

The Girls in the Photographs

At nine o'clock on the first morning Ellie arrives to help her sister clear out their dead mother's house in Decatur, Georgia, Kate is already there. Of course. Kate, in fact, has been there since six a.m. and has already organized the kitchen into stacks of cardboard boxes, her spider leg-thin handwriting marking the contents with stiff letters. Cookbooks. Utensils. Pans. She hasn't bothered to box up the empty liquor bottles and the stash of cigarette boxes their mother hid under the broken sink. Those, she threw out.

Ellie arrives hung over, but she thinks she had enough Gatorade and coffee that morning to hide it. Last night she'd gone to a few bars near her apartment in Atlanta to get drunk for two reasons. One: because her mother was dead and the unbearable funeral -- where everyone had to pretend their mother had been a good person -- was over. Two: because this morning was the beginning of the week Kate had set up for the two of them to clear out their mother's house and Ellie hadn't been alone with her sister for years. They'd seen each other, sure, but always with their mother or other acquaintances present, and normally only once or twice a year. Now, for the next few days, they would be locked in a house together, going over the remnants of what were undeniably the worst years of Ellie's life.

"I thought we agreed on getting here at nine," Ellie says as she closes her mother's front door behind her. Her mother's house is dusty and dark, smelling of cheap liquor and mold. Near the end of her life, their mother hadn't opened the windows much and hadn't gone outside at all if she could help it. She hadn't wanted anyone to see her emaciated figure, the concavity of her chest where her breasts used to be, her bald head from the chemo.

Kate stands in the kitchen and Ellie can see her scrubbing the counters briskly. She sports a pair of black slacks and a crisp, white blouse, as if she is about to go into her job at the bank

instead of clean a house. But Kate always looks nice, her smooth blond hair pulled back in a high, straight ponytail, her lipstick looking freshly applied.

“We did,” Kate says. “I just wanted to get a head start.”

Ellie rolls her eyes because getting ahead is what Kate always does. She sets expectations for others so she can exceed them, be the best person in the room, the saint. Ellie dumps her shoulder bag by the door and scans the living room. It looks exactly the way it did when she moved out five years ago. The velvet couch sagging, the faded Oriental rug unraveling, the steamer trunk coffee table collecting dust. It all looks frozen in time.

“Well, congratulations,” Ellie says. “What do you want me to do?” She doesn’t want to sound belligerent, but she doesn’t want to be here, and Kate knows that. Their childhood had been shitty and while Kate, five years older, escaped to college, Ellie had suffered through those five years alone with their mother, and another two trapped in the house before she’d saved enough money to flee to an apartment of her own in the city.

Kate had guilted her into helping clear out the house because Kate arranged the funeral, the memorial service, their mother’s cremation, everything, and she made sure Ellie knew that when they’d talked about cleaning out the house over the phone. *The least you can do is drive the fifteen minutes from Atlanta to mom’s house to help me for a few days*, Kate said. Plus, Kate was sure to mention, she’d have to leave her account-managing, golf-playing, Marc Jacob’s transition lens-wearing husband, Dean and their two boys. Ellie didn’t have any serious responsibilities.

“I’m almost done in here,” she says. Her heels clack on the kitchen linoleum as she walks toward the living room to face Ellie. “We can get to work in there next.”

Ellie glances around. “This place looks like a shithole.”

“Mom hadn’t been well for years,” Kate says. “It wasn’t like she could clean up after herself much.”

“But it always looked like this,” Ellie says. She walks over to the fireplace mantle and looks at a framed picture of herself and Kate as six-year-olds, dressed in shiny, red cocktail dresses, makeup smeared on their faces. Ellie’s stomach clenches and she slams the picture frame facedown.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been back, I guess,” Kate allows.

She’d moved to Marietta, Georgia, with her husband just after college and grew an instant perfect family, as if she’d followed the instructions on the back of a dehydrated food packet. Add one rich husband, two unbearably cute children, a 2,285 square foot house, and mix well. Meanwhile, Ellie jumped from job to job in downtown Atlanta, finding and losing friends year to year and feeling transient. Right now she works as a cashier at a Walgreens and lives in a minimalist apartment in a rather shitty part of town. She takes comfort in the empty neatness of her life and the distance it provides her from getting hurt by anyone or anything.

She doesn’t envy her sister’s life. Her bitterness toward her sister comes from Kate’s judgmental attitude about how Ellie chooses to live. When they saw each other over the years for major holidays, Kate always went on about Ellie’s potential, her “unique” style, her eye for photography, her love of art. Why don’t you *do* something with all this potential? she’d ask Ellie. Work at a gallery, or go back to school for photography. But Ellie isn’t interested in the authority of school, nor does she want someone to teach her the *right* way to do photography. More so, though, she doesn’t want to take Kate’s advice.

“I’ll finish up in the kitchen,” Kate says into the awkward silence between them. “Go through the stuff in here and make piles of what’s worth keeping and what we can throw out.”

Kate turns back to the kitchen. Ellie scoffs at the room. If it were up to her, she'd throw it all out: the rug, the couch, but especially the pictures like the one she saw on the mantle.

Already, around the room, she sees five more of them, some in frames on the tables, some hung on the walls. These pictures are just a few of her mother's favorites, but Ellie knows she'll find hundreds more stored around the house.

The pictures are from the photo shoots their mother forced them to do, a Sunday ritual throughout their childhood. Her mother called it playing dress up, but Ellie wasn't fooled. All the costumes their mom dressed them in were leftovers from her pageant days. She'd been an up-and-coming model, she told them too many times to count. But things don't always work out in life. Instead, her mother got pregnant, twice, with a man who didn't marry her and left. Instead of being the model she'd dreamed of, their mother forced them, week after week, to don the bedazzled, sequined cocktail dresses, the pointed breasts sagging around their flat, young chests. She'd position them in front of neon-colored backdrops, like curtains out of gaudy 80's music videos, and take flashing Polaroids of them until starbursts popped behind their closed eyelids.

Thinking of these photo shoots makes Ellie nauseous. Standing in this house, she can still smell the musty, mothball scent of the costumes her mom tugged down over her head, the warm burnt smell of her hair twisted in a curling iron. She can taste the plastic, creamy lipstick that got on her teeth and coated her tongue. She can hear the ghostly tunes of Dinah Washington, Etta James, Nat King Cole, the songs her mother played as she contorted the girls' young bodies into stances that were supposed to be provocative, sexy. The photographs never came out the way their mother wanted. The girls just looked young, uncomfortable, awkward.

Ellie isn't sure how long she stands there, staring at a picture of her and Kate on the wall. In it they are ages five and ten and wearing green, velvet evening gowns, the spaghetti straps falling off their thin, bony shoulders.

"Elle?" Kate says. She's come into the living room now that the kitchen is done. "Can you please stop just standing there and help me?"

"I'll do the bathroom," Ellie says. She thinks she might throw up. Plus, she reasons, there won't be any of these photographs in the bathroom.

"Ellie?" Kate says again, hearing the off-kilter tone of her sister's voice, but Ellie's already gone into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

Kate arrives for the second day of the Great Clean Out with an engraved, wooden *Memories* box that she bought at a Hallmark store in Marietta. She gets to her mother's house early this second day, too, feeling that she and Ellie had not made as much headway as she hoped on the first day. Today would be different, she woke up thinking. Today, they would make some progress and maybe Kate could penetrate Ellie's trademark cynical, bitter exterior.

This kind of behavior wasn't new to Kate, and she planned on handling it the way she handled her sons when they pouted over being out of Oreos. Sternness and optimism. Kate knew she hadn't been there for Ellie since she left for college, and she also knew living with their mother had never been easy. But she refused to let Ellie's attitude devastate her back to the person she had been when she'd lived at home: a daughter forced to mother her own mom and sister.

Kate sits cross-legged on the living room floor. The early morning light filters in through the half-opened blinds and warms her back. In the trunk at the center of the room Kate finds

stacks and stacks of pictures from the old photo shoots. As Kate flips through these pictures, she doesn't recognize the young, obedient girl she sees staring back at her. She'd been eager to please her mother, then, and thought the photo shoots were the way to do it. But there hadn't been a way to please this woman who had been so disappointed by life. She had high expectations for her girls, but never any for herself.

The photo shoots hadn't bothered Kate. To her, the shoots were when she thought their mother was at her best: playful, doting. What Kate remembers about being home are the countless mornings before school when she had to clean up her mother's empty liquor bottles from the kitchen, and the nights she tucked their drunken mother into bed. She remembers the mother who screamed words like "goddamn" and "fuck" as she drove the girls to school an hour late, her thinning hair done up in 1960s-style, bulbous curlers.

Kate doesn't want to remember this woman now that her mother is dead; it feels mean, ungrateful, horrible, even. And Kate prides herself on her kindness, beyond all else. Her mother couldn't have been all bad. And by filling this box with photos they actually like she plans on proving it. She and Ellie can save something from this shithole of a house, something they will be able to show to their children about their grandmother, to their friends about their childhood. Something that isn't as scarred as their memories.

"Early again," Ellie says, and her deadpan voice makes Kate jump.

She turns to look at Ellie, her hand flattened to her chest. "Jesus, Ellie, I didn't even hear you. Why are you here so early?"

"Why are you?" Ellie shoots back. She has her blonde dreadlocks pulled back in a low ponytail, her face clean of makeup and looking younger than ever. Kate thinks how pretty her little sister would look if she just washed and brushed out that ratty hair, and plucked those

hideous discs from her ear. Kate knows it isn't fair to try to control Ellie, but for all the years they lived in this house together she'd been forced to act as Ellie's mother. Now, whenever they are together it's hard for her to let go of that role. Looking at the two of them, no one would be able to tell they are sisters.

"I just wanted to get an early start," Kate says. She smooths her manicured fingers over the wrinkles in her grey pencil skirt and looks back into the trunk. "Would you help me go through these? Figure out which ones to keep?"

Ellie cranes her neck to see over Kate's head, into the dusty trunk, and wrinkles her nose.

"You can't be serious," she says. "We're *not* keeping any of that shit."

Kate fondly picks up a picture of the two of them dressed in matching velvet leotards with black tights and tap shoes. At that age they'd been about the same height, and they stood together in identical outfits. They were looking at each other and not at the camera, staring into each other's blue eyes, their profiles mirroring each other, their hands locked together. They looked as if they were in the middle of a sudden truce, a basic sisterly understanding that no one else could be a part of.

"Aw, come on Ellie, they aren't all bad." She hands Ellie the Polaroid. "This one here. It's lovely."

Ellie drops the picture almost immediately, as if the thin, yellowed paper is toxic. "I can't look at these, Kate. They're sick."

Kate feels hot, tense frustration build in her chest. Normally, at home or at work, Kate is excellent at controlling a sudden burst of anger like this. She can handle even 2-year-old boy emergencies with ease and comfort. But with Ellie, she can't control herself. Something about Ellie's contorted sense of entitlement just kills her. Why does Ellie think she is the only one with

bad memories of their mother? Why does she think she has the right to be the victim when Kate was there, too?

“Oh, please, Ellie,” Kate says, fighting the frustration in her tone. She stands, teeters for a minute on her two-inch heels. “Don’t do this right now. We have a lot of stuff to do and it would be easier if you stopped making Mom into some crazy Disney princess witch every time we talk about her. Mom wasn’t perfect, sure, but-”

Ellie scoffs. “Wasn’t perfect? Kate, seriously?”

