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## Rampant Love

Erica F. deVeer  
*University of New Orleans, efdeveer@gmail.com*

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Rampant Love

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Fiction

by  
Erica deVeer

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For my family and all of my friends,  
who continually inspire me to delve deeper into the human heart,  
to see the heart,  
to reveal the heart.

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## The Stables

Puberty had not been good to Eulalia. Whereas her friend, Jessica, had sprouted bulging breasts and a curvy bottom, Eulalia just got flab everywhere it wasn't attractive. And worst of all, she still had no breasts.

Eulalia stood in front of her floor-length mirror in her bedroom. She had on an extra tight mini skirt her mom had bought for her. She made a disgusted sound.

Jessica lay on Eulalia's bed, flipping through a teen magazine with the members of the hottest boy band on the hot pink cover. She was waiting while Eulalia got ready to go to the movies that night.

Jessica glanced up and said, "Well, you can't wear underwear with that one."

Her glossy lips looked bigger today than they normally did, and Eulalia wasn't sure if she was pouting them out or if she'd gotten too enthusiastic with her lipliner.

"I look like an out-of-work hooker," Eulalia said.

"But it'd be perfect for the stables," Jessica whispered and grinned.

Jessica's older sister had told them about the stables, a place only upperclassmen went on the weekends to party, and since Eulalia and Jessica entered their freshman year a few months ago, Jessica had been begging her sister to take them, like she was obsessed with the prospect of being the only freshman among the coolest juniors and seniors. Jessica often told Eulalia that she had been born a few years too late, that she was meant to be with the seniors. She even tried to convince the freshman counselor to transfer her into a senior social studies class.

Eulalia's mom knocked on her closed door. "Let me see."

"No," Eulalia called back. She didn't even know if she could get the skirt off without ripping a seam. As she tugged the stretchy fabric down her legs, little dimples of cellulite

appeared on her thighs. Finally, she got it to her ankles before falling against the wall. Eulalia opened her bedroom door just enough to hold out the skirt.

Her mom peeked through the crack in the door. “Didn’t hurt to try,” she said.

“Didn’t hurt *you*,” Eulalia informed her mom. She pulled her T-shirt as far down over her princess underwear as she could.

Eulalia’s mom opened the door all the way and leaned against the doorframe. She had been cleaning her bathroom, yet her hair was perfectly voluminous without being frizzy, and her face was dewy without being shiny. Eulalia’s mom had shown her how to do makeup, but Eulalia didn’t think a perfectly polished face would go with, what she called, her relaxed look.

“Big plans tonight, girls?” her mom asked. She seemed to get dreamy-eyed for a moment, probably recalling her own teenage years, her own fun nights out and the attention she got from all the boys in town. Eulalia’s mom was a beauty, even now. Having a mother so eye-catching was good practice for being best friends with Jessica, who knew how to captivate a room. Eulalia didn’t think Jessica was beautiful like her mom was, but Jessica was magnetic in her own way.

“Movies tonight, Miss Candice,” Jessica said.

Eulalia resisted changing into her sweatpants and instead grabbed her loose jeans from the floor and quickly slipped them back on. If she made the switch, she didn’t think anything could force her out of her sweats, but Jessica would never let her go to the movies like that. She claimed she couldn’t be seen with a slob. The way she winked when she said it and tugged at the pants’ drawstring made it feel like she was looking out for Eulalia.

“Honey, I’ve told you, call me Candi,” Eulalia’s mom said. She stretched out the skirt in her hands and examined the waistline before folding it.

Eulalia knew that skirt would look perfect on her mom, like she was made for it with her stick thin legs and narrow hips. Eulalia found herself being jealous of her, especially when she tried on the things that didn't fit Eulalia and looked good. Eulalia refused to go shopping with her anymore, but her mom bought Eulalia clothes anyway, and they always seemed to be a couple sizes too small, as if she refused to acknowledge the actual size of Eulalia's body. And so, sweats became Eulalia's go-to outfit.

"You want to wear this tonight?" Eulalia's mom asked her, holding up the skirt.

"I prefer looking like a human, not sausage bursting from its casing," Eulalia said.

Her mom laughed. "Let me know when you're leaving."

"Ready?" Jessica asked.

Eulalia brushed minimal blush across her cheeks and dabbed lip balm onto her lips. She checked her outfit in the mirror before grabbing her purse out of her closet. She had panty lines on her butt, but there wasn't much she could do about that. "Ready."

Eulalia and Jessica went to the kitchen to wait for their ride. They passed Eulalia's dad, who sat in his recliner halfway napping and halfway watching golf. Eulalia kissed him on his head. It smelled like he'd been cutting the grass.

Eulalia's older brother, Stanislaus, sat at the kitchen table working on his calculus homework even though it was a Saturday night, but when Jessica walked in, he glanced up over his glasses at her. With every step Jessica took, just the right places on her body bounced. And then she leaned against the counter in a way that twisted her body to look like one of Eulalia's handmade lanyards from summer camp.

"Stop gawking, you perv," Eulalia told Stanislaus.



Jessica giggled, and even this movement made her body look more desirable. Eulalia once asked Jessica to give her lessons. Stanislaus slid his glasses up his nose and began scratching his pencil across his notebook paper again.

Eulalia's parents came into the kitchen. Her dad grabbed some leftovers from the refrigerator, opened one container, and smelled it. "Still good," he assured them. "Fun night out?" he asked.

"As much fun as you can have in this hole of a town," Eulalia muttered. One movie theater with two working screens, one bowling alley with broken pins, and one skating rink where the wheels periodically fell off the skates while you were moving did not make for the most exciting adolescence Eulalia could've imagined. When she and Jessica became best friends in fourth grade, though, they got creative. They made up jumping routines on Jessica's trampoline, with its squeaks keeping their pace for them as the accompanying music. They would jump off and on, touching their toes or leap-frogging over the other. They talked about selling tickets to their "show," as they called it, but never got around to it. And when they felt like their heads were about to burst from too much jumping, they'd lie upside down on the sofa in one of their houses and watch *Laverne & Shirley* reruns, which were always better when all the blood rushed to your head, and try to drink Coke through a long chain of straws without any going up their noses.

But trampolines weren't cool in high school, and Jessica would only drink Diet Coke now.

Jessica got a text that her older sister had arrived.

"You girls want some dinner before you leave?" Eulalia's dad asked.

“No time for food poisoning,” Eulalia said. “Movie to catch.” She waved goodbye to her parents. Stanislaus was watching Jessica again as she adjusted her top and smoothed her hair. Eulalia knocked into him as she walked by.

“What’re we seeing?” she asked Jessica when they got into the car. Jessica’s mom had designated her older sister as her personal chauffeur. At least, that’s how Jessica explained it, and Eulalia wasn’t going to be the first one to be ungrateful, whatever the real reason was.

Jessica turned around in her seat to look at Eulalia, and Jessica’s sister glanced in the rearview and side mirrors as if checking for any spies.

“Cathy’s letting us—”

“For the last time, it’s Cat, like, meow, Cat.” She clawed the air to emphasize this.

Jessica rolled her eyes. “She’s letting us go with her to the stables.” Jessica squealed, but Eulalia wasn’t sold on this plan.

Last year, Cat and her friends started going to the stables. She would return at night with stories about sweet punch that turned your mouth as red as a lollipop and about learning how to inhale just right and about boys sneaking multiple girls into the woods in one night to teach them what they liked. Cat’s excitement was contagious. The three girls would laugh and joke. Eulalia only thought of the tales as ghost stories intended to spook her, but the stories inspired Jessica and Eulalia to try new hairstyles and makeup tricks to look older in hopes that they’d be invited to the stables when they entered high school. Eulalia didn’t have an older sister who could teach her and guide her through the labyrinth of high school, so having Cat was like knowing she would have a beacon at the end of the maze.

But after Jessica and Cat’s dad left and their parents divorced, Cathy transformed into Cat, bleached her mousy brown hair and eyebrows, and started wearing thick black eyeliner on

top of her blue eyes. Then the tales of the stables stopped. Eulalia felt she would be even more helplessly lost among the unnavigable twists and turns of high school. One night she pushed Cat for the latest stories. Cat muttered that if Eulalia wanted a bedtime story, she should ask her mother, and she slammed the bathroom door behind her. That night, Eulalia heard the shower run for what seemed like hours.

Once Eulalia and Jessica entered high school, they met in the hallway between classes, the only time they could see each other at school, and discussed the rumors and stories spread among the students, things Cat had never told them. Eulalia saw things that even if Cat had described, she knew she would've never been able to envision, the look in the girls' eyes who hadn't come back to the party after going out to the woods or the way the boys would lick their lips as they passed their phones around. Eulalia always averted her eyes or focused even more on writing her study guides, but Jessica tilted her head toward them and scribbled on her own notebook.

"You make such a big deal of it, but the place smells like manure," Cat said.

"Why do you go then?" Eulalia asked. The flab on her stomach, which she tried so hard to conceal, bunched her T-shirt, and she could count her rolls.

"Weed." Cat hit the accelerator.

"I told my parents the movies," Eulalia said. She wasn't sure if she wanted to go to the stables, but she absolutely didn't want to go in a T-shirt.

"Ease your conscience," Jessica said. "You didn't know you were lying." She tossed a shirt behind her to Eulalia, who held it up to see it looked more like half a shirt.

"I can't wear this," Eulalia said.

Jessica turned in her seat to look at Eulalia. “Yeah, a T-shirt’s much better.” She winked. “Modesty’ll hook the boys.”

Eulalia saw Cat roll her eyes, but she stripped off her T-shirt and pulled on the tight top. It was cut off an inch or so above her belly button, and Eulalia just hoped no one would look close enough to see the hairs running along her midriff.

“Put these on, too.” Jessica swung some low wedge shoes over her shoulder. “They tighten up your butt.”

When they finished riding along the bumpy dirt road that led to the stables, the girls got out of the car. Eulalia tugged at her shirt, trying to pull it down as much as it’d go. When she saw Jessica, she had to look again. She looked different than when they got in the car. She wore something around her hips that could loosely be considered a skirt, and her halter-top now cut right below her breasts.

“If you wore a bathing suit, you’d be more covered,” Eulalia told Jessica.

