cousins. He imagined the fleshy white meat as he tore apart its big claw, all in the span of a second. He chided himself for thinking of prey as food. He felt as if he'd seen this crab before. He remembered a large papa crab, it might have been the very same one, that had eluded him very early in his learning process.

It was nearly midday. Visibility was great and the crab hadn't yet sensed his shadow. Wolfgang strangled the water around the crab, and splayed out his fingers. He went in for the strike.

Wolfgang's hands pushed against the legs of the crab and he felt it waft its way upwards even as his hands came together underneath it. He pulled his hands up in the hope of bringing it up above the plume of sand that he'd raised and that's when he felt the big claw grab onto the soft flesh between his thumb and forefinger. Instinctively, he brought up his hand and tried to flick it off. The crab seemed eager to comply once outside the water and let go, flying out to another one of the rocky pools. Wolfgang rushed after it, but the crab was gone.

Dejected, Wolfgang began the walk back to the shelter. On his way back, with the tide on the rise, he spotted an unusual color glinting in one of the reef's outcroppings further out from shore. Wolfgang climbed onto the reef, watching for urchin whenever he put a foot or hand down. Waves crashed all around him and he shimmied towards it. Because it was bright orange, he thought it was a sea cucumber at first, and in this sea, the prettier something looked, the deadlier it was. It didn't move, except when it was rocked by a wave. When he was close enough to see it, Wolfgang found a sickle-shaped sac filled with tiny fish eggs. He held it carefully in his hand and imagined his mother's face when he would give it to her. Wolfgang remembered how he used to hate seafood. He didn't hate it now, but he probably wouldn't ever eat crab again if he had a choice.

He arrived at camp to find his mother beaming and glistening with sweat.

"You'll never guess what I did all morning," she said.

"You found one of your exercise tapes?"

Before Wolfgang could show her his prize, Olive grabbed hold of his arm and led him to the sandy shore near their shelter. Just out of reach of the high tide, Olive had re-done their hastily made SOS. She had written the letters out in double rows of shriveled coconuts embedded and packed into the sand like jewels hammered into a crown.

"Very nice, mom," he said.

"How was hunting?" Olive asked.

Wolfgang felt suddenly ashamed of his paltry offering, and held his hand out to her. "I found these," he said.

Olive approached and widened her eyes. "Caviar?"

Wolfgang shrugged and nodded simultaneously.

Olive took the sac carefully from Wolfgang's hand and did a playful half-turn and curtsy, smiling in mock-demureness. "Looks like we'll be eating like royalty. Great job, Captain."

"I'll try and find us a main course before sundown," Wolfgang said as he sat in the shade beside her..

Olive patted her son's back. Her arms were firmer than they'd ever been, and though she constantly compared her hands and feet to the before pictures in those dermo-abrasian ads on the subway, Olive still felt like she was in the best shape of her life. She felt strong, she said, and she tried her best to stay positive, pointing out muscle groups to her family that she never even knew she had.

"Look at this," she said, pointing to a series of ridged muscles underneath her armpit. "And what about this?" she said, turning her head and pointing to her neck.

She feared always the threat of skin cancer and insisted that everyone rest for a few hours in the shade during the worst hours of the afternoon. Wolfgang did not share her concerns but usually honored them. Though it felt more like he was humoring them. Skin cancer seemed like a silly concern, almost a luxury. Or maybe it was that it seemed presumptuous to worry about slow killers under the circumstances, like worrying about a heart attack as you fell out a plane with no parachute.

As if on schedule, Vernon appeared from the shrubbery, carrying hollowed-out coconuts half-filled with water. There were a number of traps around the island, leaves shaped into funnels and bowls, lining the inside of coconuts and left out each morning to collect dew and rainwater. They had one plastic bottle they had found washed ashore, and Wolfgang used it on his hunting trips.

"Vern, guess what?" Olive yelled.

Vernon's beard had grown long enough to reach the graying tufts of hair on his chest. He walked slowly and with a slight limp from a herniated disc that occasionally flared up and left him on his back for days at a time. "What?" he asked, without raising his voice.

"We're having caviar tonight!"

Vernon raised his eyebrows in a rare expression of surprise. "Really?" He set down his load. "What's this?" he asked, eyeing the message Olive had written in the sand.

"My day's work," said Olive with an almost child-like pride, setting the caviar in her husband's outstretched hand.

Vernon surveyed both the caviar and Olive's work and gave a low whistle. "Great job, guys."

They were quiet a moment to allow Vernon to share what he had done with his day, but neither of them asked how it had gone. Scavenging, they knew, was rarely fun or productive. On a good day—that is, the low tide of the waning moon—the long, C-shaped island might measure a square mile or less. There wasn't much to survey, but potentially useful things might wash ashore and then disappear again with the next high tide. He went on patrol every morning around six and late every afternoon as the tide ebbed, leaving the island fat with sandy white shoreline.

Vernon walked to his mat and collapsed on the palm-frond bedding. They sat underneath a squat, leafy shrub tree with low-lying branches. They had no idea what kind of plant it was, but all that really mattered to them was that it didn't make them itch and it provided enough shade for all three of them during high noon. Vernon took a swig from one of the coconuts and said, "Help yourselves, guys."

They all took slow sips and sat looking at the twinkling-green ocean. Olive asked Vernon to pass her a Corona, and he snorted. Vernon brought up his on-again, off-again project to weave

a hammock from coconut tree leaves, and they talked about how great that would be. Vernon promised to get the project back on-again.

As if reminded of something, Vernon reached into his left pocket—the right one had a hole large enough for two of his fingers to pass through—and pulled out a small black object about the size of a chicken neck. He tossed it in the sand in front of Wolfgang..

“It's rubber,” Vernon said.

Wolfgang picked the rubber up. Its edges were smooth, and he couldn't tell if it had once been part of a tire or hosing, but it stretched and snapped when he pulled at it. He passed it to Olive. “That's cool. What can we do with it?”

Vernon shrugged. “If nothing else, we could use it for the signal fire. It should burn nice and black.”

Wolfgang picked up a strip of cloth they had salvaged from the seat cushions and used it to pick up a pinch of sand. He took up a short wooden spear he used for fishing and with upwards strokes, he polished the shaft. The wood was not from the island but had been salvaged from the same piece of driftwood he had used to make his parents' sandals. When it had washed up, Vernon and Wolfgang peeled off the layers upon layers of bark and soggy wood until they came to the heart of it, impossibly dry and fragrant despite who knows how many months or years at sea. Olive buried her nose in the wood and with a soft sigh she had said, “Smells like Cypress.” She smelled it again. “But tangy or something.” Finally, the family had been given a job they had the tools to do. They each took up large pumice stones, one of the few things their island had plenty of, and scraped the dead wood off the trunk. The wood they salvaged was soft enough to carve with their seashell tools and Wolfgang wasted little time making himself a short spear from a branch that looked like it had mostly stayed out of the water. He had shaped and smoothed it with the help of sand and these long, iridescent mussel shells that occasionally washed ashore.

Their edges were as sharp as the jagged lid of a tin can but as fragile as glass, and Wolfgang used them to shave slivers off the wood much in the same way he had once whittled crayons with a fingernail as a child. If he had none of the oil-black shells, he used the arrowhead, which had already become a revered multi-tool.

A bird call snapped Wolfgang out of his meditative strokes, and he looked up to see a frigate bird gliding in the sky. It faced the wind with its boomerang-shaped wings slightly cocked, hovering as it surveyed the surrounding landscape. Wolfgang brought up his hand shaped like a pistol and took careful aim at the bird.

“Pew. Pew.”

“How about some frigate cordon bleu tonight?” asked Olive.

Wolfgang's mouth began to water, and he stood up with the help of his spear. With a casual stretch, he said, “I'm going to get back to work.”

Regretting her slightly off-color joke—food was a sensitive subject—Olive stood up too. “You shouldn't yet. The sun's still too strong.”

“It'll be okay,” Wolfgang said, “Besides, I might try to do some real fishing. I can see deeper in the water when the sun is overhead.”

“Good luck,” said Vernon, who did not get up. Olive glared at him, and he shrugged, then covered his eyes with an arm and laid back down on the matting. “I think I'll join you later, if that's alright.”

Wolfgang was already walking away. “You know where to find me.”

~

At day's end, Wolfgang had caught four small fish. They were part of a school of juveniles who were more afraid of the hungry mouths in the open ocean than those on the shore.

As usual, he had not seen anything large enough to spear. Wolfgang caught these smaller fish by cupping his hands beneath them and heaving towards the shore with all his might. It was tedious work, hard on the lower back, but it was work Vernon could also accomplish. He had caught a fish of his own, boggle-eyed and oily, bulbous under its fins.

“Did you ever stop to think,” asked Vernon, “that we might be eating species unknown to science? Like this guy, what the hell is he?”

Wolfgang looked skeptically at the ugly fish. “I don't know, dad. I just hope it's edible.”

They returned to the shelter and partitioned the food such: Wolfgang ate two of the fish, cooked over a fire until they were crisp to the bone, along with nearly half of the caviar, while Olive and Vernon had a fish and a half each, with their own small portions of the fatty, gooey eggs. Their hunger was not abated much, but they had learned to savor each bite, and the meal went by slowly as they swished the eggs in their mouth and popped them one by one between their incisors. Wolfgang had tried to divide the food more equally in the past, but both Vernon and Olive had both put up a strong, united front of opposition with arguments he could never quite counter, about his growing body and how he needed more calories because hunting was more work and how by feeding him they were really thinking of themselves, but still he suspected none of those reasons told the full story.

After their meal, they lay by the fire and looked up at stars more numerous and bright than Wolfgang had ever thought possible, blanketing the sky from horizon to horizon.

Wolfgang saw a shooting star. They were easy to see on clear nights such as these. He said, “Pot roast.”

Olive said, “Mmm.”

Vernon said, “Just like Ma makes it. That would've been a nice addition today.”

“You know,” said Olive, pausing for a short while, then continuing, “I think today is Julie's birthday.” She held out her right fist and said “July,” with her left index finger wagging in the air. Then she began to point alternately at her knuckles and the small spaces of flesh in-between, “August, September, October, and November. It's been one hundred and forty-seven days in this...” Olive fluttered a hand in an expansive arc. “Far as I can tell, today's November the fourteenth, her birthday.”

“So we missed it,” said Vernon.

“Actually,” said Olive, “Japan is the land of the rising sun. Day breaks here before anywhere else. Julie's probably waking up to her birthday right this instant.”

