

Lizzie Leitch

A Tie Dye Onion:
STORIES

Lizzie Leitch

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By the River

That fall the colors came early. That day the breeze was soft and cool like it was filled with more oxygen, as it came off the river from far away. It was that time of late evening when the sunlight was a blanket spun of golden thread, giving color and warmth to every fire-orange poplar leaf and turning the leisurely river into a pool of melted, dying stars. James was in a little grove of trees by the bank, enjoying the sunlight pressing through the thin, orange canopy of slowly fluttering leaves. On the ground, illuminated by one of those beams, but slightly hidden by the leaves, was a small, ivory knob like one that would be on a jewelry box. When he picked it up, he dropped it almost as quickly. James was fairly sure it was a forearm bone called the radius, if he remembered correctly. It was slender, light and milky-white. Something about its smoothness and fragility reminded him of a swan's neck. But it was human. It was a human bone as real as his own flesh.

James picked it up again. He was holding someone's bone in his hands like it was as ordinary as an apple. The bone was shorter than his forearm. *Female*, he thought. And it probably was, though it was strange to him that he just felt or knew she was female, like the bone had said it aloud or whispered it into the folds of his brain. There was no grave marker, no etchings on the great oak beside him. She was lost or forgotten or hidden. He was afraid then, for a moment, like a little child who sees a report of a dead woman on the news and fears it is his mother, until turning to see her washing vegetables in the kitchen.

Where's Abigail? He thought. Reason came as quickly as fear, for it was impossible that these could be her bones, already fleshless. He'd just left her up at the farmhouse. They'd come to the Miller House that day to book their wedding. Abigail had called it *fate*, that they'd had a last minute cancellation for November 14th and now they could be married this fall instead next. She loved the ivy-green shutters and the tree-lined drive. He loved the way the leaves sounded as the wind pulled them across the brick path and that she was smiling. With-in minutes of arrival, she and the event coordinator were talking maximum number of guests and appropriate color palettes. He had excused himself for a walk by the water; she apologized for being fussy and childish. He put the bone back by the oak and covered it in red, waxy leaves. No need to tell Abbey about it. It was a 150 year-old farm. He must have uncovered an old grave. It was a beautiful place to be buried.



For the next few days he would sketch the radius on gum wrappers, dollar bills, and coffee receipts. He'd done some drawing in college, as part of his art major, but only a class or two. He really preferred sculpture. Two weeks later, he and Abbey brought her mother back to the Miller House for a tasting with the caterers. They ate leg of lamb with mint jelly, roast beef and candied carrots and chicken curry dumplings, which they both decided were too exotic for their wedding. Abigail was a middle school music teacher and seemed plain to most. She had a sweet face; she'd be cute when she was a grandmother. In college, she carried a small gold leaf Bible and a sewing kit in her book bag every day. He laughed at her inability to curse and how she would stare flabbergasted at couples kissing in the supermarket. He loved those things about her, loved her sincerity and how thoughts scrolled across her face like off of a typewriter. He loved that she wore jeans that aged her ten years due to their complete lack of shape. She had a particular affinity for sweaters with pearl buttons and for buttoning them up at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way. He hoped her wedding dress would have buttons all down the back. He liked that for some reason.

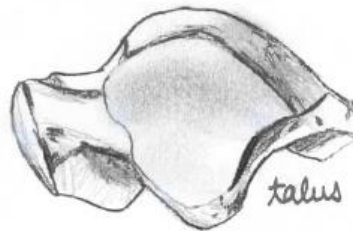
After they were full with chocolate raspberry liquor cake and coconut kiwi praline angel food cake and about a dozen other flavors he couldn't remember, the three of them decided to walk the grounds. By the river, Abbey ran the yellow willow branches through her hands like the mane of a butterscotch-colored foal. She asked him what he thought of magnolias for her bouquet, because there used to be a grand magnolia tree in her grandfather's front yard. She and her mother argued over forest green or rust bridesmaid dresses. He commented politely, watching the curls of willow leaves float

down river like a parade of honey-yellow feathers. He teased with Abbey that his power in planning the wedding was no stronger than the Queen of England's poodles' stance on taxes and asked if he could go take pictures. She laughed, telling him he could pick his own tux as long as it wasn't white or brown or tacky.

He brushed the wet leaves away and found her radius again. He hadn't told Abigail where he was going for a walk. As he cleared more leaves, the rounded ends of more bones appeared from the black earth. *Ribs*. He guessed, but he wouldn't pull them out of the ground. He didn't want to rob her grave, to make her un-whole. One bone though was almost already unearthed. It looked like an irregularly shaped moon rock. He couldn't orient it on his own body. *A heel bone?* He heard Abbey's voice calling him and realized he'd been there longer than anticipated. He shoved the bone in his pocket and wiped the dirt from his hands on the oak's rough bark. James joined Abbey and her mother farther down the riverbank by the small, wooden dock. He asked Abbey to ride home with her mother, because he wanted to stay by the river and work on his vows. The bone felt heavier in his pocket than it truly was. He knew Abigail would think writing vows at the Miller House was incredibly romantic and sweet. Of course she left him there and hadn't even pulled all the way out of the long drive before he began turning the cold bone over in his hand by the water. He put his feet in the cold October river. He rolled up his pant legs and walked out to knee-deep, letting the cold bleach his skin a bit. *Elise*. He knew that it couldn't actually be her name, but he saw her there in the river a few yards from him, her long, dark hair and river-blue eyes bouncing off her bone-white skin. She lay on her back, weightless, and he watched her float away down the river

through the bright afternoon horizon, freed. He had forgotten that the bone was there in his hand.

He cut his foot on something sharp in the water. The pad of his foot was bleeding a watercolor red. His flesh was throbbing and stinging, but he could walk to the shoreline still. The rest of her foot was somewhere in the moist soil wearing away. He thought of a lot of things Elise could have done. Was her full name Elise Miller? Did she grow up in that house? Had she run from the house to the waterside on summer afternoons to swim? Had she ridden ruby-colored horses barefoot and barebacked on fall mornings? Had she walked to that oak and decided to die? Had she been dragged there, heels making trails in the dirt? She deserved to have her story told. He would call the police; they would drive up, blue and red lights flashing; they'd question him; his DNA would be on the bones; she'd end up on a cold metal shelf at a morgue or university. And she wouldn't be able to see the river moving on forever. *I'll love you till you bury me in the ground and even then forever. I'll love you even when I'm bones or dust:* he wrote in his vow book. James walked back to the oak and set the round bone by her radius, hiding again the treasure like a squirrel in fall.



Abbey needed the final payment check dropped off two weeks prior to the wedding. James slid the check in the drop box. It was raining, but he figured a walk

would calm him anyway. The smell of earth and spoiling leaves hung in the cold raindrops and the whole river looked like thousands of clear, bouncing marbles. Earlier, he'd gone and gotten his great-grandmother's wedding ring resized for Abigail's finger. She'd told him: *There's something so beautiful in the mystery of something that's old and almost forgotten.* He'd thought about telling Abbey about the bones then. He thought in some way it could be a secret they shared together, but then again he thought she wouldn't really understand the intimacy of it. There were a lot of things James didn't tell Abbey, because he thought she wouldn't understand, which was fine because he understood everything about her. He'd told her he was excited for them to give the platinum ring more memories. *Old and almost forgotten.* He searched the wet dark earth along where he'd found her forearm. After a little while, he found them. They almost looked like the pieces of a broken necklace. There's no way he could tell if those little bones made up Elise's ring finger. He found no ring.

Maybe, because there was no ring to find. Maybe, she had been killed by her lover. They might have run barefoot down to the river and jumped over the muddy bank and into the water fully clothed. She might have held her breath and skulled underwater like turtle. When she opened her eyes, she would be surprised to see only black, because it would have been that point in the earliest part of the evening, when she couldn't register the darkness. He might have wrapped his hand around her ankle and tugged her backward, startling her. But she would come up laughing. Then they would lie on their backs and let their shirts swell and flap like they were floating blankets. They would drift so silently that they wouldn't startle the blue heron as he slipped his twig-thin legs through the calm river, making the green water ripple with silver in the moonlight like

spinning green gems. She could have died in this little copse by the river. Elise would have climbed up the clay bank to sit on the low hanging tree branch and to dip her toes delicately in the water like the heron in the reeds. She might have slipped from the bank instead and her head may have hit the large gray rock. Her feet would have sunken first as she disappeared into the still emerald water and her hair would float above her face like slowly sinking ink. Her lover may have grabbed the back of her shirt, right at the tag, and tried to pull her from the river depths leaving ligature marks on her throat. The lover must have cradled her, laid her on the bank and brushed the hair from her face. And his hands must be stained with the red clay of the riverbank.

Those little finger bones told him less than a pile of kindling twigs. Had she had died alone? Had her death been an accident? A fall? Had her lover cried as he placed her hand over her chest in the grave he'd dug? Did he visit her for days after like James? Or did he drown her? Strangle her? Cover her face with the dirt first? James lined the finger bones up, longest to shortest, by an oak root and wrapped a ring of vines around where a ring could be. When he drove away, he thought he saw her peer out at him from the grey woods.



The night of the rehearsal dinner was colder than it had been and the wind sipped heat from fingers, toes and earlobes. At dinner, they drank from gold-rimmed champagne

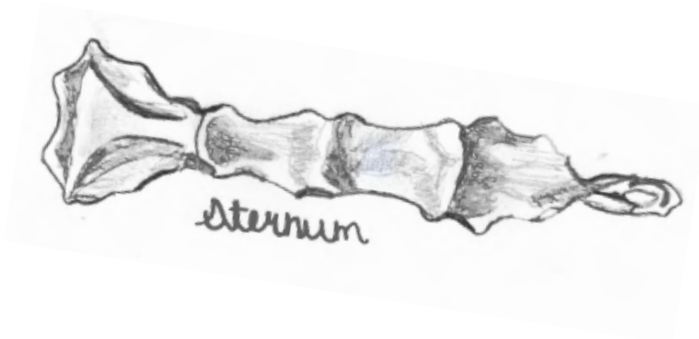
glasses; there were toasts to long lives and no one got too drunk. Each time he touched Abigail, he was aware of her warmth and the way her eyes blinked. He could feel her pulse. She told a long story about her brother and a duck, while swinging a pickled beet on a silver fork. She smiled at him when she noticed he had a stolen bushel of Jorgen almonds and stashed them in his pocket like a chipmunk. Though she didn't often place herself there, Abigail thrived in the center of the room. Something about her warmth and approachability was so attractive. He tried to force thoughts of Elise from his mind.

In the foyer was a large cage with ivy detailing. It held a single green lovebird. *What are you doing out here?* Abbey asked. *Just thinking for a bit. Catching my breath.* James said. *Do you want to be buried or cremated?* He asked. *You are so strange.* She said, flicking the top of his hair over and smoothing it down. She told him she hadn't really thought of it much. He told her he wanted to be buried somewhere in nature. The bird's wings made that powerful flickering sound as if he were going to fly away. *How about we get through our wedding first and then we'll write our wills?* She said. He told her that sounded good, apologized for being morbid, and they went back into the party.

When the pie was gone and the pork cold, James drove Abbey back to her mother's house in the city that evening, carrying her sling backs as she walked barefoot up the townhouse stairs. Abbey liked the old-fashioned idea of spending their last unmarried night apart. At the door, she told him that she loved him and laughing said she'd see him on the other side. He said he loved her too.

As he lay in their bed, he kept hearing the wings of the green parrot tap at his ears and he couldn't sleep. In the middle of the night, he grabbed his car keys.

James found the sternum that night, the anatomical gate to the cage that protects the heart. He dug each rib from the earth, all 24 of them. He slowly rebuilt her slender ribcage, placing matching sets into sternal notches. It was complete, white ribs gleaming in the moonlight like a trap. *The heart.* He thought. He'll never be able to see it or feel it contract and supply her veins with oxygen and warmth. He'll never know that woman's heart like Abigail's. The fleshy machine was in the oak already.



On his wedding day it snowed. He wasn't sure, but he guessed that Abbey cried that morning from the crashing disappointment. He put his boots on with his tux and told himself he was just going to the river. The water was slow and grey; a set of geese paddled by without ceasing their bobbing and grooming. The frozen leaves by the bank looked like watercolor suns through a frosted antique window, sparkling and crystalline. Each step he took sounded like the crushing of horned beetles.

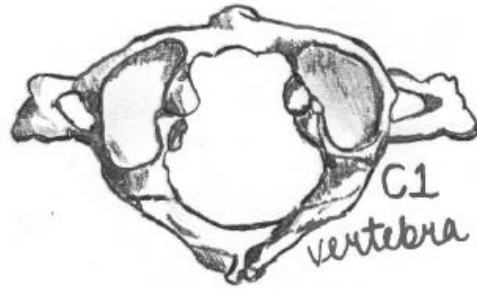
He would visit Elise for the last time, to bury her again and finally. Snowflakes stuck to his lashes and brows as he looked for the finger bones and heel bone. All the blood had left his hands, but he continued to dig through the leaves and dusting of snow for a place to put the bones. He was careful not to stain the tux. He found a bone that looked like a bangle bracelet for a child. It was light and had loops on either end. It was

broken in half and the two semi-circles lay in his hand. Those he buried too. He laid an “E” in sticks over the grave, but could think of a prayer to say.