“I mean it,” Kate says. She puts her hands on her hips, the mom pose she learned from the countless child-rearing books she’d read in preparation for having her own children. Don’t let me be like Mom, she’d thought to herself, again and again. “Mom had issues, sure, but she wasn’t as horrible as you always make her sound to people.”

Ellie picks up a handful of photographs from the trunk. There must be hundreds in there, maybe thousands. Years of their lives stacked up in neat, towering piles.

“Why do you give a fuck what other people think about Mom or us?” Ellie asks. She brandishes the handful of photos like a knife, jutting them toward Kate’s stomach. “She was a bad mom, Kate. You can admit it. It doesn’t make you a bad daughter.”

Kate turns on her heel and stalks toward their mother’s bedroom. “I’m not fighting with you on this.”

Ellie follows her into the claustrophobic hallway of the one-story ranch house.

“Are you telling me you really want to make keepsakes of these ridiculous pictures?”

Ellie says.

“Those and others,” Kate says. She enters their mother’s musty, rose perfume-scented room and strips the bed of its faded, pink sheets. “They meant so much to Mom, we can’t just throw them all out.”

Ellie shrugs, leans back, and juts out a hip. “Who said anything about throwing them out? I say we burn them.”

“Ellie!”

“Forget it,” Ellie grumbles. “But if you want to keep that shit, leave me out of it. I’m done.”

Kate listens to Ellie’s clunky combat boots bang down the hallway for a few seconds before she throws down the sheets and trips after her. She doesn’t want to admit it, not to her bratty, little sister, but she can’t be alone in this house, with all these things of their mother’s, with all these memories. She might go crazy, she might never leave. She might get trapped in this spider web their mother has spun. All her fears from years ago bubble up in her throat and she thinks she might scream.

“Ellie, don’t be a baby about this,” Kate says, her fear making her voice shrill and angry.

Ellie strides through the living room to the door. She spots Kate’s memory box and gives it a swift kick, sending it smashing into the wall. Kate yelps.

“Ellie, would you please grow up? Just because you have a few bad memories about this place and mom doesn’t give you the exclusive right to be the one that falls apart! That’s not what adults do! We don’t all have that luxury!”

Ellie spins around and throws her handful of photographs into the air, only for them to flutter down like confetti on both their heads. Like a child throwing a tantrum, Kate thinks,

fuming. Her chest aches, her throat burns. She is exhausted from keeping herself calm and her muscles shake.

“God, for once, Kate, I’d love for you to just take my side on something, to be my sister, not my mom.” Ellie says.

Kate trembles, shakes, and before she knows what she’s doing, her hand flies out and smacks Ellie on the cheek, right beside her pierced lip.

The smack is loud in the small, quiet room and afterward the only thing either girl can hear is the other one breathing. The breaths are heavy, identical, ragged, like animals.

Coldness rushes into Kate and she searches for something to say. Her eyes water as she watches her sister’s face turn from shocked to horrified to angry.

“Eloise,” Kate says, as softly as she can. She holds her hands out, as if she is offering something. She is offering everything.

Ellie storms outside and slams the front door behind her.

When Kate looks down, she first sees her hands shaking. Beyond them she sees the picture of her and Ellie in their leotards, staring up at her from the floor.

Ellie drives until ten o’clock at night on the highway before she turns back. She drives on I-85N with no particular destination in mind, just to drive. Years ago she decided driving was the only way for her to calm herself down. After Kate left for college and Ellie got her license, whenever their mother was too drunk, Ellie would take her mother’s keys and just drive. She liked driving through towns after dark, when the streetlights changed silently and there were no other cars around. She liked to pretend she was the only person alive on Earth, but then, almost as soon as she thought it, she would feel lonely.

After she turns around it takes her two hours to get back to their mother's house in Decatur. Ellie stalls outside, her arms draped over the steering wheel. Kate's car is gone and it's just the house and her, staring at each other. The house she lived in for years, the house she dreaded returning to every day, unsure if she wanted to find her mother drunk and belligerent, or sober and insufferable.

Kate didn't get it. Kate couldn't get it. She hadn't lived in this house alone with their mother for years. She hadn't seen the way their mother would pore over those photographs years later, cawing over Kate's beauty and perfection, and berating Ellie as the lesser daughter. Ellie remembers one night, just a few weeks before she finally left, when she'd been asleep in her single bed. Her mother came in and sat on the bed beside her, making the mattress sag and the air around her turn stale with the smell of bourbon.

"Wake up, Ellie, wake up," she slurred in her low voice, slow and labored with a sluggish Southern accent that got stronger when she drank. She pinched Ellie's shoulder, hard. "Stop pretending. I know you, Girl."

Ellie peeked up at her mother through half-closed lids. "Mom, go to bed. It's late."

Her mother laughed, loud and off-key. "Shut up, Ellie. I just want to show you something." She produced a picture, one from the old photo shoots. Her mother stopped making the girls do it once Kate was in high school because she'd been drunk too often on Sundays to rally herself into it. Besides, after Kate left, the appeal was gone. Kate had been the one she'd wanted to catch on camera.

This particular picture was one of Kate and Ellie, back to back, both wearing feathered boas and beauty queen tiaras. Kate was taller than Ellie, more statuesque and striking. Her long, blonde hair bobbed just right and her smile drew wide to reveal straight, white teeth. Ellie looked

like a dumpy midget beside her, a scared grin plastered on her pimpled face. This had been from one of their last photo shoots, when Ellie was in her awkward years and Kate was growing into the beauty she'd always had.

“See this picture?” her mother asked, thrusting the photograph against Ellie’s nose, too close to her face for her eyes to even focus on it.

“Yeah, Mom. I remember it.”

“This is how I see you girls,” her mother said. She looked at the picture again. Then, softer, she says, “Why do you hate me so much, Eloise?”

“I don’t hate you,” Ellie lied, her voice flat.

“You hate me,” her mother said. She straightened her back, let her unfocused eyes drift to the open bedroom window. In the silver light of the early morning, Ellie saw how striking her mother’s profile must have been, the grand curve of her bosom, the slender length of her neck. But when her mother turned her face back to look at her, the beautiful woman disappeared and Ellie stared in shock and fear at the contorted face of a sick, old woman.

“I don’t care if you hate me,” her mother hissed. “Because maybe I hate you. Had you ever thought of that, Smart Ass? Maybe I hate you.” She looked again at the picture and sniffled as if she might cry. “Why couldn’t you have been more like, Katie, huh? She loved me. She was always so sweet to me, and to you.”

Ellie sat up in bed as her mother crumbled onto the mattress, reduced to sobs.

“Where’d she go, Ellie?” her mother asked. “Where’d Katie go? Why doesn’t she come here anymore?”

Ellie pulled her knees up to her chest as her mother sprawled on the bed and hiccupped herself into a drunken sleep. She hadn’t been shocked to hear her mother say these things, but

that didn't make the sting hurt any less. She thought after years of this, she would be used to the drunken confessions of what her mother really thought. But they never stopped hurting, and Ellie knew she'd never forget them.

Now, as she stares at the house, she remembers she doesn't have a key. Only Kate does. She gets out of the car anyway and goes up to the front door. Covering her fist with her light, cotton jacket, she punches a hole in the bottom right window pane of the door. She reaches around, unlocks the knob, and lets herself in.

At night, the house seems like the setting of her nightmares. Long shadows creep across the floor, and grey faces from old photographs watch her. She stands in the living room for a minute, lets herself smell it and feel the stale air of it against her face. She hoped that if she could come back here tonight she could face it all one last time, dispel the memories and the feelings and the power of her hatred. But she can't.

On the floor, she sees the picture of herself and Kate in the leotards. She picks it up and studies it for a minute. The picture is actually pretty nice, Kate was right. The composition is symmetrical and striking, both of the girls looking, for the only time in their lives, almost identical. They look like sisters, Ellie realizes, something she didn't always believe herself. The picture has the power, in that moment, to make Ellie miss her sister. She can still feel the sting of the slap on her cheek and she realizes this slap hurts more than the memory of what her mother said to her all those years ago. Her mother might not have been a good person, but Kate is, and even if Ellie doesn't always want to admit it, she is lucky to have her.

Before Ellie leaves the house for good she slips the photo in the back pocket of her jeans. She hopes one day she can believe what she sees in that photograph: that she and Kate are sisters, that they are team, that they can understand each other.

As she buckles her seat belt she sends Kate a text, because she still can't bring herself to call her.

Do what you want with the stuff in the house. I'm going home.

Early the next morning, Kate faces the day without an ounce of enthusiasm. It feels good to be so upset and have no one there to see it. She doesn't bother showering at the hotel and wears her sweat pant-pajamas over to the house.

The first thing she notices is the busted window, the remaining glass in the pane crooked and sharp like teeth. She knows she should care about this. Maybe she should worry that someone broke in, but what would they steal? Let them take what they want. This process of cleaning out her mother's house seems pointless without Ellie. The whole reason she'd rallied to do it, she realizes, was to see her sister and spend time with her for the first time in years. Maybe, against all odds, they would have been able to rediscover each other, connect in a way they hadn't before, uncover some memories from their childhood that didn't seem like they were invented by someone's nightmare.

But now she's gone. And it's all Kate's fault.

She stands in the living room and looks down at the trunk full of pictures. These pieces of paper were how her mother had conceptualized the two of them, had tried to capture them and minimize them in ink. But they don't reflect what Kate remembers. She closes her eyes and tries not to think about her mother, but about her life with her sister.

She remembers hurried breakfasts before school, how she'd taught herself to make hard boiled eggs when she was twelve because a seven-year-old Ellie said she liked them. She remembers spending hours braiding and unbraiding Ellie's thin, wispy hair at night because it

helped put Ellie to sleep. She remembers going to the mall with Ellie to get her ears pierced because Ellie wanted it so bad and their mother could never remember to take her. Together, they'd selected a pair of pink rhinestone studs shaped like butterflies. Ellie loved them so much she'd kept them in for three months too long and her ear lobes got infected. Kate re-pierced Ellie's ears herself. She'd held the wailing Ellie afterward, a tissue spotted with blood in one hand and a tissue covered with tears and snot in the other. They'd held each other like they were drowning.

Kate checks her phone. She has the sudden urge to call Ellie and is disappointed when there is no call from her sister waiting for her. There is nothing but Ellie's text from late last night, saying she didn't care what Kate did. Kate remembers Ellie's voice from yesterday, more tired than angry, saying she wished Kate could just be her sister. Maybe, now that Mom was dead, she could be. She could stop treating Ellie like a child and just be her sister instead. But Kate doesn't know how to do that.

She picks up a handful of the photos Ellie left on the floor. Now, years later, looking at the pictures, Kate recognizes how creepy they are. She and Ellie, dressed like strange, vaudevillian dolls. Their mother calling out commands and encouragement. Kate can just hear her in her syrupy-sweet voice, low and a little raspy from years of smoking. "My beautiful girls, my beautiful girls," she would say. Over and over again. Kate hasn't wanted to think of all of the terrible times with their mother, but it is impossible to forget them. Some day soon, Kate will have to really face them all, but she isn't sure she is ready yet. But she is ready to do one thing.

In a fit of anger, Kate throws all the discarded photographs on the floor into the steamer trunk. Grunting and sweating, she drags the trunk onto the front lawn. She can't look at it

anymore. Ellie was right. She can't keep forcing herself to look at these pictures and trying to see something other than the memories that are there.