“Right, how could I forget. We're on the edge of the world,” Vernon said. “Happy birthday, Julie. We all miss you very much and love you very, very much. I hope—we all hope you have a great birthday.”

Olive began to cry and Vernon embraced her. She hugged her knees to her chest and said, “This is her first birthday without us.” Wolfgang did his best impression of an invisible person. Olive did not struggle when Vernon wordlessly pulled her down to sleep.

Long after he first heard his father's snores, Wolfgang lay awake, thinking. He remembered clearly the night of the crash. Scenes played themselves out in his head almost every evening before he went to bed. Vernon didn't talk much about it, and he had asked Wolfgang not to discuss it with Olive, who thankfully remembered very little. But Wolfgang remembered. He remembered that it was so dark he couldn't see the faces of his parents, even as close as they were. He remembered how shivering cold the water was; the outline of the plane, dark and menacing against the starry night sky. The sweeping flashlights. The trill of whistles that came attached to their life vests, coming in frantic bursts over the cries for help and loved ones.

Wolfgang pulled on the whistle now tied around his neck and blew on it gently. It made a soft wheezing sound, barely audible. They kept their whistles with them at all times now, in case anyone spotted a plane or boat, or in case anyone got hurt.

Wolfgang remembered the screams. Sometimes, a person was close enough that he could hear the scream's abrupt end: the gargling water, the sucking under. People in boats wailed in constant tones. One lady repeated her message in a loop: "Hank? Oh God, Hank where are you? Hank? Oh God." But Hank never replied. In that moment, Wolfgang had thought of the two newlyweds he had seen in line at the airline kiosk, how they kept so close that not even a sliver of light could make its way between them.

Sometimes, the screams managed a measure of coherence, despite the pain. A scream would ring out clearly, saying something like, "God, no!" or "My arm!" and Wolfgang realized he was hearing somebody's last words. The inflatable staircase the Youngs and many others were on went flat after an unseen presence below the water first nudged, then shook their raft violently. The family kissed one another, devised a simple plan, and then jumped overboard, pumping their legs violently. They managed to stay together by linking arms as they clutched their seat cushions. Vernon kept gasping, "Don't look back. Don't look back. Don't look back," but they all looked back, even Vernon.

Wolfgang's unpleasant reverie among the stars was interrupted by the sound of his mother mumbling. It sounded a little like prayer, but Wolfgang couldn't be sure. He heard Julie's name, but he had been listening for it and he couldn't understand any of the other words, and was only barely convinced she had said Julie at all. Wolfgang looked back up at the sky. There was a kind of comfort in knowing that, despite all the distance, he and Julie still shared the same moon. He felt guilty. At least he knew Julie was alive somewhere, starting her day as he ended his night. In a way, that knowledge was a greater comfort than all the creature comforts he knew she was

enjoying. He'd give his left arm for a Big Mac but wouldn't trade places with Julie for anything in the world. Besides, his parents needed him. Wolfgang sent Julie messages through the moon telling her they were all okay.

“Happy birthday, Sis. Hope you're...” Here Wolfgang's voice trailed off, and he rubbed his eyes. “Keep your chin up. And don't bogart the whole cake—I know how you are. Save me a piece for when I get home.” He paused. “Because I'm definitely coming home.”

Wolfgang turned his head to look at his parents, huddled so close that all he could see by the firelight was the blocky outline of their huddled mass and his father's pitifully bony ass, barely covered by rags. Physically, they had both seen far better days, and despite his mother's chipper attitude, Wolfgang knew she was sick with worry. Not for the first time, Wolfgang considered his parents' mortality, wondered how long they could continue to live this way.

Wolfgang felt a door slam shut in his throat, and before tears could block his sinuses and squirm free, he distracted himself by taking up the task of counting the thousands of twinkling yellow, pink, blue and white stars, impossibly clustered in some places, sparse in others. If he lay on his back long enough, fatigue would creep through his limbs and in the ensuing full-body tingle of meditative exhaustion, it felt like he was floating among them, and that each star was within arm's reach. Here, on this island, completely encapsulated by a pin-pricked dome of faraway suns, with no source of light besides the moon in the sky and the fire he built, Wolfgang felt closer to God than ever before.

Over the splash of waves, he heard the sounds of all those people dying.

Julie

Julie sped her bike home from the train station. She pumped past an anemic snowman whose eyes and buttons had fallen off. It stooped forwards with its crooked carrot nose pointed to the ground. Some of the homes still had their Christmas lights hanging on them, winking pathetically against the blinding-white snow which shone brighter than the sky. On a Swiss-style house with gray spires and wooden construction beams showing, a cardboard cut-out of Santa rode his sleigh on the roof. Whatever nails or staples held it in place had come loose at the sleigh, and Santa flapped wildly in the wind as though he were fishtailing in the sky.

Julie thought of her phone conversation with her grandmother. She had been about to board her train when her grandmother called. Julie heard the tv in the background, with the volume turned way up high. Gerty was out of breath. She said Julie's name like it was an edict.

“Come home,” she said.

“Grandma? What's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong. You just need to come home. Something's happened.”

Julie walked away from the platform and held the phone tightly to her ear. “Grandma. Are you okay?” She was amazed at how rapidly tears welled up. Already, her sinuses had inflamed and her voice sounded nasal and whiny in her own ears. “Please tell me you're okay.”

“I'm fine, I promise,” Gerty said, “Are you already on the train?”

Julie rode up a hill and the cold air burned her lungs and throat and she started to cough. She tried to keep bicycling, but the cough got worse and worse until she was leaning over somebody's lawn, dry-heaving to the thump-thump-thump in her head of a heavy bass drum. The drum slowed, stumbled over its rhythm then stopped. Julie walked up the hill.

She thought of her grandmother falling and hurting herself, staying on the floor and dragging herself to the kitchen by her pillow-soft grandma arms, then clutching at the countertop until one of her fingers hooked a cord and then pulled the phone down to the floor. Dialing Julie's number, lying about being okay, waiting on the cold linoleum for her to arrive. No, Julie told herself, Gerty would have called 911, not her. She crested the hill and got back on her bike, flying down a curve of road along where the houses were hidden behind dark green pines.

Julie kept thinking about the tv blaring in the background. Her grandmother didn't normally watch television, but earlier in the year, Julie had gotten her to help with a class project, watching news reports during the hours in which Julie was at school. Julie was charting news stories for the months of October, November and December in search of any interesting seasonal correlations. Thus far, she had noticed a slight increase in the coverage of armed robberies and suicides, but also a greater amount of time devoted to soft news pieces highlighting a heightened sense of community. Julie noted also the emergence of a purely seasonal phenomenon: the weekly sob story of some family left destitute for reasons completely out of their control, coupled with a phone number through which the interested viewer might make a donation. Julie shivered to think that any day now, a news team might knock on her door, and ask her to look into the camera and tell her story. Her report was due the first day of the spring semester, and Julie still didn't have a hypothesis.

For a brief moment, Julie was annoyed by her grandmother. Why hadn't she just told Julie what was the matter? Her inability to relay casual and ordinary information directly was starting to annoy Julie. Gerty would call her from downstairs and say "Come see for yourself!" if Julie asked what she wanted. Sometimes, supper was on the table. Other times, she had a bottle of vitamins in her hand, or some small gift, or a newly completed craft project that she wanted Julie to see.

But Julie didn't really think her grandmother would have asked her to cut class for anything other than an emergency. She avoided thinking about the most obvious explanation for her grandmother's frantic call, though the possibility of it floated along the edges of her mind. The night before Julie had watched *Miracle on 34th Street* and *It's a Wonderful Life* with her grandmother while taking down the Christmas decorations. She considered the nature of miracles and said to her grandmother that even if one allowed for a higher power who occasionally and unpredictably intervenes in our lives, that she simply couldn't conceive of said power timing his (or her) interventions according to the rotation and tilt of a lowly rock orbiting around a forgettable sun in an unremarkable corner of an ordinary galaxy. In fact, if Julie were a god, she would have much preferred to watch something more intriguing, like a starburst galaxy where stars were born and died in the blink of a cosmic eye.

"There's probably a black hole," Julie said, "out there, somewhere, swallowing up a sun. Maybe it's a blue giant or a red dwarf or maybe even another black hole. Or do they swallow each other? Could you imagine that, grandma? What could possibly be happening here that could compete with that?"

"Well if you were God, which you aren't, I'd imagine it would get pretty boring after a while, watching stars blow up and all that. That's why He made life."

"You don't know that."

"On the fifth day God made life. Light came first, if you'll remember.

"It also says He made birds *then* hippos. That makes no sense."

"I thought you told me that birds were just dinosaurs in disguise."

"That's not what I meant! And the Bible doesn't even mention dinosaurs."

Gerty said, “Well, you can think what you like, but I think it's pretty cool in this boring old rock. And pretty beautiful, too. Amazing things happen all around the world each and every day.”

“You mean like miracles?” asked Julie.

If pressed, Julie could have admitted that she believed in the possibility of miracles if not miracles themselves. It just seemed silly to expect one on Christmas. Not that anybody had really pressed Julie for anything lately. To say people had been treating her with kid gloves would suggest that people were actually touching her. At school, the kids acted as if having dead parents was contagious.

Julie had turned the corner to her street and had three more blocks to go. She rode her bike as fast as she could, flashing her head both ways at each intersection. Probably she wouldn't have been able to stop in time anyway, if she had needed to. As she neared her house, she pedaled faster and faster, faster even than she had thought she could. She careened through their unmowed lawn and leapt off her bicycle, running to the door and clutching the doorknob to help stop her momentum.

Before she opened the door, she was already saying, “Grandma? Grandma?”

The television was turned up loud in the den and her grandmother was seated on the edge of the couch, her eyes glued to the screen with a wadded tissue held just underneath her nose. “Julie!” she said, standing up to hug her in the doorway as she stood stunned stiff by the headline which read:

BREAKING NEWS – FLIGHT 181 SURVIVOR FOUND

Gerty brought Julie's hands to her mouth and kissed them. “Can you believe it?” she said. Gerty asked Julie to pray with her, and they sat on the couch with held hands and faced one another, with Julie occasionally peeking out one eye to look at the screen.

They had never been sent any remains, had never felt comfortable with the idea of a funeral. Now, hope assaulted Julie's entrenched mind once more, coming at her in tireless waves, as if it had all the time in the world. A battle stirred inside her, rousing to activity all those dormant sediments and Julie had a sneezing fit the likes of which she had never been subjected to. She did not cry, but her eyes began to itch and Julie rubbed them raw.