As he and the groomsmen fastened cummerbunds and bow ties and drank expensive scotch, he watched through the window as the snow blanketed the expansive back yard, blurring the line between bank and river, amazed at how fall’s fire had been turned into soft, rolling white. And he saw Elise standing there in that tantalizing place where land and water met. She was wearing a red fox coat and had flakes of leaves in her hair. She made no movements. Her cheeks were flushed or wind-bitten; he couldn’t tell. He thought that by burying her bones, she would no longer appear to him. But in his mind he knew, she would stay as long as he let her, because she was his to control, a creation of his mind. He could hear the wedding guests downstairs arriving, stomping snow from their shoes. His buddies were swapping college stories and telling foul jokes. He glanced out to Elise again. She was mysteriously beautiful. James’ nephew, the ring bearer, came and grabbed him at the knees. James lifted him to the window. The little boy’s breath fogged the glass. When it shrunk away and the glass was clear again, there was no sign it had ever been clouded and there were no footprints in the snow where Elise had stood.

The ceremony had to be moved inside the house. Abigail descended down the curling, mahogany staircase instead of an aisle and they were married on the landing. Her dress as he remembers was stark white with buttons down the back. After vows, he cupped the base of her head at the neck. He just buried this bone, the one that held her skull, which held her brain, which in its folds held her memories, her life. And suddenly, all he could see was the white of Abbey’s dress and the snow and the bones and in this

whiteness, he missed their kiss. Ice must have broken a power line just then, because the whole house went dark. James held Abbey and he wouldn't let her go and he told her so.



Secrets the People in this Room Know

The nurse from Shady Oaks Retirement Center knows that Great Aunt Harriet didn't die peacefully. The turtle-faced nurse knows that Great Aunt Harriet choked in the middle of the night on her own vomit. The nurse feels bad that she only has one funeral dress, which she wears almost once a week. They all blur together anyway.

The funeral director knows what a dead Great Aunt Harriet looks like naked. He knows she had a hidden yellow rose tattoo. He won't ever get a tattoo.

My mother knows that the red roses on the alter are leftover from the Rawlings funeral that came right before this. She arranged for it. Great Aunt Harriet wouldn't have minded. She was cheap too. If everyone else knew they'd be pissed. Everyone already thinks my mother is classless and tacky, because my father was supposed to marry a woman named Virginia. My grandmother even told me, secretly, that she felt that my mother was the most disappointing thing my father had ever done to her. My mother cries quietly over this sometimes on the bench in the garden.

The organist secretly speeds up the hymns over tempo, because he wants to get home for Monday night football. The Panthers and the Redskins are playing.

The acolyte steals a bottle of wine from the communion stash after every funeral he does.

Everyone knows that cousin Mary Ellen's underwear is a hot pink thong (because it's sticking out the back of her skirt), but it's still a secret because Mary Ellen meant it to be. I know about all the boys she's slept with. She doesn't know I told my sister, Karen. She told me about how she had sex in Rex Gray's Range Rover and in Gregory Valentine's parents' bed. She told me she keeps condoms in the Bible on her beside table.

Cousin Rowland has a flask of bourbon in the console of his Mercedes, which he is worried may be emptier than he would like. He is the one who taught me about rum and cokes. When Cousin Tyler got married his rich wife's parents paid for it. They had a peacock centerpiece made of asparagus and deviled eggs and an open bar. All the cousins who weren't children got drunk off rum and cokes, so the parents wouldn't notice. They were drunk too.

Uncle Jacob knows his wife, Aunt Linda, is cheating on him with the funeral director's brother, but her children Paige and Mary Ellen do not know this, neither does the funeral director. The funeral home is a family business, as most things are, and Aunt Linda and the funeral director's brother sneak into the casket display room late at night to have sex.

Mae Anne knows our Great Uncle William is gay. I have always been jealous that she was the one, who found this out for sure. She walked in on him once with his butler when she was very small. Since then, he has done a lot of trying to convince her otherwise and bought her many gifts that he hasn't bought his siblings' other grandchildren. Many others in the room have secretly thought Great Uncle William is gay because he is 80 and unmarried, but no one has shared this secret, which is part of the reason it is still a secret.

Uncle James suspects that his brother could have come to their mother's funeral, that not all the flights from California were booked and that he didn't have a very important business deal today. Uncle Mathew is probably playing golf on a warm California green by the ocean.

The pastor has been ignoring a two-days dead mouse in the corner near the pulpit; he knows the Guatemalan janitor will take care of it and say a Spanish prayer over it for him.

I know my cousin Paige doesn't really believe in God. Actually, the spirituality of all my cousins is questionable. Secret is, I don't believe in God.

My father, who just gave the eulogy for Great Aunt Harriet, said she was gracious and kind, forgiving and loving. He lied. He said Great Aunt Harriet gave him butterscotch candies, if he behaved at church on Sundays when he was small. He made that up in his head. He never knows he's lying to himself. He thinks my mother's nose is real. He thinks the church is the most righteous place to give his money. He thinks me a saint.

Aunt Linda said to her daughter Mary Ellen that her singing voice is beautiful, because she thinks M.E. is anorexic. I can hear that is a lie and I can see her collarbones more than before. And later at the wake, I'll bet she eats no more than a cube of cheese and a green apple slice.

Uncle Jacob is fake crying. He doesn't care about his wife's aunt. Aunt Anna knows her husband is faking, but she doesn't care about Great Aunt Harriet either. She is getting the oak dining room set. It's worth \$12,000 and will look great in her blue-gray dining room, especially if she can convince my mother to give her the silver set.

Rowland was drunk when he read the prayers. Everyone just thinks he's dumb.

Aunt Sarah's Tory Burch boots and David Yurman bangles are all fake. Uncle James doesn't know Aunt Sarah lost her job three months ago. She cried when she pawned her brand name jewelry for fakes and cash. Their son, my cousin Tyler, just had a baby he didn't want. They gave it a family name. I think it may be the only person in this room without secrets yet.

My Grandmother Louisa is having a hard time thinking about her dead sister, because she wants a cigarette. She's wearing their mother's pearls, staring at the stained glass window over the altar. She knows she's beautiful even as an old woman. She's secretly loving this. Everyone is glancing at her, trying not to be noticed, and she's pleased that she has managed to steal her sister's funeral from her. My Grandmother cries beautifully. The tears seem full of secrets. They drop onto her black mink coat.

I haven't told my mother that Great Aunt Harriet and I had (have) a secret. She told me she'd electrocuted the therapy cat that the turtle-faced nurse had given her. Threw it in a full tub with a hairdryer, because the damn thing wouldn't leave her alone during her soaps. She told the nurse it was an accident. "This is our secret," Great Aunt Harriet said, "And secrets make us stronger." If secrets make things stronger, then the people in this room must be strong as the stone arches of the church, able to hold the entirety of a holy building's weight. But they are fragile too, a glass foundation. The one way a secret can solidify and become immortal, I've decided, is if all the secret holders are dead. Until then, we'll watch the glass below us crack like ice and we'll either fall in or build more secrets to float on.

The Grave Keepers of the Mattaponi

What I remember the most about childhood summers is John Michael. The summer we were nine, I remember napping in the shade on the riverbank at three o'clock, when the humidity and the sun were the most punishing. I remember the freckles across his cheekbones and nose, damp fingerprints on white-bread sandwiches, and how the red clay riverbank stained our feet. For weeks, we hauled large stones around on an old blue tarp and in a stolen wheelbarrow with a broken handle to create a dam. We patched holes with mud and reeds like beavers do and by mid-summer, we had blocked a narrow portion of the Mattaponi River enough to have a waist-deep pool to play in. We made fishing poles from long, strong branches and my father's old line. We liked getting catfish the most. Once John Michael got a hook through the eye of a big grey one. He held it like a puppy, rubbing water over its skin, whispering to it, comforting the gasping creature as he carefully removed

the hook from its eye. He placed the fish back in the water, said a prayer and cried on the bank. I never let John Michael see me cry, though I'd known him longer than I'd known anyone else. When a brim I caught swallowed a hook, removing it pulled his lungs out through his mouth. I threw its breathless body into the woods and used the lungs as bait.

After I went to college, John Michael and I only spoke on occasion. He still came to my parents Christmas party every year. A night one summer, we drank beers on his back porch and got a little too drunk, so he walked me home. We got coffee the weekend I had to come home for my grandmother's funeral.

The night before I went back to school for my senior year, John Michael called me at home. "Oh good," he said after I answered, "I'm glad I got you. I thought you might have gone back to school already." John Michael was one of those incredibly readable people, the type of person that makes you believe you're a mind reader and even over the phone I could tell something was wrong. "Sara died," he said, "Do you want to come see her?"

Sara was a sheep John Michael and I had raised. She was born the summer we were eleven and her first-time mother rejected her, leaving us to bottle feed her around the clock, spending many nights with her in the barn, sleeping on the hay. I grabbed a bottle of scotch from the bar before walking down the road to John Michael's.

John Michael was the youngest of five children, all girls except for him. I think that's why his parents, ordinary people by all accounts, named him something

so formal. The Haynes lived in a little grey farmhouse with a green roof and grew a rotation of crops throughout the year. All of John Michael's sisters had left home by the time I went to college, most of them married. Occasionally, they'd come by, bringing their wide-eyed babies in from the city to see their grandmother. Arthritis and dementia hit his father early and while his mother took care of his father, John Michael ran the farm alone, a task which he did surprisingly well. I thought John Michael could take initiative about as well as he lived up to his showy name, but surprisingly the farm seemed to be running as smoothly as ever.

John Michael and I were technically next-door neighbors but our driveways were at least a half-mile apart. As I walked that night, I thought of all the time I'd walked that pavement before. Many times, I remember skipping like a bullfrog trying to keep my bare feet from burning or dodging earthworms after the rain or other nights in Augusts' humidity. The crickets always sounded the same and the dusk turned everything a beautiful shade of blue grey.

When I reached the barn, the last edges of the day's blanket of sun were being pulled away from the horizon. "She's in here," John Michael said rolling the barn door open. Sara looked just like she did as a lamb. I sat beside her, stroking the soft curls between her eyes. I touched her long dark eyelashes. John Michael rubbed her ear. I handed him the bottle of scotch. He handed me an almost full bottle of red wine. "She's so cute," I said, " But she was a real pain in the ass."

"We spoiled her. No wonder she was a brat," he said stroking her chin. For many nights after we'd weaned her off the bottle, we would sneak Sara into my room and I'd let her sleep on the foot of my bed under the patchwork quilt, always

only one little hoof sticking out. On night's when she'd mew too much and I was afraid she'd wake my parents, I'd call John Michael and he'd climb up the trellis and thorough my second story window. He'd sit by my bed, singing and rocking her. Most of the time I'd fall asleep too.

"She was more dog than sheep," he said.

"You're right. She followed you like a dog," I said, "She'd even go in the water for you, if you weren't giving her enough attention."

"She'd sit on the bank and scream till I came and picked her up. Then when she got too big, she had to swim out to me. I think she secretly liked swimming."

"Me too. I want to give her that old patchwork quilt when we bury her."

"That's awesome," he said, "Do you want to go down to the river first?"

"We should," I said.

We'd finished the bottle of wine by then, but we took the scotch. Our path to the river through the cornfield had long ago vanished. We pushed our way through the stalks, holding them back for each other and letting them swish behind us, pausing on occasion to sip more. We stepped from the moon soaked cornfield into the dark forest and in the lack of light my senses heightened. I could here the flick of bird wings as they fled from our path.

We walked quietly into the still water. The narrow river still bulged a bit where we had blocked it, but only a few stones of the dam remained. We stood about waist-deep. A silk-blue heron landed in the reeds a few yards from us. The heron caught a silver fish. It whipped its tail out of the side of the bird's beak. For a

moment, it looked like the heron had caught a bit of moonlight. He moved with incredible fluidity and silence.

We watched him for a few more moments before I moved too quickly threading a lock of hair behind my ear, which startled him into flight. He made a slender shadow on the water. We walked a little further down the river. Hitting rocks and holes as we walked, we swayed like silent sailboats.

“Shhhh,” John Michael said, walking slowly towards the bank. I couldn’t see the bullfrog, but knew that was what he was heading for. He knew exactly where to place his hands above the frog’s head, so that they were in the blind spot between the eyes. He scooped the bullfrog from the reeds quickly like an eagle and held it out to me. The frog’s yellow eyes looked at me blankly like gold coins. “Do you think we’ve been catching the same damn bull frog all these years?” I asked him, feeling sort of nostalgic and drunk, “I swear they all look just the same.”

“Well no. Possibly. Bullfrogs in captivity live about 12 years,” he said.

“Didn’t actually think so,” I said.

“Want to see if we can beat our record?” He asked.

“What is it now?”

“Fourteen,” he said.

“Sure,” I said, “Let’s see how close we can get to it.”

John Michael held the bullfrog out and half tossed it, half let it jump from his hands. The rule was that we had to be at least an arms length apart and we couldn’t move until the frog started its jump. I caught the frog easily, right around his ribs.

“Good catch. One,” he said.

“Ready?” I said. I open my hands so the frog was flat on my palms. It froze for a second like it was trying to decide where to jump. As soon as I felt it move, I flicked my wrists up to give it height. I gave that bullfrog a little too much height and it went almost straight up instead of out and up.