“She’s hoping a senior will jump her,” Cat said as she covered her eyes with black sunglasses and her hair with a floppy hat. Compared to Jessica, Cat wore a habit with her black jeans and long dark sweater.

“It’s a look,” Jessica said. “A little drafty, though.” She smiled and ran her hands over her butt as if trying to smooth down her skirt.

“Getting my weed, then we’re leaving.” Cat walked off ahead of them, and Eulalia could hardly keep up as the mud sucked at the heels she wore.

The stables were abandoned years ago, but the faint stench of manure still drifted through the stalls. The ground was covered with hay, which was much easier for Eulalia to walk on, but everyone still stared. A few people had parked their cars at the entrance of the stables and left

their headlights on. One car had been backed up to the opening so that its speakers could provide the soundtrack for the night. Cat walked over to the group of her friends all dressed in black and standing by an open stall. Trails of smoke drifted around them. Some groups were well-dressed like they were going to a country club. Others wore T-shirts and ripped jeans that looked bought that way.

Jessica walked down the center of the stables like it was a runway and all eyes were on her. Her hips swayed more than usual, and some guys' heads turned. Eulalia trailed behind her. In the center between the stalls, corroded horseshoes lay in scattered piles. Some guys in polo shirts and topsiders were playing horseshoes with the old ones, which still had broken nails stuck in them. Some stalls were open, like one with a big jug of punch on the ground and cups littered around it. Girls in short dresses walked in and bent over to grab cups off the ground and fill them. Eulalia wasn't sure if the cups were used or not, but it didn't look like anyone cared.

On the wall of another stall, bridles with dark stains and bits with teeth marks hung next to whips with horsehair stuck in the tips. One girl grabbed a bridle and held it up to her own head. "It won't fit," she said and pouted. The guy she was with wore a band T-shirt. He laughed and nodded. Eulalia, intrigued by what she might find in the next stall, walked by another one that was open. She quickly turned her back on a few half-dressed couples, some of whom looked like they were in pain, while a small group gathered around to watch and cheer them on. Eulalia's eagerness ended, and she hunched herself shorter when she passed by the closed stall doors so she wouldn't see what was behind this even minor measure of privacy at the stables.

"Punch?" Jessica asked as she walked up to Eulalia with a cup in each hand. One had a piece of straw on the lip. Eulalia hadn't even noticed how slowly she was walking around. Jessica had lapped her.

“No thanks. I don’t want to get meningitis today,” Eulalia said.

Jessica peeked over the closed stall doors. As they waited for Cat to finish, Jessica took a sip from each cup of punch in her hand, and her eyes brightened in a glassy way that Eulalia had only seen that time that they broke into Jessica’s mom’s liquor cabinet, which wasn’t hard. All she’d done was put a child lock on it, as if teenagers were still children. Eulalia could only drink the rum when it was mixed with something, but Jessica had sipped every single bottle of whatever they had, like this red liqueur that looked and smelled like condensed cough syrup and even the Scotch that smelled like Eulalia’s dad when he and Mom returned home from a date.

After every sip of the red punch, Jessica kept licking her lips, and her lipstick started fading, leaving a bright red outline at the edge of her mouth from her lipliner. But the more she drank, the more it stained her lips bright red again. Jessica stood at the stall with the growing crowd and hooted at the couples. Eulalia stood in the corner by the punch stall. She couldn’t see Jessica, but she could hear her.

A guy walked up to Eulalia and held out a cup to her.

“You get that from in there?” she said, looking toward the stall with the jug of punch and used cups.

“Yeah, but I bring my own cups,” he said. He looked like he belonged to the well-dressed group.

“You’ve obviously been to these things,” she said. Her arms were crossed over her stomach, but she reached out a hand to take the drink.

“You obviously haven’t,” he said.

She sipped the drink. It was sweet, but that was all she could taste. Eulalia found out he was a senior and told him she was a freshman and realized they went to different high schools.

He was impressed she was only a freshman and had the guts to come to the stables. His shaggy hair covered his ears, and he had a pimple on his chin. She focused on not focusing on it, and she found the drink in her hand was a convenient distraction. Eulalia leaned against the stall, feeling more relaxed. By the time she finished her drink, Eulalia found herself focusing really hard on his face. Everything around it was getting sort of blurred, but she knew she'd remember his face.

“Want to take a walk? Can't see the moon in here,” the guy said. He leaned close to Eulalia and ran his finger down her bare midriff and hooked it in the band of her jeans. It tickled in a way that made Eulalia shiver and gave her goose bumps. It wasn't necessarily pleasant, though. She grabbed his hand so he'd let go and tried to laugh, but he threaded a finger on his other hand through her belt loop and pulled her toward him.

The world surrounding him came back into focus. Eulalia backed away, though he was still hooked on her pants, and poured out the last bit of her drink on his feet.

Cat came up to them. “Everything okay?” she asked.

Eulalia had never been so happy to see her.

“Back off Kitty Cat,” he said. He ran his hand around Eulalia's back and slipped the tips of his fingers under the top of her pants.

“Come on.” Cat grabbed Eulalia's hand and walked her away from him. “The creep,” Cat muttered.

“Know him well?” Eulalia said, trying to silence her nerves with her own words. Her goose bumps wouldn't go away. She was ready to put her own T-shirt back on.

“I'm ready to go,” Cat said, facing Eulalia who couldn't see her eyes through the black sunglasses.

“Jess was there.” Eulalia pointed to the stall where she saw Jessica last, but she couldn’t hear her.

Cat frowned and pushed through the crowd. She came back a few seconds later and shook her head no. Cat motioned to one of her friends, who gave her a small joint. She inhaled and held it for a few seconds before exhaling. Even behind the dark glasses, underneath the black hat, and behind the grey smoke, Cat looked worried.

“She wouldn’t have gone to the woods?” Eulalia said. From how Cat described it, she hoped Jessica wasn’t there. She didn’t think Jessica was that desperate.

Cat headed out of the stables, and Eulalia followed past the blinding headlights and the deafening music. The bass from the stereos bumped in Eulalia’s chest, and the alcohol thumped in her head. Eulalia waited for a moment to let her eyes adjust to the darkness, but Cat pushed on.

Eulalia heard Jessica singing the wrong words to some rap song, and two guys were laughing. They were in front of the car with the speakers. Jessica danced in front of the guys, and her skirt rode up. One came up to her and danced really close with his knee between her legs. The other guy slipped his phone up Jessica’s skirt, and it flashed.

“What the fuck,” Cat yelled.

“But we’re having fun,” Jessica said. She had red stains around her mouth from all the punch she’d drunk, and her hair was mussed.

The guy with the phone flashed the camera again, and the two grinned. Jessica swayed and leaned on one of their shoulders before noticing the phone. She straightened up and tucked her hair behind her ears. Eulalia was sure Jessica, in a moment of lucidity, understood what was happening. She was sure Jessica was about to set them straight, like that time a boy in class



kicked up her skirt as she walked by and sniggered with his friends. Jessica had grabbed his shirt collar so that her long fingernails sank into his throat, and he had stopped laughing. Their teacher asked if they had an issue, and Jessica replied that he just had a question about a math problem.

Eulalia waited for Jessica to dig into these guys, too.

They got distracted by a notification one of them received on his phone. Eulalia was glad they were losing interest already. This would give Cat and her a chance to get Jessica out of this situation.

Jessica looked at Eulalia and didn't seem nearly as drunk as Eulalia expected.

"Take my picture," Jessica said and posed with her mouth puckered and her hand in her hair. The guys' attention was recaptured, and the camera clicked again.

Cat grabbed the phone and dropped it into a full cup of beer on the ground.

"My new phone," one yelled. He quickly pulled it out of the cup and tried to dry it off.

"Why're you so bitchy, Cathy?" Jessica said, emphasizing the name. "You on your period?" She looked around as if waiting for someone to laugh, but no one did.

Eulalia grabbed Jessica's hand. "You're done."

Jessica wanted to walk back through the stables as they left. There were some other seniors she wanted to give her phone number to, but Eulalia guided her around the outside of the stables in the darkness where some couples were trying to be alone and talk and maybe kiss because the stables were too loud.

When they got to Cat's car, Jessica limply leaned against the side. Eulalia reached for her T-shirt from earlier and helped Jessica put it on over her clothes. It was longer on her than the skirt she wore. They all got in the car, and Eulalia sat in the back with Jessica, who leaned her head against the window and fell asleep. At one point, Cat checked her phone and hit the car's

accelerator until Eulalia thought the engine would fall out. Every few minutes, Jessica scratched her nose or crossed her ankles or curled into the tightest ball she could, and Eulalia saw her shoulders shake as she exhaled. Cat decided she and Jessica would stay at Eulalia's house that night. She said their mom had enough to deal with. Cat's phone lit up again, and Eulalia saw a photo of a girl with lollipop red lips and a bare breast.

They walked into the house, though Jessica was almost sleepwalking with her eyes halfway closed. Stanislaus was still in the kitchen with his math papers and books overtaking the dining table. Jessica walked past him, through the living room where Eulalia's mom sat watching a TV show about housewives, and straight to Eulalia's room. Eulalia heard some women who sounded like they were from New Jersey talking about respect and how the other doesn't respect her and how she can't respect her either anymore. Stanislaus twisted in his chair to watch Jessica and looked back at Eulalia and Cat.

"I'll go help her," Cat said.

Eulalia's mom turned off her show and walked into the kitchen. "Hey girls."

"Hey Miss Candice," Cat said as she left for Eulalia's room.

"Sweats are in the bottom drawer," Eulalia told Cat.

"Cute top, Eulie." Mom sipped her nightly chamomile tea. "Is that Jess's?"

"Jess and Cat are going to stay over tonight. That okay?" Eulalia said.

"Sure. Dad and I can make you girls pancakes tomorrow." She looked over her shoulder in the direction Cat went and lowered her voice. "Is Jess okay?"

Eulalia sat at the table across from Stanislaus. His homework looked daunting, but Eulalia would've gladly faced a hundred math problems right then instead of what she'd

encounter at school on Monday. She nodded yes as her mom handed her a bowl of fruit salad topped with pecans and whipped cream. Eulalia wasn't sure if her lie convinced, though.