Julie, who did not think twenty-four-hour news was always the best thing (and she did not think that was a bold enough hypothesis, even if her teacher did), was thankful then for three full-time news channels and an otherwise slow news day. Whenever one channel digressed into current events, Julie switched to another and heard more about how precious little they knew. As the day wore on, some of the programs had the idea to fill airspace by listing the names of victims whose remains had never been found. The first time it happened, after they said the names of Wolfgang, Olive and Vernon, Gerty reached for Julie's hand and gave it a squeeze charged with meaning. But when it happened again a few minutes later, Gerty merely dabbed her nose with a tissue.

One newscaster even mentioned her. He said, "The Young family is survived by their eleven-year-old daughter, Julie."

"I'm twelve!" she screamed at the tv.

"Our thoughts and prayers go out to her."

Forty-seven people strong, the list of M.I.A. passengers was a little longer than Julie would have liked. She took a pad and pencil from her backpack and calculated that the chances that it was one of her family members at 6.383 percent or one in fifteen-point-six-six-six. She told her grandmother this, and Gerty simply stared at her, her mouth open as if she expected to find something to say but could not. Eventually, Gerty shut her mouth and pulled Julie in by the hand

to kiss her forehead and then rested her cheek against Julie's forehead as though she were taking her temperature.

Sometime between lunch and dinner Julie went to the bathroom and locked the door, though she knew a properly motivated jiggle on the knob could unlock it from the other side. Julie stood in front of the mirror and thought she looked demonic. Red-rimmed eyes and dilated pupils within mostly yellow irises, set against skin that looked gray-green in the bathroom light, the color of old olives. Her face felt heavy, and Julie down ran her fingers against it to see if it might peel loose off the bone, like some macabre version of the cooking shows she loved. Julie thought she could see herself in her middle age: excessively thin, sunken and sullen. She tried to take deep breaths, but they all came shallow and ragged. She blew her nose into a tissue and washed her face.

Julie tried telling herself that even if it all added up to nothing, she was no worse off than if she had simply gone to school today. Her life would be no different than before, and the worst-case scenario was a day off from school.

As she exited the bathroom, Julie could not help thinking: if it was one of her family members, did she have a preference for which? She had been closer to her mother than her father but tried to push away thoughts that she would prefer to have her back over him. She was not a superstitious person, but she had become very careful about what she wished for and how she wished for it for fear that God, or fate, or whomever, might willfully misconstrue her meaning. Julie ran back to the den just in time to avoid weighing the relative worth of her brother's life.

New developments had broken and the news rolled across the bottom of the screen in a gaudy flash. A source of some kind had leaked some information about the survivor: she was a middle-aged Caucasian woman being treated for shock, pneumonia and dehydration. Julie's heart skipped one beat, then two, and she began to tremble. She felt as if she were suddenly freezing

and her hands contorted as though they were being drained of blood. Julie grabbed her pad and clutched a pen. She asked her grandmother how many of the listed M.I.A. passengers had been adult women.

“I don't remember, Lemur.”

“Well I need to know! I remember two for sure. Then there was a married couple, and two other families, so that's at least five. Plus mom makes six. Do you remember any more?”

Gerty slowly reached for Julie's pencil, “Sweetie, don't do this. Come here. Pray with me.”

Julie yanked the pencil away. “No! I don't want to pray, I want to do this!”

“Why?” Gerty asked.

“Forget it, just leave me alone.” Julie was starting to feel dizzy, but she put her pencil to paper and did some long division. One in six would have been about a seventeen percent chance, but Julie knew she probably forgot a couple of women, at least, and if that were the case, then the actual chances that it was her mother was closer to twelve-point-five. Julie announced the number in her head. Twelve-point-five. She chanted it in her mind like a battle cry. She tried to put it in perspective. She thought: if there was a twelve percent chance of rain they wouldn't suspend a little league baseball game, so why put any stock in the possible rescue of her mother?

During a commercial break, Julie went up to her room and dug through her jewelry box. She had one of her mother's rings in there, which now fit rather well around her own ring finger. It was an older ring that had fallen out of favor with Olive, a large oval-shaped turquoise stone set against faded yellow gold. The specks of brown on the stone made it look like a robin's egg and Julie had always imagined that the stone was, in fact, an egg awaiting the proper conditions under which to hatch. Out of habit, Julie covered it her hand to give it warmth.

Julie felt herself begin to cry and before a sob escaped her throat she pleaded, “Please, God...”

Downstairs, Julie heard her grandmother wail. Julie rushed down the stairs, the ring still on her finger, and was greeted by a new ticker:

BREAKING NEWS – FLIGHT 181 SURVIVOR IDENTIFIED AS TEXAN LUCY BRAHMS

It was one of the women Julie had forgotten about. And it was there, at the threshold of the tv room that her mind cracked again. The sound of it was deafening and resounded through her skull. Her mind did not slide this time, as it had the first time, but merely deflated, collapsed into itself, and made a promise never to break again.

Gerty set aside her own grief in the manner that she had become so accustomed to doing and walked over to Julie, whose eyes were still transfixed by the television. “It’s good that someone was found,” Gerty said. “Not just for her and her family, but if she could make it then maybe it’s possible other people did, too. They might even restart the searches, now. Wouldn’t that be great?”

Julie was not listening. Silver linings were useless, impractical. What she needed was the firm and definite knowledge that she would never feel this way again. That her world would never again feel quite so shattered. The prevailing question, she now understood, of both this moment and of the moment when she first heard of the plane crash was not, Why me? Why my family? but a much more fundamental: “Who am I?”

For a moment, Gerty looked terrified. “What do you mean, who are you? You know damn well who you are.” It was unlike Gerty to cuss, but she kept certain options locked behind a glass case she did not hesitate to break in case of emergency.

“I do?”

“Yes. You're Julie Young, my beautiful, wonderful granddaughter. You are the smartest child I've ever known, and there's nothing you set your mind to that I haven't seen you accomplish.”

“I can be anything I want to be,” Julie said dully.

“Yes, of course you can.”

“I could be anyone.”

In the background, the tv continued to spew out information. Lucy was a stewardess from Texas. She had washed ashore on an Aboriginal island whose residents' lifestyle was protected by laws drafted in a country they had no idea they were a part of. She was neither God nor devil to these people, but a strange curiosity, and the tribe's children would run their fingers inside her mouth to explore her capped white teeth. She survived on scraps and charity until she was able to steal a canoe in the dead of night. She crossed hundreds of miles of open ocean until, at the very edge of her life, she came upon a Tongan fishing boat. Gerty turned the tv off.

Gerty felt uncomfortable with the lack of expression on Julie's face. She took Julie by her slim shoulders and gave her a soft jostle. She said, “You'll figure out who you're going to be at the same pace as everyone else your age, and not a moment sooner. But no matter what, you are still your mother's daughter and your father's favorite girl and my lovely, brilliant granddaughter. Nothing will ever, ever change that, Julie. You know that. Right?”

Looking away, Julie nodded, though she wanted to say, even Hitler had a mother, Grandma. But that would have led to more jostling, and Julie would not have been given permission when she asked: “Can I go to my room, please?”

Gerty held on to Julie a little longer, tried to find meaning in the averted lines of her face, but then she let Julie go and said, “Yes, of course. Don't lock the door, please.”

Julie turned and stormed up the stairs, and Gerty lingered for a while at the doorway. After Julie turned on her stereo, Gerty leaned against the wall and wept.

~

That night, Gerty tucked Julie in as always, but Julie was tense under her covers and to Gerty the moment felt charged with an electricity that might convalesce at any second. Gerty told Julie the story of how she got her first dog. This was a story Julie had heard many times before.

When Gerty was a child her parents had always refused to let her have a dog. She swore oaths to be its sole caretaker, she made arguments for an increased sense of responsibility, but they always said no. Her father in particular seemed to be against pets, generally. During the Depression, Gerty said, it had been her father's job to kill any animals that wandered inside the one-room shack he shared with his parents and four siblings. Most often, it was rats he was killing, but there was the occasional cat and at least one puppy that had tried to make a home with them. The experience had soured him on animals altogether and was for Gerty a mysterious part of his life.

Then, one Christmas morning, after she had resigned herself to a lifetime without the love of animals, Gerty found a black and white beagle puppy sniffing the droplets of pine resin under the tree. Surprise! her mother had screamed. Gerty's father, though tolerant, never really warmed up to the animal and only spoke of it as "that beast of yours."

"But a true surprise," Gerty concluded, "one which you never see coming, well, it can be one of the most magnificent things in the world."

Gerty wrung her hands and looked up at the ceiling. She then told Julie a new story. Or, a very old one she had not told before. When Gerty was thirteen, her father left her and her mother. They had never been the second family, he told them, just one family of two. The lie had created

a burden he could no longer support. Financially. He had just had a baby boy with his other wife and said he felt obliged to protect his family name. Gerty's mother didn't ask why, or where the other family lived, or how she could find him, or anything like that. She had just sat and stared, first at him, then at the place where he had stood and she said, *How can this be true?*

“I watched them from the hallway,” Gerty said, “with my head pushed against the polished wooden legs of our dinette. When I saw father walking towards my room, I ran. I closed the door as gently as I could and jumped into bed. I remember fidgeting a lot before he came in the room. Like I was posing for him. I remember thinking, *I'm going to remember this forever*, and it seemed to matter what position I was in. I sat on top of the covers with my feet flat on the floor, then I brought them up and curled them underneath me. I sat with my back against the backboard, then I lay on my stomach. I ended up turning off the lamp and lying down under the covers as if I were asleep. It was only seven o'clock. He opened the door and I didn't say anything, I just lay there like I was sleeping very soundly. He stood at the doorway for what felt like forever, and for every second of it, my mind was screaming, telling me to get up, to stay down, to ask him why, to hug him, to hit him, to pull on his arm and beg him to stay. But I just lay there.” Gerty took a long breath. “I just lay there,” she said.

Gerty fidgeted on Julie's bed. “Eventually, he left. He never said anything, anything at all.” There was no hatred in Gerty's voice, only the sadness hate leaves behind. She patted Julie's head and sighed. She seemed like she were about to say something else, but just shook her head and said, “Goodnight, dearie. Tomorrow will be a better day. I'm sure of it.” Julie lay awake after her grandmother left, wondering if she had any cousins from this runaway great-grandfather. She wondered what kind of people they might be. If they were nice, what kind of names they'd have.