“Two,” John Michael said as he caught the frog well before it hit the water. “Almost too much hang time on that one.”

“I thought it might come down and splash us in the face,” I said.

We got to eleven before the frog made a really good jump and hit the water before I even realized it’d left JM’s hands.

“A pretty good one,” he said giving me a high five.

We sat on the bank and finished the scotch. I wrote our names in the wet earth. John Michael took reeds and folded them into little crosses like we did palms at church the Sunday before Easter. “For Sara,” he said and I made some too. We were quiet for a while.

I took the quilt into the barn. “Have you decided where to bury her?” I asked John Michael.

“I’ve actually dug her grave already,” he said.

“Wow, you’re efficient when you’re drunk,” I said.

“I actually dug it earlier,” he said.

“How are we going to get her there?”

“I can carry her. Even old and fat she’s not that heavy. Just hold the door for me.”

The grass under our feet was cool and damp as we walked. I could hear the bullfrogs from the river, the crickets and the cicadas, but somehow still it seemed quiet. The moon was incredibly bright and its light bathed everything in soft gray.

“By the cherry tree?” I asked when we reached the gravesite.

“Yeah she liked to eat the bark from the trunk. Almost killed it when it was young,” John Michael said. John Michael planted that tree for me when we were nine. We had just learned about George Washington in school. My father got me an entirely colonial outfit: petticoat, powdered wig, tricorn hat and all. JM got me the cherry tree, rolled it down from the nursery three miles away in the wheelbarrow.

“It even bears fruit now in June, most years. I’ll save some for you this year,” he said.

He placed Sara in the ground. I laid the quilt over her. John Michael pulled one hoof out from under it. “Good idea,” I said. We pushed the dirt mounds into the grave. I was surprised how quickly there was no longer a hole in the ground. We smoothed the soil and John Michael pulled the little crosses from his pocket and placed them in a neat line. The air had grown thicker. I wasn’t really drunk anymore and I could feel the mosquitoes biting my ankles. “It feels like it might rain,” I said.

“I think it might too,” John Michael said, “Do you want me to walk you back?”

“No, I’ll be fine,” I said reaching around him for a hug. I hadn’t remembered him being that much taller than me. We stayed there for longer than we had before, my arms around his ribs, his hands on my shoulder blades. We both smelled like damp soil. “I’ll call you when I’m home on break,” I said as we let each other go. I

looked at the stars the whole way home and thought about how John Michael didn't have freckles anymore.

At first I thought the tapping was a dream. I got out of bed to unlatch the window for John Michael. "I'm surprised you didn't pull the trellis off the side of the house," I said as JM stepped in.

"I probably shouldn't go back down that way," he said, "Pretty sure there was some splintering." I didn't ask him why he came, because he probably didn't know the answer. We read pieces of my old diaries. We had forgotten that Sara loved clovers. We had forgotten a few fights we had over cheating at checkers. We had forgotten that we'd made sailboats out of watermelons. JM plucked a few songs softly on my beginner guitar from memory. The moonlight came through the window and over his shoulder. The shadow it cast looked just like it did when he was a little boy, long eyelashes and sloped nose. He hummed a soft song, something I didn't know I remembered. His voice was deeper and smoother than it had been and eventually we fell asleep.

What Will We Do When We Are Old?

As soon as it started raining today, why do you think I thought about it ending and the sun coming out again? I could almost see the birds shaking droplets from damp feathers, calling to one another, eating earthworms from puddles and the light making the drops on the tips of leaves sparkle. Do you think, maybe, it's because I feel that now we are at the true beginning of us, that I keep thinking about the end? Maybe it's because of our wedding last month and this daughter we'll see in September, all things that are new? When your mother brought over the tiny white christening gown yesterday, why did I think of funerals? And the soft white silk of a casket? Why do I keep picturing you old and hunched? Like the middle doesn't matter, like only the choices we made now will be the direct decider of forever?

What will we do when we are old, Jay? What will we do on Saturdays? Will we go to the café bookstore on the corner of Elm and Main to read? Maybe on rainy

March afternoons like today? Remember the few times we did that our last year of high school? Remember how we felt so smart and mature? So old? Will you find a book within minutes? A thick one about World War II? While I read the back of twelve or so books, making mental notes and ranking them in my head, will you grumble? And tell me to hurry, so we can find two seats together? Will you order oolong tea with milk and sugar, your cup looking like the grey sky? Will you get two apple crumble muffins, because you know I will eat all of yours if you don't? If the only table that's left is the one by the doorway, which floods in cold each time the door opens, will you get frustrated enough to go sit in the stacks alone? Will you fold the cover of your beautiful new book around? Do you know I hate it when you do that? Because when you finish it you'll leave it on our coffee table or beside table, cover curled like a fish tail, can you not do that?

What about Sundays? Will we still go to church? Will you lead me, both of us hunched like shy geese, to our pew by the stained glass window of the Lord and the lamb? Will we be able to kneel for prayer or will we ask God to forgive our aching knees and other sins from the edge of the oak pew? Will the church always have those three windowed walls that pour colored light off white pillars and the soft skin and eyelashes of children? And when it rains, will the drops on the glass sound like tiny timpani drums and will the church fill with the orange glow of candlelight and dusty bulbs? "Will we still come here when we are them?" I asked you pointing at an old couple last Sunday, the woman in a red sunflower hat, the man's eyes as cloudy as June sky. "Yes," you said, "At least on Easter." And if we pray hard enough, will you get to be an architect? Do you know I love to watch the way you draw

skyscrapers on napkins? And the way you look at buildings, which to me seem to be cold grey monsters, but to you they are art and glory, like how I imagine God looks at the oceans?

After church, will we make turkey and cheese sandwiches with white bread (I'll let you have it then because it doesn't matter when you're old) on chipped blue plates for lunch each day? The ones you put on our registry that I always hated? I won't say a thing when you cut it down the middle sloppily instead of cleanly and diagonally. Why have you always done it that way? Will it be even sloppier when your hands start to fumble like all old men's do, like my grandfathers and fathers? Will your teacup shake just slightly enough for me to notice, hovering over your lips?

After Sunday night dinner can we play Candyland? Maybe our grandchildren can come over and play too? Will you apologize when you accidentally curse at cards that fling you back thirty spaces? When we're old, will you see our daughter and me as one of those cards? A double red that threw you off course? Or will we sit on the back porch with the late-summer fireflies lighting dimly, sleepily, eating a chocolate each, too tired to speak or pull a game out?

Do you think our lives will be simpler when we're old? Happier? Light and sweet like daisies or dancings? On Mondays, when the tickets are far cheaper, can we go to ballet? Just a few times a year? Will you put on a mustard yellow tie with red and purple fish and I'll wear a red suit and onyx earrings neither of which match our orthopedic shoes. Will I watch you smile and your eyes soften through the thick lens of your glasses in the stage's leftover light? Will we hold each other's warm

plump hands? Will we go to fancy dinners with our friends? Will we indulge in creamy bisques and high fat dressings before lobster and prime rib? Will we eat rich crème brûlées and chocolate tarts with every meal? Will we have a candy bowl on the coffee table, which only we would use?

On Tuesday evenings, will we go on walks down Brewer Lane in the late evening? In the summer, the sky would be purple and the frogs would bellow like drums under the cricket sopranos, the oaks above casting friendly shadows. The porch lights and the street lights near the little brick houses across the lake would reflect on the plum-colored water as golden-yellow orbs, and there on the ripples a pair of ducks would swim through the light, illuminating their ink-black feathers for only a moment. “A couple like us out for a swim,” would you say? Could we sit on a bench and watch until the purple turned to night and the ducks were part of the horizon?

Or will our Tuesdays be like today? Will you still care when I burn the chicken or over-spice the collard greens? Every time you break one of those stupid blue plates I don't care, you know that? I hate them anyway. Will you go eat Sheppard's Pie and boiled potatoes at your mother's and leave me to eat alone? But she will be dead when we are old, won't she? Instead, will you go eat at the little diner in town? Will a young woman, who is my age now, look at you eating by yourself on the corner stool and feel sad for you? See your wedding band and think you a widower?

If I'm not dead before you, can you still tell me what to do? As soon as you get home? How to fold your laundry? How to make eggs the right way? Which blouses

to wear? How to make your after work drink, still three cubes of ice when we are old? Will you still mutter under your breath? Will you still speak out of the side of your mouth? Will you take the damn elevator if you have to? Remind me why I'm always wrong?

Will you let me have hobbies? I think I'll want to paint when I'm old; could you give your poor old wife some money for a canvas or two? Will you hide money from me since I don't know what to do with it? Will I still buy stupid things like fringed bathroom curtains? Will your voice crack more because you are old? Because it's tired? Will I be quicker than you?

How hard do you think I'll be able to slam a door then? Will you cry in the middle of the kitchen floor? Tonight was the most pathetic thing I've ever seen you do. Will I still make you a sandwich as a make up? Will you go out the next day and buy me a new dress? Can old dogs learn new tricks? I want a pink one for tomorrow. But old ladies want hats don't they? To cover their hair maybe? Do you think their heads get cold? Will you be bald?

Should I get you a plaid cap for Christmas? What about holidays (days less boring than today)? Will you still want to light sparklers on the fourth of July? We can't do that when we're old can we? If our hands fumble? Will we go select pumpkins in the fall? Will you let me get the ill-shaped oval one that I love? Even if it's a little heavier and pricier than the others? Can we carve them? Fill them with yellow candles? Roast the seeds in the oven with garlic salt and cumin? Can we cut down Christmas trees every year at the Brooks farm? You know I feel bad for the ugly ones; we will always have an ugly tree. Can you deal with that? If we have to

get a fake one, which is definitely more realistic, will you decorate it with me? Can we fill it with handmade ornaments our children will make? Even when the paper fades and the macaroni cracks? Can we play Christmas hymns?

At Christmas service, can our hands be trusted to hold a candle? Over salted ham and roasted turkey, will you tell all the grandchildren the story of you, the billy goat and the briar bush and give them each \$10 from your billfold? Will each show you their new toy? Will the littlest one curl in your lap and place his cheek on your warm chest? Will you not drink too many Bloody Marys and get too drunk? Will your vomit freeze in the snow? Will you even be embarrassed? Will you make me count your drinks?

Even without alcohol, will your speech slur? Will I forget to turn off the stove? Will we have strong enough senses of smell to notice the gas? Will I light a cigarette and set the whole kitchen aflame? Do you know how bad I want a cigarette right now? Will I die crying to you from under blue flames? Will you hear me cry to you and tell you I love you or will your hearing aids be turned off? You would die too, probably slower than me right? While our cats pant in the heat, pawing at the windows and crying for you too? Or maybe our daughter will cut our gas off. Think I'll be so demented I'll try to cook anyway, confused over why the soup's still cold? Will we have to be reminded to eat? Will we have to be dressed and cleaned like infants? Will the children sell the car? So we don't crash into a tree just running out to grab some milk?

Or will we lay hospital bed by hospital bed, playing opera over breathing tubes and coughing? Will our daughter and her children come to see us? Will our

eyes meet hers? Or the ceiling? Will she think we won't notice if the visit's a day after thanksgiving? Will gravy dribble off our lips like saliva from a dog's? Will you remember the Thanksgiving before we were married at your father's farm, where we walked in the cornfield under a warm-orange sky? Can you ever forget the sky-wide flock of black birds flying overhead like a mist, and how they flew away like a memory and left us there feeling like we'd just been born?

When funerals come as frequently as the Sunday paper and we've been to so many services we know almost all the mourning prayers, will we stop going to some? Will we decide our attendance based on the soap schedule on the TV? When our friends slowly start to leave this world and most of our wardrobes are black, can I make stew for you and I? Like when your father died? Can we sit in the kitchen where the large, empty dining room table won't swallow us? Or will you go into the bedroom or the back porch swing and leave me the TV remote, though I don't want it? Will you say more than goodnight? Can we cry together?

Will our lives become a parade of doctor's appointments and a shifting blur of pastel art prints and blue paper gowns? Will skipping a dentist appointment to go eat muffins and read at a café be our excitement for the week? The month? Should we make a bet now? On the number of pills we'll take each day, you seventeen and me twelve?

Will our children have your green eyes? Do you know I want them to have your eyes not mine, because they remind me of the river in spring, cool and clean? Will your eyes always be that way? Or will they dim and cloud like a morning fog?

On better days, in our room at the nursing home, will you build dollhouses for our granddaughters and paint them pink and yellow? Will you glue together tiny green shutters and paint keys on the pianos with a fine tip brush? And if you can still play the violin, will you do it for me? Even if its not perfect and the bow squeaks or the sound is dull under weak fingers? Will you let me sing with you? Even if I'm flat?

Will we go on a bitter Thursday morning, cold dew on the tips of gray grass, finches puffed on barren branches, under a colorless sky to pick our funeral plots? Will you want to lie side by side under a pink dogwood too? Which, come spring will drop soft pink petals over new green grass like parade confetti? Would there be a robin in the tree to sing for us? Wait do you want to be cremated?