Kate finds a book of matches in her mother's room, in the dresser where she always kept a few packs of cigarettes. In the kitchen she grabs a half full handle of vodka, which she pours onto the pictures in the trunk on the front lawn. Then, she lights four matches at a time and drops them into the trunk. The fire starts slow at first, the flames licking the edges of the Polaroids like cautious tongues. Finally, they gain strength when they hit the alcohol and eat up the faces of the girls, the edges of the pictures curling like leaves.

Soon the fire crackles, consuming it all fast. Kate stands beside the pyre, on the dewy grass in bare feet. She knows soon it will be over, the fire will die away, and she will have to clean up the mess. But for now she edges closer to the flames as they become something big enough to keep her warm.

Ten miles away, in her Atlanta apartment, Ellie sits staring at the picture of her and Kate she saved from the fire at the house. She holds the photo in one hand and her cell phone in the other. It has no missed messages or calls. But she keeps staring at it, waiting and wishing her sister would call.

The Woman with the Scar

Monica didn't remember to buy olive oil at Publix this afternoon. This is the first thing she thinks after her horse, Manuel, rears up and sends her tumbling into the tall grasses behind him. It's what she's thinking when Manu's hind foot shoots back and kicks her in the jaw.

In the seconds before she can register the pain or the unconsciousness slipping over her, all Monica can think is how she didn't remember to buy the goddamn olive oil. This will be the third time this week she'll have to go back to the grocery store for something she's forgotten. First milk, then laundry detergent, and now it's the goddamn olive oil. It's been hard to focus lately, if lately means for the last five years of her life. For these five years, Monica hasn't been herself, and her lack of focus has made her a worse rider. She's been distracted from her riding by her daughter, Danielle, at home, a daughter she didn't want and now has spent way too much time thinking about to focus on what's important – jumping.

But as Monica lies in the grasses, feeling separated from her broken body, she wonders if maybe she has been off for much longer than five years. Ever since she was old enough to ride she'd killed herself trying to make it as an Olympic-level show jumper. If she dies now, what does her life add up to? A few minor successes in her career and a slew of failures in her personal life.

It was only been a matter of time before her lack of focus came back to bite her. Or kick her in the face, as the case may be.

Monica didn't see the snake, but Manu did. She should have been paying attention since they were outside the corral and off the beginner's trail, somewhere new for the young Manu. She should have been more in tune to the horse's hot, huffing body beneath her, the way she's

always in tune with her favorite horse, Triston. She was stupid, stupid. She could have prevented this, but her mind had been on her daughter, just like in the grocery store when she walked right past the oil olive.

Now that she is on the ground, unable to move or even open her mouth to call for help, she has time to think. She wonders how long it will be until her two-year-old daughter is old enough to blame her for being an absent mother, just like Monica's own mamma. She wonders how long it will take for her daughter to recognize the coldness in Monica, the coldness that has always stopped her from feeling connected to the people in her life.

She wants to be pissed at Manu, but she's not. It's her fault, of course. It's all her fault.

It was too soon to ride Manu on this new trail. He's still young and impulsive, but he just needs someone to whip him into shape. Triston, who she's been riding since high school, is getting old. At fifteen, Triston is past his prime. But Triston would understand her riding Manu instead. He knew her better than anyone. He knew how if she didn't have show jumping, she didn't have shit. He wouldn't want to stand in the way.

Still, training Manu feels like a betrayal. She didn't have that same instant connection when she'd met him that she'd had with Triston. When she bought Triston, with help from her rich Gram, she knew they'd be a team. "You're going to be mine, did you know that?" she'd asked him, cradling his soft snout in her palms. People are complicated, but horses understand even the smallest things without you having to say anything. Rider and horse communicate through touch, and riding with Triston feels a little like flying.

He'd gotten slower over the years, though, and a hell of a lot sloppier. A couple of months ago, she stopped visiting Triston in the barn and put all her focus (or what remained of it)

into training Manu for the next national competition, her last shot at qualifying for the international level, maybe her last chance ever. Now, she'd never get there, even if she survived.

Monica's hands smell like saddle soap as she lies with her palms pressed down to the dirt near her nose. This stinging, chemical smell mixes intoxicatingly with the smell of her own coppery blood.

Monica didn't ever consider being anything but a show jumper, so she knows the smell of saddle soap well. When she was young, the feeling of being in the stable where her pa worked was magic, with the dust motes floating in the golden stripes of morning light that drifted through the stable's wooden slats. Some children thought magic meant ridiculous velvet wizard hats and the sickeningly sweet smell of sugar cookies at Christmas. But magic really meant a soft, moist horse muzzle in her palm, the homey scent of worn leather, and the sharp chemical sting of saddle soap. This, more than anywhere, was where she belonged.

She loved standing alone in the stables, closing her eyes and listening to the gentle trampling of hooves on hard dirt and straw, the heavy breathing of the horses as they slept, the rush of air that left their wide nostrils. The slow movements of their huge bodies made the rest of the mornings feel still, quiet. Their vastness commanded it.

She doesn't belong here, on the ground, without even Triston to comfort her. Monica can barely see Manu, standing just a few feet away, calm since the snake slithered off. He tosses his head, looks away from where she lies, bleeding buckets in the dirt. She wishes she could open her mouth to call for help, but her face is numb from the pain and she dips in and out of consciousness. All she knows is she doesn't belong here, dying in the dirt.

Everything feels sticky: the sweat on the back of her neck, the moist riverbank dirt sticking to her cheek, the blood pooling in her mouth. Monica flexes her fingers, presses them together, feels them stick and peel apart. Time has slowed like this for her, too. Pressing together and peeling apart slowly. Like syrup stuck to skin.

Monica didn't ever try to love her mamma, but she wanted to understand her. All Monica knew was that she had been an accident and her mamma, who'd never really wanted to be a mamma at all, left after Monica was born. Her pa told her this one morning when he decided fourteen was too old for Monica to know nothing about her mother.

"Your mamma would have been the death of me," he told Monica as they made breakfast one Sunday morning. She didn't ask about her mamma much because Pa and Gram both agreed that Monica was better off without her and there weren't a lot of things Pa and Gram agreed on.

"Did you love her?" Monica asked as she climbed onto the countertop to reach the syrup in the upper cabinet. She'd always been short and never grown past a frustratingly puny 5'3".

"I thought I did," he said.

"What's the difference between thinking you love someone and really loving them?" Monica asked. She was curious, being unsure if she had ever really loved anyone.

He flipped a pancake and pushed what she called his moon glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Well you know, I guess you're right. There's not much of a difference, is there? Yes, I loved her."

"But now you don't."

"I couldn't love her when she couldn't love you."

Monica climbed back off the counter top and licked the sticky residue of syrup from her fingertips.

“So why did you love her in the first place?”

He snapped off the heat on the stove top and squeezed past Monica to take the pancakes to their kitchen table. The kitchen, like their entire one-level, ranch-style house, was small and suffered from a 50’s décor that had never been upgraded. No one who’d lived in this house had ever had the money for renovations.

“I think it was the way she looked when she slept,” he said. He was never afraid to answer even Monica’s trickiest questions and he always answered them honestly. He never treated her like a little kid, something she appreciated when she saw how other kid’s parents still cut up their apples for them. “When she was asleep she looked so pretty and sweet, like she couldn’t hurt a fly.”

“But she could,” Monica said.

“Oh, definitely. She hurt people for fun sometimes, I thought.”

Monica dropped the subject and focused on her pancakes, but secretly she thought about last Wednesday at school when she’d “accidentally” dropped a book on another girl’s project while she was out of the room because her version of the solar system had been better than Monicas. She’d felt accomplished at the look of defeat on the other girl’s face.

That day, Monica wondered if detachment could get passed down like her dark brown hair and big, brown eyes. Maybe these weren’t the only things she inherited from her mamma. Maybe she’d inherited this coldness, too.

A gentle breeze rustles the tall grasses around Monica and shifts the top strands of her hair across her eyes. Just through the grasses she can see the sun glistening off the ripples in the

shallow creek nearby. A beautiful day, a beautiful day to die. As Monica watches the wind blow wrinkles in the creek's surface, she realizes she is crying.

Monica didn't cry for her pa after he died suddenly of a heart attack when she was twenty-five and he was fifty-seven. The week before it happened, she'd placed in her first international competition, a 1.20M Open Division, which meant Monica had been better than both riders her age, and some professionals.

To celebrate, Pa took her out to the old stables with a picnic. He cried like a baby and told her he'd never been prouder of anything in his life. Now, lying in the dirt, Monica wonders why she didn't cry that day with her dad. Was it just that she had been happy? Or was it that coldness inside herself that made it impossible to understand Pa's feelings?

Over the weeks after he died, while Gram made all the plans for his funeral, Monica stayed in her bed at his house. She wanted to say she'd loved him more than anything, and all those other cheesy sentiments, but that just wasn't true. She didn't love him more than she loved the stables, the horses, the moment of flight when Triston cleared a jump, the clenching in her heart when she knew she'd won. Certainly she'd loved Pa, but never as much as he'd loved her and maybe never as much as she should have. Eventually she left the bed because she couldn't let this setback of his death ruin her jumping form; she practiced in the corral the next day. After all, she had a competition in a month.

Now, as Monica remembers this, she knows it was callous to treat her pa's death this way. But she isn't sure if she would do it any differently now.

As the afternoon passes, sunshine moves along Monica's back, sending long shadows across the ground. The light on her back warms her clammy skin. It feels like a person's hand, even, skimming across the skin on her shoulders, sending shivers of pleasure down her back.

Monica didn't break up with Luke Grimes even after she found out he was married. He told her a year after her Pa's death once they'd already slept together four times, each time at her place. She lived in a modern flat in Atlanta and commuted to the stables in Decatur every day. She was decent at riding again, but still not as good as she'd been when she'd won the 1.20M Open Division before Pa died. She really needed to buckle down and start focusing again.

She'd met Luke at SkyLounge, a rooftop bar for young professionals in downtown Atlanta. He'd hit on her, but she'd been the one to invite him back to her place. Luke had a rags-to-riches story that he bragged about whenever he could. Even that first night over drinks he'd told her about how he'd grown up in southwest Atlanta, where Monica's pa never would have let her go at night. Luke'd had the balls to go into consulting with Deloitte and now made more cash than anyone in his family ever had. He wore well-tailored suits and ties that matched. He knew how to mix drinks but could afford to let other people make them. He could cook gourmet food and had a slight Southern accent that made him more likeable without him even having to try. What she liked most about Luke, though, was how, like her, he was a no-bullshit kind of person. He didn't accept excuses and he was efficient with his time.

After the fourth time they slept together, while she got dressed, he stayed in bed. It was dark out, after ten, and the distant sounds of Atlanta's traffic filtered up to Monica's fifth story bedroom. The lights were off but the glow from the city outside was bright enough for her to see Luke's outline, still sprawled across her cream-colored sheets.

“I have something to tell you,” he said in his oddly formal way. “You aren’t going to like it.”

“Okay,” Monica said, but did little to brace herself as she slipped her arms through her bra straps.

He didn’t even hesitate. Once Luke decided to do something, he was committed. “I’m married,” he said. “I take my ring off when I go to bars and before I come over here.”

Monica stopped dressing and tried to make out his expression. Did he feel guilty? Did he feel sad? His voice betrayed nothing.

Monica didn’t feel guilty or sad. She wasn’t disappointed or even surprised, for god’s sake. She liked the idea of another person in her bed after a busy day. She liked the way he pressed his face into her neck when he came, the way they collapsed into a comfortable silence when they were done. But she didn’t need him to be hers. She certainly wasn’t planning on being his.

“Okay,” Monica said. “Does your wife know?”