“Enid,” she said aloud, “Charlemagne.”

Julie missed her brother.

Wolfgang

Time mattered little on the island. There were no seasons and the temperature varied little. Every so often it rained, or the winds came strong for days, furious as though it were about to storm but with the sky clear overhead. But these things all followed some greater calendar of events that dwarfed the one conceived by man.

Olive still kept track of the days on the trunk of the mother coconut tree. Wolfgang had turned fifteen on the island; Vernon, forty-eight; and she was now forty-six. Though they had celebrated day one hundred, day two hundred had passed with nary a whisper. A year had gone by and left them behind, stranded on their godforsaken island. The last thing they wanted to do was celebrate its passing.

Tensions on the island had finally come to a head, triggered, of all things, by a small patch of chicken wire. Vernon had found it washed ashore, wrapped around the fin of a pale blowfish with a bloated, distended belly and empty eye sockets. He had run bow-legged to the encampment with the thing swinging from his hand, his peeling, sun-burned face crinkled in a leathery smile.

They sat Indian-style around eight bits of wire, lined up by size, from two to sixteen inches in length. The smallest bit was quickly claimed by Olive as a needle and Vernon said that with one piece cut into many he could construct much more reliable water traps. He took the middlemost piece.

Wolfgang had the idea of constructing fishing hooks when his eyes fell on the hollowed-out eyes of the dead fish. Its puckered mouth and bloated belly made it seem like it was holding its breath in anticipation. Wolfgang said that if he could leave a baited hook he could trust not to break, he might catch one of the larger fish that he thought swam around his pools at night. The

rope they made from the coconut fronds was strong and didn't fall apart in water, but hooks had to be built with absolutely no wriggle room in the knot; otherwise a fish would eventually snap the hook in half and escape. Wolfgang thought that with these metal wires he could finally build his hooks in such a way as to bind them more strongly than before.

Vernon and Olive agreed to give Wolfgang two of the bits of wire, though he asked for four.

Wolfgang was careful not to raise his voice but spoke so intensely that the cartilage around his larynx pulled taut all the way to his sunken, sun-red chest. "Don't you want me to catch more food? Aren't we always hungry? This is what I need!" There was a cracked desperation in his voice they hadn't heard since the days when they could ground him. "What's not to get?" he said. "What could possibly be more important?"

Olive said, "We know it's important, Wolfgang, but you're asking us to let you take half of the wires and leave them out in the high tide overnight when we could be using them for a dozen other things. Show us you can manage two without losing them and maybe you'll get more."

Vernon said, "This is how life works, my boy. You want investors, but investors want returns."

Wolfgang sneered. "Great. Thanks for the lesson on capitalism, Dad. Real useful. In fact, it's probably worth a little something. Let me see how much I have on me." Wolfgang patted his hip as if searching for a wallet.

Vernon said, "That's enough."

"Oh no, no, I insist. We should start an economy—it's the next natural step in our complex society. Sand is trading at three and a quarter today." Wolfgang picked up a handful of sand and threw it underhand onto Vernon's lap. His voice shaking, he asked, "Do you think that'll

cover it, or should I drop by the bank for some more?” Wolfgang took up two more handfuls and with his hands raised at his side, let them trickle from his loose fists.

Vernon stood up and took two strides to Wolfgang, who jumped to his feet to prevent his father from glowering down at him. Wolfgang's fingers curled at his side.

Vernon saw Wolfgang's twitching hands. He asked, “You gonna hit me?”

“Enough, boys! You two are killing me with all this goddamned testosterone. Wolfgang, sit down! You're getting two wires. Here,” Olive extended an arm to him holding two of the longer wires. She smacked him with it when he refused to look at it. “And that's all there is to it.” Wolfgang didn't look down at her or the wires. She shook it closer to his face and said, “Go build your hooks, do what you have to do.”

Wolfgang took the wires, still looking at Vernon, and said, “Fine, whatever, but don't hold your breath.”

Wolfgang swooped to grab the rotten fish by the tail and swung it wide, flinging sand and rotten fish parts in an arc behind him. A chunk of it flew at Vernon, quivering in the air in front of him as if it were at a near-standstill, like water in space. Then, it slapped him on the arm. “Hey!” he screamed.

Wolfgang walked on until he could cut into the shrubs just out of view from his parents, then he crouched out of view. He sat down with an oyster shell and began to cut into the soft purple-brown flesh of the fish, and despite the smell, he couldn't help but think that Julie might have liked the color of it. A boil or organ in the fish's belly burst unexpectedly and began to ooze dark, oily gunk into the sand and Wolfgang recoiled at the smell of it. He took a pinch of sand soaked in the stuff and rubbed it between his fingers before bringing it to his nose. He grimaced and wiped his fingers clean on his shirt. He extracted long, sharp spines from the fish's vertebrae, then tied them together into a hook shape with short coils of braided coconut husk rope. Then he

wrapped the hooks with strips of cloth than had come undone at the hem of his jeans-turned-jorts. He checked both hooks to see if they could withstand the weight of a coconut without breaking. One of the hooks bounced loosely at its joints and Wolfgang re-wrapped the spines, twisting the cordage into a bowline that looped around the fish spines and pulled them closer the more pressure was applied against them. He tested it again on the coconut and this time it held strong. He connected the wires to the hooks.

From where he sat, Wolfgang could hear his parents talking.

“It's just hunger and hormones,” his mother said.

“He's never been hormonal like this,” said Vernon.

“Hungry, neither. Cut him some slack.”

“I hate how dependent on him he thinks we are.”

Olive said, “That's silly. We all need each other out here, nobody is more important than anybody.”

“That's not what he thinks. Didn't you see him throw sand at me? The boy is out of control, he thinks he can just do whatever.”

“So, what should we do, Vernon? Put him on a time out? This whole damn island is a time out.”

“You think I don't know? The problem is he knows. That's the problem.”

“Maybe you just need to find another way to interact with him. Man-to-man? I don't know. You two always got along great before. What's different, really?”

“He is,” said Vernon.

But they all knew that wasn't the whole truth.

Julie and Gerty

“Grandma?” said Julie, with a voice that was both shy and tender.

“Yes Julie?”

“I’m ready.”

Gerty looked at her. “Ready for what?”

“I’m *ready*, Grandma.”

“Oh,” said Gerty. “Lemur, you know there’s no rush. You don’t need to—”

“—Grandma...” Julie paused and looked Gerty in the eyes. “I’m ready,” she said.

“Well, okay,” said Gerty. She looked around the room as if for the phone book. “I can call someone I know. When you get to be my age—”

“No, I don’t want that.”

“But you—”

“I mean, I want this. But not like that.”

“I don’t understand what you’re telling me, Lemur.”

“Can’t we just do it ourselves? Why pay someone a bunch of money just to bury an empty box?”

“But Lemur,” Gerty said. “That’s not how things are done.”

“Why not?”

“What about all of your parents’ friends? Wolfgang’s friends? Don’t they deserve a chance to say good-bye?”

“It’s been over a year. Hopefully they’ve gotten over it.”

Gerty said nothing.

“I *need* this, grandma.”

Gerty thought of the televised funerals of the victims of Flight 181, some with bodies, or parts of bodies, others altogether empty. Casket after casket, candlelight vigils, wailing widows, played and replayed on all the news networks as the list of the missing dwindled to smaller and smaller numbers. Arms and legs and spleens washing ashore, tagged and ID'd, then shipped to families. Gerty thought of the hundreds of television cameras and microphones thrust against grieving faces and all the collective moments of silence held across the nation which added up to days and weeks. She thought of Julie and their relatively insular existence from all of that and she thought of the 9/11 families and the tragedy of all those empty boxes buried under the ground; all those businessmen and tourists and janitors whose bodies were never found and whose cause of death was simply Al Qaeda. At least those families had a clear culprit, someone or some thing to blame and get angry at besides the world at large.

“Well,” said Gerty, “what would we bury?”

Wolfgang

Later that night, when Wolfgang got back to camp, they sat around the fire in silence.

“So how did it go?” asked Olive.

“What do you care?” said Wolfgang, tossing pinches of sand into the fire and watching it flash like glitter.

“Don't talk to your mother that way,” said Vernon.

“Not now, Vernon. Just shut up. For once, please: Just. Shut. Up.”

Vernon got up and he pointed his great big finger at Wolfgang. “Now why do you have to talk to us that way? Why can't you just be *decent*?”

“Vernon...” said Olive gently.

Wolfgang squinted up at his father. “What?”

“There's no excuse for you to talk to either of us that way,” said Vernon. “I don't care how gruff you are with me—” Vernon stabbed a thumb into his chest and then swung his arm to point his big finger at Olive. “But your mother is just trying to be nice to you.” The finger pointed back at Wolfgang, prodded his chest. “Why are you like this?” he asked.

“I didn't say anything to her,” said Wolfgang.

“You were being ugly. Apologize. Right now.”

With each sentence, Vernon poked him again. Maybe it was that finger—Wolfgang wasn't sure, himself—and the truth was he could've agreed with every part of Vernon's statement, except for “right now.” Why shouldn't he be allowed to consider his actions at another time, of his own discretion, and apologize when he was ready? With a nervous, caustic little laugh, Wolfgang asked, “Or what?”

“Or what?” Vernon narrowed his eyes slightly, nodding his head.

And because he had imagined this moment before, Wolfgang said, “Stop biding for time. What on Earth could you possibly do to me?”

Vernon kept nodding his head and without another word, he walked back to where Olive sat under the trees. Wolfgang turned his back on them and walked off, taking a branch from the fire.

Wolfgang went to the northernmost tip of the island, his tip, where he was more exposed to the mercy of the wind. It blew strong, as always, and it blew the fire on his branch out, down to embers. In the darkness, Wolfgang failed to find tinder in time and eventually tossed the smoky branch far into the ocean. Wolfgang bent low and hugged himself as he walked. He began to curse, rather loudly, knowing that the wind would just carry his words westwards, away from his parents. He reached the island's end and then really let loose, screaming a mixture of obscenities and howls, as loud as he could, knowing that at that volume it was impossible for his parents not to hear, but not caring.

Wolfgang sat down and slipped his feet into the cold sand and watched the stars. He looked up to the white disc of the moon and was thankful at least for the added light of the full moon in the absence of a warming fire. He said good-night to his sister, then set his head down on a plank of wormwood he sometimes used for a table, or chair. He curled up in the sand but was still pelted by the wind.