When you are dying and we know it, will we hold hands and cup each other's faces? Will you look at me like you did tonight? Like a coward? Or will you look at me like you did the night we broke into your granddad's barn and rode the horses bareback to the lake, where we tied them to a tree and let them graze at the thistle in the velvet blue dusk, when we laid by the lake on a barn blanket, dipped our toes in the water to make the stars ripple and reform, like we could control the universe, that dawn when we awoke, the reeds and water glowing as if a fire of gold and we felt as if something new had begun and we had created it and the possibility of riding the horses on forward forever to the next stream, the next river, the next ocean was real. Can you be with me when I die?

Things I Wanted as a Child

I wanted hair like my mother's; I wanted curls that would bounce in the sunlight like ribbon on birthday presents. I wanted hair that was not red or blond, hair that was different. Strawberry blond, she had called it.

I wanted chocolate chip pancakes with strawberry jam for breakfast.

I wanted to pick strawberries again with her, like I did that one time, when the sun warm-ripened them a bit and she smiled at me and pulled the sticky, blond strands of hair from my face, laughing, and not being mad that I'd dribbled strawberry guts onto my white, eyelet dress.

I wanted a different pet. One that would make other kids jealous, a pet that would make Billy Fink bite his lip till it bled. I wanted a turtle or a deodorized skunk, maybe a monkey that I could teach to dance with maracas and feed bananas and figs and maybe I could comb his hair, sing him songs and tell him secrets and dress him in a pair of red plaid overalls and a matching cap.

I wanted that sun-yellow dress with the macaw parrots embroidered on it like the one Libbie Parrish had. I watched her from my dusty window when she went into St. Ann's church across the street, her mother warning her to keep her white leather oxfords clean. I even wanted that. I wanted something to roll my eyes at. Parents are supposed to know everything about their children, every want and every weakness.

Daddy had green eyes and I wanted them to lose the fire behind them. Sometimes the veins in his eyes were as red as the coils of the hot stove, but sometimes those same veins looked like tiny parasitic worms sucking the energy from them. I thought maybe that was why sometimes he didn't look at me when I spoke, that maybe his eyes were just too tired. I wanted his eyes to be less drained and cleaner. I wanted them to be calm and soothing like a green spring. I was afraid of Daddy's eyes and their unpredictability, because I didn't understand them.

I wanted to live near the water somewhere. I wanted to learn to swim. I thought it was the closest you could get to flying.

I wanted to watch little woodland birds in a forest by the farmhouse I would live in if I could have everything I wanted. I wanted a wood I could hide in, a place I could sit with the spotted hound dog I would have and read old novels and I could sing with the birds to my dog and myself. He would lick at my hand and I'd tell him that he was a good dog, because he'd just want to be loved by me.

I wanted a voice like my mother's, like how I remembered it when she rubbed my back and sang me lullabies about blue birds, blackberries, sailors and sweet dreams. She promised me she'd buy me a guitar for my birthday. "You promise?" I'd ask. "I promise," she'd say and she'd tuck the quilt she made me over my arms and say, "Sleep tight, little rabbit."

"I promise" is what I wanted the pastor to say when I asked him if he was sure my mom had gone to heaven. But that's not what he said. "All those who follow the Lord's word and are righteous will seek eternal refuge in His kingdom," is what he said. I memorized those words, let them tumble in my head like Daddy's blue jeans in the wash. I wanted to know if that was something special he said to me about my mother or if it was simply an old, ingrained word sequence like how I can play chopsticks on the piano or say sorry when I'm bad.

I wanted there to be music, but there wasn't. Maybe Daddy could have played his violin. I remember the pastor reading the Bible to the small service, his stick-like legs and arcing back looking painful and arthritic. I remember though it wasn't cold that the people huddled together like black hens. The vibrant oranges and yellows that dappled the trees had fallen and browned. They'd been crushed into dust, dust that mixed with the slush from the winter snow that came early.

I wished everyone had been wearing yellow, because that was her favorite color. Instead, I watched hands rub over black coats at the shoulders and cheeks push into lapels. A grackle landed on a curl of the rod-iron gate. He looked slick like he was made of emerald feathers dipped in black, oil-based ink. His beak was the color of graphite and it reached out and plucked a red berry from a green branch. The berry was small and round like Christmas beads, but so red it looked like poison and when it went down it bulged the black feathers of his throat. I wished he had choked.

If he had it would have confirmed for me that quick death of the beautiful and the misunderstood was something that God did to everyone not just my mother. I wanted to know that was true.

"Is that true, Mama?" I always asked skeptically. "Yes," she would tell me, "Just for you, of course." On the sides of dirt roads and highways and little run down shacks each late September little bunches of yellow wild flowers grow. You probably never noticed them before. "Just for your birthday, September." "And you couldn't wait to

have me; you were so excited for September and for me to come,” I’d say waiting for her confirmation. “Yes, Daddy and I would say: September, September and she’ll be here!” I was born on the 23rd. “Good thing you made it in time. October is an ugly name for a girl,” she’d say to watch me laugh.

I wanted to remember the name of that tea, the pretty pink tea that tasted like sweet roses. Our neighbor, Mr. Wu, gave it to me that night at his tiny kitchen table with the green and red sea dragons on it. Then, I had wanted to figure out why Daddy had pulled me from bed and handed me, still in my pink sheep pajamas, to Mr. Wu. “Daddy?” I called over Mr. Wu’s shoulder. It was the first time he looked at me like he didn’t know my name, like maybe he didn’t want to. Mr. Wu let me fall asleep on his couch with the cartoons still blinking purple shadows.

Ectopic. I wanted to know what that word meant. Why it was whispered at the wake after her funeral. I heard Daddy say it a few times on the phone. I thought maybe it was from the Bible, but I couldn’t really read that well yet and the Bible doesn’t have pictures. We used to read a Dr. Seuss book, Mom and I, and I memorized a lot of the words, but after a while I couldn’t remember them, so I just looked at the pictures and colors and made my own stories, different ones each time. My stories had trolls and frogs and pocket giraffes. Every little girl had a mother and 1,000 dresses. I couldn’t make up a story for what ectopic meant, but I guessed ectopic was what God used to take my mother from me.

Sometimes I wanted a willow tree to lie under, so I could hide and catch the breeze like a secret. I could lie so still that the baby rabbits would come and chew at the clovers without noticing me. I'd let their cotton tails remind me of clouds and in those clouds I could rest and think of her and the bunnies' long dark eyelashes would remind me of my mother's and I could believe she sent them to me for company, because she knew I'd love them.

I choked once on a jawbreaker. I wanted air. I think that was the most I ever wanted something. Daddy came and beat on my back till the candy sputtered from my throat and rolled in sticky drool across the linoleum kitchen floor. "You shouldn't be eating candy," he said.

I wanted no chores. I hated scrubbing the floor. That floor was evil. One time, I stepped on a large piece of glass that Daddy must have forgotten he'd broken. He'd be angry if I told him I'd cut my foot. So I put hydrogen peroxide on it and bit my check so I wouldn't cry as I pulled the brown glass out of the pad of my foot. I hid the bloody socks under my bed.

I wanted to know where the lost things go, things like socks, pencils and answers. Was there a stockpile somewhere of things lost by little girls? "Little girls are for making messes and losing things," my mother told me once. "I do both of those things," I told her. "You do," she said. "Now go find a hair ribbon; it's almost time to leave for school."

I wanted her to be there for Christmas. I couldn't tie the red ribbon in my hair right and I think God may have looked down on me for not looking nice in his house.

I wanted a bigger house so I could have siblings. I wanted one brother, an older one, and one sister, a younger one. And I wanted them to be named August and January. We'd be Augie, Janie and Ember for short. And they could play with me and when I took Janie's doll she would scream at me, "September no fair!" We'd play with blocks and board games and August could read to me and I could read to Janie. And when Daddy went alone to his room for hours without speaking to me, we could keep each other company and August could play the piano so we couldn't hear Daddy crying.

I wanted not to cry. Ever. But when Daddy raised his voice my eyes couldn't help but feel like puddles.

I wanted not to be clumsy. When the teachers would ask about the little plum-colored marks on my skin. "My mother said that little girls are for making messes and bruising things," I'd tell them.

I wanted to not tell lies. Daddy's fine, I told grandma. We do go to church. He still plays the violin, all the time. Yes, he did remember to get me an Easter present; he got me a kite. No, not a kitten, a kite. Yes, we flew it last weekend in the park.

“We don’t always get what we want,” she told me once, “You can’t always win; sometimes there isn’t even a winner.” Sometimes they’d bicker, sometimes they’d fight, sometimes he’d play the violin and she’d sing and you’d have to believe in God it was so beautiful. I thought not getting what you want is the only thing that can make you sad. Mommy wanted more children and Daddy wanted to have enough money to go to architect school. And they’d fight about that and hairdryers and the color of the front door. I wanted my mother to live and she died, but we can’t always get what we want.

I wanted him to push me on the swing set again, softly like he used to. I wanted to hear him whisper close to my face, “I love you sweetheart.” And when I heard it I didn’t want his breath to smell like that, like it always did now, like whiskey.

I wanted to throw up after I tasted it. I just wanted to see why he liked it so much. I noted exactly where the bottle was and I was so careful not to drop it. I spit the dark liquid straight out of my mouth onto the floral wallpaper. I scrubbed it so Daddy wouldn’t notice. Luckily, it didn’t poison the flowers.

I wanted to lie in a field of flowers like we’d done as a family when we went to visit my grandparents one summer in Maine. Lupine, the flowers were called. They looked like soft, purple dusters. We ate the blueberries that we’d picked and if you haven’t tasted Maine blueberries you could never know how great they are, just like you’ll never know my mother.

I wanted to keep it. "It's too small," he said. "But Mama made it for me," I pleaded. He threw the dress in the kitchen trash. I scrubbed the lace and the little blue, printed roses under the outdoor hose and waited in vain for my doll to grow big enough to fit it or for me to shrink back into it, to shrink back to a time when Daddy would have said that even beautiful clothing couldn't make Mommy and I more beautiful, but that dress was like adding extra sugar to the jam.

"Did you get enough dinner?" He'd come into my bedroom, wake me up and ask on nights when I'd been bad or he'd be sad. "Yes, Daddy thank you," I'd say. But he'd carry me pajamas and all and buckle me in, take me to McDonald's and order me a hot-fudge Sunday. Many times I'd fall asleep even before I finished it, sometimes even before we'd hit the drive through.

I learned to ride a bike on my own. I rode around the church parking lot, hoping maybe one day that summer Daddy and I could ride down to the river for a picnic under the poplars. I hoped he'd be impressed at how quickly I had learned. I think he wanted me to be smart like him.

I wanted to ask if ectopic could get him too. I was worried that if Daddy or I were bad enough, God would take him too. He went away to Philadelphia for two days to get building permits for his boss. I couldn't fall asleep at Mr. Wu's this time, but I

wanted to, so I prayed that I could fall asleep till Tuesday when I'd wake up to Daddy's arms and maybe a present from the city.

I broke a string on his violin. I just wanted to hear it make sound, but I broke a string, the little one on the end that makes the high-pitched fairy sounds when you pluck it. I walked four blocks alone in the August humidity to the music shop in town and broke my piggy right there to pay for a new string. I was glad he wasn't mad I think, but he hadn't even noticed I'd been gone.

On the last day of summer, Daddy and I needed to go to the store, because we were fresh out of everything even cereal and peanut butter. "How about a sort of special dinner tonight?" Daddy asked, "Look watermelons are on special. Go grab one you can carry." We put egg salad on white bread and had a spinach, goat cheese and strawberry salad. "I like spinach. You don't have to cut it," Daddy said. I had forgotten he was silly. The watermelon was our dessert. "Bet you can't spit the seeds farther off the porch than I can," Daddy teased, challenging me with his eyebrows. "Little girls don't spit," I told him, but don't worry I spit anyway and beat him. He pulled a strand of hair from my cheek that had been juice-plastered on by the melon pulp. "Go wash your face," he said.

I wanted her to make him smile again. I wanted her to fix dinner again. Even if she burnt it and Daddy got mad. Even if they screamed at each other so loud I had to

cover my ears, even if Mom broke plates on the floor. Even if they didn't come to tuck me in together that night and even if Daddy had to sleep away or on the couch.

I wanted to sleep in their bed again. Daddy never let me do that anymore. "She's scared Ray," my mother would say. "All right," he'd say and he'd go and get my toy stuffed lamb. "Goodnight little rabbit," he'd say as he'd tuck me into their cool sheets between them.

I wanted a pet rabbit and I actually got one for my 9th birthday that following fall, but Ichabod chewed out of his cage and got away. Libbie Parrish said a hawk probably ate it. Billy Fink said, "Your Dad probably did." Daddy said he would fix the cage. I wanted to fix the hole in him, to make him feel better, to watch his hands play the violin again without shaking. I hoped maybe he could teach me to play too. I wanted to know how. I wanted to know if he could love me anymore. I wanted to know if he could love me more than he missed her.

Pros and Cons of Being an Alcoholic

Pro: You get an automatic few hours of relief everyday you're an alcoholic, even if wife number two didn't work out or almost-wife number three cheated on you. And all these failed relationships aren't blamed on you or your dark soul, but can instead be blamed on your "disease". I consider alcoholic as an acceptable profession for a widower, which I am, which I became at 29. I've done it for almost 27 years.