“No.”

“Do you love her?”

He sounded a little offended when he answered. “Yes, of course.”

Monica climbed back into bed, half dressed, and finally saw Luke’s face clearly. He didn’t show any signs of remorse. In fact, he looked fairly comfortable, with one hand behind his head and the other resting on his stomach.

“But you still want to do this with me?”

He nodded and leaned forward for a light kiss. “If it’s okay with you.” Then he added quickly, “And if we can keep it our secret.”

She smiled. “Who would I tell?”

Even as she agreed to this she knew it was probably a shit idea. She knew he wasn't a nice guy, the kind of guy Gram would want her to be with. But, she decided as Luke shifted his weight on top of her again to kiss her neck, she was lonely since Pa died. Not lonely so much for a pa, just lonely for another human, whatever kind of human it had to be.

Now, Monica's body is rigid and numb, without any human around her to touch her and remind her of her own humanity. Manu has wondered farther off, getting lost in her garbled vision, but she can still hear him, his hooves muted on dirt. For the first time in years she wonders what happened to Luke. She wonders where he is now, what he's doing while she's dying. She wishes her body would get on with it and die already. The more she thinks about him, about it all, the more Monica isn't so sure her life is worth saving. But her focus is as broken as her jaw, and her thoughts skip like a broken record. She can't keep her mind trained on anything, not even dying.

Monica didn't get an abortion after Luke asked her to. He said it over coffee the night she told him she was pregnant. He said it in a no-nonsense way, the same way he'd told her about his wife. To him it was a no-brainer.

“How about you get an abortion?” he said. They stared at each other across the kitchen table, an ambulance siren wailing from the streets below.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he said, pushing his ceramic coffee mug away. “Isn't that what you want?”

Monica panicked. Of course it was the first option she'd thought of, too, when she'd found out she was pregnant. At twenty-seven, she didn't want a baby at all. In fact, she didn't

think she'd ever want a baby. There were a lot of things she thought she was good at, a lot of things she thought she *could* be good at, but motherhood wasn't one of them.

Of course, having a baby would mean she'd have to stop riding for a while, at least while she was pregnant and for a little while after the baby was born. That realization stung more than anything and caused her panic. How far would that set her back? It would take at least a year or two to get back in form.

But then, every time she imagined getting the abortion, she thought of her own mamma, of Pa, of herself, and this made Monica nauseous. If it had been her mamma's decision, Monica wouldn't exist. She thought of what Pa had told her: *I couldn't love her when she couldn't love you*. And finally, she thought about how Pa had cried at that picnic just a few years ago. Wouldn't be so proud now, would you Pa?

"It isn't so easy," she said.

But Monica's mind was made up. She could love this baby, or at least she could try. Maybe she would prove to herself that she could be more than her mamma, more than the heartless person she feared she was. She could at least give the baby the chance to be loved by other people. She'd never let the belief that something was going to be hard stop her from doing it before, and she wasn't going to let it now. She couldn't be that selfish, even if she wanted to be.

She told Luke he didn't have to be part of the baby's life, she was letting him off the hook, and just like that they stopped speaking. Eventually, Monica had trouble believing he had ever existed at all. Now, this idea troubles her. How could the only person in her life that year have suddenly disappeared without her feeling anything?

The heat of the day vanishes and leaves Monica feeling cold. She is getting tired of waiting to die. The dirt is soft beneath her cheek, but her body is a rock, stiff and unfeeling. That sounds about right, Monica thinks. Stiff and unfeeling is how she's always been.

Monica didn't fall instantly in love with her daughter, didn't cry when she was born, didn't feel comfortable even holding her. She didn't name her daughter; Gram decided on Danielle. Monica didn't stay home to take care of her daughter, but went back to the stables a month after the birth. Because, most of all, Monica didn't give up being an Olympic show jumper, even if it seemed farther away than ever. She would just have to work harder than before, harder than ever.

She didn't see herself as a mamma, even now that she technically was one. Monica sometimes held the baby at night, her muscles aching and her legs rubbed raw after working in the stables, and tried to feel some connection to the squirming, wailing creature. Like her, it had dark hair and brown eyes, but she thought its heart-shaped face looked more like Luke's. Already, Gram had plastered the house with pictures of Danielle: Danielle yawning, Danielle blowing spit bubbles, Danielle sleeping, Danielle laughing. Monica felt like she knew the baby in the photographs better than she knew the baby itself.

At the time, Monica had tried not to let this bother her. She couldn't let it distract her from her work at the stables. She'd focus on all the personal shit after her competitions. But now that Monica thinks she might die, she realizes there won't be time after the competitions. She's run out of time, and suddenly nothing she did ever seemed like it was enough.

This part of the trail is quiet, especially now that the heat of the day has passed. The high-pitched trill of birdsongs has faded and all that remains is the whistling of wind and the gentle

rumble of the creek. Underneath these natural sounds, Monica can swear she hears a chorus of people, singing. The song is soft and kind, like a lullaby.

Monica didn't go to her daughter's first birthday party. She didn't see the point. Her gram had set up a ridiculous party and asked the neighbors to come over to sing and watch Danielle stare at a candle flame until someone else blew it out for her.

"No one remembers their first birthday," she said as Gram pushed a pan of cake batter into the oven.

"That isn't the point," Gram said. She sounded tired. Monica guessed both of them had had enough of fighting over the choices they made for Danielle.

"It's my first competition in two years," Monica said. "I can't miss it."

Gram dropped the matter but the things she didn't say cemented themselves in Monica's head throughout her event. She wanted to stop worrying about what waited for her at home, to detach herself from people the way she could when she was younger. But every time Triston prepared for a jump, Monica wondered if someone had blown out that pathetic candle for Danielle yet, and what kind of disgustingly cute pictures would be added to the house from the party. More pictures of Danielle, but still none with Monica in them. She went home to a quiet house after the competition, without a medal.

Monica didn't know what kind of toy to buy her daughter to make up for missing the party. She didn't know what kind of toys her daughter even liked.

Monica didn't know what her daughter's first word was but soon she was blabbering over dinner.

Monica didn't know her daughter's favorite stuffed animal when Gram asked her to fetch it once when Danielle couldn't sleep. She guessed the purple elephant. She guessed wrong.

Monica didn't know when she was supposed to potty train Danielle or teach her to walk, but these things happened while Monica wasn't watching.

Monica didn't know if she would ever get her gift for show jumping back, if she and Triston would ever be the same. She didn't know how long she was supposed to try before giving up. She didn't know if she could give up.

Now, the universe is forcing her to give up, and the only way to do that is to kill her. But before it does, Monica thinks for a lucid moment, it's going to make her lie here and think about everything she's done. She's a bitch, right? That's what she's always suspected. Cold-hearted and detached. That's the worry that she's been trying to ignore for the past five years, if not for her whole life. That's the worry she has to face now that she's out of time to change it.

Monica's eyes focus on a springy weed, separate from the others, poking up out of the ground and swaying its floppy top leaves in the gentle evening breeze. Hair. It looks like hair.

Monica didn't correct Danielle when she started calling Gram "Mommy." The first time it happened was over dinner when Danielle was about two and a half. She was more active and curious than ever, bouncing while she ate. Gram liked to dress Danielle in frilly dresses and style her hair into a ponytail that sat on the top of Danielle's globe-like head and shot straight up in the air like a weed.

Gram accidentally hit her water glass with her elbow, sending it spilling over the green checked tablecloth. Danielle gurgled with laughter. "Silly, Mommy!" she said and clapped.

Monica and Gram locked eyes across the table as Danielle laughed between them.

Monica wished she could blame her grandmother, or even the child for how trapped she felt in this house, with this family. Trapped between this family that wanted her, and the future of show jumping, horses, and freedom she wanted to have. But she knew, as per usual, it wasn't their fault, not really. Later that night, while Gram cleaned up the dinner dishes, Monica watched Danielle play with a pair of stuffed dogs in the living room. Gram had told her that Danielle loved animals, just like Monica, just like Monica's dad.

Monica watched her daughter bounce the dogs on her knees and drag them cheerfully by the ears around the room. The little girl's ponytail bobbed and swayed in the air, making Monica think of sweet Cindy Lou Who. Monica lowered herself to her knees beside her daughter and pulled her into her lap. Danielle struggled to get free but Monica sat Danielle facing her.

"Danielle, Baby," she said, in the best baby voice she could muster. "Who do you think I am?"

Danielle's big brown eyes searched Monica's face. She reached out with her chubby fist and grasped at the air beside Monica's face, looking for a string of hair to hold onto. She loved people's hair, for some reason, loved to tug and twist it.

"You're Mommy!" she said.

"That's right," she said. "And who ate dinner with us tonight?"

"My other mommy!" Danielle said.

Monica hesitated, thought about correcting her, but couldn't. What could she say? She wished she could be the kind of person who wanted to be a mother to this little girl, this sweet and innocent baby who hadn't asked to belong to her. But no matter how much she knew she should be that person, she couldn't. She couldn't even get herself to want to be.

Now, this regret is the biggest of them all: the realization that Monica can never be the person she needs to be for her daughter, and can also never be the person she wants to be for her show jumping. She can be neither, she is only nothing. And in these moments before her death, the more she remembers what's happened over the years, the more she wonders if maybe she deserves this.

It could be her imagination, but she hears the pounding of a horse approaching, a startled rider crying out. The next thing she knows, there are sirens, and the next minute after that, Monica thinks she's flying.

Monica didn't think she could survive the kick in the face but eventually it becomes clear that she will, as she drifts in and out of consciousness days later. In the hospital, activity goes on around her, discussions of how lucky she's been, of how she'll have facial reconstruction surgery, of broken cheekbones and jaw, of split skin, of the scar she'll carry for the rest of her life.

Sometimes, in her fits of consciousness, she sees Gram, sitting in the grey hospital chair beside her bed, holding Danielle in her lap. She wishes she could gain some kind of strength from her daughter's laughter or her grandmother's worn, wrinkled hand on her arm. She wishes she could be grateful for them, for family, for what she did have now that she'd survived something many did not. But Monica can hardly be relieved, still too drugged and distracted by thinking of all the things she didn't do, of all the things she isn't.

The Walking Joke

Ten minutes into his buddy Mac Elroy's wedding reception, and Chubbs was already on his second beer. The night wasn't going quite like he'd planned. Chubbs hadn't known anyone at the ceremony, and the cathedral had been imposing and pretentious, not like the laidback, quiet Mac he knew. This wedding was the first time Chubbs had seen Mac in a year, and he'd worked it out in his head that this would be their big reunion when he and Mac would reconnect. Chubbs would prove to Mac that he could still be his confidant, just like he'd been growing up.

The two of them had been inseparable since they were five, back when they learned to ride bikes together in their Marietta, Georgia neighborhood cul-de-sac. So what if they hadn't seen each other over the past year? So what if they'd stopped keeping in touch as much since undergrad four years ago? A few texts here and there, a phone call now and then, that's all Chubbs really needed. He knew their friendship was built to last, and if they couldn't keep up with each other 100% of the time, well, that was life. They'd still always understand each other. Seeing Chubbs would bring back the old Mac, Chubbs was sure of it. They'd pick up where they left off because Mac could be his vulnerable, sensitive self around Chubbs.

Chubbs hadn't been a groomsman for the ceremony. Mac'd called Chubbs as soon as the save the dates came out a year ago, though, to make sure it was okay.