Wolfgang got on his knees and dug himself a trench to shield him from the wind. As he fell asleep in his shallow ditch, Wolfgang found himself chuckling at the ridiculousness of his running away from home when home was a tiny island there was no running away from. A strong gust of wind came and Wolfgang curled up deeper into himself.

Julie

Julie braved her parents' room and her brother's room, both times accepting her grandmother's presence but rejecting her offer to go in the closed doors on her behalf. "No. I need to do this myself," she said with flat certainty.

From her father, she took a guitar pick he kept in the change jar, two of his cufflinks, and an old sweater which still smelled faintly of him. The smell on everyone else's clothes had become so faint that Julie questioned whether she really smelled them or if she conjured up the smell in their absence. But her father's clothes, especially anything made out of wool or tweed, still smelled like him. Julie nearly gagged now as she sniffed the sweater, at the thought that she was smelling a dead man.

From her mother's dresser she took an extra pair of glasses and an old tortoise shell brush with strands of her hair still in it. Julie looked through her mother's jewelry, but didn't touch any of it.

She went in Wolfgang's room and walked around with a light touch. She picked out a few of her favorite drawings, a charcoal pencil and a thin coloring brush she remembered watching him use to paint Magneto's armor steel-blue. She took Khan's hamster ball from inside his closet, as well as one of Wolfgang's shirts and his bronzed baby boots, which Julie had always teased him about for how small they were compared to his size-thirteen feet.

Julie put the items in their respective tins, stacked them on top of one another, and put on her jacket and mittens. "I'm ready," she told Gerty.

"Where are we going?" Gerty asked.

"The backyard," Julie said.

Two years before, Julie and Wolfgang had buried her hamster, Khan, in the woods behind their home. Back then, she had taken her cues from her brother, mimicking his downcast eyes and stuffing her hands in her pockets. She tried hard to keep as still as him.

Wolfgang had stood straight, his forearms enveloped by the front pocket of his favorite Georgetown sweatshirt. He said, "Today, we have lost more than just a hamster. We have lost a pet, a beloved friend, and a member of our family."

"Don't forget, film critic," Julie added. She would often use her body as protective fencing around Khan so that they could watch movies together, feeding him baby carrots and bits of lettuce as they watched films borrowed from her father's collection of classics. "He liked noir best."

"He liked film noir and having his head put in people's mouths."

"Hitchcock, too! I mean, it scared him, but he couldn't keep his eyes off the screen."

"—Hitchcock and sunflower seeds," Wolfgang amended, "but most of all he liked to dart under people's feet as they were about to take a step. Ultimately, this was Khan's fatal flaw.

"He was a good hamster," Wolfgang said. "He will be missed dearly."

Wolfgang trickled soil into Julie's hand. He threw a handful of his own to cover the Converse logo on Khan's coffin. Julie did the same, then smudged her face with dirt when she rubbed her nose. With a loose, jiggly spade, Wolfgang covered the box with moist spring earth, alive with bursting seeds and scurrying beetles, then he jammed a knobby branch into the mound to mark the grave..

Wolfgang took Julie's hand in his and they walked back to the house, where their parents sat on the patio. Before they came within earshot, Julie asked him, "Is that it?"

She was asking about the responsibility owed to the dead by the living. It seemed to her that a five minute summarization wasn't enough to honor a life lost forever. But Wolfgang

misunderstood and pulled her to him by the shoulder. He said, "Don't cry. We'll see Khan again someday."

"Where?" she asked.

Wolfgang shrugged and said, "Heaven." He looked up to squint at the sun, for where else could heaven be but up.

Present-day Julie squinted up at the sun and her eyes swam. Gerty shielded Julie's eyes with a hand on her forehead, saying, "You'll go blind that way."

Gerty and Julie walked over to the woods behind the house where she searched, but could not find the marker for Khan's grave. She came to a spot close to where she thought Khan was and said, "Here."

They began to dig.

They were dressed for the occasion, in sweatshirts and jeans, and each time Gerty stood back and said, "I think that's deep enough," Julie would just keep digging quietly until Gerty picked up her spade and got back in the hole with her.

After an hour, they stood over the grave with their hands browned by earth. Julie said, "Someone should say something."

"Right," said Gerty. "We are here today to bury three beloved and desperately missed family members: My son, Vernon, his wife, Olive, and their son and my grandson, Wolfgang Young."

"Grandma," said Julie, nodding her head towards her grandmother's hands. Julie's hands were clasped before her while Gerty's hung at her sides.

"Oh right," said Gerty, clasping her hands as well.

Julie looked at the tins in the ground and her grandmother's voice faded into the background until Julie heard her say, "Julie? Would you like to say anything?"

“Good-bye,” she said.

Wolfgang

The day after their spat, Wolfgang had successfully avoided his parents all morning and for much of the afternoon—no small feat on their small island. He had seen his mother, but only from a distance as she swam in the ocean. He had avoided crossing into their end of the island and for the most part, they had kept their distance from his.

Wolfgang stood in the water and wriggled his toes in very small amounts. If it weren't for the sand shifting beneath him, he might have thought he wasn't moving at all. He sank deeper and deeper into the sea bed. Tiny grains of sand made their way between his toes and rolled up the breast of his feet to climb up his ankles all the way to his shins. Wolfgang quivered in the shallow water while his mother swam laps around the island. She would disappear around the bend, then reappear twelve minutes later around the other side.

Olive swam a slow and composed crawl, relentless and silent, barely splashing the water. Her feet were submerged as she paddled steadily on. Wolfgang thought that if it were possible to wear grooves in the water, the ocean would have been scarred by her constant path. Wolfgang did not know where Vernon was but felt confident that he, like Wolfgang, was sure to be watching Olive as she orbited the island. Wolfgang thought that he could have built walls on either side of her and she wouldn't even have noticed. He had never thought to join his mother on her swims. Just as he had fled to his tip of the island the night before, they each had a place they could go to for privacy, and swimming was that place for Olive. The scheduling of these swims was the only seemingly patternless thing on an island completely dominated by cycles of the moon and tide and Wolfgang treasured the mystery of it, keeping a running tally in his head of her moods, conversations and even the feeding habits immediately preceding a swim in the hope of tying together some pattern that possibly not even she fully understood.

Wolfgang had spotted her this day while he was out hunting, tip-toeing around the rocky shallows, his eyes darting to see the tiny plumes blooming up from the sand and the directions they betrayed. Though he hadn't spoken to her since the night before, he guessed her mood was somewhere between exhausted and at the end of her rope. Those weren't moods, exactly, but they were around here. He watched her strokes, trying to divine some meaning, though it was remarkable, once again, just how unremarkable and steady her swimming was.

Neither of his traps had caught a fish last night and that had been part of the reason Wolfgang hadn't come back to the shelter. He wanted to return with a bang. In the morning, he moved the hooks into deeper water and passed the time during the unproductive high tide by spear-hunting for fish, something he had only succeeded at once. He remembered the feeling of spearing a fish the whole way through, the high it had given him. He compared it to the current frustration of coming back up for air empty-handed time and again. In the distance, he saw Olive's brown shape slice gracefully through the emerald water. He stopped to watch her go by. She swam an especially far loop around the shallows, where sharp red and brainy yellow coral sprouted from the submerged ridge as if from a fissure in the earth.

A year ago, Olive was hesitant, feeling her way around the island she now seemed to know like the back of her hand. The first day she swam, about two weeks after their arrival at the island, Olive stopped and tread water every so often to check her distance from the shore. Wolfgang had gotten in the water and directed her with his arms to take a wide loop around his end of the island. She had smiled and waved before gliding back underwater and making the long loop around. To this day, whenever Olive would swim past, Wolfgang half-expected her to pop her head up at wave at him, like she had that first time, but she never did. Wolfgang's instincts told him that whatever drove her to the water was something halfway between emotion and

spiritualism—a kind of sacrifice or prayer. Sometimes, she could go for weeks without a swim, only to do it for days on end.

Because the day was ending, Wolfgang decided to call it quits as his mother looped out of view yet again. He waded into deeper water and floated on his back a few minutes, splaying his legs to try and make up for his bottom-heavy body. Eventually, he tired of holding his breath and let his feet sink into the sand. His mother could float effortlessly and had tried to teach him when he was a child, holding him with a gentle hand under his lower back, as though buoyancy was a skill he could learn with proper technique. But Olive floated no matter how she held herself, as though her bones were hollow. She swam as though she belonged in the sea, with a graceful efficiency that never seemed to tire or hurry. This was very unlike her movements outside the water, which Wolfgang recognized as something like the awkwardness of girls his own age who were not always aware of their own size. Olive had long, skinny arms and tender, round knees which had ended a promising volleyball career in college—the year before she met Vernon. Her awkwardness was a running joke in the family, and whenever she had an accident, even completely understandable ones, she would refer to her alter-ego, Kaptain Klutz. Sometimes she tried to designate lower military ranks to Wolfgang and Julie if they tripped or spilled something, but they both shunned her attempts to nominate a successor.

But in the water, Olive was absolutely graceful. It was something Wolfgang both recognized and envied. For some reason, Olive couldn't translate that grace into her life outside of water, proving as bad or worse than Vernon at hunting for crab and fish, but Wolfgang somehow knew that he didn't hunt as well as his mother swam.

She came back into view on the opposite end of the island. It took her less time to swim this side of the island, cutting a path like the string of a bow, a straight line from one end to the other. As she came near, Wolfgang called out to her, though he knew she couldn't hear him.

Olive switched to the breaststroke, which meant she was on her last couple of laps. Her head bobbed up and down at the water's surface as she rose with eyes closed for breaths of air. She had told Wolfgang once that she didn't swim for the exercise—each day, just surviving in this place was like a twenty-four-hour triathlon—but that she swam to clear her head. She said that sometimes it felt more relaxing even than lying down and doing nothing.

She was thin. It was undeniable just how much thinner she was now. Wolfgang thought she looked like one of those displays from the Bodies Exhibit, with every muscle and sinew in plain view—thick, visible ropes of tendon stretching from bone to muscle as though they were about to snap. Wolfgang winced sometimes, if he saw her carrying a load or bending over to pick something up, the bones of her spine stretching the skin on her back taut. He would often take her loads from her, half out of concern, but also from some kind of disjointed sense of propriety.