Pro: If you are an alcoholic, you are friends with everyone you see on evening walks down Brewer Lane. The late night joggers or the teenaged lovers out too late, they smile shyly at you. When you reach it, the lake's not deep enough there in this summer's drought for you to drown. If you've got some bread or any food really, you can feed the little ducks under the purple summer sky and not feel lonely, if you're already a little drunk. In a few moments, slowly watching the ducks bob for water-logged crumbs, you won't feel the humidity anymore and the dusk will turn to darkness. The moon will come out.

Pro: You'll spend a lot of time just thinking about small, but beautiful things like ripples in water, sipping slowly from a flask of probably bourbon. As lines blur, it will become difficult to determine the real moon from the reflection on the calm lake. If the ducks swim through it, even then you won't know it. Because how could you tell if they are floating across the water or gliding across the sky? In this sort of drunken haze, you get to know more about life, because you're not busy doing things, except tending a glass or bottle or flask. You think about all the sad too: how you never became an architect, that your daughter doesn't call, that your grandchildren will never see a white tiger. They get more ridiculous as you go.

Pro: If you find a bottle in your pocket and empty it, throw it in the water. It'll either float or break on the bottom on a rock. From my experience, it's 50/50. Look closely it'll glint in the silver light.

Con: People like to beat drunks for their empty wallets. If you're an alcoholic and you see several dark figures, run, hide. Sit in a dumpster. Close the lid. Let the summer humidity mix with the leftovers from Costianni's and swirl into your nose and clothing. You can still sip, just don't let them here your lips pop and smack off the bottle as they run by. There will be no light and you'll think about all the other times you've hidden like a coward. Remind yourself how much of child you are. Remember when you broke four of your wife's plates? You spent the night at your parents. When it's numbingly quiet again, peek out of the top. Keep your head alert. The bars only a few blocks away now.

Pro: As you get drunker at Spalding's, trust me, bad memories will come to your head. But don't you think they'd float there anyway? Alcohol or not? You can look at your wife's death in a better way. You only married her because she was pregnant right? Remember how bad a cook she was? Remember those over-spiced collard greens? They tasted like sauerkraut. Remember how angry you got? Even at little things? You remember the good things too like summer evenings on porch swings, sleeping by the water or your daughter in her yellow Easter dress.

Pro: You get something to struggle against. As an alcoholic you get pity when you don't deserve it. You get hope too. Alcoholics can always get better. I'll tell you hope is a pretty important thing. Some dumb girl will buy you a song on the jukebox if you're nice. Try something where the words are easy and familiar.

Con: Being an alcoholic can be expensive. You have to budget a bit. *Pro in a con: It won't matter. If you're really an alcoholic, you won't need Grey Goose. Anything in a plastic bottle is fine.* If you're an alcoholic and you're not drunk it's a problem. You will run out of cash and Billy, the bartender, won't take your IOU's any more. Drunkenness will start to turn into headache, even quicker than you think.

Pro: When you leave the bar you'll feel great in the warm summer rain. You'll stop to think about how it smells and memories of rain will come to the fringes of your brain so you can almost see them again.

Pro: The walk home won't feel long at all.

Con: In reality alcohol is a depressant. And it will remind you, what shit you are. How you sat at the window and watched you're little girl learn to ride her bike on her own, because her mother was dead and her father was a drunk. You'll sit in the street where she fell, knees bleeding and crying alone. You'll cry because you're drunk and wet. You think about her getting up and on the bike again. You'll realize what a good kid she was and that you were no part of that. She escaped you. Glass

will cut your palm. Remember you threw a bottle out the window last night, idiot. Why the hell do you throw things?

Pro: When you die, it will be a relief. And you'll think about dying a lot.

Pro: There's no need to find your key, because you forgot to lock the door.

Pro: There's still a little liquor in the bottle.

Con: Your lime is half dried on the counter.

Con: You spilled your last drink all over yourself on the way up the stairs.

Pro: You'll fall asleep easy.

Con: But you'll have bad dreams. You'll hear your daughter crying again, just like she did a few nights after Annaliese died. When this was a real moment and not a dream, you lay in your bed and watched as the last brown leaves fell from the tree outside your window. She stopped crying for you eventually. But here in your drunken dream, you'll walk into September's room. You'll see her snot-faced and eyes swollen, starrng at the moon, calling for her parents, neither of which will come to her. You'll wake from this dream in her bed. You'll call your daughter on the phone over and over again and listen to her husband's voice on the answering machine.

Rind

My cousin's name was Jimmy. But my father will tell you I never had a cousin, except my mother's sister's girl, Molly. The real Jimmy or the Jimmy my lonely childhood mind created was lanky, but strong like a well-bred, new-born colt. He lived on a pumpkin farm and we'd gone out to a clearing in the woods to throw rotting pumpkins, which his Daddy (who I only have one hazy image of) said we could do with what we wanted. We threw them at trees and rocks watching their rinds break open. Jimmy told me he had to run to the barn to grab something. I remember sitting in the forest alone on the cold earth, surrounded by dead pumpkins and something about this made me feel sad or guilty. The sound of hallow pumpkins rupturing floated over and over in my head.

"A real Samurai sword," Jimmy said when he returned, showing me. He said he'd gotten it for his birthday. "Pull," he said and I'd throw a pumpkin in the air and he'd slice it clean in half with a sort of hacking sound. "You try," he said. I was shy

and nervous but something about the stickiness, the shine of the blade and the feel of the handle in my palm pushed my curiosity over fear. "Go," I said. Jimmy threw the pumpkin and I swung as hard as I could. I saw a flash of silver and gold sunlight. I remember the light wooden handle, bladeless in my hand. I heard it too, the sound of something sharp breaking something hollow. That sound is what makes me feel that this is real and not imagination.

He was the first thing I'd seen dead. Jimmy's blue eyes were open, his face still soft, chapped lips slightly parted. The blade in his rib cage had warm, viscous blood coming out around it. I pulled the blade from his chest and the sound it made was the same as a knife in a ripe pumpkin.

The blade was still in my hand when I whipped open the back door. I remember our mothers were drinking full goblets of red wine and it had begun to darken their lips. I can't remember what I said or if I said anything at all. I just kept thinking about rotting pumpkins. When pumpkins decay, they nourish the seeds inside them and keep them warm. I wondered if Jimmy had seeds to grow inside him and if he lay in the forest broken forever, if something could grow from him, if he could exist beyond his hollowness.

Under the Cranberry Bog

It was the first year Joel had decided to wet harvest his cranberries, because he no longer felt shame in letting water do his work. He had flooded the bog the day before and was walking out to see if a night in the water had beckoned the little berries from the safety of their bushes. The water was covered in swirls of ruby red and tufts of the tallest bushes shot sporadically from the depths. In the center of the water, still and calm, was what on first glance may have looked like the sails of a sinking miniature sailboat. It took a moment for Joel to realize that it was a woman lying face down in the water. Joel ran into the water crushing bushes beneath his feet as he ran to the center of the bog. It was only about waist deep where she was. He rolled her onto her back in his arms, surprised not by her weight but her stiffness. In the stillness of the water, the fall trees surrounding the bog reflected

over the white of her dress and skin. The blurred reflection of Joel's face floated over her neck. Her hair was the color in between red and chestnut, her body small; she was maybe eighteen or twenty. The color of her irises was hidden by half-closed eyelids.

As he carried her from the bog, they parted the red, her fingers sweeping berries. The coroner would have to drive out from Blue Hill. It may take an hour or so and he was cold and wet. The entire walk up to the house cold water dripped off the tips of her hair and the lace edges of her capped sleeves onto the dried amber grass and browning leaves. He laid her on a woolen blanket by the fireplace and lit a fire. He opened one eye and saw it's golden-brown color, before closing it and the other. He placed her pruning hands in her lap and laid a patchwork quilt over her shoulders to feet. He called the police and sat by the fire, put on Patti Page and reread the same page of his book.

No one recognized the girl. The coroner zipped her into a clean white body bag and promised to keep Joel updated. Joel put the quilt in the washing machine. He went to the diner in town for dinner. The dead girl found in the cranberry bog hadn't reached the town rumor mill yet because only Sandy, Joel's favorite waitress, spoke to him. He ate meatloaf and potatoes and had blackberry pie for dessert.

Joel often went to bed as late as possible, falling asleep first in his fading, red arm chair, so that when he finally lay in bed he didn't have to be aware of his loneliness for long before sleep took him away. Joel had grown up in that house. His

father, like most other men in Maine, was a lobsterman. His mother worked at the pants factory until it was shut down when Joel was small. Joel worked summers on the bay lobstering and fall's harvesting cranberries. The girl he'd almost married went to college down south. Every summer she'd come home and Joel would take her out on the lobster boat. But Joel was too simple for Celia and she became a lawyer in Boston instead of a lobsterman's wife. On occasion, she'd call him drunk.

He awoke to "The Tennessee Waltz" playing. The fire, which should have been nothing but embers by then, was still aflame. Sitting in the pool of its light was the girl in the white dress, stringing cranberries onto black thread. "Hello, Miss?" he said, half aware she was dream. She looked up at him, eyes round and unblinking. The cranberries were coming from nowhere, appearing in small handfuls in her palms. Each time she'd finish a foot or so she'd loop it around her neck like a scarf. Joel thought that if he tried to control his dream too much he'd wake, so he asked, "Can I help?" The girl spun her head over and a spool of black thread was there. She pulled a needle from her hair, threaded it for him and placed a handful of cranberries in his palm. They worked quietly, timelessly, until dawn's pure light came through the window and they had yards of cranberries beaded on the thread.

The girl took the needle from Joel's hand and tied the end of his strand to the end of hers. She looped a yard or so through her palm and around her elbow. She walked out the front door letting the extra yards drag behind her, each berry skipping in an identical clink over the threshold. When Joel got outside, the girl was already up in the oak tree in the front yard. She wrapped the cranberry garland around branches slowly and smoothly like sewing. "Careful up there," Joel said feeling

stupid for protecting the safety of a fake, dead girl. There was even more garland than he thought because the girl was able to cover the whole tree; it reminded Joel of red Christmas lights.

She motioned Joel inside. Joel thought for a moment how pleasant this dream was. Through the window they looked at the tree. It had lost almost all of its leaves already, the few remaining though still a vibrant orange. A yard or so of garland dangled from the end of each branch, such that the tree almost looked like a red weeping willow. "It's beautiful," Joel said, "Thank you, for decorating my tree." She put a finger to her lips, pointed at the window. A little yellow finch appeared on a middle branch and pulled a berry from the strand, as he swallowed the feathers around his neck bulged.

The girl smiled and looked at him. "Oh, for the birds," he said. She nodded. "He's very cute. My favorites are the chickadees. My mother liked the wood thrushes," he said. The girl had gotten so close to the window, that her nose had actually touched the glass. She smiled again, but continued to face the window.

Joel poured tea into his favorite teacups and returned to the window to hand the girl a cup. She held it. Slowly, more and more creatures came, grey squirrels, robins, cardinals and blue jays. Soon, the girl set her cup on the windowsill and left through the front door without a gesture toward Joel.

But Joel followed her down the hill to the cranberry bog. All the fruit had come off the bushes and the gap where the girl's body had been was filled with berries, creating a flat red blanket between the trees.

The girl walked out into the bog about waist-deep. Slowly, she sunk underwater. After a few moments, the cranberries erased the round break in the berries the girl had created. Joel did not rush after her, because the water was cold and he would wake soon.

Joel was about to turn back to the house when she emerged across the bog, unhurried like a turtle taking a breath. She stood, shook the water from her hair and walked into the forest.

This is when Joel expected to wake up, for the dream to end, for his white ceiling to appear above him. And when it didn't, he walked to the house, stared at the still full teacup on the windowsill, and eventually after a day of chores and reading went to bed.

Joel awoke that night to the girl sitting on his bed gazing like a dog at the blue moon. This the first time he thought maybe the girl was a ghost. Strangely, however, he was unafraid of her. She was wet, dress soaked to the skin enough for the ivory of it come through the fabric, her hair in dripping clumps. Her lips were blue and trembling, the crescents under her eyes purple. "What are you doing?" Joel asked.

He wrapped her in the same quilt he'd wrapped her dead body in and combed cranberry bush twigs from her hair, laying it smooth over her shoulder. The girl continued to shiver. He took the only thing he had of Celia's, a red dress, and gave it to the girl. She rubbed the fabric between her fingers. "You can put in on in the bathroom. It's a little fancy, but it's dry." She was silent still. "You are going

to freeze,” Joel said, “Let me help you.” He pulled the white dress up over her head. She was pale as moonlight and slender like a white egret. He zipped her into the red dress, which had this strange feeling of familiarity. Maybe it reminded him of the zipper on the body bag.

“Come on,” she turned to Joel and said. It was the first time she’d looked at him. Joel couldn’t tell if it was question or command. She took his hand in her cold one and walked him to the bog. It was dark enough for the tall cedars that surrounded the bog to look like a black curtain, except for their tops, which were dusted with gray moonlight. Together, they walked into the water. Across the bog, Joel could see some sort of movement on the surface, a few round ripples appearing like ghostly stepping-stones. These ripples appeared to be in a sequence; it reminded Joel of a skipping rock coming toward them. Joel didn’t realize it was a harbor seal, until it was right between them holding a headless trout in its mouth. The seal slid the rest of the fish down its throat in a bird-like gulp. The girl held the seal in her arms, its chin resting on her shoulder. The creature closed its inky-black eyes and the girl hummed to it a tune Joel did not know. It reminded him of the sea.