"Yeah, dude, it's just turned into this big *thing*, you know," he told Chubbs in the same tone they'd always used with each other. The you're-the-only-one-that-really-gets-it voice. "Janie has so many brothers and she wants them all in the wedding party. Plus she wants some guys we met in law school together, you know? And she doesn't want me having any more than seven because she's only got seven bridesmaids. The whole wedding planning is just a fucking nightmare."

Chubbs got it. He really did. He guffawed at these excuses. Did Mac really think he wanted to be groomsman anyway? Chubbs already knew he was Mac's best friend. He didn't need to be asked to stand stiff-legged at the front of an imposing cathedral to prove it.

Now, at the reception, Chubbs felt increasingly uncomfortable in the formal suit he'd borrowed from his dad for the occasion. He couldn't remember the last time he'd worn a tux and the stiff collar kept choking his fleshy neck. He was much more comfortable in huge T-shirts and sweatpants, attire which Mac had never had a problem with when they used to hang out. But Chubbs didn't want to just seem like the same old guy, stuck in their hometown and going nowhere. To Mac, Chubbs wanted to come off as an upstanding guy now, someone worthy of being his best friend.

Chubbs took an initial wander around the reception space. The reception was in Rockefeller Center. A large circular room with a panoramic view of the New York skyline, the venue was spectacularly urban. It wasn't Mac's style at all, Chubbs thought bitterly as he took another swig of beer. The Mac he knew would have gone for something laidback, maybe outdoors, where people could loosen their ties and undo their top shirt buttons.

Chubbs took another gulp of his beer and studied the other people entering the room. They were all getting fancy cocktails with names Chubbs didn't recognize. Chubbs saw Mac's dad coming toward him, and forced down two more gulps of beer.

"Charles," Mr. Elroy said. "Mac mentioned to his mother and I that you were coming. It's been a while." He offered his hand to shake and Chubbs took it uncertainly. Despite his best efforts to be "one of the guys" Mr. Elroy had always made Chubbs uncomfortable. Of course, most adults always had, which was why it was strange now, to be called Charles and shaking hands with this man. Chubbs, at 27, was supposed to be an adult himself.

“It has,” Chubbs said. He suppressed a burp. Then, he added, “Sir.”

“Four years, right? Since Mac’s graduation?” Mac had gone to William and Mary while Chubbs went to Thomas Nelson Community College. As soon as Mac had gotten accepted to college, he and Chubbs had started looking at where Chubbs could go so they’d be together. There was no way Chubbs would be getting into William and Mary with his grades, but the community college was right in Williamsburg, Virginia, too.

“Right. I’ve seen Mac since then, you know, a few times. But not you guys.”

Mr. Elroy was giving him his best salesman-smile. He owned a chain of successful sporting goods stores, an empire he built himself. He had Mac’s black hair but he used a slather of hair gel to keep it impeccable when all Mac did was brush his. For a second Chubbs wondered if this was what Mac would look like when he was older, a fork of wrinkles in the corners of the eyes, a slight belly but in good shape. Girls thought Mr. Elroy looked pretty good.

“How’s your dad doing?” Mac’s dad asked with a gusto of familiarity that Chubbs wished he could feign in return. Instead, everything he said sounded nervous, like Mr. Elroy was catching him and Mac hiding their stash of pot all over again.

“Hanging in there,” Chubbs said. “He’s still working for UPS. Still travels a lot.”

“That’s great, just great.”

His dad had always been a CEO at UPS in Atlanta, had always made a lot of money, and had always been absent. Chubbs’ mother died when he was an infant -- a blood clot of all things -- and his dad hired a series of nannies to do most of the child rearing. He was a laidback guy with a blasé attitude towards most things outside of work. He believed in trust funds and financial security, in leather reclining chairs and takeout steak dinners. Not a social man, but an ambitious one, Chubbs’ dad had done well in every aspect of his life that didn’t touch family or

friends. In that vein, Chubbs had made it his mission to do the opposite. He didn't care for money, perhaps because he'd never had to worry about it, and instead just wanted to make sure a parade of good friends and loved ones came to his funeral.

But Mac's dad was a guy who had been capable of both making money and maintaining a relatively happy family. It was Mac's mom who'd always seemed to pressure Mac to lead a life like them, continue living in Marietta, marry one of her friend's Southern Belle daughters. Before Chubbs knew it, Mac was trying to escape by getting a 4.0 at William and Mary, going to Yale for law school, and becoming a big shot lawyer in New York City of all places.

"I know it means a lot to Mac that you came," Mr. Elroy said. "And all the way from Georgia! You still living there?"

Chubbs was. In fact, this was the first time he had ever been to New York City, or even further north than the Mason Dixon line, and he didn't like what he'd seen so far. The barista at the coffee shop he'd been to this morning hadn't laughed at his coffee joke (What do you call stealing someone's coffee? A mugging, of course!), and he'd gotten lost on the subway at least three times. This was a far cry from his and Mac's friendly, hot hometown in Georgia, but it was the place that, for some reason, Mac had decided to call home.

"Yep, still there," Chubbs said.

He'd rented an apartment with his trust fund, but with so much money readily available he'd continued to have a hard time finding the motivation to keep a job. Sometimes, he'd pick one up for fun, to fight boredom and meet new people, but there wasn't a lot he was qualified to do. He tried working in the mailroom at UPS, a job his dad got for him, but it was too lonely. He tried being a salesman but hated how fake that made him feel and wearing a suit to work just

wasn't him. He wanted to be all of his clients' best friend, not the guy that sold them a four-door sedan.

He'd met some nice people doing these odd jobs, tried to make friends, and people generally knew him around town. But nothing stuck. People didn't seem to care about friendships the way they used to. It wasn't anything like he'd had with Mac, Mac who'd never made him feel as silly or stupid as other people did. Sure, he hadn't taken Chubbs with him everywhere he went in college and sure he'd never invited Chubbs up to visit in law school or New York. But Mac was the brother Chubbs had never had.

"That's just great. We still live in Marietta, you know. I'm sure Gloria would love to have you over for dinner sometime," Mr. Elroy said, referring to his wife. His eyes were already skimming the crowd for her, a way out.

"Now Mr. Elroy, don't tempt me," Chubbs said.

Mr. Elroy laughed, a bit too loud. He held up a hand, flagging down his wife. She spotted Chubbs and immediately frowned. She'd stopped coloring her hair since Chubbs had last seen her and it was turning a dignified shade of silver, pinned back with a wide, black clip. In a second she'd glided over to them and stood next to Mr. Elroy, a foot shorter than both Chubbs and her husband.

"Well Chubbs," she said, her tone heavy with a sigh. "What a treat to see *you* this evening."

Mrs. Elroy'd always been the one to give Chubbs disapproving glances during their childhood and nag about Chubbs' bad influence, even while Chubbs was in the room. Mr. Elroy, despite making him nervous, had been okay.

"The feeling's mutual, ma'am," Chubbs said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

“I’m sure,” Mrs. Elroy said, adjusting the clip to perch high up on her skull. “You boys did have some crazy times.” She shifted her gaze to her husband. “I think we should go talk to Janie’s parents. Can you imagine how much they must have spent on this wedding? I’m glad we took care of the honeymoon.”

She was already pulling Mr. Elroy away with her as she spoke. He hesitated just a moment to give Chubbs a firm smack on the back. He tapped his finger on Chubb’s puffy chest.

“Great to see you, Charles,” he said with his buddy-buddy smile. “Don’t forget to have a good time.”

“Oh you know me, Mr. Elroy,” Chubbs said. “I’d never forget that.” But Mr. Elroy was already gone, his arm tucked sweetly around his wife’s small waist.

Chubbs fidgeted where he stood, looked at how much beer remained in his can, drained it, and sauntered as casually as he could back to the bar, where he already knew the bartender’s first name.

“Another one of those, sir?” the bartender asked.

“Do you have tequila?”

“How does gin sound?”

Just then, a cheer spread throughout the room and Chubbs turned to see Mac and his new wife coming in, hands clasped and raised in the air, triumphant, as if they’d just won a marathon. Mac was dressed in a black-and-white tux, his black hair tamed into a short, crisp, banker cut. Chubbs almost didn’t recognize him and this realization made a pit of dread settle in Chubbs’ stomach. How could he almost not recognize his best friend? But he tried to perk himself up. This was all for show, this was just for the sake of this crazy party. Once Mac saw Chubbs he

would give him one of his old, goofy smiles, make a wisecrack, and the two would fall back into their old selves, like these years hadn't even happened.

Meanwhile, Janie was smiling, but her smile was small and contained, saved for a privileged few. Her brown hair was back in a bun and her features were all small and fair, like a mannequin's. She was almost frighteningly thin, with delicate wrists and a long, slender throat. She was unadorned except for a pair of simple diamond earrings and Chubbs found her uncomfortably plain.

"Sir?" the bartender said.

Chubbs watched as people began to swarm the couple, hugging and kissing and congratulating. Chubbs didn't recognize any of them. It didn't look like Mac had invited any of their old friends from high school.

"Yeah, yeah, gin, sure," he said.

With the night not going quite as he'd hoped, Chubbs had a hard time not thinking about the night when the distance between him and Mac started growing.

It was Christmas Eve and Chubbs' father was out of town, as usual. Mac came over because Chubbs told him that he had access to his father's stocked bar. When Mac got there, Chubbs told him he also had the keys to his father's BMW.

Mac'd had less time to hang out with Chubbs since college started and when they did get together Mac would be full of stories about all the crazy things he'd done with his frat brothers. Every time one of these stories came up, Chubbs felt nauseous. Chubbs and Mac used to be able to finish each other's stories, supply the punchline to one another's jokes. All of their experiences had been experiences shared, not ones retold. Chubbs wanted something they could

do together, some story that would upstage the ones from the frat and prove to Mac, again, that they were supposed to be best friends.

So for this night, Chubbs planned a route: first they'd go by their high school for old time's sake; then, they'd drive past the lake where they used to go to smoke. Finally, they would end up at Mac's house for the night once his parents were asleep.

Chubbs offered Mac a shot of Jim Beam to start the night.

"You really think we should be drinking before we drive that BMW, dude?" Mac asked.

Chubbs scoffed. Wouldn't Mac do this with his frat brothers? It sounded like they'd done much worse. Besides, they wouldn't get too drunk.

"You pussyng out on me?" Chubbs asked. "It's just one shot."

Four shots later, they piled into the black leather interior, Chubbs at the wheel, Mac in the passenger seat, cradling the rest of the handle between his legs and giggling like a little girl. Chubbs felt flushed and happy, like the two of them were sharing a secret again.

The drive to the high school was vague in Chubbs' memory, fuzzy and washed out like an overdeveloped photograph. He did remember bumping up along the lawn of the school where he put the car sloppily in park. He and Mac clamored out, taking swigs from the bourbon bottle. In the back of the car, they'd packed two cartons of eggs from Chubbs' house and a few rolls of toilet paper. They galloped around the exterior of the high school, tossing toilet paper rolls and smashing eggs against the school sign, the windshields of cars, and on the classroom windows.

"What are we, twelve?" Chubbs laughed, high on his own enjoyment. "Let's leave them something they'll really remember." He squatted beside the double front doors of the school and left a shit on the sidewalk.

“Ew, dude,” Mac yelled. He stumbled backward and pretended to gag. “That’s pretty gross, man.”

Chubbs panicked for a second. Had he gone too far? Did Mac think he was too gross, too ridiculous? But then Mac started laughing.

“Won’t Ms. Tyler love that when she gets here,” he said. They both remembered the tight-ass English teacher Ms. Tyler. They used to make jokes about her all the time, but it’d been a while.