The sun was setting behind Wolfgang, washing the sea in the pink-orange-violet of the sky's dying colors. Olive squinted her closed eyes against the bright yellow of the sun as it dipped into the ocean. While she was still some forty yards away, Olive slipped underwater, and when she reemerged to take a breath, her face seemed blurry and vague. Wolfgang blinked as though to clear his vision in the late afternoon haze of sunset, but when he looked at her again her face was still distorted and formless, lacking in features as though he were looking at her through a thick glass wall. She did not dive again, but began to tread water and Wolfgang saw with terrifying clarity that everything else—the frigate birds struggling to make headway against the wind, the dark blue line of the horizon where the ocean met the pinkening sky, each crest of every ripple in the sea—he saw that all these things were sharp and clear in his vision, but that his mother's face was still blurry.

Wolfgang yanked his feet up from the sand and ran awkwardly towards her, making slow headway as the sand sucked him from beneath and with water resisting his every step and movement.

He yelled out, “Mom!”

Now facing him, Olive brought her hands to her face. With all ten fingers, she clutched at the blurred transparence and pried the jellyfish from her forehead down, then flung it into deeper water. She called out Wolfgang's name, but it devolved into a scream of agony. She shouted in a raspy, breathy voice very unlike her own and Wolfgang screamed that he was coming. He began to swim in a crawl stroke, keeping his head above water and his eyes fixed on his mother as she shuddered in painful spasms as she tried to swim towards the shore. He reached her and without thinking removed two of the tentacles that still clutched her face—one that ran down her cheek and wriggled across her lips as if to shush her, and another which coiled around her throat. Both times, Wolfgang was stung as soon as he touched the tentacle and his hand exploded with a numbing fire he ignored as he called for his father and blew on the whistle hung around his neck. He swam to shore, dragging his mother behind him. He looked down at her as soon as his feet touched sand and he saw Olive's open mouth as she stared up at the sky. Short clicks of air came in and out of her as though she were trying to speak or breathe, he did not know which. Pinkish-red welts began to rise on the skin of her face like the criss-cross of whip lashes. With his good hand grabbing Olive around her torso and pulling her from behind, Wolfgang looped his other arm under her armpit and kept dragging her to shore, blowing madly on his whistle. Where was Vernon?

Once they came ashore, Wolfgang flushed her face with seawater. He said to her, “I think I remember something about salt water being good but freshwater being bad.” If she registered what he said, she didn't show it. Her eyes stayed fixed on the sky and her face was frozen in an

expressionless demonstration of horror. She locked eyes with Wolfgang and hers were filled with tears.

“Dah,” she said. “Dah.”

“Dad!” screamed Wolfgang. “Dad!”

Wolfgang looked down at his mother's face as the pinkish-red welts swelled with fluid. Her thin nose, so much like his sister's, began to bulge hideously (he realized only then how much tranquility that nose provided him, how much closer he felt to Julie merely at being able to look at his mother's nose) and her lips swelled where the detached tentacle had rested. He flushed her face with saltwater as she transformed before his eyes. Wolfgang blew hard on the whistle. He tried to clench his hand but was seized by a sharp, unbearable pain that made him cry out despite himself. The pain began as soon as he thought to move his hand, and he noticed a dull ache creeping over his entire body, which was amplified whenever he made any kind of movement. Even blinking felt like the thudding of a bass drum against the front of his head. Dizzy, Wolfgang tried to look around for his father, but he was seized by a sharp pain which jolted up his back all the way to the nape of his neck, where skull met spine.

Olive reached out her hand and dropped it on Wolfgang's lap, where he clutched his own arm in agony. She said “Uuuh.”

She touched his arm, above where the tentacles had stung him. “Uhhry,” she said.

Wolfgang's joints ached with every movement and he had only been stung twice, by a tentacle that had already pumped itself dry. He wondered how much worse her pain was than his and he blew hard on his whistle.

Vernon came stumbling through the brush with a coconut splashing water on the ground. It had been raining heavily the past few weeks, filling their water traps and making sunsets much more dramatic affairs. Vernon arrived to a heavy violet sky with a distant corner of tinted pink

and yellow where the sun still poked out its last few rays. “Oh no,” he said, dropping the coconut and kneeling beside her. “Oh God, no.”

Vernon was trembling as he poured water down Olive's throat. She gargled as though she were choking. Vernon asked, “What happened to her? How did she get like this?”

Wolfgang propped up his mother's head to keep it from submerging in the shallow water and he said, “Jellyfish.” Vernon put one hand to his mouth and the other on his wife's face.

“You're going to be okay,” he said, “Everything's going to be okay, Olive. I love you.”

Olive said, “Uuhn.”

Her voice was coming out harsher and deeper, and her throat was swollen where the last tentacle had clung. She raised her head like she wanted to say something, but she couldn't get enough air in her lungs and her throat clicked like a rattle. Her hand clutched to Wolfgang's arm, and it was all he could do not to fall in tears. She dug her nails in deep with every painful seizure.

Vernon looked up at Wolfgang. “What do we do?” he said.

“What?”

“What do we do, Wolfie? What can we do?”

“I...I don't know,” he said.

“What do they do on those nature shows you watch? What do they do?”

Wolfgang's hands were trembling. “I don't know. It's always an arm or a leg or something. They cut off circulation and call an ambulance, Dad. They never talk about people who get their faces stung.” And what Wolfgang thought, but didn't say, was that the shows on tv only told the stories that had happy endings.

Vernon looked down at Olive. She was lying back down and her clicking slowed like a broken metronome. “Should we...shouldn't we pee on her?”

Wolfgang looked at his father. “That's a myth,” he said.

Vernon looked back down at Olive and clawed at his scalp. “Open your eyes, Olive. Can she breathe? Oh my God, what do we do?”

“I don't know, Dad.”

Vernon fell over his wife in kisses and tears. “What will I do? What do I do?”

Darkness fell around them and Olive stopped breathing.

“What do we do?” Vernon asked.

Julie

When she was done with it, Julie's room was empty. The two walls against her bed had a high shelf of sturdy pine that had been stacked to the ceiling with clear plastic tubs stuffed with soft and colorful toys and clothes. The shelves were bare now. She had removed her desk, which had been etched with the seated growth charts of her and her brother. Julie had made the case that all real power was wielded from behind desks and that all the extra height Wolfgang got from his gangly legs were irrelevant anyway, and probably even a detriment unless he wanted to be professional basketball player, which he clearly had no ambition to do. Wolfgang had agreed to the measurements and still defeated Julie soundly every year, but the difference was always less pronounced than the standing ones recorded by their dad. So anyways, the desk had to go.

The bed she kept, though she had likely spent more time there than anywhere else in her life. She ripped the blankets off, then pushed off the mattress to stare at the bald frame. Nothing came up. Julie tossed the mattress back on and sat in the bed. She bounced on it a little and the springs bounced back with no complaint. She fell down on the bed and thought she could probably keep it. Beds probably cost a lot of money. And Julie thought it might be good to keep at least something, even in a fresh start. Not as a reminder, exactly, but maybe like an anchor.

“I like my bed,” said Julie.

“Well that's good,” said Gerty.

Gerty had initially welcomed Julie's idea to clear out her room and start fresh, but she slowly came to the realization of just how out of her depth she was. Her optimism drained as she watched Julie's clipped words and slack shoulders. By the end of it, she had been reduced to devil's advocate, pleading for old Christmas gifts and keepsakes, things she called portable memories, things Julie would miss when she was older. Sometimes Julie would take pity or agree,

as with the ceramic tree her brother had made for her in shop class, or the wafer-thin gold snowflake ornament her parents bought the year she was born, in what she understood had been an emotionally charged Christmas. She gave to Goodwill her teddy bear, named simply Big Teddy, which Wolfgang had won for her after multiple attempts at a rigged carnival game when she was seven and he was nine. She barely glanced at what had once been her favorite sleeping shirt, a hand-me-down from her mother.

As they searched through old boxes, Gerty gasped and held up a clear plastic teething ring filled with red goo. “Do you remember?” she asked.

Julie looked at it with eyes more gray than yellow and said, “Trash it.” Gerty pocketed it instead.

By the time they were done, they had four large boxes of toys, three of clothes, and two assorted. A truckload with no truck, and a pointless SUV Gerty couldn't drive. Julie asked for some time alone, to think, and Gerty reluctantly left the room to heat some dinner.

Julie drummed her fingers and sat up on her bed, surveying the empty room. There were no sheets on it because the smell of them reminded her too much of Olive. Tomorrow she and her grandmother were going to Target to pick out a new bedspread and buy new detergent.

Restless, Julie picked up her phone. She dialed a number, hung-up, then dialed it again. She turned on her stereo and faced the speakers to the door.

“Hello?” a voice asked.

“Hi. Is this...is Beetie there, please?”

“This is she.”

“Oh, hi Beetie.” Julie fought an urge to hang up. “You probably don't remember me, this is Julie. We met at—”

“The MoMA, of course I do! How are you, Julie?”

Julie smiled. "Okay. But also kind of like it can't get any worse."

"I see."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're fine, I'm just kind of in the middle of something. We should schedule to meet up."

"We should?"

"What's that? Sorry, I can barely hear you over that noise. What is that, King Crimson or something? I could never get into them."

"I said we *should* meet up. I was thinking. And maybe you could do some work for me? In my room?"

"What kind of work?"

"I don't know. A mural? There's a lot of blank canvas."

Beetie laughed. "You don't want to see my portfolio first?"

"Sorry. I haven't done this before."

"No, of course not. I'm the one who's sorry. Give me your e-mail and I'll send you some of my work. Sorry I don't have a website, my *friend* has been promising me one for months but hasn't come through yet."

Julie turned the music off and gave Beetie her e-mail. She heard a faraway voice yelling on the other end of the line. Julie said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have called. You were in the middle of something. You can go if you want."

"Hush. I'm happy you did. Besides, now that we have a professional relationship you can call me anytime." And here Julie could almost sense Beetie's smile when she said: "Boss."

"Oh, and there's *one* last question."

"Right."

“You're not one of those New Yorkers who doesn't have a driver's license are you?”

“Hey, I'm from Indiana, don't even start with me. I've had my hand so far up a cow's ass I fondled its brains, so don't be calling me no New Yohka.”

Julie smiled and hung up her phone, a black and red rotary phone that Gerty had told her had once belonged to her grandfather.