"Must've been some movie," her mom muttered as she pulled a large Gatorade bottle from the refrigerator. "For Jess." She handed Eulalia the bottle. "I'll put the Tylenol in your bathroom for the morning."

"How's calc coming, Stan?" Eulalia's mom asked.

"Calculus doesn't come. It sits and makes me come to it," he said, taking his glasses off and rubbing his eyes. He looked just like a skinnier version of their dad.

"You'll get it," Eulalia's mom said as she placed a bowl of fruit salad with slivered almonds and maple syrup on top of his open calculus book. She hugged Eulalia and kissed her on the head. "Night."

Stanislaus leaned in toward Eulalia. "You look like shit," he said. "What happened?"

"Cat took us to the stables." Eulalia knew he wanted to go to the stables, but his friends did homework on Saturday nights, so he didn't go.

"Bunch of creeps there," he said and took a bite of his fruit salad.

Eulalia hadn't touched her own.

"Everyone talks about it." Stanislaus leaned back in his chair. "The guys brag about it."

Eulalia stuck her spoon in the whipped cream in her bowl. She swirled it around and peaked it up to look like the summit of a mountain.

"They sent a mass text." Stanislaus picked at the frayed edges of a notebook page. His phone sat face down on the table. "How is she?" He didn't look at Eulalia.

She shrugged. "Don't know."

"You can sleep in my bed tonight, Eulie." He looked up.

“Thanks, Stan.” She tried to smile, but she didn’t want to. “You’re okay,” she said. “You know, for a nerd.”

“You’re not so bad either,” he said, smiling. “For a freshman.”

Eulalia got up from the table and walked to Stanislaus. She wrapped her arms around his bony shoulders. “Good night,” she said.

He squeezed her forearm.

Eulalia grabbed the Gatorade. She stood outside her bedroom and cracked the door open. Jessica, still wearing the T-shirt from the stables, lay on Eulalia’s bed. Cat wore Eulalia’s dog pajamas and was curled up facing Jess and stroking her hair.

“Here,” Eulalia said. She put the bottle on the bed stand near Jessica.

Cat lifted her head. “Thanks.”

Eulalia knelt on the ground by Jessica’s head. Her eyes were open and unfocused. “Jess,” Eulalia began, “You need to know. Those guys.” She didn’t know how to say it. “They took some pictures.” Jessica still didn’t look at Eulalia. “Of you.”

Jessica blinked and focused on her. “I know.”

“These guys.” Eulalia swallowed. “They sent out those pictures.”

Cat picked up her phone and furiously typed something out.

Jessica put her hands under her head. “I told them to.” She closed her eyes.

Cat’s thumbs stopped hitting the screen, and she looked at Jessica. “Did you look at them?” she asked.

“They’re just pictures,” Jessica said. She buried her face in her pillow.

“Jess,” Eulalia began. She looked at Cat who nodded as if she saying yes to what Eulalia was telepathically asking her. “The pictures they got were under your shirt.” Eulalia watched

Jessica to see if she'd respond, but she didn't. "And up your skirt," Eulalia finished. She didn't believe her friend would knowingly tell some creeps to share those pictures with everyone they knew.

"How'd everything look?" Jessica looked at Eulalia. "The seniors said they like girls who're tight." She yawned.

Cat sat upright and fully faced her sister. From the look on Cat's face, Eulalia thought she was about to slap Jessica. Eulalia didn't know what her own expression conveyed, but she couldn't control it at that moment. Jessica loved attention, but Eulalia didn't think she'd go that far to get it.

"Jess." Eulalia couldn't think of anything more to say.

Jessica looked from her sister to Eulalia and apparently saw something judgmental and self-righteous in their faces. She responded with a look that was mean and reminded Eulalia of the little girls who used to bully her in kindergarten. They used to poke Eulalia's stomach and pinch her arms. Once Eulalia became friends with Jessica, she stood in front of Eulalia, threatening, even daring the other little girls to touch her one more time.

Now, Jessica was the one poking and pinching Eulalia. "At least guys like the way I look in a skirt," Jessica said.

Eulalia felt herself recoil from Jessica and was glad she didn't have any classes with her this year. She didn't need Jessica to stand in front of her anymore. "At least I don't get confused for a prostitute on a daily basis," Eulalia said.

Jessica sat up. Eulalia thought it must be hard attacking someone while lying down. "All you're good for is cheating off of in algebra." Jessica glared at Eulalia.

But Eulalia realized she was okay with being the smart girl who boys needed to tutor them or to copy notes from. She wondered if Jessica would be okay with being the girl who boys reduced to exposed body parts on their phones.

“You’re right.” Eulalia stood up. She still had the crop top on and could see the red lines on her stomach from the rolls she got when she sat for too long. Eulalia pulled a pair of pants out of her dresser and tossed them onto the foot of the bed. “For tomorrow,” she said to Jessica, who still watched her. “When you leave.”

Jessica was angry, angry enough, Eulalia hoped, to sneak out without saying goodbye in the morning.

## Whiskey and a Sledgehammer

The starchy collar of my button-up shirt made my neck itch. I didn't want to wear it to graduation, but my dad insisted. He said that it wasn't every day you graduated from high school and it wasn't everyone's luck here to get into a college out of town. "Gale, be proud, son," he told me. "Look proud, son," he told me.

Well, now I celebrated, proudly I might add, with Ian sitting next to me in my truck parked in the school gym's lot. Sitting between us on the seat were a carton of cigarettes and a bottle of whiskey Ian stole from Sheriff's office last Friday night while everyone else in town was at the high school baseball game.

We had an hour until the ceremony began. Ian unscrewed the cap on the whiskey and took a swig. I grabbed it from him and did the same. No matter how much I drank, it still stung, and I didn't exactly like the feeling, but I liked the way I felt when people saw me drink it.

I would start college in the fall, and Ian would start at the police academy. No one could deny the irony of the situation. Out of every student in our school, Ian had run into the law more than anyone. As Sheriff would cuff Ian, he'd wink at me and smile, knowing how the night would end. I would visit Ian when he was detained. I didn't have money to bail him out, but the town cops rarely required that from Ian. Sheriff thought that after enough hours and nights spent in a police station cell the lesson would sink into his head, so Ian was never charged with any actual crimes. It helped that the sheriff was his dad.

I never got cuffed. Sheriff didn't think punishing me for Ian's dumbassery was a great decision. It didn't hurt that both of my parents were on the city council. But it also meant that I was held to this high standard and that everyone's eyes were on me. I would walk into the convenient store across the street from school and get these smiles and nods from the old lady

behind the counter and from some trucker buying a Monster drink and a can of Skoal. People I didn't even know who knew me, like I inherited celebrity status because my parents were movie stars. Compared to some of the deadbeat parents in this town, I guess they were.

When the graduation ceremony was about to start, Ian and I walked into the school gym. Ian had on his unzipped gown, wearing the purple polyester robe as if he were starting a new fashion trend. And I couldn't deny that the look suited my friend. Though we'd been friends for all of high school, we still got odd looks when we were together like everyone had expected us to grow apart by now, like Ian was a bad phase of my otherwise pristine adolescence, or like he was a charity case I was supposed to drop after high school so I could marry Mary Belle, my girlfriend, and work at the chemical plant, a life that didn't require college, didn't require much from me except that I be there. I wanted more than that.

And I think Ian wanted more, too, for him and for me.

But he didn't want a family of his own. Ian's was too messed up for him even to consider perpetuating the shittiness of it all. He had made a decision never to have a family right when we started high school. One day he came to school, and his eyes were rimmed in red.

"You look like shit," I told him. "You not sleep?"

"No, shithead, my mom left us last night," he responded with a sarcasm that tried to make it seem like this wasn't the real reason. Ian looked angry and clasped his hands together. I thought if he pulled them apart he wouldn't be able to control what they hit.

"Fuck her," I said. And that afternoon, we broke into his dad's safe and got his city-issued handgun and bottle of whiskey and shot at blank billboards until the mosquito hawks stopped harassing us.



After that, I knew I could never stop being his friend. We had become inextricable. We were banded together like soldiers.

As Ian and I stood in the back of the gym before taking our places in line for the procession of the graduates, Ian nudged my shoulder. “Dick Dad’s here.”

I turned to look at what he saw, but as I was looking, Ian walked by me to Jules, our classmate, who stood with her father. I was convinced he had been in love with her for years. She had red hair and freckles on her tan skin. She was tall and curvy and unexpectedly friendly for someone so stunning.

Ian stood in front of her and her father, the mayor, who was a head taller than Jules and had his hand on the back of her neck. He wore penny loafers and a sweater vest under his sports coat. His hair was parted on the side and gelled into place. It looked too contrived. He left Jules to find his seat in the stands.

He was the Dick Dad.

When I approached, Jules was laughing, and Ian, with his hands in his pant pockets, was smiling, probably proud to be able to please Jules. She tucked her thick hair behind her ear just then, and Ian reached his hand out to touch a black bruise on her neck. She pushed his hand away and readjusted her hair to cover the bruise.

Ian told me about Jules’s abuse when he needed my truck for his plan. I drove, and he told me where to turn and when to turn off my headlights. We ended up in front of Jules’s house. I had only been once before for an end of the year party that everyone was invited to. It was a huge house with columns on the front porch and big windows that showed off their leather furniture and marble statuettes.

“Stay,” Ian told me, like I was a dog. “But keep the truck running.” He ran to the front door. It didn’t look like anyone was home. He opened the unlocked door, and within minutes he returned carrying a duffel bag, and Jules followed him. She got in my truck and sat between Ian and me. “My dad can protect you,” Ian said. Jules’s hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail. I couldn’t tell if it was just a shadow on her cheekbone.

We got back to Ian’s house. His dad was supposed to be working nights all weekend, but when we entered the house, he was sitting at the kitchen table with a bottle of whiskey. The seal hadn’t been broken, and Sheriff twirled a fresh glass. He didn’t even look up at us. “Her father called.”

Ian took the duffel bag from Jules and shook his head. He started heading toward his bedroom. “I’ll take the sofa,” he said.