Another seal appeared and nuzzled the palm of Joel’s hand. Its fur felt like wet feathers. The two seals chased each other around Joel and the girl, bouncing cranberries off their noses into the other’s mouth. Joel couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed before then.

The girl took a deep breath and pulled Joel underwater with her. The seals followed. They swam through cold darkness. In the distance Joel could see a few

orbs of golden light suspended in the thick blackness. They got deeper and closer to the lights; the bushes scraped Joel's forearms. He held onto her delicate wrist.

As they got close the lights focused. They were candle chandeliers made of heavy gold and crystal, hung from the ceiling of floating cranberries. Joel realized he didn't need to breath. He decided this must be dream.

From somewhere far away a record began to play something smooth, but heavy in a duet of cellos, with violin high notes and a saxophone underbelly. The sounds seemed to be traveling slowly from all directions like a beautiful, distant echo. The water was still over their heads. They stood under the largest chandelier. Joel took the girl's waist, "We should dance," he said. The girl's hair moved from the current their dancing was making, like it had wind in it. They stayed in the circles of light coming from the candles on the chandelier; bubbles came from their mouths and rose quickly like in champagne. "What is your name? Can I know that?" he asked.

"Victoria," she said. The water felt more like blurry air.

"Victoria, what are you?" he asked.

"I'm a girl who lives under your cranberry bog," she said.

"But the cranberry bog will only be here a few more days. I'll drain it to harvest the berries. Where will you live then?"

"I don't know, I've always lived here," she said.

The songs ended and they swam to the surface and floated among the cranberries for a while.

Later, as they walked up the hill to Joel's house, he looked back and saw the faintest splashes of light under the cranberries.

When Joel awoke the next morning, the sun was high and he was feverish, sweating, cold and sick. Victoria was there, humming in an armchair near his bed. She spooned pink tea into his mouth. Joel could have laid there in a fever-induced stupor for days, he was unsure, but Victoria was always there, hazier than ever though, probably due to dehydration.

"No wonder you haven't been answering your phone," Mike, the coroner, said, "You're sick as a dog." Joel didn't know if he'd knocked to enter or not.

"Thank you," Joel replied.

Mike told him they had figured out who the girl was. She was staying with her Aunt who was ill. Joel looked around for the girl. Mike told Joel the funeral was tomorrow at the little church by the cove and asked when he was planning on draining the bog.

"I've just been sick a little while. I'm going to drain it as soon as I can handle the cold water." Joel said.

Mike said he hoped he'd feel better soon and left.

The girl didn't return for a long time. Joel had already gotten up and made himself a sandwich. He'd read three chapters of his book. The girl sat with him at the kitchen table without a word like she'd been there the whole time.

"I'm going to your funeral tomorrow," Joel said.

"It should be very lovely. My family is very nice," Victoria said.

“Will you be gone forever after that? Will your soul be at rest?” Joel asked.

“I don’t think so,” she said, “I don’t know.”

Joel didn’t ask any more questions, because he didn’t think Victoria had any more answers than he did. For the rest of the day they sat by the fire. Joel read to Victoria. They played cards. It was simple, but lovely. Victoria fell asleep in Joel’s arms. He carried her to bed.

The next morning she was gone. Joel put on the same suit he wore to his father’s funeral four years ago and drove to the little church by the cove. There were not many people there, no more than fifteen or so gathered around a rose-covered casket by the sea. Victoria’s father was tall and pale with fire-red hair. Her mother looked so much like Victoria except that her hair was dark and her eyes were blue. For a moment Joel thought he saw Victoria next to her mother, but it was another girl, maybe twelve, who must have been Victoria’s younger sister.

The hymns they sung seemed thin. Joel didn’t like hearing his own voice. In the cove, there was a lone harbor seal sleeping on a rock. He wanted to speak with Victoria’s family, but he didn’t know what to say. He was glad the funeral was closed casket. He did know one thing for sure after the funeral. The girl hadn’t lied; her name was Victoria. He must have been keeping her ghost company for the last few days. He guessed she would be gone from then on.

When he returned home he walked to the bog. It was evening. In a white row boat in the center of the redness was Victoria, unhooking a silver trout from a

bamboo pole. She rowed to the bank where Joel was. He stepped in the boat and rowed back to the center along the path through the berries she'd made.

The trout flopped against the wooden bottom, dying. She re-baited the hook, placed it in the water and did the same on a pole for Joel.

"Victoria, you're dead," Joel said, "You were buried today. Suddenly, Joel was wet, standing waist-deep in the water still wearing his funeral suit. The next instant he was back in the rowboat.

"No, I live," she said, "In the cranberry bog." The trees behind her shown through her face like she was a reflection. For a second or so, Joel was in the water again, alone.

"You can live forever with me under the cranberry bog," she said. They were in the boat then, but only for a moment. Joel sunk under the water and opened his eyes to look for Victoria dancing under a golden chandelier. There was nothing but blackness. He surfaced and saw Victoria's reflection on the water in front of him. He turned around but she was not there. "Victoria," Joel called.

She was there again and she handed him a small boulder. Under the water, it was fairly light. As he lifted it above the cranberry surface it was heavier. He held it. The light had softened; the sun was setting, laying itself over the red. She whispered in his ear, "You don't have to drain the bog." It was quiet, then. The trees were still. Joel had two choices he could lay the boulder across his chest, sink to the bottom of the bog and watch light filter through the cranberries waiting for Victoria. Or he could drag the boulder to the bank, sleep by the fire alone, and drain the bog tomorrow. Both options seemed equally lonely. He walked to the bank and set the

boulder down. When the cranberries had been harvested, he took a long black thread and made a garland. He covered the oak tree with it.

Switzerland

I read about a company in Switzerland that can turn human ashes into diamonds. My wife and I lived like we were entitled to life. She drank too much wine after dinner. I smoked too many cigars. We ate too much Kung Pao chicken from China Star though we knew it had tons of MSG. She died in a car wreck less than a year after we married and never told me what to do with her body. We never planned much beyond Friday or a beach trip in June. Being young meant that death felt like a lottery game at which we can cheat.

The company says their diamonds range in color from clear to deep blue, depending on the amount of Boron in the ashes. I'd send the company an urn of her ashes. Actually, I would have to fly her to Switzerland myself. I don't like the idea of her flying alone in the cargo hold with art prints, antique toys and clothing overstock. An older man on the plane might ask me about my business in

Switzerland. I'd lie, say I was a photographer or something, hoping to ski the Alps and catch the peregrine falcons and pygmy owls nesting.

I would hope her diamond would be the light blue color of her eyes. I could have the diamond set in a ring. But what does a man do with a diamond ring? Then too, it would be easier for her to be stolen. Some young, rich idiot in the Hamptons would buy her diamond for a cocktail ring.

The things she could see from the finger of a rich woman though. She would stare into glasses of bubbling champagne; she'd fix Hermes ties; she'd rest in a black velvet box. On the marble vanity top, she could see the woman and her husband fighting over money and the blonde woman down the street, the one for whom the woman wore the ring to the black-tie fundraiser for, to make her jealous. Their volume would echo through the large, white emptiness of their bedroom, being amplified by the round porcelain of the tub. She'd have no more meaning than money to a millionaire.

I could just have her cremated and I could spread her ashes over all the places she loved: amber sand dunes, the river and slow shallow streams, gardens and poppy fields.

Or it could be simple. I could bury my wife in the small cemetery at a church. One of the first weekends we went away together, we'd gone skiing in the Appalachians. On the drive home, the sun was setting, pulling the blanket of light from the treetops. I pulled the car over into a small gravel parking lot. The door to the white wooden church was open. When the church bells rung, we were startled. The last of the light was filtering through the stain glass windows on all sides of us. I

could bury her in the cemetery out back, there below a yellow poplar tree. I can't think of a good epitaph. And then of course eventually, maybe, the carbon in her body would be pressurized into diamonds, but probably not.

Malcolm

The morning we found out my son Malcolm was going blind, the two of us sat at his window and watched the baby spiders on the windowsill, blown away from their cotton nest like dandelion seeds into a blue sky. I thought of all their destinations, some may have ended up on the green oak tree only a meter away. Another may be taken from the air to a sparrow's beak, to the throat of a bald, pink hatchling. The lucky one will remain on the chipped paint windowsill, where he can make his web by the light of Malcolm's desk lamp at night. But, I thought, even he is unfortunate, because he will never experience the joy of floating weightless and free in the breeze. By what lottery system does one creature live while his siblings may die? If Malcolm were a spider hatchling, I would want him to stay in the cotton nest forever, safe and away from fate.

The doctor didn't tell us much about the timeline of Malcolm's blindness. From what I could understand, Malcolm's incredibly rare autoimmune disease was eating away, slowly, at the myelin on his optic nerve and eventually no communication between his eyes and brain would come through. He said Malcolm would probably "go dark" sometime before his ninth birthday. He was almost right. Malcolm had very few questions about his eyes. His only request was to start to learn Braille before he lost his sight. I sort of let him take the lead on our activities after his diagnosis, which in retrospect was silly. I guess I was afraid that if I showed him all the things I loved about the world it would make losing them that much worse.

Malcolm's father walked out on us when he was almost four, so I always very sensitive to Malcolm feeling abandoned. Every day I would pick him up from school and on nice days we'd walk home together, holding hands. One nice fall day that year, when autumn was showing its first signs of coolness and the leaves were an orange canopy high above our heads, I watched Malcolm kick dried leaves across the brick sidewalk. I think he liked the sound of it and I was relieved to think: *He'll always have that*. He would always be able to hear them, but he wouldn't be able to watch the leaves fall and land like butterflies on the streets and over cars. "Mom, can you buy me a camera?" Malcolm asked, eyes still focused on his feet and the leaves. "For what?" I asked him.

"I want to take pictures of things," he said.

I bought him one of those little disposable cameras and he took pictures of everything: our cat Igor, his best friend Asher, fall trees, expensive cars, pink

flowers and chrysanthemums, me. Malcolm was restless for the whole two days we waited for the film to be developed.

“Open them up,” I said handing him the envelope.

He unfolded the envelope, pulled the pictures out and closed his eyes. He ran his fingers softly over the glossy photos. “I’m stupid,” he said dropping the photos like a deck of cards and letting them fall onto the kitchen floor. He kicked the photos like fallen leaves. “They all feel the same.”

“We can write captions! For each of the pictures we can write a caption on the back of each that I can read to you whenever you like. This will be our project until... this will be our project,” I said. And that became our project.

It didn’t usually snow that much where we lived. So when it did it was a special occasion and the schools would close, even for just two inches on the streets. I was happy that this storm was not predicted and that Malcolm would wake up to a surprise. I had been worried there might not be snowfall that year for him to see.

“Mom!” Malcolm called from his room.

I came in and his cheeks, pink, were pressed to the cold window glass, his breath making a tiny O-shaped fog.

“Let’s go outside!” I said.

“School?” he asked.

“Closed,” I said.

“I don’t even have snow boots my size anymore!” he said already getting dressed.

“Tennis shoes and three pairs of socks,” I called back to him leaving for my own room. I let myself act more like a child that year. I felt that a kid, who was experiencing something so unfathomable to most adults, needed to be reminded that he was a child. Though truly, I’d always felt that Malcolm was wiser than even I realized.

“I love it when it snows,” he said as we walked together to the park.

“But you have to miss school when it snows smarty-pants. I know that makes you nervous and weirdly sad,” I said. Malcolm had begun learning to read Braille at school, as practice. This made me sad, but thrilled him.

“This snow will all be melted by tomorrow like always. We’re not going to miss that much,” he said, trying to disprove my point.

The snow was still falling, but so softly it was almost undetectable. The melted flakes on each of our faces and lashes looked like dewdrops. Everywhere, the definite shape and edges of things had been removed and softened by the white powder... except for the trees, whose angles were coated in crystal ice, clear enough to let the grey underbelly of the branches show through. The whole park looked like a heavenly forest of dead chandeliers.

“It’s so white,” Malcolm said.

“It’s very pretty isn’t it.”

“Yeah. It is, but there aren’t any colors.”

“Your mittens are red,” I said.

I could see him thinking. "It'll be like this for me soon. I won't see any of the colors. It'll be like a forever snowstorm." I saw the baby bit of sunlight sparkle all the colors like whispers off the snow. "Actually," he said, "I'll probably just see black." I knew some days were worse than others for him, but hearing him say out loud that blackness was coming scared me.

"How will I remember the colors?" he asked, needing a response.

At first I didn't have one. "We'll make a little dictionary of colors for you. Here," I grabbed a pad of paper from her coat pocket, a habit I'd acquired being a secretary. "You'll always remember colors," I said, "But just in case."

We decided that orange was happy and bright, but a bit sour too... like an orange. Pink, we thought, was special because it only comes out in nature a few times a year. Blue was calm and peaceful like water or melting ice.

We had been working through the pictures slowly, Malcolm dictating to me, as I wrote in cursive on the backs of each photo. Then later, he would translate to braille by poking holes in a piece of cardstock with a needle. By spring, we'd almost finished them all, Igor, the cat, the apartment complex's garden, even the one of pigeons, which Malcolm for some unknown reason was fond of. I was looking through them, smiling, not because all these pictures were of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen, but because they held a memory for me, each a different memory of when we sat together appreciating life and each other. Then, I came across a photo of myself. I didn't even realize he'd taken it. He had already captioned it himself.