She must have hit refresh fifty times before the e-mail arrived, as promised. Beetie's portfolio had as many tattoos as anything else, which Julie half expected, somehow, but the really amazing thing was the diversity of mediums she worked with. There were statuettes, carvings, watercolor landscapes, charcoal sketches, even a conventional oil-on-canvas of fruits, but instead of grapes and pears she had a pineapple and tamarinds, and a cluster of bananas laced with berries that looked like miniature red pumpkins. Shuffled inconsequentially among these works were a few spray-painted murals, and it just so happened that it was a mural which Julie liked best, of a grinning surfer riding regal cartoon waves spiraling into white under a sky-blue sky. He looked how she imagined a surfer would be portrayed in a deck of cards, facing away in an eerie, smiling profile, and not really looking straight ahead, but a little down. Glued to the top right of the mural was a bright yellow plate, and the ceramic of it shone light back at the camera. Sea foam collected at the surfer's feet and it was almost as if he were a modern-day Venus, emerging from the ocean on some glorious, godly surfboard.

Julie wrote back quickly:

I like the surfer one. Do you think you could do something like it for me?

Beetie responded within five minutes, with the subject heading “Yes.” In the message body there was an attached picture. It was a picture of the surfer mural, but from a different angle, lighted by an open window off-camera. Julie had been able to tell from the original picture that the mural wasn't outdoors, but it had seemed so large and she had not pictured it in a private

residence. She had imagined it gracing the commuters of some secret tunnel, like the one with all the animals near the Bronx Zoo. Or maybe overlooking customers from behind the counter of some popular surfer shop. Not that she had given it much thought. But there it was, benevolently standing guard over a tussled round bed and a cement-floor room. Blocking the bottom right portion of the mural, just beneath three flying fish, was a large folding table covered in magazines and loose sketches and drawings. Stained coffee mugs, brushes, pencils and X-acto knives lay in disarray. Pushed to the far side of the table was a lamp, an ashtray, a pile of two-fold papers and unopened mail. Underneath the picture, in the text of the e-mail, Beetie wrote:

Where I sleep, work, live, circa two minutes ago.

Julie walked to her wall and stood before it. “Maybe a tropical paradise.”

Wolfgang

Wolfgang and Vernon sat on opposite ends of the fire. Wolfgang carefully tied their last bit of shoelace around his arm, then he lay in the sand and breathed slowly. They sat this way for hours without any words when Vernon spoke. He said:

“We had come to an agreement, your mother and I, because there was no compromise between her wish and mine. The agreement was: she'd name any boys and I'd name any girls. She actually wanted to name you Adolph, after her grandpa. Boy, did we have some sleepless nights over that. I said, Why not just call him Lucifer and be done with it?—and she says: What's wrong with Lucifer? Can you imagine? Wolfgang was bad enough.”

Vernon tossed a log in the fire. He said, “She told me she had never gotten over her mother naming her Olive instead of a traditional German name. She said it felt like her mother had expected a coward.” Vernon laughed. “Can you imagine? What am I saying. Of course you can.”

Vernon looked into the fire. He said, “I'm glad you like your name. You got teased some, but you've definitely grown into it.” Vernon looked up. “Sometimes, I feel like names define people as much as we define names. Would you still be you if you were called Adam or Tom?”

Wolfgang didn't respond.

“I liked the name Olive, even though she hated it. She said it made her sound *drab*. Could you imagine? Sometimes your mother...” Vernon trailed off and tried to scoff but his breath cut short. He began to cry and his hand reached out to touch hers.

“I'm glad Mom named me,” Wolfgang said. Then he got up and left.

He walked the shore and said to himself that this was his first night going to sleep as a person without a mother, as if the realization might sink in and cause some great and sudden shift

in his core, changing him into the kind of person he'd need to be from here on out. He had no idea what that person might be like. He considered that Julie must have been going to bed with thoughts like these for the past year. Who knew what kind of changes she had undergone to help her cope. Wolfgang knew that by now, he must have been dead to her. Shouldn't he be?

Wolfgang sat down and faced the ocean. The pain of the sting on his hand was still there and still excruciating, though Wolfgang had not thought of it the whole time by the fire. Vernon had not even noticed it. Carefully, Wolfgang placed his hand in his lap and looked at his palm, where sore red lines of raised flesh intersected with his life, heart and fate. Wolfgang thought of the moment right as his mother took her last few breaths and the rattle in her thin chest as she reached for his hand; this hand. He tried to clench his fists and a flash of pain ran up his arm so quickly, it jolted him upright and made him cry out. He had been watching his hand, though, and it did not seem like it had moved.

For a moment, the pain blinded him to all else, overwhelming the senses in a way unlike any other pain he had even known. It burned and made him freeze up in concentration of this pain that pushed against his skin and stretched out to his most distant nerve endings, searing him through and through. It felt like when he had first been stung, but as though it were happening all over his body. Wolfgang thought about trying to move again, but the mere thought of it seemed to incite the anger of this vicious, lustful pain.

The pain ebbed like the tide, back towards his hand, which thudded, visibly, he thought and subsided to a dull ache. Wolfgang thought of Olive swimming out in that black sea. Alive one moment, and dead the next. In the time it took to run a toaster, his mother went from this living, swimming creature to a heap of flesh. Refuse vulnerable to rot and decay.

When he was eleven, Wolfgang had once stayed up late and watched a television show about people with cancer. He was grumpy at the breakfast table the following morning because he

had had little sleep and could not understand why there were so few organs for the people who needed them when so many people were dying all the time.

Olive said, "Everybody has the right to choose what happens to them after they die. That's personal, and for some people it's sacred. How would you like it if someone went rooting around inside of you without your permission if you died?"

Julie, her mouth full, said, "Don't morticians do that anyway?"

Wolfgang said, "If it's like a starving animal, that's fine, whatever, he can eat me if he needs to. I'm just meat anyways."

Even then, he had felt strange referring to his dead corpse as *I*.

Julie asked Olive if she was a donor and Olive said that yes, she was. Wolfgang asked if they could become donors and she said she did not know.

The next day, they went to a hospital where a nurse told Wolfgang he was doing a very nice thing. She told him that a single donor could save over half a dozen lives if all the major organs were intact. She said that most people his age didn't like to think about saving a life if it meant they had to die to do it, but that she was always glad to see that some young people still cared enough to give unselfishly. Wolfgang felt proud and asked if he could give some blood also and she said to come back in seven years, but offered him a lollipop anyway. While Olive filled out a form with his information, Wolfgang began to think about what she was signing away and about dying and then being buried all hollowed-out, but then he tried to think about the people whose lives he might be saving, but they were faceless nobodies and he was left merely thinking of his death.

He looked at Julie, but she was humming, light years away, probably saving an astronaut or someone who adopted a bunch of Chinese babies. In as detached a way as he could muster, Wolfgang asked the nurse questions about organ harvesting. She told him that some organs could

stay alive in a body for many hours after death, while others like the brain died pretty much immediately. She told him that a person's heart might live for hours after it had stopped beating and that skin and muscle cells could be harvested even a day or more after, especially if they died somewhere cold.

“Like in a meat freezer?” Julie asked.

“Sure,” said the nurse.

“What if they die somewhere hot?” Wolfgang had asked.

“They decompose much more rapidly. Organs have to be fresh to be any good.”

“Fresh,” Julie repeated with a long, hissing shh.

Wolfgang's memory ended about there. He knew there must have been a good-bye, a drive home, a retelling to his father, but he had no recollection of any of it. He got up and with his good hand threw a pebble as far into the water as he could. He felt weak and feverish, and though he tried not to, he couldn't help thinking about how some parts of his mother were still alive that very moment but that other parts had already gone rogue and begun to eat away at her insides. He tried not to think of his father alone with her body right this instant. He was probably talking to it. He had been doing it all night long.

Wolfgang tried again to clench his hand and fell to the ground with pain.

Eventually, they would have to tend to the body. It was like the nurse had said, once the sun came out, things would start degrading rapidly.

Wolfgang willed himself into a fist and whimpered with effort.

She would have probably wanted to be buried under her tree nursery, Wolfgang thought. Something about self-sacrifice. Something about immortality.

Wolfgang grit his teeth and tried to imagine what it might have been like if the stings were on his throat and his lips and all around his nose and eyes, instead of just on his hand. He

tried to imagine what he'd tell his sister. What would he say were her last words? Would he ever even get a chance? He had known on some level that she must have already accepted his death, but before today, the idea of this acceptance was just impetus for him to fight on, to prove it wrong. But now it felt like she knew the score and that Wolfgang just hadn't figured out the obvious yet.

He brought all four of his fingers to a curl in his palm and it hurt as if he had snapped them in the other direction. He brought the stung hand to his mouth and bit his knuckle, hard, though he could not feel his own teeth on his skin. He convulsed with pain, sweaty and feverish and with his face and neck coated in sand. Was this all that they had lived for? To die one by one on this island? He would be the last one to go, wouldn't he?

Wolfgang sat up and curled into the fetal position, with pain still jolting him, running up his arm to the nape of his neck, then shooting to all the other extremities. He fell to the sand with tears streaming down his eyes. The pain was so intense that he thought, Maybe this will kill me like it killed her. Maybe Dad will be last, not me. He felt a surge of pity for his father and caught his breath. He looked out to the water through the blur of tears and watched the reflection of the moon, rippling, and shifting.

Shifting?

Wolfgang rubbed his eyes with the inside of his shirt and looked up to see the moon far above him, not hanging over the sea where it would have to be to be reflected where he saw it in the sea. His good hand became clammy like when he'd spot a crab wading in a pool. His heart bounced and he took a sudden breath, as if he were expecting to hold it. He felt nervous, like he was about to kiss a girl for the first time. Kissing a girl. Wolfgang realized that on some level, he had given up on the hope of ever doing that again. The shimmering light moved once more. It was surveying the ocean.

“Hey!” Wolfgang screamed, “Over here!”

Wolfgang remembered the whistle around his neck and, fumbling, brought it to his lips and blew as hard as he could. No sound came out, so Wolfgang blew a little softer. At first it trembled, but then came out in a strong, tremulous shriek that sliced through the hollow wind like nothing else could. He blew on it again, then again.

After a few minutes, Wolfgang heard Vernon coming, saw a quivering fire bobbing quickly towards him. “Wolfgang?” his father called, in a terrified voice. “Wolfgang? Are you okay?”

“Over here! Quick, Dad!”

There was no question of pointing the boat out to him once he was there. In the black of night it was apparent. Vernon ran for more kindling and Wolfgang continued to blow on his whistle and scream. He walked into the water, going chest deep, then swimming deeper out away from the island's shallows, where the shore fell sharply into deep ocean sea. Wolfgang tread water and screamed.