Sheriff stood up in front of Ian. “Son,” he said and put his hand on Ian’s chest.

“Her father h—” Ian began, but Jules cut him off.

“I’m sorry, Sheriff,” she said. Jules reached out for her bag from Ian. He looked at Jules as if telecommunicating with her to tell his dad what her father did.

“I’ll drive you home,” Sheriff said. He followed Jules out of the door and put his hand on Ian’s shoulder, but Ian slapped it away.

Ian and I sat at the table and cracked open the seal. When Sheriff returned, he glanced at the contraband in Ian’s hand and took a seat at the table with us.

“Someone has to report it,” he told us. His voice made it clear he didn’t want to fight with Ian. Sheriff grasped the bottle.

Ian stood up and dropped his arms by his side. “Sheriff, I would like to report child abuse, sir.”

Sheriff remained seated and took a gulp of the whiskey. “He’s the mayor.”

Ian got in his dad’s face. “And you’re a coward.” He grabbed the bottle and left the kitchen. He told me later that night that his only comfort was that soon Jules would be done with high school and could leave. I told him he was right.

After that night, Jules started avoiding us. Ian wasn’t invited to her graduation party, so I wasn’t going to go either.

Now as the ceremony was about to begin, Jules looked grateful that Mrs. White, the school secretary, called us to line up in our positions for the procession just when Ian noticed her bruise. Ian didn’t even zip up his robe to process in, and no one told him otherwise. He was pensive, which was often followed by volatile. I knew the next hours of doing nothing but sitting in his own head would only fuel Ian’s fury.

After our procession and the speeches from the smart kids and the congratulations from the teachers happy to see us leave, Principal Donough began awarding the diplomas. We were all restless to walk up and grab our diploma cases before the teachers changed their minds and refused to hand them over.

Mary Belle sat three people ahead of me in our row. Our last names were so close to the same that they were only a few letters off. She had joked that when we got married, she wouldn’t even need to change her last name. People always mispronounced Pucheu so that it sounded like hers, Poucher. That was the curse of having a French name in a country town.

Throughout the ceremony, she kept glancing at me and grinning. She looked nervous, but I knew she was anxious to graduate and start her two-year hospital technician program. She had dreams of saving the town’s people. When our row of students stood, I felt charged with electric energy. Mary Belle walked across the stage to get her diploma. She waited for me at the bottom

of the steps that came off of the stage. Mrs. White, now in charge of maintaining the flow of students, didn't even tell Mary Belle to keep moving like she had told everyone else. I guess she was sentimental or something and wanted to let us have a moment.

All the faculty members knew our class voted us cutest couple at our senior dinner. We even got an award. I hadn't minded until Ian mimicked vomiting into his hand as Mary Belle and I kissed for a yearbook picture. I had wanted to punch him. I wanted to make his face as red as mine felt, but I knew he'd beat me in a fistfight. It wasn't worth it.

When I reached the bottom of the stage's steps, Mary Belle jumped up and threw her arms around my neck, choking me a little. She kissed me right on the mouth, and the photographer snapped a picture. "How wonderful will it be to have that picture to show your kids in a couple years?" he said.

I got stuck on "a couple years." In a couple, as in two, years, we were supposed to be thinking about bringing children into the world. I was a child myself. But before I could respond or even screw on a smile for my official graduation photo the photographer was supposed to take, Mary Belle took off her cap, knelt on both knees before me, and held onto my hands. It felt like she was clinging to me for life.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Gale, can you marry me?" She smiled up at me.

It felt like the whole town was watching us, and I couldn't think. The photographer had his camera ready to snap a picture of my answer. "What?"

"Let's get married."

I glanced around the auditorium. Principal Donough kept handing out diplomas, but soon the ceremony would be over, and we'd be expected back in our seats so we could throw off our

caps. I had been waiting four years to throw off this fucking cap. I didn't want to miss it. "We're barely eighteen, Belle." I pulled her up to her feet.

Her eyebrows pulled together in confusion and then hardened into indifference. "Never mind, Pooch," she said as she let go of my hands. She never called me "Pooch." That was my awful middle school nickname. Everyone called me that until I started hanging out with Ian. No one messed with him, and when we became friends, no one messed with me either.

Mary Belle didn't let me explain. We retook our seats and waited for the moment we could toss the cloth-covered pieces of cardboard mounted on our heads. I watched Mary Belle, trying to catch her eye when we stood up. But all she did was look straight ahead, take off her cap, and let it drop to the ground as everyone else threw theirs. I took mine off, and it was the last one to fly, but damn did it soar.

I looked for Ian, but I couldn't find him. When I looked back toward Mary Belle, she was gone. I headed back to my truck. My classmates and their parents crowded outside the entrance to the gym, so I had to thread my way through them before I felt like I could breathe. I saw Jules and her parents. She looked happy, but she always looked happy, and her parents looked crisp and gelled.

I heard a car alarm go off, and I thought one of the grandmothers must've hit the panic button because she couldn't find her car. When I got to my truck, the door was open. I searched for Ian and found him at the panicking car. He had a sledgehammer in his hands, which he swung up and let smash down on the trunk of a Beamer.

I ran between him and the car. "Ian, what are you doing? Whose car is that?"

He pushed past me and slammed the head of the sledgehammer into the windshield.

“Is that mine?” I asked. I kept the sledgehammer in the bed of my truck so I could do some drywalling work on the weekends and earn money for next year.

“I wanted to crush his knees,” Ian said as he raised the hammer again. “But his car will do.” He shattered a headlight.

People started gathering around to watch. I saw the mayor’s tall, gelled head above the crowd. “Man, let’s go.” I grabbed the handle of the sledgehammer, so Ian couldn’t swing it again. “Come on.” He wouldn’t let go of the handle, so I pulled him away by it. We got in my truck and took off. I headed for Schwegmann’s, the abandoned grocery store on the edge of town. The grocery store had been closed for three years now, and the lot and the building just sat there vacant, begging us to occupy them.

I parked the truck just outside of the reach of the blue-white light from the lot’s street lamp. “Why’d you do it?” I asked.

Ian slid a cigarette out of the carton that was still in the truck and slipped it between his cracked lips. He lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply a few times without blinking once. He looked sleep-deprived and slightly crazed. “Don’t you want to be a hero, Gale?”

Ian often had these moments and days when he desired immortality, an immortality that other young Ians could look to for inspiration when he was gone, at least from this town.

“I just want a degree, a wife, I dunno, kids and a dog,” I said. The parking lot lamp pulsed.

Ian looked directly at me. I felt his gaze more than actually saw it. He had this way of piercing people. I think he knew he had this power, so he used it wisely. He didn’t look at you until he really wanted to unleash it on you.

I shook my head and looked away from him. Schwegmann's had been grafittied in the years after its closure. I believed the long-eyelashed eye right above the "Schweg" was Ian's handiwork. He never owned up to it, but it seems like something he'd spray-paint, so he'd always have an eye on the town.

"Let's burn our shit," I suggested. We had planned our post-graduation ritual for weeks.

Ian opened his door and jumped down from the truck, his gown flowing like a cape behind him. With the bottle still in my hand, I got out of my truck and slammed the door behind me. We pulled our backpacks full of textbooks and notes from my truck bed and dumped them in a metal trashcan. I took a note from Mary Belle out of the front pocket of my bag. It had hearts and flowers doodled in the margins, and her square print gave the page texture. I couldn't remember what the note said. I dropped it in the can without reading it. Ian poured in lighter fluid, and I tossed in a lit match. The fire burned and grew until we had to back away. Ian grabbed the cigarettes and headed for the abandoned store. I took off my gown and tossed it over the flames before grabbing the whiskey and taking a few jogged steps to catch up to him. If I let him walk too far, I'd lose him.

I followed Ian to the side of the abandoned grocery store, and we climbed the fire-escape stairs up to the roof. I never knew why they had those. The building was tall, but it only had one floor inside. On the roof, you could see the water tower near city hall and the clock tower on the courthouse peeking over the treetops.

Ian stood on the edge of the roof, and I sat next to where he stood. The wind whipped through his purple gown, blowing the fabric out behind him. "From up here, I could almost love this town," Ian said. He breathed deeply through his cigarette.

Our cigarettes burned down toward our fingers, and we passed the bottle between us. I was proud that it was almost empty already.

“He’ll go to the cops,” I said.

“By the cops, you mean my dad?” Ian laughed and then clenched his teeth, flexing his jaw. Ian looked down at me. “Why’d you say no to her?”

I cracked my knuckles on the roof. I didn’t want to think about that. I tossed my stub of a cigarette behind me, grabbed the carton, and lit another one. I blew the smoke out slowly and let it engulf my head in a smelly cloud. Mary Belle hated when I smoked. “I didn’t say no.” My feet dangled about a hundred feet above the pavement, and I flicked the ash to see how long it would take before it hit the ground. It dissolved a few feet down.

“Not saying yes is no, jackass.” Ian stretched his arms out wide, juttied his chest out, and leaned his head back. He looked like a young version of God just as He finished creating the world. Maybe on the seventh day, when He took a step back, looked at His new creation, and said, “Damn, I’m good.”

“Visit me?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. I wasn’t sure I would, though. Leaving felt final, like the town wouldn’t welcome me back once I betrayed it. I wasn’t sure if Ian would either. Becoming a police officer would make him a vital organ protecting this town from viral outsiders.

I thought of Mary Belle. She was at Jules’s party right now, and both of the girls were probably talking to other classmates about future plans, pretending that after tonight life would be different. But tomorrow they would all wake up, and their dreams would confront the reality that only a few people were lucky enough to be leaving, and I was one of them.



Ian handed me the whiskey, but when I smelled it, I cringed and shook my head. I couldn't force down the last bit. Ian grabbed the bottle from me and finished it like I couldn't. I wasn't meant for this town.

## Through the Head

Sitting in my fading green truck, I watch neighbors and family friends, half the town's population, walk into the church. A parade of black.

The engine is off, but I still have my seat belt on. The windows are cranked up. My mascara clumps together in the humidity every time I blink. My black dress doesn't keep me cool even though it's November, and my unusually bare legs are sweating in the bright sunlight. I never realized how scratchy the cab's interior is.