My mother is beautiful. She has long brown hair. She likes to wear silver jewelry and diamond earrings. I hope she still smiles like this when I am blind.

I thought about my smile. You really only see your smile occasionally, on a videotape or in a flash of mirror before you realize you're watching yourself. I knew then that I would make sure Malcolm could always feel me smile, know it's there.

My mom has blue eyes. They are like the ocean. But I've only seen the ocean in books.

Malcolm walked into my room that August morning. I had known it was coming. He'd been seeing only soft shadows for days. "Mom," he said. He was crying. I held him, because I didn't know what else to do and that felt right.

I decided to take him to the beach. I decided that it had to be that day. What is the best way to celebrate a first day of blindness? I didn't know why I felt it must be then, but I packed up beach clothes from my newly blind son and we left. I wanted to keep it a surprise just until he realized, which he would quickly.

"Don't change from your pajamas," I said, "We don't have time."

"Have you already called work and told them?" he asked, half confused, half concerned.

"Everyone can use a little mystery every once in a while and I'm not telling you where we're going either, but we're going far."

"Will the Volvo even make it far?" Malcolm asked.

That was of actual concern to me, “You’re eight not eighty grandpa, but if you’d rather stay here and play shuffle board or bake pies or...”

“Mom.”

We got there right as the light was waning, casting everything in gold, the crowns of each soft wave sparkling like champagne in a clear glass, our skin warmed lightly in color and temperature, the beach grass turned golden as wheat in fall. I took his hand, lead him to the flat sand where we sat waiting for one wave to kiss our toes in welcome. Malcolm shrieked and laughed when the water caught his toes.

“Do you want to write, Malcolm?”

“No, lets sit more. It’s nice.”

At dusk, gold slipped into blue. We sat quietly in the interim period when the sun’s light is undetectable, but it is not yet black. The sky was a welcoming royal blue, the first few stars appeared like diamonds on rich fabric, but it was still warm and the sand was soft. I held his hand.

“Malcolm, come, here, quick!” I said moving only a yard or so from where we sat. He stood and ran two steps before stumbling face first into the sand. I ran back to him.

“Ouch, are you ok?” I said, laughing a bit, pulling his head back. The red rimmed around his eyes contrasted their natural blue color. He was crying. “I’m sorry I should have helped you,” I said.

“It’s just the sand. It’s in my eyes,” he said, wiping at them, but the sand from his hands just stuck to his tears.

“Well guess what? There are baby turtles coming toward the shore,” I said.

“Really,” Malcolm said trying to stifle the tears still dripping to his nose. “I don’t know if you’re telling the truth,” he said.

I held him there in the sand. I let him cry. He let me cry. But only for a moment or a minute or two.

“Hold on a sec,” I walked further from the water a bit, “Here hold out your hands, in a cup, be still.”

“Ok,” he said with the bit of sand crystals still resting on his cheekbones.

“It’s a baby turtle, a hatchling,” I said.

Malcolm smiled, “How many are there?” he asked.

“Tons,” I said. They’re all about to come down now like a little army of green soldiers on their very first mission.”

“What else, Mom? Say it like you’re writing it for me, out loud.”

He was looking towards the moon, but I realized, he wasn’t looking *at* the moon. Or anything. “Ok, well, the ocean right now is calm. The waves are sliding in and out like fabric in the wind. Everything is blue, it’s beautiful, the sky, the ocean, and the moon. It’s so big and bright tonight like God is pointing it right at us and throwing down a path for these baby turtles to the ocean, to right where they are supposed to be.”

But the gulls were gathering too, snatching the turtles from the ground in an instant. I saw a crab crush one’s spine with a pincer claw and drag him into the ground. Some eggs lay cold in the nest.

“Keep going.” Malcolm set his turtle down softly on the sand, “What’s he doing now?” he asked.

“Robert? Don’t you think that’s what his name is? He’s going towards the water making tiny tracks in the sand like a soft paintbrush or calligraphy. He’s following the moonlight. That’s what pulled him from his warm shell tonight, just like you and I know how to breathe.”

“Is he moving fast?”

“No silly, he’s a turtle, but he’s moving as fast as he can. Some of the babies are about to reach the water. They’re almost there. Oh. They’re gone. The water caught them.” It felt like a sigh, when the turtles finally reached the water, like the moment before waking. The breeze was comforting, rhythmic, and full of energy. But I did not need to describe this for him. He probably knew it better than me.

“More,” he said.

“Well, it looks like a little parade, the moon creating a street for these new creatures to enter the world and the life they were given. Uh. Listen, the seagulls above. They’re... singing. And cheering them home... like an. Orchestra or a cluster of horns. The waves are the symbols. The turtles are smiling. And soon they’ll all be in the ocean. And the ocean will rise and soften their tracks and tomorrow no one, except you and me will know, that tonight a tiny little miracle happened right here for us.”

Still gulls torpedoed for the sand and silently hatchlings died in their throats. I was glad Malcolm couldn’t see the birds and that with something so unfair already happened to him, I could protect him from this one sad thing. And for I moment I

thought from now on he would only see the beautiful, even if only in his head. I was glad that I could give him this perfect moment, to ease the fear that he must feel, to ease my own fear too.

“Mom,” he said, “The birds are eating the turtles aren’t they.”

Glass in a Silver Coat

Henry waited in the parking lot of the clinic for Beth. She was independent and said she wanted to do it alone. The afternoon was grey, but the rain was warm. He scanned the radio, but nothing seemed right and the static of the old radio bothered him. He listened to the crickets instead. "Hey," Beth said getting in the passenger seat of the pickup.

"Do you want to go eat or something?" Henry asked.

"No," she said, "I'm really not hungry."

"Oh," he said, "Right."

"Do we still have that order to finish?" Beth asked.

“Yeah, but I can finish them. Do you want me to take you back to your apartment?” he asked.

“No, I’d really rather go work on something,” she said.

As they drove back to the mirror factory, the sun broke out of the clouds in bursts, but the air was still thick and damp. Although they called it the mirror factory, it wasn’t truly a factory more like a large workshop. Henry’s grandfather had converted an old grey barn into a workshop to produce custom mirrors. After his death, Henry took over the small business, mostly making small, custom mirror orders for local contractors.

Henry watched Beth run sheets of glass under the power washer. He liked the way her biceps curved a little as she lifted the glass and slid it through the machine. He liked how she tucked her hair behind her ear as she waited for the glass to come out the other side.

After power washing each large glass sheet, she slowly fed them through the silver sprayer. That’s all Henry’s mirrors (like most mirrors) were, just sheets of glass coated in silver and tin. After each newly silvered mirror came out of the sprayer, Beth would inspect it. Henry was slightly amused by how meticulous Beth was. Even more meticulous than he, noticing tiny bubbles he may have ignored. She was this meticulous at every step: silver layer, tin layer, paint coat one, paint coat two and polish.

While Beth made new mirrors, Henry took each of the large mirror sheets after drying and set the mirror cutter to carve the exact size and shape he needed. Many of edges needed to be beveled too and he’d do that with a hand router.

They ordered pizza for dinner. Beth didn't eat much. "Don't get your greasy fingers on any of my clean mirrors," she said. They ate slowly welcoming the break. He asked her again if she wanted to go home. Henry wasn't surprised that Beth didn't want to talk about it. He didn't really either.

As they worked, Henry couldn't stop thinking of all the time they'd spent together that summer in that same building. She'd come to Charleston for a law internship, which she did during the day. But nights and weekends, she spent at the factory with Henry. He hated when she startled him with power tools in his hands, but loved having her there.

When they had finished for the evening, they took the scraps out back. The dumpster behind Henry's factory was the most beautiful in July. On the outside it was never beautiful, but on the inside, it was a secret beauty, a shabby jewelry box of shattered stars. It was filled with scraps of mirror, many crushed into shards, some larger pieces with spider-web cracks, some silver slivers like crescent moons created from slicing edges off for oval mirrors. They had finished their work that day around 6 o'clock, in the hour where the day's light grows old and golden.

With so many reflective surfaces, when they looked into the pile of gold and silver beams, neither could see their face whole, only little glimpses, an ear or a lip under rays of light. As they threw the day's scraps in, the patterns of light broke for a moment until the reflections balanced out again.

They walked back inside. Henry looked out the window, "Shut the lights off," he said. Beth flipped the switch.

It had grown dark by then and the white of the moon through the window reflected off of every mirror, casting white beams at irregular angles into the rafters like ghosts.

“Wow, it’s beautiful,” she said.

“I love this,” Henry said. And he did. He felt like light was being multiplied and born. “Hold on, I have a crazy idea, help me?”

They went outside. Henry unlocked the wheels on the old red dumpster.

“Are we going to ride it down a hill or something, because dying in a box of glass that hit a rock isn’t exactly how I want to die,” Beth said.

“No, but it’s close right?” Henry said, “Just help me push it.” They pushed the dumpster out of the gravel parking lot; the glass inside sounded a bit like wind chimes. They pushed it about a hundred yards or so into the field behind the factory. And they kept pushing, all the way to the river just down the hill from the factory.

The river was shallow and wide, the water clear, the bed covered in smooth grey rocks. Henry handed Beth a pair of work gloves. He scooped up a hand full of mirror pieces from the dumpster and threw them into the water. They sunk slowly and settled on the rocky bottom. Each caught a bit of light making them look like drowned moonbeams. Henry lobbed a large scrap into the river. A splash covered it and it broke over a large rock creating more white reflections. “This is crazy,” Beth said throwing more mirror in. “I told you it was crazy,” Henry said.

The night was warm. They took their time watching each piece or handful of mirror flutter through the water to the rock. Somewhere a bullfrog cried or sang,

Henry couldn't tell. The clear water moved slowly like full clouds blurring the light from the mirrors. "Come on," Henry said when the dumpster was empty, one foot in the shallow water, "You won't cut your feet. Those boots are thick." She followed him and they walked out to the center of the river, which was still only knee deep. All around them the mirrors glittered just like stars. And the real stars in the clear sky overhead shown on the water and trembled in the warm current. Henry and Beth cast dark, edgeless shadows on the surface too.

Henry felt that even if they folded the earth in half at the horizon, they still could not determine which was real and which was reflection; they couldn't tell if the moon was beside them or in the sky. And really it didn't matter, because the reflection was just as tangible to him as the moon or the stars. He realized that his life was nothing but a reflection, just as intangible. He didn't think about its weight or value or the choices he made to create it, the sources of all the lights. Because that moment held enough for him and really he thought a mirror is no more than glass in a silver coat.

Vertebra

The ground is always damp and cold when you are underneath it. You can't feel the prickling warmth of sun, you can't watch the tree buds pop into pinks and cotton whites, you can't hear wind rattle orange leaves away in the fall, but you can feel the rain. And with my opportunities for new experiences growing slimmer everyday, as more layers of dirt and leaves are created above me, I can't help but cracking into the memories, Anna's memories and the memories that maybe I kept that Anna let float down stream like a fleet of paper sailboats. My name is Atlas and I am broken.

I learned my name, cervical vertebrae one or C1, for the first time when Anna was in Mrs. Skinner's 10th grade human anatomy class. I remember the smell of formaldehyde and the bleaching look of the fluorescent lights. I realized then that Anna had never even know my name or even my nickname Atlas, which comes from

grass, Anna would climb trees by the riverbank. A place to clear her head she thought, a place to escape from thought itself.

Other times she just needed to wade through the green water and pinch her toes in the red clay bank, something to feel clean, something to ground herself away from failed math tests, and boys and her mother's expectations and her father's pity. So maybe I fantasize a bit, make it more sweet than it was, but I think Anna did that too... made childhood much more tranquil than it ever truly was.

As a teen Anna would sneak down to the river at night to swim and soothe the aching muscles that had danced all afternoon. The nerves in the skin of her pale, white stomach sent small signals up about the pressure of the soaked denim overalls that clung to her chest, ribs, and thighs. I remember the hints of temperature change as she walked out of the water after floating on her back and watching the stars invade the black sky, each nerve flustered by the change from feeling wet to feeling thick, warm summer air. And her brain flooded impulses down through me to her quadriceps and Achilles tendons as she ran back to the house on the path through the woods filled with root snares and rocks. I could hear her heart pounding and the drops of water tapping the wooden stairs as she crept to her bedroom on the pads of her feet, not wanting to wake Mom and Dad. So when I feel sore from the earth above me pressing, fossilizing me, I go to the river too, most times to watch the stars again.

I was a part of Anna and Anna defined herself as a dancer, an artist, so I, in part, am a dancer too. Mother first put her in dance lessons at age 6 to combat the ADHD and for an hour-long manicure and massage twice a week. But I knew from

the way impulses and ideas poured from Anna's right brain that dance could be where Anna would flourish.

Her first "role" was a daffodil in the spring recital. Anna sat in her grandmother's garden and watched the clusters of daffodils peek toward the sunlight and she stuck her feet in the dirt and smelled it, opened her face into the daylight and got soil in her fingernails. "They grow from bulbs," Grandmother said as she washed Anna's feet that evening, "They wait in the ground till just the right moment to bloom; they are patient."

"Your costume was precious," her mother told her afterward.

"Did you notice how I blossomed?" Anna asked as open as a sunflower.