“She deserves every respect in the world,” Chubbs joked back and smacked Mac on the back a little too hard. A second later, Mac vomited on the sidewalk. A good hundred pounds lighter than the 265 pound Chubbs, Mac couldn’t drink as much, something Chubbs always forgot because of the frat stories.

“Let’s get out of here,” Chubbs said, worried about losing the momentum of the night. “To the lake?”

“To the lake!” Mac crowed, his fist punching the crisp night air.

Chubbs handed him the keys. “Can’t let you get through the night without trying out the BMW. It might be the last time you drive such a nice machine, you know, since you’re bound to be such a fuck-up.”

Mac laughed. Even drunk, Chubb realized Mac knew he wasn’t the fuck-up.

Next thing Chubbs knew they were in the car. He could hear the engine roaring under him and Mac yelling nonsense out the window at the top of his lungs. They drove out of the suburban neighborhoods, toward where the lake was in some sparse woods. But just barely after they’d passed the last mailbox, Chubbs heard Mac say, “Oh, shit,” and the brakes squealed.

The car smashed into a pine tree just off the deserted back roads and there was a loud crunching sound, like a beer can under a boot, magnified. Chubbs didn't realize he'd been smashing his eyes shut until he opened them to see Mac, his chest slung over the steering wheel, and the front of the car, crumbled and smoking.

"Mac," Chubbs said. He shook Mac's shoulder. There was a moment when Mac didn't move and Chubbs' heart stopped in his chest. Then, with a second shake, Mac groaned and rubbed his head.

"What the fuck, man? What the fuck happened?" he blubbered.

The Elroys picked the boys up in five minutes after Mac insisted Chubbs call them. Neither of Mac's parents said a word to Chubbs as they drove the boys to the hospital and called Chubbs' father, but Mrs. Elroy kept crying and smoothing back Mac's hair as if he were dead. The next morning after Chubbs'd sobered up, the Elroys, including Mac, had already left the hospital. He waited there until his father flew back in and picked him up. Chubbs' dad told him he was disappointed but that was all. Then he bought a brand new BMW.

Mac wouldn't talk to Chubbs for days afterward and when he finally did he didn't mention the accident at all. It was as if it had never happened. He did start seeing Chubbs less and less, however, and Chubbs had the increasing sense that Mac had decided Chubbs was what his parents had always said. A bad influence, a loser, a walking joke. But most of the time Chubbs couldn't let himself believe that. Mac had to know that Chubbs was more than all those labels. All Chubbs had ever wanted to do was prove it to him.

By 7:06, Chubbs was pretty tipsy, his whole body tingling with warmth and his face a permanent flushed pink that made his thinning yellow hair look even paler. He'd drunk his way

through cocktail hour, watching countless unfamiliar faces talk and laugh with Mac like they were best friends. But they weren't his best friend. *He* was Mac's best friend. Right?

Chubbs tried to sober up by stuffing himself with as many pretentious-sounding hors d'oeuvres as he could find. The stiff-backed waiters introduced everything to him as they offered it. Herb Remoulade with Crab Meat. Lobster Louie with Horseradish Panna Cotta. Yukon Gold Potato Puree with Caviar and Crème Fraîche. Things that sounded to Chubbs more like a punchline to a dirty joke than something you would put in your mouth. (Or would you? Mac would have found that funny.) Nevertheless, three gin and tonics later, Chubbs was still feeling what Mac used to call "a little smiley." Chubbs loved this nickname because it was spot-on. He couldn't stop smiling when he was drunk. He was a happy drunk, a loving drunk, albeit an inappropriate one. But Mac always seemed to love that. Mac could get wound pretty tight sometimes, but Chubbs loosened him up. They complemented each other.

When it came time to sit down to dinner, Chubbs found his assigned table with some of Mac's friends from William and Mary. They were the closest people to mutual friends that had been invited to the party, although Chubbs wouldn't call them that. Mac's frat brothers at William and Mary had never approved of Chubbs. They didn't like his cheesy jokes, his awkwardness around women, his inability to take anything seriously, his lack of professional ambition, his disinterest in big parties. And Chubbs didn't like being made into a joke by them. He wasn't stupid. He could tell that's how they saw him.

They represented a different side of Mac's undergraduate life that remained untouched by Chubbs since he often hadn't been allowed to come to their ridiculous functions. Why would he want to put on a sports jacket or tie to go to a party when he could just have people over to his place and wear his pajama bottoms? He didn't see the appeal of the whole frat thing like Mac

did. When he and Mac hung out, Mac would just come over to his house or they'd go to a cheap pizza place.

There were two of these frat guys here: Chad and Derrick. Chubbs couldn't come up with two better names for these guys who claimed they weren't brothers but Chubbs could swear were twins. They both wore variations of the same suit, had their brown hair was trimmed in the same suave style with a hint of trendy scruff on their faces. They even had the same dimples and identical clefts in their chins. It had to be some kind of joke. This whole night had to be some kind of joke.

"What's your name again?" Chad asked. Or was it Derrick?

"Chubbs."

"Is that your actual name?" the other asked.

"Well, no." Chubbs laughed. "What kind of bastard would actually name his kid Chubbs? My real name is Charles."

"So why Chubbs?" the first said.

Chubbs studied his face for a while, trying to decide if he was having a go at him, but he looked earnest enough.

"My dad's name is Charles," Chubbs said. "It made me feel, I don't know, not like me, I guess. Mac coined Chubbs when we were eight."

"Wow," one of the said. "I had no idea you guys had known each other for so long."

Chubbs tried to keep smiling but realized it was getting harder and harder. He thought by this time he'd be getting drunk with Mac, instead of getting drunk with these cardboard cutouts. He looked around for someone to ask for another drink.

He saw Mac and Janie making the rounds, weaving through the maze of circular tables to make sure they got to see everyone. He straightened up a little, flattened his tie, and prepped his biggest smile.

Mac and Janie reached their table and the two frat brother stood before Chubbs could. Mac laughed when he saw them, but not the laugh Chubbs remembered. It was a controlled, stiff, presentable laugh. A laugh that was for the benefit of others, not for himself. He gave them each strong, masculine hugs that barely lasted a quarter of a second. They hugged Janie, too, meaning they'd probably met her before. Chubbs felt uncomfortable, now, knowing he hadn't. They talked about how lucky Mac was, how great the wedding had been, how good the food tasted, bullshit like that. Chubbs prided himself on how fake it all seemed. Nothing genuine about their relationship, nothing like him and Mac.

Chubbs jumped up and Mac spotted him. Their eyes met for a minute and Chubbs brightened.

“Mac-y!” he said, interrupting whichever of the frat brothers had been talking. “You look like your goddamn father.” He pushed between the other two to engulf Mac in a hug.

Mac patted his back, a bit awkwardly and began to pull away faster than Chubbs did.

“Looking good Chubbs,” he said as they pulled away from each other. “Thanks for coming.”

Janie was moving on to another table already. Mac saw her and took a step backward, going with her.

“Hey, I've gotta catch up,” he said to Chubbs. “Talk to you later?”

Chubbs' smile faded and his hand fell to the glass that used to hold his latest gin and tonic but now only held melting ice. He nodded mechanically, but inside he felt his hopes of

reconnecting with Mac crumble. The image he'd had in his head of their big reunion, their night of catching up and getting plastered, it began to seem more and more ridiculous set against this background. Just the idea of it, the false hope, made Chubbs feel like one big joke.

"Yeah, okay, buddy, later!" he called after him. Everyone nearby looked at him and Chubbs realized he'd probably spoken too loudly.

He took his seat again and felt suddenly exhausted.

By 9:02, Chubbs was drunk. Not just a little tipsy, or getting wasted, but full-on, smiley drunk. Now that dinner was over there wasn't anything to keep his bloated stomach padded. He stood with yet another beer on the corner of dance floor where Janie and Mac were having their first dance. Mac had never been a good dancer, Chubbs remembered. Even now he looked a little awkward with Janie pressed against him, his feet shuffling her dress back and forth as he tried not to step on it. But, Chubbs allowed, he *was* smiling. It wasn't the smile Chubbs remembered but it wasn't a fake one either. It was an honest-to-God, sweet, sentimental smile. A smile that made Chubbs think, however reluctantly, that Mac was feeling something Chubbs had never felt. He had fallen in love, with this girl, this life, this place. It was an experience, or a set of experiences, that defined Mac and repelled Chubbs, and that was that. In Janie, Mac had found someone else to love and trust, someone else to be himself around. And himself might not even be the same himself Chubbs had known. Chubbs hadn't thought people could change so much, but suddenly the last four years seemed much longer than he'd originally conceived them to be.

When the song, a jazzy rendition of *At Last* by Ella Fitzgerald, died in the background, everyone clapped and the couple did a cutesy bow: Janie curtsying, Mac folding at the waist. There was an awkward pause as everyone tried to find something else to do. This was his last

chance, Chubbs decided, maybe his last chance ever. He pushed through the people idling around the edge of the dance floor and made his way to Mac, who stood in the center.

“Mac!” Chubbs yelled, again too loud.

Mac’s eyes widened when he saw Chubbs barreling toward him. Shocked? Embarrassed? Chubbs was too drunk to analyze the look on Mac’s face, exactly, but registered enough to know it wasn’t the excitement he’d been going for.

“Hey, man,” Mac said, the words tripping off his tongue hesitantly.

“So?” Chubbs said and took an ungraceful spin that made him stumble to his left. “What do you think?”

“Of what?” Mac asked. He looked a little dazed, like he’d just woken up from a good dream and found himself here.

Chubbs held his hands out, face up, like he was begging. “The tux, dude! Have you ever seen me in a tux? It’s fucking unbelievable, right? I guess we wash up pretty good, after all.”

“Oh, sure,” Mac said but his eyes were scanning the crowd again, just like his dad, waiting for an escape.

“This is some crazy shit, man,” Chubbs said, gesturing around him. “I mean, you’re *married*? It’s just fucking surreal. I can’t imagine you as a husband.”

Beside Mac, Janie put her hands on her hips and tightened her thin lips.

“Come on,” Mac said, and there was a hint of annoyance now. “It’s not that hard. I think I’ll make a great husband.” At this he smiled down at his new wife, gave her hip a squeeze. She didn’t even look at him. She just stared holes into Chubbs’ head.

“Bullshit, man,” Chubbs said and laughed. “But you’re a champ for trying. A real champ.”

Mac frowned.

“So are you going to introduce me to the chick or what?” Chubbs said. He hadn’t noticed that the room had gone silent around them.

“This is Janie. Janie, this is Chubbs, the guy from my hometown,” Mac said. He didn’t meet Chubbs’ eyes.

The guy from my hometown?

“Thanks for making it,” she said, but her eyes didn’t say she was thankful at all. Her eyes were cold and hard, like two little rocks, waiting to stone him to death.

Chubbs swayed on his feet while the room tilted. He tried to laugh it off, and grabbed at Mac’s tux sleeve but Mac pulled his arm away and Chubbs fell down on the dance floor, his butt hitting the parquet floor hard. He winced as he felt the pain numbly. He looked up at Mac, feeling vaguely like this was some kind of horrible dream that he could wake up from if he tried hard enough. Mac’s hand tightened around his wife’s waist and he took a small step in front of her, like he was protecting her from something. From Chubbs?

And so, there on the dance floor, Chubbs started to cry. It wasn’t anything dramatic, just a tightness in his throat, a burn building behind his nose, moistness in his eyes. But it was enough to embarrass him. He struggled to his feet and straightened the suit jacket as best he could around his large midsection. People around the dance floor tried to find something else to watch, something else to do.