Standing at the door to the white wooden church, Momma greets everyone as they walk in. The pastor is beside her with his Bible in hand when he should be preparing his eulogy. He's searching the crowds, the parking lot, the cars. He sees me. Momma doesn't. She's squinting into the face of every person who ate my dad's deer meat or shared a beer with him or laughed at his jokes. Everyone hugs my small mother, even the two-year-olds toddling by.

The grief dwarfs her. Just like the mounted deer head that I put in the backseat of her car with a collage of hunting pictures before we left this morning. I arrived at the church first and watched Momma take the collage out of her car and bring it in. I watched her struggle with the deer head, my father's first buck. I watched from my truck hidden in a cluster of other big trucks at the back of the lot.

I began going to the deer stand with my dad when I was nine. He took me out every Saturday of deer season. At night, he'd bring me to the road where my mom waited, but he went back to the stand until Sunday afternoon. He always said the woods were no place for a young lady to be at night, but as Momma drove me home, I pouted, imagining all of the thoughts and ideas that no one but the animals would get to hear from him, that I wouldn't get to hear from him, and I tried to convince Momma that we were wasting precious time.

The first thing my dad killed with me there was a doe. She didn't see us. She was looking at the grass at the tip of her nose while I drifted off to look at the birds fluffing their feathers and the squirrels hiding from the frosty air. The loud shot rang in my ears even though they were plugged. I looked back at the doe, back at where she lay on the ground. One perfect shot through her lungs. One perfect shot I completely missed.

Unlike that doe, my family saw death coming from two years away. We watched it. A brain tumor. Every doctor's visit showed the tumor behind his skull growing. The only time I went with my parents to the oncologist's office, the doctor pointed at the tumor on the image, as if the white spot wasn't bright enough for us to see. When I looked at the illuminated MRI, I wondered if deer get tumors in their heads.

"Envision a baseball lodged in your brain. That's about its size and mass." The doctor's engraved plaques decorated the sterile walls of his office, and his fat finger was shoved into a gold college ring.

"What the fuck?" I said. "We don't want to envision a ball in his head. We want you to fucking get it out."

Momma gasped and slapped my wrist as if a reprimand would shame me enough to make me apologize to that damn jackass doctor who sat like an obese orangutan in his cushy leather seat while my dad was shrinking, his shoulders barely holding up his hunting bib anymore. Every time my dad put it on, the straps slipped off. He would see that I noticed, puff up his chest and flex his arms, and laugh.

"Hey," my dad blurted out in the doctor's office. "When I die, you can cut the tumor out and use it as a baseball. Teach my future grandboys for me," he said, trying but failing to diffuse the tension. I decided I would never have boys.

The doctor attempted to stretch a smile across his bloated face. Momma just stared, her eyes rimmed in red. Only my dad laughed. At that moment, the only place I wanted to be was in the deer stand. There, my dad was the killer.

After that, I went to the woods alone and stayed there all night.

To this day, it doesn't feel right sleeping in a bed anymore. Once the cold air hits north Louisiana, my bones start to ache. Momma tells me its just arthritis or maybe an old injury from high school volleyball and I should just take some medicine and rest my joints. But it's something completely different.

The statistics tell me my dad was a lucky one, though. Malignant tumors sprang up in the satellite lesions from his surgery, and he still lived for twenty-seven months after we found out about the cancer.

It has been four days since he died.

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During a break in the attendants funneling into the church, Momma turns away and presses her phone to her ear. My cell phone lights up and vibrates on the seat next to me. When she returns to her greeting duties, Pastor Matthew places a hand on my mother's shoulder and says something before she nods, never raising her eyes.

He looks at me. I swear he sees straight through the trucks and trees surrounding me. Pastor Matthew walks toward me. When he reaches my truck, he motions for me to roll down my window, so I crank the handle until I'm face-to-face with my spiritual shepherd.

"Everyone's waiting for you," he reminds me. "Your mother, she needs you right now."

I fumble with the key in my hand before shoving it into the ignition. I keep my hand on the key but don't turn it. "She needs my dad," I say.

“Just come in.” Pastor Matthew squints in the bright sunlight reflecting off of the pavement and cars. It’s so bright that everything looks white. “The service’ll help.”

My dad didn’t go to Sunday service. The canopy of leaves was his church. The deer stand, his pew. Hunting, his communion. He would come home Sunday afternoon with deer meat in his hands, and in exchange for his gift, Momma would relay the sermon from that morning. With his feet propped up on the breakfast table and his hands behind his head, my dad would sit and listen to Momma as she busied herself with seasoning the deer steaks for that night and storing the rest of the meat for another.

One day, his eyes drifted shut, and he began softly snoring while Momma was talking about the Word and how it *was* God and was *with* God. I began to think someone needed to make up another word for “word” when Momma pushed my dad’s feet off the table, jerking him awake.

“You can’t even find the time to make it to service on Sunday. The least you could do, Clinton, is listen to me.”

He straightened up like someone laced his spine into place. He stuck his tongue out behind Momma’s back, and I giggled. Momma turned around just in time to see him cross his eyes, making me lose it with laughter. She flicked a dishtowel at him.

“Clinton James Champon,” she reprimanded him. I expected her to order him to go sit in his room and think about what he’d done, but then my dad grabbed Momma around the waist, pulled her into his lap, and licked her cheek like a dog. She laughed and played like she wanted him to let her go.

The only time my dad talked about God was while we hunted. When I was ten, as my dad and I sat eighteen feet up a tree, he told me that God dwells in every living creature on this earth.

I asked him, “What about deer? If He’s in them, aren’t you killing God?”

My dad just laughed, the crow’s feet landing by his eyes, making him look young instead of old, as if nature wanted him to wrinkle and crumble, but he wouldn’t just roll over and die. It would take more than a shot to the head to take my dad down.

He never answered me.

Sitting in my truck with Pastor Matthew waiting, I twist the key. The engine turns over, and my truck rumbles to life.

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I sit at Jim’s, the bar on the outskirts of town where the blue-collar workers go. A few men with cracked fingertips and dirty palms sit at the bar after long nights of work, and a group of sunken-eyed men who wear mesh trucker hats play pool. One hits two balls in but scratches. I order a whiskey and Coke. As I sip my drink, my eyes drift above the bar to a picture of Mr. Jim and my dad kneeling behind a six-point buck. Mr. Jim is at the funeral right now.

A guy with a camouflage hat on backwards and clean steel toe boots walks up next to where I sit. The bartender puts a can of Natty Lite in front of him. The guy could at least have the class to pour it into a cup so no one *knows* he’s cheap. He looks my way, but I avoid eye contact.

“So, you hunt?” he asks me and brings the can to his mouth.

With my black dress and mascara, I don’t know how it’s obvious. I didn’t think to bring clothes to change into. But I didn’t think I would leave the funeral.

“How could you tell?” I sip my drink and don’t bother looking at him.

“Your trigger finger.” He motions down to my hand. “It ticks. So does my brother’s.”

I straighten out my fingers on the sticky bar top. My phone, lying on the wooden bar, lights up and vibrates with a call from Momma. I turn it facedown.

“He’s big into hunting. Goes wherever he can find an open season and hunts whatever they have.” He keeps on sipping that beer.

In some form of a wave, I awkwardly wiggle two fingers at the bartender down the bar. I hope someone will save me, but no one’s coming.

“He invites me, but I can never pull the trigger.”

I know I’m supposed to ask him to tell me more about himself, but I can’t pretend like I care. I twirl the cocktail straw around my glass, and the ice clinks.

I think about telling him the reason. I think about telling this guy about my dad and the way he used to talk about hunting like it was a religion and he was its prophet; about sitting in a deer stand eighteen feet in the air, just waiting for that beautiful tan creature to amble into my line of sight; about the power in the kick of a rifle when I pull the trigger and the muzzle jerks upward and the deer starts to flee, but it’s too late because my shot is perfect; about how hunting makes me feel like I own, really own, the animal.

I shrug my shoulders. “I just like to kill things.” I finish my drink and crush the ice with my teeth.

Placing my empty glass on the counter, I walk away. I leave the bar, the picture of my healthy dad, and this guy who can’t kill. I stop in the middle of the parking lot and look around. Now that the temperature has dropped, it’s too cold outside for bare legs. I feel naked with the wind sweeping up my dress. I crouch on the ground and let my dress drape over my legs like a tent. The guy with the backwards camo hat asks me if I need a ride somewhere, if I’m okay. He touches my shoulder. I recoil from him. He pulls his hand back. I stand in front of him. He tells

me he can drive me. He tells me it's not a problem, if I need some help. I step toward him. He smells like iron. He smells like cheap beer. He smells like chemo. I want to vomit. I want to cry. I close my eyes, and my dad, shriveled and sick, smiles back at me.

I look at the guy in front of me. He looks concerned. He looks genuine. He looks like someone my dad would've wanted me to marry. I shake my head no.

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I gun it at ninety-miles-an-hour all the way to our camp in Arkansas. The sun is in my eyes as it shines above the pines along the highway. Jumping out of my truck, I throw my camouflage jacket over my shoulders and grab my bow. It's only a twenty-minute hike to the deer stand if I walk fast.

Eleven if I jog.

I sprint. The leaves crunch under my feet. I can't see much, but I don't need to. The scent of doe urine and my muscle memory guide me. I climb the ladder of the deer stand that my dad built when he inherited this land from my grandfather.

Finally. I can settle.

Closing my eyes brings my dad back. His bib fits, and he's sitting next to me, his eyes vigilantly scanning the woods. When a doe walks into our line of sight, he "Mhah"s, and she hesitates, her head popping up. He aims. He kills.

I inhale deeply, and the smells of the woods replace the scent of cancer lingering in my nose.

Right now in the evening twilight, the birds, the squirrels, the lizards, and the leaves are still. Even my breath, which normally fogs up the air in front of me with each deep exhale, can disturb nothing.



In this moment of suspension, a white tail buck grazes a path into the clearing in front of me. Some people tell me I would have more luck shooting game if I planted some alfalfa or hung some corn near my stand. But that doesn't really sound like luck to me. That's why I started using a bow. Evens out the odds.