"Yes darling Babette's choreography was beautiful," She said.

I wish I could have seen Anna dance live. I could see flashes when she looked at herself in the mirror and how the movement just seemed effortless as thought itself. I could watch the electrical signals zip back and forth from brain to body, the ones that meant pirouette, pas de bourrée, and grand jeté. I could feel blood drive through her body and flush her face and pull at her heart not only physically, but emotionally too. In a way, I codified what it felt like for Anna when she was on stage, in a way videotape never could. But I still wish I could have seen it under the lights.

So after high school there was no option for Anna, but to move to New York. She had auditioned and then enrolled at NYU, but after three semesters she was cast in a small Off-Broadway play instead and withdrew. At first Anna hated New York and the eternal grey, the grey pavement and the way it smelled like carcinogens, the

grey suits and the leafless, lifeless trees, grey buildings where all she could see was her own ghostly grey reflection, the grey pigeons that sulk around vents blowing grey steam and the ever grey sky that seemed to trap all the colors away from her. She missed the blue skies and wood thrushes, the green of the poplar trees and the feel of blue jeans that cost less than \$200 a pair. In the sadness of her tiny apartment at night, sitting on her green and red plaid couch, in the dark, TV on mute, she'd splashed memories across her thoughts like the soft flickering of an old projector. And I would watch them too.

She ordered a glass of wine at dinner with her fake ID. She inspected clothing labels and brand names. She rode the subway and locked two dead bolts at night, things that to me even still seem more invented than real.

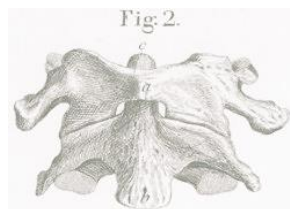
But fur felt so exquisite when it brushed against her upper arms and collarbones and the slight tug of heavy gold earrings was pleasing too. And sometimes it was beautiful. Even New York could be beautiful. Looking out from the roof top garden, when the cold wind would hit her eyes, they reacted unconsciously with a bit of water, making the city look like a big bag of jewels, like a sack of tiny diamonds and round cut rubies and the yellow taxis like solid gold bars.

And I remember one night in particular walking home from rehearsal she saw that beauty again. The soft rain sent prickles into the skin and the wet pavement and white streetlights spun silver through the streets. The aggressive hum of horns and the clattering of trash can lids couldn't sound as lovely as the woods at night in Virginia, but something about it comforted Anna then, something about being inconspicuous like a tiny gear in a giant machine. But I knew that feeling

couldn't last for her. At some point I knew she'd want something more, some one to thank her, recognize her.

She found little things to entertain herself when not at rehearsal, small music shows, hidden coffee shops, and the occasional Broadway show when she could afford the balcony seats. Jaxon's chest was painted with red and yellow and white stripes and he wore a fire orange headdress. He was Mufasa in "The Lion King" on Broadway. Anna could see him tackling her and digging his claws into her back.

He could make her smile when he took off his prescription-less, square-rimmed glasses to read the menu. He could make her laugh with his Charlie Chaplin expressions. Her heart rushed when he kissed her slowly and cupped the back of her head. I could only watch and wish that she knew that I too loved fall air and classical music and peppermint tea. Jaxon sang through his green eyes, if you can imagine that. It reminded Anna of the river; maybe that's why she loved it so when he sang. His voice was more than trickery to the ears. He didn't even know she was in the back of the dark café that night. She listened and it felt like liquid heat running from the center of her chest to her cheek bones. The physical feeling of love I think. And even when they weren't together. I could see Jaxon's green eyes flash through Anna's brain like a guiding force on her thoughts, as soothing as having your back rubbed.



I remember what it felt like to starve. I woke up everyday feeling hollow and weak, almost like I was out of breath, like reverse constriction. I needed calcium for strength and being deprived of it made me like plastic. I yearned for the chalky taste of calcium and the rich, fatty feel of protein that I needed to create white blood cells and support weight. Anna had switched to a small modern dance company after a year with “Dogz”, the failing musical parody of “Cats” and the pressure of this new company was a constant whispering in Anna’s ears. Her mind felt like a dance studio itself, surrounded by the mirrors. In the haunting reflections in Anna’s head turned hundreds of other dancers with effortless leaps and meat-less rib cages, dancers with ghostly faces and tiny legs like sickly, white egrets. The pain nerves would call up for something to appease them, something to supply the burden of movement, but each time one more sip of water drowned their cries, no sugar to convert to ATP, and of course no fat to store or use.

A dancer never wants broken blisters to bleed and stain through the pastel pink of their shoes. I remember the sound and feel of the cellophane wrapped around her feet and what it felt like when it entrapped blood and how that blood turned cold. Jaxon just signed the bill at dinner, never mentioning the food still on the plate that he’d just paid for.

I remember the sounds of clapping, though loud, it seemed so far away, almost like it was underwater. During bows the blood always rushed to Anna’s head and made her eyelashes flicker. She always had to take a cab home, if she decided not to sleep in the dressing room.

Adrenaline is almost like its own sense. I could never read the nerves as they sprinted from brain to body and back when adrenaline barreled through Anna's veins like chemical pirates. I can't even recall the exact words he said on the phone, but I remember the surge, feeling like hundreds of caffeine bubbles were popping in her muscles and the roots of every hair. Anna had been cast as a bird in a new Cirque de Soleil production. I watched each night in awe as Randy put on her makeup, transforming her into a different, exotic, form of beautiful. Her feet were painted with orange scales and she wore feathers in her hair and in a sort of collar around her neck. I remember the first time he turned us around to the mirror after tying the crow-like wings on.

"Why?" she asked running her feather tipped fingers over the fake bone protruding through the lines of mangled black feathers.

"Your wing's been broken," he said, "The performance gymnasts will be up on the fabric and the Chinese poles."

"You've fallen," he said.

The bird Anna died on stage, eaten by a lion, unable to fly away in her old age and with the broken wing that never healed. At this part, the music tightens and the violinists put quickening pressure on their bows and as her hamstrings would constrict to make the leap each night... the leap that was her character's final attempt to fly... the adrenaline would block all the pain signals from leaking into her brain. And as she was crushed by the lion's jaws, the tension like a bud in her chest would break and a smile of relief would blossom across her face as the stage lights

warmed her flushing cheeks, a sort of acceptance of death for her character, a freeing.

Sometimes as she turned slowly downstage, before the lion came, she could catch the glimpse of the audience, some tiny frozen image that would float back to her as she lay in bed... a little girl in a light pink sweater clasping the plumped, veined hands of a grandmother, a woman smiling at the show and a man smiling at her, or group of friends even if they weren't paying attention. She thought about them for a long time.

Anna saw a tight roper fall. There was no net. Nets don't fit well into artistic performances during a show. Artists are expendable. Art is not. Parents ushered children out of the theatre and bought them cotton candy to make them forget or told them that the paramedics were part of the show, but it was past their bedtimes now and they couldn't stay any longer. Carl was still on a breathing tube, last time Anna heard.

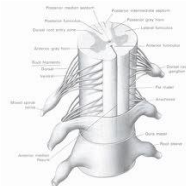
When a clown, who played a monkey, was no longer funny there'd be a new monkey soon, maybe a fatter one. And when that monkey showed up drunk they'd find a monkey who could roll his eyeballs around like twin globes.

And Jaxon tackled a zebra... easier, newer, more interesting prey for the Lion King. She was young and sweet and Nala's understudy, soon to take the whole role. Jax apologized sure, but he wasn't sorry and they both knew it.

Could Anna still leap as high? I couldn't tell. But she was quieting dressing rooms and drawing pitying looks. And I remember Anna thirsted for some confidence again, for some way to not feel broken. I felt worthless along with her.

Soon there was something wicked and foreign looping through the blood stream. It would start with a slight burning in one nostril and soon Anna's brain would turn into a puddle of images. I watched as faces turned into Picasso-like blocks, triangles, and irregular shapes. Sounds slowed. The flow of conscious thoughts blurred like a stream clogged with leaves and soil in a thunderstorm. She would pull her shoulders back, she'd push her heels more confidently into the floor, and the whole body would feel like it was overflowing with helium. She could joke with the theater ushers and go out for drinks with her friends who were rockettes. And she could wear dresses with no backs and plunging v-necks and high ascending slits. She could entertain men and she could eat the olive in her martini.

Later it'd feel like everything had been turned inside out that the skin was on the inside and everything was exposed even worse than being naked. Anna would force herself to think of black, just the color black, not black sky or black velvet or black fur just the color black until sleep decided to save her or force her into dreams.



I can't pull that many memories from after Anna moved home to Virginia. Maybe there aren't that many great things to remember. She'd been fired on a failed drug test, an easy excuse for the show directors. She'd gotten a few jobs at pizzerias and coffee shops, but when you don't show up, you don't keep jobs for very long. Dad had suggested she come home and take care of the house, because he and mother had moved to the city, leaving the farmhouse sitting empty.

Anna's head was like a tin bucket with a hole in it. Nothing stayed there; nothing filled it and therefore nothing really filled me either. She would go down to the river sometimes, but she never swam, just dipped her toes around the edge making ripples that sparkled like prasiolite in the silver moonlight. Maybe she knew even the river water couldn't fill her pail.

Tiny yellow finches would play by the river in the mornings, wetting their beaks and bouncing water from their wings and Anna thought about how easy it'd be to squeeze them and make them burst like a feather filled balloon. She ignored the paint set Dad dropped off for months. And sometimes I remember the feeling of want flickering like lighting a match in the veins, though it'd been months since she'd last seen that powder.

She returned to Babette's studio and taught some lower level ballet classes, but she quickly grew frustrated by the children's inability to remember any choreography or even her name.

I remember one walk in the woods when she came to a fallen tree it was damp and the bark got caught in her fingernails. She'd brought the paint set for some reason. I can still recall the tiny impulses to her hands from the brain that told her to paint the tiny spots of the little fawn in front of her onto the paper. The little creature was so quiet and soft, simply following its mother unaware that an artist was capturing his little white tail and coal-black nose.

Each day she painted a little more, encapsulated one more memory, one more image, something to make her almost smile. I have kept a few of those images

too like the blooming foxgloves and the swelling blackberries and the house in the distance... I can use the paintings to go back to those moments sometimes.

The fall breeze that morning invigorated each organ more than usual and all the senses stayed unusually quiet as she painted the poplar tree on the bank before its leaves were to fall. Soon the wind that oxygenated her cells, picked up Anna's paintings like a deck of thrown cards and washed them into the river, but Anna wasn't surprised. She had gotten used to nothing staying, nothing she did making impact.

It'd been almost a year since she moved back, but Anna's parents had never really taken her around Richmond much yet. They had been ashamed, I guess. Anna's mother had been out of town with a client that night, so Dad had no choice but to bring Anna to the opening of the fine arts museum. The classical music that had always delighted me because it filled Anna's brain with such joyful memories of dance, now sounded like the crying of circling crows. "You look beautiful," Anna's father whispered in her ear as the baby nerves there picked up the warm humidity of his breath. She pushed the backs on her pearl studded earrings tighter to distract from the feeling. The paintings in the museum were mostly of people. Anna could usually discern the current emotion of each character, but would pour over each just staring into their painted eyes, hoping she could pull something deeper from them.

One of the largest pieces in the gallery was of the ocean. I thought Anna might try to walk into it. I can't remember its frame at all, maybe Anna didn't notice it, but the whole thing had this feeling of silver like it'd been covered in silver dust. Maybe the frame was silver. On the beach were two horses standing at the waters

glistening foam edge. The silver cut and shadowed the muscles in their hips and legs like they were on the face of a smooth silver coin. The water appeared to be made of hundreds of blues. Every color blue we'd ever seen. I could even hear the ocean. She felt drenched just looking at it, not wet, underwater almost, but without the pain of needing air. And those blues, they looked like giant sheets and she almost felt them wrapping around her body and draping over her shoulders, but moving still like the bustling in a ball gown. Warm sheets of ocean water.

She thought about this image, is it a memory? ...this beautiful thing that she had created in her mind that didn't exist? She thought about those few notes that sipped across Jaxon's voice and through her ears when she was lonely. She thought about stage lights and the city skylines, and fawns, and monkeys, birds and clowns and nights where there are more stars than sky and how no one could ever see them stuck inside her head. She didn't think about me. I could see them.

At home that night, still in her blue velvet dress, the arms had no idea what they were doing, not that they could change it if they wanted to. But I knew. I watched the nerve signals go down. The hands worked slowly, but the brain sent no hesitation. She had calculated it based on her current 103lb weight. She needed a three-meter drop height and a three-inch rope. You can look up how to tie the knots online too, it's in the same e-how post about how to ensure you break your neck when hanging yourself.

I remember the medical examiner saying it was strange to break C1 when committing suicide. Mother and Dad had her buried by the poplar at the riverbank in a biodegradable wood coffin. "She'd want to be able to hear the water." Dad said.

I don't hold her skull anymore. Her brains have long ago rotted away. I wonder if the memories have rotted too and if the earthworms can eat them. I wonder how long it will take for the alkaline clay soil to erode me away or if I'll be dug up first, years from now to install a dock on the river. I wonder what they'll know about me or about Anna. Will they know she killed us? Will they assume it a car accident? Will they call it tragic? Will they know that I loved her? Will they know she could dance?