“Dad!” he screamed. “It's nighttime! They can't see smoke!”

“It's not the smoke I want them to see!”

Wolfgang swam out further and blew on his whistle, knowing that the added proximity might be the difference between being heard or not.

Vernon built his bonfire with the help of Olive's nursery, stacking the saplings against one another over a fiery bed of dry fronds. Then, taking his own whistle in his mouth, he ran into the water with Wolfgang. They took turns blowing on their whistle and yelling for help. Behind them, the fire grew tall as it consumed Olive's leafy-green babies with their paper-thin fronds. The light in the distance stopped sweeping the water and lay stationary. They screamed louder, their voices cracking against the wind. When the light moved again, it pointed level to the water's

surface and swept the horizon like a lighthouse, flashing briefly in Wolfgang's eyes. It didn't really illuminate the surroundings, but it was still strong enough to make him wince. Vernon and Wolfgang motioned madly. Long after they had both gone hoarse, they blew on their whistles with burning lungs and tread water in the dark, impenetrable water.

In all the times Wolfgang had pictured rescue, he had never imagined it would happen at night. And though a part of him felt as though this might simply be another one of his rescue dreams—some prolonged hallucination which for some reason also involved his mother's death—the light served as an anchor to reality, shining brighter and brighter in his eyes, going on for longer than any dream ever had. They kept signaling, laughing and crying, but always waving, always motioning, blowing mindlessly on their whistles long after it was clear they'd been spotted. As the boat approached, they yelled their hellos and thank yous because their voices could not be heard any other way.

Julie

Julie took out the trash, and though she had been in fairly good spirits that day, she fell in a heap by the recycling. The trash had been Wolfgang's chore. She took deep breaths and steadied herself, repeating under her breath that everything was okay.

She pulled herself up off the ground just as Beetie arrived in a beat-up, two-door Volkswagen Derby which sputtered when she put it in park. The ventilator kept running long after she left the car. "This is Little Red," said Beetie. "I left the hood back home."

Beetie walked up the narrow, winding pathway to Julie's front door with a grin on her face. She wasn't dazzlingly made-up this time, and the only flourish on her was a glam-rock, two-tone rainbow on her eye lids which shifted like a hologram from metallic blue to silver, depending on your angle. The path she walked was a silly, aesthetic thing nobody ever used. Built out of stepping stones embedded into the grass, it followed a ridiculous, twisty-turny route dreamed up by the previous owners, who Julie supposed had some extra landscaping rocks left over. Beetie took the path unerringly, her eyes never leaving Julie, and this was enough to make Julie laugh, despite herself.

Beetie's smile faded as she got closer. "What's wrong?"

Julie shook her head, took Beetie's hand and pulled her inside, saying "Grandma! Beetie's here."

Grandma Gerty arrived at the foot of the stairs in faded jeans spotted with paint stains, heavy work gloves, and an old tee shirt that had belonged to her son. There was a giant yellow cheeseburger stretched out across her wide bosom. "Splendid. Let's get going."

Beetie smiled a little nervously. "I didn't know we were going somewhere."

Julie beamed at her. "We gotta buy paint, right? You get to drive the SUV, though!"

Gerty looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I thought Julie would have told you..."

Julie grabbed a backpack and made her way out the front door. "I'll go shut off the sprinklers in the backyard!"

Beetie smiled and shrugged and started to move towards the door. "It's okay, I don't mind."

Gerty nodded quickly so as not to lose her attention, "Yes, there's just one other pit-stop, though. I hope that's alright."

"Where at?"

"Near the art supply store, there's a thrift store, we have some things to donate." Gerty paused. "What is your Christian name?" she asked.

"My Christian name?"

"The name your parents gave you."

"Yes, I know. It's Beatrice," Beetie said, "after my grandmother."

Gerty smiled. "That's a lovely name! You know, I've never met a Beatrice I didn't like. I'm sure your grandmother would have been no exception." Gerty gripped her large wicker purse. "And you of course, I'm sure of it. Well, Beatrice, have you seen Julie's room?"

Beetie balanced on one leg to poke her head out the door. She saw Julie staring into the fully packed SUV, motionless, her hands hidden in front of her. "Oh, that's okay," said Beetie, "Julie sent me some pictures of the wall, already. Gave me the measurements. I know how much paint I'll need."

Gerty nodded but didn't move. "Perhaps you should take a look before we go? The lighting really is something else. Maybe it'll help you pick out what shades you want? I've taken a few painting classes, myself, and the professors always say lighting is everything."

Beetie made a gesture to indicate Julie waiting outside and Gerty said, "It will only be a minute."

Gerty opened the door to Julie's room, and Beetie popped her head in, but did not actually step inside. "Looks good," she said, "Is our Julie a little bit of a neat freak?"

Gerty shook her head gravely. "No. She's had a very difficult year, Beatrice. I'm not sure how I should say this, or if I should say anything at all, but our family is no longer with us. Her mother, her father and her brother all disappeared in that horrible plane crash last year." Gerty still could not bring herself to say they had died.

"Oh my God." Beetie covered her mouth. "I'm so sorry." She looked towards the window, as if to see Julie, but the view was of the neighbor's house. "I'm so, so sorry."

"Thank you. The pit stop today is so Julie can give away everything in her room that reminds her of them. As you can see, not much is left." Gerty gripped her purse. "I don't know what else to do," she said. Her eyes were as dry as paper.

Beetie reached out and squeezed her shoulder. Gerty tensed.

"Oh," said Beetie, withdrawing.

Gerty took Beetie's hand and patted it, let it go. "I really don't wish to interfere with Julie's friendships, but if you're going to be doing this job, you deserve to know what you're getting into."

Outside, Julie's blue dress had got her some unwanted attention. A large bumble bee, harmless but terrifying with its deep, vibrant buzz, circled near her right ear, swooping closer, then farther, almost like a hummingbird. Julie ignored it and stared at the boxes until her eyes became raw and itchy in the dry, asphalt heat. A smaller honeybee found Julie's hairpin quite similar to the thistles that grew most abundantly in the high heat of July and August. Even as she

traipsed over Julie's hair, the bee occasionally got to buzzing, her wings flapping a half-beat behind the tempo of flight.

The night before, Julie had come downstairs and picked up the keys to the SUV. The air was cool, but the concrete warm against her bare feet. The street was dark and quiet except for the communal hum of the neighborhood's A/C, and a distant barking. The SUV towered over her, stalwart reserve damming up a potential flood of boxed memories. Lately, whenever she had walked past it, the car had begun to give her shivers of a distinct, haunted nature.

She had clicked a button and unlocked the car, stepping back when it beeped, louder than she remembered. She froze, but nothing happened. She wiped her hands on her dress and leaned down to touch her palms against the steaming warmth of the driveway. She felt then only half aware of the movements of her body. This had been a game, once. Pretending that a finger or a limb had taken a life of its own and that it was scheming grandiose plots to take over her body, then the world. She would foil her body's secret undertakings and then live with the quiet pride that came with knowing she had been the world's secret savior.

Without much realizing what she was doing, Julie had crawled in through the cargo door. The car stank of stale air. Most of the backseat had been folded into itself to make room for the boxes, and Julie looked them over, opening each and every one. She picked up a plastic orange choo-choo by its smokestack, then dropped it back into the bin full of toys. Julie stuck her head in the bin of blankets and her mother's hand-me-down sleepwear. This included a giant, lanky shirt that covered Julie to her calves. The sleeves would hang from her hands like limp noodles which she whacked about carelessly, saying merely "oops," if it hit anyone or knocked anything over. If Wolfgang got mad enough, he'd chase her and she'd try to glide away, but he always caught some lingering part of her. He'd tie her sleeves together, sometimes even wrapping them around her back like a straight-jacket. There were permanent creases on the sleeves in testament to the

severity of his knots. Julie looked at the shirt's faded design: Mickey in his magician's hat, painting a Disney castle with one stroke of a brush and smiling back at the shirt's fourth wall. Silhouetted mops in the background walked down stairs.

The shirt had been co-opted by Julie over the course of years. It had been Olive's only extravagance during their trip to Disney, but she allowed Julie to borrow it from time to time. As Julie grew older, and either outgrew or broke all her of her own keepsakes, she became more and more attached to the shirt and thought of it more and more as her own. She went from asking each time she wanted to borrow it to simply taking it from Olive's closet and returning it weeks later, in the form of dirty laundry. One day when she got back from school, Julie found the shirt topping the pile of folded laundry on her bed and it became just another sacrifice Olive never called attention to. Had Julie even said thank you?

She ran her hands up and down the creases of the shirt, half-expecting a good-bye note or secret message to flutter out, but of course there was nothing of the sort. She breathed in the shirt and the blankets and felt that its scent had weakened so much that she had to press them very hard against her face to get a whiff of anything except the smell of car, which made her feel a little queasy. Then Julie, who crumpled her shirts and had a drawer full of loose socks, watched herself carefully fold each and every article of clothing, set them back in the boxes exactly as she had found them, lock the SUV, and walk back to the front door.

When she arrived at the foot of the stairs, she looked up and saw three hunched figures in the darkness. Immediately she knew they were the ghosts of her family. She did not blink, she did not look away, but stared with burning eyes at where the shadows lurked. "It's over now," she said. "I'm not going to see you anymore."

The figures stood silently at the top of the stairs, watching her as impassively as those statues in Easter Island. "Good-bye," she said.

And just like that, the figures disappeared, though Julie had not actually expected them to. She walked up the stairs slowly, looking carefully at the floor where the shadowy figures had stood, crawled back into her bed, and immediately fell asleep. The next morning when she woke up, she asked herself, had that really happened?

Out in the heat of the sun, Julie squinted into the SUV and tears filled her eyes and the boxes all blurred together. She realized now, with some surprise, that she was the same height as the SUV. She always forgot to figure in those extra few inches above her eyes.

Beetie and Gerty came out of the house and saw that Julie was still standing in the same place they had left her.

Gerty gave a short, grandmotherly gasp. “Julie, sweetie. I'm so sorry, I left you locked out, didn't I? Here.” Gerty fumbled with the keys, pressed a button which re-locked the car, groaned, then pressed the unlock button twice. The car blinked to life, and Julie squinted back at her grandmother.

“Huh?” she said.

“Well, go on and open the doors. It must be very hot in there.”

Gerty handed the keys over to Beetie. “Do be careful.”