My dad will be—would have been—proud of that ten-point rack. He would have taken a picture after and shown off to all of his friends at the bar. He'd have said, "My daughter got that one fair and square."

My arrow is already in place, but when I line up my aim and extend the bowstring, the buck stops grazing. He's alert. The deer picks up his hoof off the ground and puts it down only inches from its previous spot, returning his mouth to the grass. I look down the shaft of the arrow. I can place the arrow wherever I want: through his temple, into his ear, through his eye. The deer is dead if I release the fletching, even though the shot could destroy the rack. I point the arrowhead at his lungs. Shot there, he would die in seven seconds. It would be quick. It would be merciful.

But I look at his eye again. He doesn't see me. I'm too high up. But I see him. I see his eye. I see God in his eye. God's staring at me.

He's smiling.

He's laughing.

I release the arrow.

## Gold Dust

I first met Moses one fall afternoon at the neighborhood basketball courts, but he wasn't playing. With his back to me, Moses stood, holding a walking stick in his hand and staring at the public pool dug right next to the court. I sat on a bench tightening my shoelaces.

"It's closed, man," I called to him. Everyone in town knew the pool closed after the Labor Day weekend, so I knew he wasn't from here.

He turned and looked at me but didn't respond.

I glanced at everyone warming up their shots and stretching their legs. The guys from school came out in the afternoon to practice for upcoming tryouts. I was a sophomore vying for a spot on the varsity team. Basketball could get me out of this town where kids began working for their dads in high school, dropped out, and took over the family business. Though my dad worked for the Corps of Engineers, and they didn't participate in nepotism, my mom ran a craft store and joked with me about hiring me as her next purchasing manager. If basketball couldn't give me a future outside of this town, then nothing could.

Moses didn't belong in this town, I could tell, but he could've. He carried the same backpack and wore the same Nikes that my friends and I had on our first day of school. His cropped haircut resembled mine when I was ready to walk into Supercuts and get a trim. Though he had a vagrant look about him, his eyes didn't share the same vacant expression I saw in the guys who waited outside the church for Saturday free lunch. He seemed to be right where he wanted to be, staring at the pool.

Still sitting on the bench and watching Moses, I said, "You play?" and motioned toward the chain-netted basketball goals.

He twisted to look at me and shook his head no. "I'm harnessing my power," he said. "To part the water."

"Whatever," I told him. He was there for an hour while we practiced. I kept sneaking glances at him between plays. He moved his walking stick from one hand to the other, and sometimes he squatted down and sat on his heels, but he kept his gaze on the pool. I asked the other guys about him, but they had never seen him around or at school either. Some of them aimed their passes at him, saying whoever hit him got to take two free-throw shots.

The next day, Moses returned, but he wasn't standing by the pool. He sat on a bench and faced the courts as if he'd deigned to let us entertain him. His backpack and walking stick lay on the ground by his feet.

Warming up, I tried to hit a jump shot but missed. The ball rolled over to Moses. When I got closer to him, he appeared older than I assumed he was with his dark hair and his sun-darkened skin. I figured it was from over-exposure to the sun and the real world, a world I felt sheltered from by the town limits.

"You want in?" I asked as he picked up the ball. He took it gingerly between his fingers as if it were a large soap bubble that might burst at the slightest pressure. I stared at the way the ball seemed almost to float between his hands, and I wanted to see how he'd play. If a scout saw the way he handled that ball, he'd certainly earn a full-ride.

"I don't play," he said, the ball still held between his fingers.

I moved closer and grabbed it. "Thanks," I said. He let go, and in an instant the ball seemed to weigh fifty pounds in my hands. I was intrigued by the power in his fingers, and I wanted to harness it for my game. "What's your sport, man?"

“Life’s better as a spectator,” he said. His gaze moved from the ball in my hands to my eyes, and when he blinked and looked away, I seemed to weigh an extra hundred pounds. “I like to watch other people make fools of themselves.”

As I walked away, I couldn’t shake the feeling that he was watching me to see what would happen, but I was being paranoid. When my next layup landed me with a mouthful of asphalt, I felt like a fool and understood why he only watched.

When our game was over that afternoon, I grabbed my bag and headed toward home. Moses walked over to me. The way he moved so fluidly, I was sure, if he played basketball, he could bend around his opponents and stretch up to the goal, dunking the ball without his feet ever leaving the ground.

His confidence and the way he talked told me that he knew things this town could never teach me, and I wanted to know what he knew.

I stuck out my hand. I hoped that, when he grabbed it, the power in his fingers would lift the weight I’d felt on the basketball court for the past hour. “Andrew,” I said.

He looked at my hand and up at my eyes. “Moses,” he told me without shaking.

I dropped my arm to my side. “You float down a river in a basket or something?” I asked him. I forced a short laugh to let him know I wasn’t serious. “I’ve never seen you around before this week.”

Moses shrugged and nodded his head toward the basketball goal behind me. “You seemed to be struggling,” he said.

I didn’t like how easily he perceived that. “That’s why you practice,” I said, trying to play it off as a bad day. “To work out the kinks.”

“Want a drink?” Moses asked me. He offered a bottle of water to me.

“Not today.” I backed up a bit, beginning to question my initial impression of him. Maybe he was harmless as I initially thought, but I really had no idea.

“This’ll help you.” Moses opened his hand to show me a tan, sand-like substance in a plastic baggie. “Gold dust,” he told me.

It didn’t shimmer or shine like gold. “It’s seriously gold? Where’d you get it?” I asked, trying to get a better look. The only gold I’d ever seen was on my mom and dad’s wedding bands.

Moses sprinkled some of the dust into the bottle and held it out to me. “Drink it,” he said. “It’ll make you golden,” Moses told me.

“Look man, I’m not into drugs, okay? Totally cool if you are, but that’s not my game.” I wasn’t sure what Moses was playing at.

“It’s not drugs. It symbolizes your idols,” he told me.

He spoke like he was a prophet. I took the bottle and peeked over the rim as if some mysterious creature would jump out at me and pull me down deep into the water, deeper than the bottle even went. But when I looked, all I saw were flecks at the bottom. They still didn’t shimmer. I held the bottle out for him to take it back.

“Everything you idolize, crushed up and poured in.” He didn’t take it. “It’ll take the weight off.”

He couldn’t have known about the weightiness I’d felt. I wondered if he actually was a prophet, a modern day prophet sent by God to warn us to repent and change our ways, and I wondered if he’d require all of us, even people’s cats and dogs, to don sackcloth and sprinkle ashes on our heads. Maybe this prophet needed an assistant, and I didn’t mind living in the belly of a whale for a few days if it got me out of this town.

I looked in the water again. It looked harmless, and he said it wasn't drugs. I chose to accept him as a prophet, raised the plastic bottle to my mouth, and let the water barely touch my upper lip before pulling it away. It tasted slightly briny and metallic. I licked my lip and waited for lightning to strike me, but, besides leaving a bad taste in my mouth, nothing happened. I handed back the bottle to Moses, thinking gold dust was too valuable to use only once.

I started walking away, and the heaviness I'd felt since earlier dissipated. I stopped and turned back to Moses. With the bottle in one hand, he leaned on his walking stick and watched me like he knew what was happening, like he had made this happen.

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For the next couple of nights after that, Moses was at the courts. I would tell him hello, and he would give me fresh water to drink before I practiced my game. It became a ritual. That first taste had taken the extra weight off of me. The second made me weightless. And the third gave me wings. At least, that's how I explained it to myself. By that time, I was drinking the full bottle, only leaving the sandy dregs at the bottom. Each drink seemed less salty and less metallic. I wasn't sure if it was really gold dust, and I wasn't sure it was really making me weigh less, but I did believe Moses being there had some power to make me better. He gave me hope that I could make it out.

Everyone left the courts except Moses and me. I took some more shots, practicing my free throws. My game was improving exponentially. "Man, I'd follow you into the desert," I told him.

"I've never been to the desert," he said.

Moses told me he was from a big city, and I assumed the closest one near us, but he was staying in an abandoned farm outside of town now. He wasn't homeless, he claimed, but he also

didn't claim to have a home. He left whenever he wanted. He stayed wherever he wanted. He came back whenever he wanted. He told me national parks were his favorite places to go. He'd sneak in at night and sleep on the wet forest floor off the paths. He'd make a bed just for him in the earth, and when he'd wake up, deer would be grazing around him and chipmunks would be crinkling through the empty granola bar wrappers in his backpack. He also found ways to hide in museums. He was easily overlooked, so he'd slide onto loading docks and hide behind large crates or he'd slip into break rooms and crouch in closets until everyone left. Then he'd explore. But he looked at the things no one went to museums to see, the things museums didn't protect with sophisticated security systems, like desk drawers and unlocked lockers. He was interested in the people, not the artifacts.

Before he finished his story, my mom and dad had both texted me, asking when I'd be home, telling me to stop by the store to pick up some milk, telling me that I had a school meeting the next morning, asking me who I was with and what we were doing, and reminding me about dinner.

I envied Moses.

That morning my dad had asked who I kept staying out late with. I mentioned Moses, and he had asked me, "Who's this Moses character?" like he had come straight out of Egypt and into our neighborhood. I told him only so much. I wanted to keep Moses to myself. He represented my independence, my exodus from small town slavery. I swore to my dad that Moses was real and that he never suggested anything as ridiculous as raining frogs or swarming locusts. My family and Moses were two separate worlds, but my dad insisted they collide by inviting Moses to dinner that night.

I felt foolish asking him. “Hey man, you going to be hungry tonight?” I dribbled the ball a couple times, bent my knees, and pulled the ball up near my chin. I still hadn’t seen what Moses could do with a basketball. “Like around dinner time?” My foolish feeling persisted. I dribbled a couple more times, trying to get the ball to land just right in my fingers before I took the shot. “Cause my mom makes killer ravioli. Not from the can or anything. Like, from scratch.” I took a shot at the goal. It looked and sounded like I swished it straight through the hoop, but I missed.

Moses sat watching. “If someone hadn’t been looking, they’d thought you made it.”

The ball bounced and rolled into the grass around the blacktop. I shrugged. “But I didn’t.”

He was looking at me. “Sure.”

I jogged over to get my ball, dribbled over to Moses, and tossed him a soft pass. “6:30?”