Chubbs wiped self-consciously at his wet eyes and tried not to look at Mac’s face, at his embarrassment that even just this *once*, Chubbs couldn’t act like a standup guy. Chubbs knew that’s what everyone thought of him, just one big goof, one big embarrassment. He’d just thought, *known*, Mac was different.

“Honey,” Janie said, touching Mac’s chest. “Maybe we should go cut the cake?”

Mac nodded and started to turn away.

“Mac,” Chubbs said and took a step toward him, but Mac didn’t even look back.

By 10 o’clock Chubbs was sitting on the corner of Fifth Avenue in the December chill, his back pressed up against the cool cement of the Rockefeller Center where, upstairs in the circular room, the reception went on without him. Guests drank their fancy cocktails, Mr. and Mrs. Elroy danced on the parquet floor, and Janie and Mac faked spontaneity by shoving cake in each other’s faces so people could laugh at something purposefully embarrassing. They all went on in their dresses and tuxes under the twinkling, crystal chandelier. And Chubbs sat in the cold, alone. He’d shed the too-small suit jacket in the stairwell and his black tie lay, discarded, beside him. Now, with buttons undone to reveal his undershirt and his hair ruffled, he looked just like what people always thought he was: a loser.

He whimpered there for a while and looked at the lit-up tips of skyscrapers piercing the cloudy winter sky. It was an alien city, a place that he’d never actually even conceived of as real and he was suddenly and simply stunned by the enormity of it, the unknowability of it, the existence of it all. It could have been the cold, but Chubbs really did think it took his breath away.

A man in a black peacoat and suit walked by with a confident stride. As he passed Chubbs he tossed a few coins at him, absent-mindedly. Chubbs glanced down at the money and had to smile to himself. If the old Mac still existed, the Mac Chubbs had always thought existed but maybe never had, he would tell him this story, the story of when that douchebag in New

York thought he, a trust fund kid, was a homeless guy, begging on the streets. Chubbs gathered the coins in his palm and counted them. Fifty cents. Boy, they would have found that funny.

Hitched

The truth is I was lonely, and if you really want to know why I was lonely it was because Janie'd left me just two days ago. She'd been with me for six months, *six months*, which was longer than any woman before her, even the woman who'd had my one and only daughter, and that was saying something, wasn't it? But then she left and so there I was, driving through the thickest fog I'd ever seen, from where I used to work in Los Angeles to where I was hoping to get a job in Salt Lake City, and I was lonely. I was a hair past fifty and lonely for more than just flesh.

I just wanted to talk to someone, anyone, so I wouldn't be alone no more, stewing in my own head on all the things I'd done wrong to end up alone. I wanted someone to distract me from myself. But I figured whatever was ahead of me had to be better than what was behind me, right? Because behind me were a slew of odd jobs, a dead dog, a laundry list of ex-girlfriends, and a lot of lost hair.

So I was driving out of LA when out of this fog comes a girl and I slammed on my brakes because she wasn't far off the road and I was worried I might hit her. Not all of her exactly, just her arm, which was carrying a duffle bag.

The car screeched on the asphalt and the tar scent stung my nose. The girl turned around sudden in my headlights and looked really scared in some ways but also not scared at all in others, like I surprised the hell out of her but she wouldn't have minded if the car'd hit her.

I rolled down my window and stuck my head out into the fog.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yelled, even though I didn't need to yell because it was dead silent out there, with no crickets or nothing.

"I'm walking," she said. "I'm looking for a ride."

Her voice was real high and shaky, like a glass vase about to fall off a table, and I wondered why she was out here alone and who she'd left to get that way, or who'd left her. I liked trying to put together the pieces of another person's puzzle. I liked used things, like cars that were owned by chain-smokers, or dogs that had belonged to other masters before me and had been kicked out in the rain because they hadn't been able to hold their pee for another hour.

And I liked women like that, too. Women who had been with so many other men that their jean jackets still smelled like a sweaty mixture of them and their mouths still tasted a little bit like all those other men, too. They would flinch at certain words and places that brought up certain memories of certain other men, and it was like some puzzle I had to put together of who had been there and what they'd done to make this happen, like it was all some kind of game and if I could understand these things and these people, maybe I'd feel less alone, you know? Because if I understood them maybe they could understand me.

"Where're you headed?" I asked, trying to seem casual, which was a mistake after I yelled at her because now I seemed like a crazy, right? I mean now I seemed too friendly and for any young, pretty girl that should be a red flag. Not that this particular girl was all that pretty, but she wasn't *ugly* either so it still counts, don't it? She'd be pretty to someone, I'm sure. Everyone is pretty to someone.

She was just looking at me, so I tried again.

"Where're you headed?"

"Where're *you* headed?" she asked almost at the same time and now it was my turn to get worried because what was that supposed to mean? Was she looking for money or for someone to take care of her or for a job or for food? Because I wasn't interested in none of that. I learned a long time ago, about the time my dog Leo -- a tiny, curly-haired spaniel -- died, that I wasn't no

good at taking care of things, or of people, and that I just better not try because I just fuck shit up. That's why my old girlfriend took my one-year-old daughter and I didn't fight her about it none. I still always sent child support checks on time since it was the only kind of consistency I could offer. It's better for nobody to depend on a nobody, because a nobody like me can really do some damage, even when I don't want to. That's the truth.

"Salt Lake City," I said.

"I'm going to Salt Lake City, too," she said. "Will you take me?"

"I can try," I said, which was the truest thing I'd said in a while. I always try, but trying don't seem to work much for me.

She didn't seem concerned. She shuffled to the passenger side door. She was wearing really tiny shoes with really high heels and she tottered on them like a little kid trying on her ma's shoes. It kinda broke my heart, but not really, because she also had to be at least sixteen and she had a woman's body with a tiny waist and blooming breasts and really long, dark blonde hair and was wearing makeup. All these things were clearly trying to make her look sexy and it sort of worked, so the shoes were only a little cute.

She opened the passenger door and threw her duffle bag in the backseat, hitting me in the face with the cloth strap. I bit back my comment because I didn't want to be a bully. My pa was a bit of a bully, even though he never hit my older brother Toby or me or anyone I saw. But you don't have to hit people to be a bully.

"Thanks," she said, and settled into the passenger seat.

When she got in I could see the little dark hairs growing on her legs, and they made me think of the thicker, darker hair on my own chin and neck that I hadn't shaved in a week because I didn't have a woman to yell at me for trying to kiss her with scratchy hair.

The girl snapped her seatbelt on, and I realized I didn't have mine. I reached over my belly self-consciously and found my own seatbelt above my head, because I'm kinda short and really fat, and snapped it into place as well. Then I started driving again.

"I'm Darren," I told her.

My pa always called me "Pup" and called Toby "Alpha" like we were all his pack of dogs. The kids in the neighborhood used to call me Brooks, which is my real first name but I hated it so I always tried to get people to call me by my middle name which was Darren, after my pa. And Toby was the only one who ever called me Darren, which I liked. Say what you want about Toby but he wasn't a bad guy. He might've been a drunk and a bum but he wasn't a bad guy. You can do bad things and not be a bad guy, and you can do good things and not be a good guy. I'm not saying Toby calling me Darren made him a good guy, I'm just saying he wasn't no bad guy neither.

"Do you have a name?" I asked. I felt lighter already, having someone to distract me from all these things going on in my head. But it was weird that it was this young, desperate, scared girl. And she wouldn't look at me because she must've thought it was weird, too.

The girl had a tiny mouth and when it moved I could see that she had tiny teeth, too, but big gums, which wasn't so pretty. But she had a really nice body, which was probably what she'd been told all her life, because if there's something about you that's that noticeable you can bet everyone will point it out as if you don't see it yourself. Like how I was always fat. People told me all the time about how I was fat. Big Brooks, they said, like I didn't know the first thing people saw when they looked at me was the fat that hung over my waistband. So I'm sure she knew that her face wasn't that pretty and her body was really where she'd gotten lucky, which was probably why she hid her face behind so much makeup and her body behind so little clothes.

“Kyle,” she said.

I snorted and her eyes narrowed into little slits that made her face look even smaller and tighter and uglier.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s a boy’s name,” she said. “I get it.”

“I didn’t say nothing,” I said.

She just looked out the window and I felt bad because I understood not liking your name and I was being a dick. But I also didn’t want to say sorry again because I knew how if you say sorry enough times it stops being genuine and starts being annoying.

I knew that because Toby, my brother, had been my best friend and he died when I was sixteen. It was alcohol that did him in, which is what would have done my pa in, too, if he hadn’t given the stuff up after Toby died. My pa’d always liked Toby more than me, but then Toby died and Pa and I were alone.

“I’m named after my dad,” she said.

“Don’t people normally name their sons after their pas?” I said.

She shrugged her bird-like shoulders. They were bare under the dress’s thin spaghetti straps and I saw goosebumps on her arms, so I turned off the A/C. Her dress was low cut so I could see the swell of her breasts but I really wasn’t into that, not with how young she was. She was older than my daughter would be now, but not by much, and she was still *someone’s* daughter, right? She seemed younger and younger every time I looked at her.

“My dad didn’t have any sons so he gave his name to me,” she said.

“Your ma didn’t name you, then?” I said.

“I don’t know my mom,” she said and then I felt like a real dick, didn’t I? Because I never knew my ma either. She’d died of throat cancer when I was just a baby, but Toby always told me from what little he remembered of her she was a real standup lady.

“I’m not sure people normally name their children after *themselves*,” I said. I meant it like a joke but after I said it I realized it didn’t sound much like a joke.

“People don’t normally pick up hitchhikers, but here you are,” Kyle mumbled. She was very smart, I thought, or at least she had a smart tongue on her, and I liked that even though it wasn’t always strictly speaking very nice.

While I searched for something else to say, she looked out the window at all the fog and I wondered what she saw in it because to me it looked like nothing, but she was staring so hard she must’ve seen something. Maybe if you stare at anything long enough it looks like something.

Maybe that was why Janie’d picked up with me in the first place. She’d worked at the bar I’d been frequenting while I was on my third construction job, this time in LA, and she was kinda old for working behind the bar, almost 50. But I flirted with her because she was more my type, right? The type that had seen a lot of things and lot of people and had a lot of scars they didn’t like to show people.

But I’m not a good looking guy and I don’t say the right things at the right time, so for a long time she’d just give me a slightly pained smile. Eventually she agreed to go out with me. I realized Janie must have taken up with me because she’d looked at me long enough to get used to me. And I don’t just mean to get used to how I looked, but also to get used to *me*, how I spoke and what I said and how I carried myself. She looked at me long enough that she was able to resolve what I was in her mind and make me into what she wanted me to be, and then when I wasn’t like that she left.

But that's putting the blame on her and that's not fair. I wasn't blameless. No one is really blameless unless they're dumb and I'm not dumb. I smoked and drank away most of my pay checks, and I went through moods sometimes, real down moods, where I was unresponsive. Sometimes I just wouldn't come home and Janie would stay up all night wondering why. It's the kind of shit I used to pull with the girl who'd had my daughter, too. I'd just leave sometimes and not come back for days. Because I used to think that finding someone to love would fix everything and make me happy. And then I always got real down when I found out it didn't. People can't fix everything.

Kyle flipped down the visor on the passenger side of the car and looked into the small mirror. She swiped a long fingernail under her eye, trying to catch the stray pieces of mascara there but then gave up and snapped the visor back up.