The ball seemed to slow and stop suspended before him. He reached out, as if to pluck the ball from the air. Without looking at me, he nodded his head quickly. He avoided my eyes, and his normal fluidity morphed into jerky movements. I got the feeling he didn’t like parents, even his own, if he had any. I wanted him to like mine, though.

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Moses left his walking stick at the coat rack in my house. He met my parents and my sister, Sabrina. They were all in the kitchen helping with dinner. Sabrina rolled her eyes when my dad told her something, and my mom wiped her hands on her apron, stained from years of splattered red gravy and popping oil, before shaking Moses’ hand, a privilege I still hadn’t received from him.



In my room, while we waited for dinner to be ready, Moses stood in front of my bulletin board examining pictures of me, my mom, my dad, and Sabrina at the waterpark a few towns over one hot summer Saturday when I was twelve and of my family last Christmas morning wearing the matching scarves my mom had knitted us. The sports wallpaper I'd had since I was six was starting to peel off the wall. "I chose the wallpaper when I was, like, a baby or something," I explained as I plopped onto the leaking beanbag chair in front of my TV and outdated PlayStation. Watching Moses in my room was surreal. He didn't fit in. I wished I didn't fit in. "What about you? Any horrible design decisions you made?"

"Flaming walls," he told me as if he were giving me the weather report for the day.

I laughed, but he just stared at the pictures. "Like you drew red and orange flames up the walls of your bedroom?" I asked.

"Nah, real fire," he told me. He focused on something I couldn't see.

I didn't know what he was telling me. I felt like he was letting me peek into his world with this information, but he wasn't going to give me any more than that. Something inside me, maybe my mom's voice, warned me that he was unstable, that he was clinically insane, but another voice, maybe the idol I worshipped, told me to go deeper, to follow him farther.

I lay flat on my beanbag chair and shot my basketball straight into the air, fitting my hand through an imaginary hoop after the ball left it. More of the tiny beans slipped out through the hole, and I felt the cold ground on my back. "Maybe I'll throw flames onto this piece of crap chair," I told him.

Before I could readjust the beanbag so that my tailbone wasn't crunching on the hard floor, my dad threw open my bedroom door. "Son. Door," he said.

“What’s the point of having a door if I get no privacy?” I asked him. I figured I’d stumped him, but that old man was too smart.

“You get privacy when you change your clothes. That’s all the privacy a fifteen-year-old boy needs.”

“Sabrina gets to close her door all the time,” I reminded him. I was outraged at the double standard that existed in my house and believed Moses to be a witness to the injustice I suffered. Maybe this evidence would convince him that I needed to join him when he eventually left.

“Open,” my dad hollered as he picked up a basket full of clean clothes that needed to be folded and retreated down the hall. I could hear boiling water and beeping appliances in the kitchen.

“I’m ready for freedom,” I told him. If anyone could, Moses could lead me there. “Freedom from these sheetrock walls of my cell, man.” I turned to Moses who stood with his hands behind his back as if he were observing an experiment that he had to remain completely aloof from. My entreaty didn’t seem to move him much, and I thought it had sounded better in my mind than it did out loud. “Want a drink?” I asked.

He nodded and followed me to the kitchen where my mom was cooking away. Three pots sat on the stove, and the steam rising from them made her hair look frizzy and caused her to sweat on her upper lip. My dad stood at the breakfast bar, folding the clothes and watching my mom finesse her way through cabinets and around appliances. I think he figured his job was to make her laugh. He’d talk and talk, and my mom would listen and smile and sometimes let out a polite chuckle. It was a challenge that never grew old to my dad. After about ten minutes of listening to his corny jokes, Moses and I sat on the sofa in the living room. I turned the volume

of the television up until I could easily ignore my parents. Suddenly my mom laughed. She really let one come from her diaphragm, and it seemed to shake the entire house.

Moses relaxed into the sofa and stared at the television while I searched for something to watch. I put on a basketball game. It was a local high school team, my school's biggest rival.

We hadn't won against that team in five years. "I want to crush them," I said.

"You've got the gold dust now," Moses said.

Sabrina walked into the living room. "Mom, Dad, Andy's doing drugs." She sat on the other sofa. "Do we have to watch this?"

"Drugs, son?" my dad asked. He and my mom came to the living room. My dad sat between Moses and me. "Anything I've tried?" He smiled and winked at me.

Moses shifted.

"She's lying," I said.

"Dinner's ready," my mom announced. "TV off."

My dad plucked the remote from my hand and hit the off button. "Wash your hands, kids."

Sabrina, Moses, and I stood at the kitchen sink. I elbowed Sabrina when my parents weren't looking, and she played like she was going to knee me in the groin. When we were done, Moses's hands were a couple shades lighter than his wrists. We sat at our round dining table, and my dad scooted his chair a few inches closer to my mom to grab her hand. Moses picked up his fork to eat, but my dad said, "We bless our food." Sabrina and I folded our hands and bowed our heads. Moses rested his wrists on the edge of the table.

After we recited the prayer, we all took up our forks.

"So Moses," my mom said. "Are you new at Andy's school?"

Moses stabbed a raviolo, and the pasta fell apart. “I’m from elsewhere.” He took a bite and barely moved his mouth to chew before swallowing.

Sabrina glanced sideways at him. “Mysterious,” she said.

“Are you and your parents just visiting?” my dad asked.

“I travel alone.”

My mom glanced at my dad, who seemed disarmingly interested.

“Where do you stay?” he asked Moses.

Moses caught on. “With friends. In town.”

“If you ever want to stay here,” my mom said, “feel free.” She patted his forearm.

After dinner, we cleaned up, and I asked Moses if he wanted to play some video games before he left. “I don’t have much, but it’s something.”

When we got to my room, I sat in front of my console, but Moses paced around the room. I held out a controller, but Moses didn’t take it.

“I’ve got to leave,” Moses said.

“It’s early, though.” I turned on the game and selected the player I wanted to be.

“No. This town.”

I looked at him. The synthesized music of the video game repeated on a loop. I thought I had more time with Moses. “Wait until after tryouts tomorrow.”

He agreed.

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The next night after tryouts, I met Moses at the abandoned barn where he slept. He had told me how to find it. It was a couple miles outside of town to get there, and my gym bag filled with extra socks and underwear, all the cash I could find, and some nut bars started to weigh my

shoulder down. I was ready to leave with Moses. I had left my family a note on the counter. It said, "I'm fine. -A." I was sure Sabrina would make some joke about the girly show she watched where the antagonist left notes signed "A." And I was sure my dad would start joking about how I had such an inflated sense of self that I felt the need to remind the world how attractive I thought I was. But I was sure my mom would worry. She might be the only one to say how strange it was that I left a note, that I must be serious. My dad might then say he hadn't even known I knew how to spell let alone use a pen.

But after all the joking was over and they realized it was my farewell note, they'd sit at the table and tell stories about me, almost like a memorial, but they'd understand why I had to do it, that I have dreams bigger than taking over my mom's business. I'd call them as soon as Moses and I settled in the next town.

The barn's wood had greyed, and the inside was dark. It smelled like a combination of wet laundry left in the washer for too long and the mulch my dad scattered in our garden. There was another kind of musty smell that popped up every few feet, and I imagined it to be the sweat of the farmers who had worked in that barn.

Some of the beams looked rotted. Termites had colonized the wood, but there wasn't much left to tempt them to stay. A line of stalls stood on either side of the wide center lane, and a ladder led up to the haymow above. Moses started to climb up.

"You sure it's safe?" I asked. I wasn't so sure the ladder would hold. Moses disappeared above me. The wood creaked when I stepped up, so I moved quickly to the top and rolled onto a layer of hay covering the floorboards.

"Watch the slots in the floor. Don't want to get your foot caught in them," Moses informed me. He lay on a sleeping bag in a dark corner of the loft and had some magazine

propped up on his knees. I had to look twice before realizing it had a naked girl on the front cover. The stack next to Moses was full of more naked women and even models in lingerie catalogues that Moses must've stolen from peoples' mailboxes. All of the magazines seemed dated, and some looked like they'd been tossed lazily aside. There was no way my parents would've been okay with that if I did it. They would've called the magazines "contraband" and shredded them so that, if I even wanted to look at a nipple, I'd have to dig through and piece the glossy pages together like a puzzle.

"You said you'd come," I said.

Moses quickly glanced my way before looking down again. "How'd you do?" He turned a page.

"You didn't bring the gold dust." I had been counting on the gold dust. I dropped my bag on the floor. "Where should I set up? You think this hay'll itch?" My life was already changed. I had always thought the game was my future, but my dreams of playing basketball were over, and I wasn't going to succumb to this small town's pressures. I would get out while I had the chance, and Moses was my chance.

He looked up from his magazine. "I didn't know you were sleeping here tonight," he told me. He closed the magazine and sat up. The way his eyes seemed to jump from me to the ladder to the pulley and rope that dangled in front of the haymow's door unsettled me. I looked over my shoulder expecting someone to be standing at the entrance of the barn. Moses looked ready to slide down the ladder or swing off the rope to escape. I realized how little room he actually took up in the loft. Everything—his bag, his flashlight, his magazines—was close enough that he could make a quick and clean getaway if he needed to. And the look on his face said he needed to.

“Yeah,” I said as I unzipped my bag. “Nothing left for me here,” I told him. “And I figured you wouldn’t mind the company?” It came out sounding like a question. My bag sat open in front of me, and I waited for Moses’s reply.

“Sure, sure,” he said. “But let’s move tonight. Been here too long.” Moses started piling his magazines into his backpack and rolling up his sleeping bag. “I just got to pick up some stuff—more food, since there’ll be two of us,” he told me. “Meet me at the benches of the basketball court.”

“Let me come, too,” I told him. I pulled out some cash from my bag. “At least chip in?” Moses stopped his frantic packing and stuffing. He looked at the crumpled bills in my hand. “Yeah, okay,” he said as he grabbed them.

The gentleness I’d seen in his handling of the basketball disappeared. The skin on his fingers was callused and rough, and his nails were so sharp they felt like they could draw blood from my skin.