"You from LA?" I asked.

"No," she said.

"Neither am I," I said. "I just had a girl out there."

"Not anymore, I guess," Kyle said.

"Nope," I said. "Nope, she wised up and left me." I hoped what I was about to say didn't sound creepy, but if I stayed silent for too long it would sound creepier. "You have a guy?"

She pulled her knees up to her chest and if I looked down I knew I'd see her panties peeking out because her dress was so short but I didn't do that because I was still thinking about Janie and my daughter.

"No," she said, but this sounded softer, like a lie, and I started to think she wasn't as sharp as she wanted me to think she was.

I looked at her clothes for the first time, really *looked* at them, and I realized the dress was dirty but it was new, as if she'd just bought it for this occasion, and it was cheap and the hem was already unraveling and the straps were too thin, and it didn't fit her just right because it was too short, and the bust too tight. And I wondered who she was trying so hard to impress because that's what all this meant, didn't it? She wanted to seem clever and sharp and pretty and sexy but I didn't think she was any of those things. Of course, I didn't want to say so because I always tried to seem nicer, happier, and more confident than I was, too, and only my pa ever called me out on it. So why would I do something like that to her?

"What are you going to do in Salt Lake City?" Kyle asked.

"My boss from my last job said he had a brother there who could give me work," I said. But that wasn't the real reason and I didn't really feel like lying because if I lied to her I'd have no one to tell the truth to but myself. "But really I just needed to get away from the place where Janie left me."

She nodded.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Twenty-one," she said without missing a beat.

I looked at her and she knew that I knew she was lying so she said, "Eighteen," a little more pathetically. Her shoulders tilted inward now, like she was crumbling from the weight of the truth, and I was sorry I asked.

"Why are *you* going to Salt Lake City?" I asked. Then I regretted it because she choked on something I knew was a sob, but how was I to know she was about to start crying? I wouldn't've said anything if she was going to cry.

I've never known what to do with a person when they start to cry because I get scared of people when they talk about their feelings. I'm not sure what they expect. For me to fix it? I couldn't even fix my old 1980 Oldsmobile Cutlass when it died on I-59 as I was on my way back home to Georgia from Alabama, where I was working at the time. I was trying to get home to see my pa, who was dying after a massive heart attack. I couldn't fix the car and it took forever for a tow and my pa just died. But that's life.

"I don't know," Kyle said now. "Because you're going there."

"You don't want to follow me nowhere," I said and I must've sounded mean because she shrunk away from me like my dog Leo used to do when I lost my temper. I didn't get mad so much. Pa used to get mad, and so did Toby, but I never did. No, that's a lie. I got angry plenty, I just never did nothing about it. Never do that. It ain't healthy.

Kyle didn't say anything back. She just kept staring out the window at that damn fog. I wished I knew what she saw when she looked at it, when she looked at me, when anyone looked at me. I just wanted to know what other people saw sometimes. I was tired of seeing through my old eyes.

Finally I figured I didn't have nothing to lose so I just said it even though I know it wasn't my business and I was just asking for more tears and crying and feelings, things I couldn't fix. But I had to know.

"What are you doing out here like this?" I asked her. With just the two of us in the car, my voice seemed so loud and close. Cars are intimate places really, maybe the most intimate places I know.

There was a full minute of really horrible, awful, terrible silence. Then, in a jumble of words, she said, "I'm leaving. I thought when I left my family in Palo Alto I was leaving. I

thought I was done with all of their shit and I was leaving with our cute mechanic, Max, and I would just be gone and then they'd be real sorry for all the shit they pulled. But that wasn't leaving. This is leaving. Max was worse than they ever were and maybe no one is really good after all. Maybe it's all bound to be shit and I better just get used to it. Either way I'm leaving and I don't know where I'm going but I can't go back to him, and I can't go back to them."

She said it all really fast and angry, like her glass vase body was cracking and she about to shatter into a bunch of a pretty shards on the floor. When she stopped to take a breath she gulped air fast and I glanced at her. Her eyes were big in her thin face and her chest was pumping and panicked. I had a moment of fear because Janie used to have panic attacks after sex sometimes and it scared the shit out of me, but scared the shit out of her more and I didn't ever know what to do but sit there and wait.

I was pretty scared because Kyle was starting to have a panic attack in my passenger seat and meanwhile I was trying to work through everything she'd just said and what I was going to do with this lost, scared, tired, mess of a girl. But she couldn't breathe and that trumped the rest of it. Her whole body shook and she gripped the door handle with white knuckles.

"Okay," I said. "It's okay. Just keep breathing. I've got some old takeout bags in here somewhere." I reached behind her seat and tried to find a bag for her to breathe into because that's what they do in movies when someone's hyperventilating.

And then I saw it, a dark something in the road, something birthed from the mist like a ghost, and I slammed on the brakes but there was a sickening bump that threw both of us against our seatbelts. We screeched to a halt.

"Shit," I roared, the smell of tar burning my nose for the second time that night.

A silence fell on top of us like dead weight and I realized Kyle had stopped hyperventilating. The thing we just hit had shut her up from shock. Her eyes were big and scared, and she had her back pressed up against the seat like she was on a rollercoaster at an amusement park, but she wasn't one bit amused.

“What was that?” she asked in a weak voice.

“I don't know,” I said. “It's so damn foggy. We shouldn't just sit here. If a car comes they won't be able to see us at all till they're right up on our asses.”

“You aren't going to even get out and look?” she asked. The way she said it made me sound like a real jerk so I sighed and put the car in park.

I turned on the hazards and all around us the fog flashed with the red of our lights, a huge warning beacon, begging the universe to stay away. I got out into the light-saturated fog and the coolness made my skin feel slimy and prickly, but also kind of nice, like the fog was part of a dream. I walked around to the back of the car and there it was, the mist creeping over its limp body, the flashing red lights outlining the tips of its mangy fur. A dog. A goddamn dog. Why did it have to be a dog?

I took a few steps closer to it, partly afraid I was going to hear it whine and realize it was still alive, that I'd just broken it beyond repair. But it didn't make a sound and its hide didn't flinch even when my boots made a sound right by its floppy ear. I knew it was dead. Distantly, I heard a car door slam and the smacking of heels on asphalt as Kyle came up behind me. When she saw the dog, she gasped.

“Does it have a collar?” she asked. Her voice was weak and shaky. “A phone number or a name or anything?”

I could barely stand to look at the thing. It was a mutt for sure, but I knew dogs so I could tell it had a little lab in its blood somewhere, and something a little dopier looking, too, like maybe a bloodhound. It was thin, really thin, and its dark, coarse fur was all matted with dirt and water and now blood. The body was all crumbled like a used tissue near the middle and the fur was trod down from my tires. My stomach churned and I was sure I would be sick but for some reason the bile didn't come.

The dog's eyes were closed and the mouth was open, the gums a shocking red-pink against its dark body. But the teeth were yellow and I knew right then this wasn't nobody's dog. This dog had never known a lick of love in its life. No one ever took care of it or brushed it or fed it or made a fire for it or drove across the country with this good dog in his passenger seat. He didn't have a master or a companion or a mate in the world. Dogs are pack animals, you know, dogs are meant to be with people or other dogs or even other creatures, just not alone, not ever. Dogs aren't supposed to be alone, but this dog was always alone and here it was, bleeding all over the asphalt at my feet with its red tongue swelling out over its sad teeth and it died all alone. It wasn't fair.

"Shit," I said.

Pressure built in my throat and my face but before I could even think about crying I heard another set of heavy sobs. I looked up and saw Kyle, her tiny body outlined in the hazard lights, her arms hanging limp by her side, openly weeping. I wanted to cry too, but I couldn't let myself, not in front of this broken girl. We couldn't both break down at the same time.

That was part of being company for someone, I decided. You needed to be able to keep yourself together when they couldn't. I wish I'd known that with Janie, or with the mother of my daughter, or even with my daughter.

“We killed it,” she said.

My throat closed up and I gritted my teeth to keep my eyes from watering.

“I killed it,” I said. “Me, not you.”

I couldn't remember the last time I'd wanted to cry so much. Maybe when Toby died. I cried a lot then, cried and cried, until my pa finally lost it while we were driving back from the hospital and he told me to stop crying and to be a man and I didn't even deserve to have a brother like Toby anyway.

I didn't cry when Pa died. When I finally made it to the hospital they said he was already gone, that no one had been there, that he'd died alone. I didn't even cry then and that was my own pa.

I didn't cry when my dog Leo died, even though God knows I wanted to. He'd been my best friend after Toby and I couldn't even shed one tear for Leo after he died and left me, finally, alone.

But now I wanted to cry over this stupid lab-bloodhound mutt that had the dumb sense to run into the road in the fog? Get your shit together, I thought. For once in your life, don't just keep thinking about how you feel. Kyle is right there feeling bad, maybe even worse. And she didn't exist just to make me feel better, even if that's why I picked her up in the first place.

“Kyle,” I said and tried real hard to sound nice. Her sobs quieted. She sounded young.

I wondered if that's how my daughter would sound when she was eighteen. How old would she be now? Maybe ten? I hoped she had friends. I hoped her mother was good to her. I hoped she had a dog that didn't die and she would meet a boy that wouldn't be a jerk like this guy, Max. I hoped she wouldn't end up like Kyle on the side of a back road in the fog, catching a

ride from a strange man in the middle of the night. I hoped to God that she wouldn't end up alone.

"I'm okay," she said.

For a minute we both just stood there, the dead dog between us. I wanted to hug her, but that would be weird, right?

"We should go," she said.

But neither of us moved. I felt bad about all those times I thought she was ugly now.

"We can't go," I said. "We shouldn't leave him here."

"He's no one's dog," she said. "He's probably diseased. There's no shovel. We can't bury him."

"We can at least move him off the road," I said. "Want to help? I have a blanket in the backseat."

Kyle sniffed, nodded, finally moved. I heard her open the back door and rifle through the stuff there, pushing her duffle bag aside. The door slammed again and she came back with a red and white checked blanket. Kyle unfurled the ugly blanket and put it over the dog's body. It fluttered down over the dog's corpse, outlining the way its poor paws curled up beneath it like a dead bug. I didn't watch the dog, I just watched her.

"It must not have had a master or another dog friend or anything," she said.

"Maybe it did," I offered.

"It didn't," she said. "The poor thing was alone when we killed it. Even if it was a bad dog or something it deserved more, you know?"

I nodded. "I'm sure he was a very nice dog. I'm sure he died really fast too, no time to suffer or nothing."

Kyle bit her lip really hard and nodded and closed her eyes. I bent down and tucked the corners of the blanket around the dog's body, which was still warm. I lifted him, folded the blanket around him, and carried him off the road to lay him down in the trees. Kyle followed me, stumbling in her heels, but at least she'd stopped crying. I gave the dog a pat where his head would be.

"At least he's not alone now," she said in a soft voice.

I looked over at her and then put my arm on her shoulder, patted her once, twice, and she didn't pull away. Her skin was soft and pimpled with goosebumps.

"Let's go," I said.

"Okay."

We both walked back to the car and got in. I turned off my hazards and put on my seatbelt and we started to drive.

We were only driving for a second before I said, "I would have gotten hitched to Janie, if she'd let me. Just so I wouldn't be alone. It's probably good she left."

Kyle nodded. "I would have gotten hitched to Max. If he'd ever asked. Just so I wouldn't be alone."

"It's probably good you left."

She nodded and suddenly I didn't feel like we needed to speak anymore. The company was enough.