It was starting to get dark as we walked back to town together. I couldn’t have made it far without Moses. He knew where to go as if the trees lining the side of the road whispered directions to him. When we started seeing houses getting closer together, we knew we were on the edge of town. “Meet you at the courts,” Moses said as he and I split up.

I got to the courts and sat on the bench where I was the first time I spoke to Moses. An hour went by as I kept my eyes open and my head on a swivel, looking for Moses in every shadow and in every shake of a bush. Then another hour passed. I only cared about bigger shadows and passing cars now. As the third hour moved slowly by, I stared at one of the goals.

It was almost eleven at night, and I was fighting sleep. I stood up and walked around the court. A red kickball sat right in the middle. Picking it up, I held it between my hands and looked

at the goal. “He fakes left,” I announced as I pumped left, “and fakes right. No one knows which way he’ll go or when he’ll take the shot. He’s a crazy man on the court!” I jumped up and down, pumping myself up, and without thinking about it, I pushed the ball to the ground, ready for its return to my hand. I heard a hollow “thunk.” The ball was so deflated that it barely made the trip back up to my calf before rolling away. I watched it until it stopped in the branches of a nearby bush.

I took that as my cue to go home.

The front door was unlocked, and my family lay sprawled out in the living room watching some dancing show they’d recorded. My sister shouted something out, and my mom and dad each threw her some Monopoly money. I dropped my bag loudly on the floor. I was ready for their relief that I was alive and their thrill that I was home.

My mom looked up when she saw me. “Hi basketball star, your dinner’s in the fridge. We got Chinese.” She returned her attention to the television.

“Dinner?” I asked her.

“Yeah, Andy, I got you your favorite.” She seemed to be watching intently whenever the camera panned over the audience. “Mohawk,” she screamed, and my dad and Sabrina groaned and threw her Monopoly bills as she grinned.

“I didn’t make the team,” I said. “And how’d you know I’d be late?”

My mom was sympathetic and told me there was the club league in the spring, which didn’t help. “Moses stopped by and told me he saw you practicing at the basketball courts. He dropped something off for you in your room. Said he was returning it to you—”

My dad shouted, and the others showered him with groans and fake money.



I hurried down the hall, bumping my shoulders into the walls, and flew into my room. I expected some explanation for why he kept me waiting. I looked around my room. On my dresser and my desk, I didn't see anything that wasn't there before. I looked at my bed. Somewhere between the pile of clothes and the crumpled up sheets I saw the corner of a white piece of folded paper and realized it was resting on top of a geography magazine and next to a brown paper bag. My name was on the front. Inside, the note said, "Being a fool is better than being a spectator. For next year." Moses hadn't signed his name, but he drew a picture of him standing in front of the public pool. Its water was parted.

I opened the paper bag and pulled out a baggie labeled "gold dust." It was filled with the substance I had relied on, the substance that had represented my idols. "This magazine? Really?" I picked it up. This cover was so unlike the ones he had. On the front a pack of hungry lionesses with bloody meat in their mouths crouched above a gazelle's carcass. I flipped open the pages, looking for more lioness pictures. All I saw were naked women. Some had on outfits designed to look like they had on clothes, though nothing was disguised. Moses had changed out the cover of one of his magazines so I could keep this in my room and my parents wouldn't know. With every picture I looked at, I wondered why he hadn't met me and where he was going. I couldn't turn the page without thinking of Moses, and that just ruined it. The pictures didn't even appeal to me anymore. I felt like the fool he pegged me for.

I closed the magazine and left my room with it. When I got to the living room area, I asked, "Shredder?"

My whole family replied with different answers, their eyes still fixed to the television.

"Kitchen," my mom said.

I took her word for it and found the shredder near the breakfast table. I sat, tore out some pages, and fed them through. The shredder's buzz was like the purring from a satisfied lioness after a nice meal.

"I can't hear," Sabrina complained loudly and turned up the volume on the television.

I tore out the next pages until all I had left was the cover. I kept the lionesses.

And the gold dust.

## Boyfriend Wanted: Nothing Serious

### WANTED:

Someone who will stroll with me through mazes of live oaks with their crooked arms extending out to us, beckoning for us to climb them. Someone who will wrap his arms around them, embrace and caress them. Someone who will walk with me along the levee by my apartment and smell the salty sewage and watch the pumps suck water out of the streets and dump it into the lake after a heavy rainstorm.

### WANTED:

Someone who will help finish the bottles of wine I buy in bulk, who will drink the half I don't from a brand new glass, one from the set I never had a reason to use before because I was the only one who drank my wine.

Someone who will clean my dirty dishes in the sink, the mugs stained with coffee and my lipstick, the ones that rest next to my hand as I sit at my newspaper, filling in Sudoku puzzles. Someone who will angle his body away from me when I try to take the sponge that smells like a moldy towel out of his hand and tell him that he doesn't need to clean anything because he's my guest. Someone who will continue, who will tell me, "Please, I insist," and I'll let him insist because that's what I've always wanted someone to say to me.

### WANTED:

Someone who will leave his socks in the doorway, socks that will smell like sweat and mildew because he won't believe in washing his socks. Someone who will think that the build-up of dirt

and grime will contribute to his immunity to foot fungus, who I will try to tell is dead wrong, but then the memory of my brother's death will suppress that comment.

Someone who will gawk at happy Japanese families with me, the ones who take pictures of each other because being at the park on a mild, cloudless day with their two-year-old is something worth celebrating. Someone who will make me laugh by imitating the dramatic way the parents clap and laugh to make the child smile for a photo as we drink white wine from red plastic cups, who will like to drink ice-cold wine from plastic because he'll think that only snobby people won't. Someone who will feel compelled to prove to the world that he's not snobby, who will make me love him for how he thinks.

WANTED:

Someone who will love me in a canoe on the bayou, who will sway softly on the water with me as the cobweb of stars stick to the rippling water around us, only my short breaths and his grunts disturbing the cicadas' summer song. Someone who will love me as the summer air grows wetter and wetter, heavier and heavier, until we can't tell when we're swimming in the water or swaying on shore so that every night of the last summer weeks will be a mystery until, sticky with sweat, we open our eyes.

WANTED:

Someone who will take me to the pharmacy the morning after I forget, who will tell me that this is what God would want, He would want me to live untethered, unconcerned, and He even provided me with this pill because, if He didn't want it, He wouldn't have allowed it to be

created and sold over the counter. Someone who will convince me and give me more to confess than the usual white lies, jealousy, blind eyes I turn toward away from needy, and self-centered focus of my gaze. Someone who will give me something that makes me avert my eyes from the priest, something to shame me into hiding behind the screen for the first time in my life.

WANTED:

Someone who will adjust the other side of my bed, who will set the pressure of the mattress to his perfect setting, who will balance out the queen-size space. Someone who will check my pillows for monsters before we go to bed because, if he doesn't, I will roll on him and punch and kick him in my sleep and he will have to hold my arms and lock my knees until I wake up. Someone to trace the flame shaped stretch marks on my hip until I fall back asleep. Someone to kiss the moles on my knees and declare, "All better."

WANTED:

Someone who will answer the phone when my mother calls, who will tell her I'm in the bathroom, I'm unavailable, who I'll try to convince to tell her I'll be unavailable for life.

Someone who will let me talk when I'm ready, let me talk about my father and my mother and the way they hated each other, the way my mother hated my brother and my father hated me, the way they bonded over their mutual hate for me after my brother died because I should have done something, I should have stopped him, I should have known, because, despite my mother's hate for him, she could appreciate that my brother was the only person in our family who could love; he loved himself enough to get out.

Someone who will pinch my neck—but too narrowly so it'll welt and look like a bad hickey—as I rest my forehead on his shoulder and tell him how my father died because my brother died, as I explain the way our normally empty refrigerator filled with cheese and milk and potatoes and carrots because my mother stopped feeding on hate and started eating food—and pills—after the funeral, the way I tried to eat those pills, too, but I took too many of the wrong one and only got a yeast infection. Someone to hate because he still has both of his parents, to hate because he doesn't hate them.

WANTED:

Someone who will forget to hold the door open for me when the night air begins to leave a cool aftertaste, but I won't worry, because he'll have a lot on his mind and he'll remember next time.

Someone who will hide his phone next to his thigh as he checks a text message he just received during dinner, who will glance up at me with a brilliant smile of straight, white teeth, who will squeeze my calf because he knows that makes me laugh.

Someone who will kiss the bruises under my eyes and tell me I need to get more sleep. Someone who will trace the red finger marks on my ribs, the ones that he put there last night after I asked him why he didn't call me back again, after I asked who kept texting him, after I reached for his phone because I have trust issues. Someone whose fingers will fit perfectly between my ribs, who will squeeze and squeeze until I can't breathe.

WANTED:

Someone who will be the coffee grinder to my coffee bean for the Halloween party my coworkers will throw. Someone who will go, “Zzzp. Zzzp,” as he chases me around a room full of drunk liberal arts graduates and declares that he’s going to grind me. Someone who eventually will, who will pulverize me so much that I will pass through every coffee filter, getting grinds in his morning cup, coating his tongue, lodging between his teeth, ruining his breakfast, ruining his morning, ruining his day.

WANTED:

Someone who will accompany me to random fifth-graders’ soccer games at the park down the street. Someone who will cheer the team on with me as I raise my “D” sign and then he raises his “Fence” sign. Someone who will sit next to me in the small bleachers, shouting and screaming, making the team’s coach, with her arms crossed and her silver whistle in her puckered mouth, glance back at us like my middle school Civics teacher used to, warning me to close my lips or earn a demerit. Someone whose deep exhalations will fog up the cool air next to me and will mix with mine until I can’t tell where his breath begins.

WANTED:

Someone who, right when he walks into my apartment on the night of our six-month anniversary, will let me sing, “Let me cater to you ’cause this is your day. I got your slippers, your dinner, your desert, and so much more. Anything you want, just let me cater to you,” who will let me dance for him, guide him to the recliner, untie his shoes, unbutton his shirt, and unbuckle his belt. Someone who, halfway through the song, will grab my wrists and tell me to

stop, and I'll only have one of his socks off, but he'll yank the other off himself and flip the TV on, muttering, "Pathetic" and, "Disgusting display," under the din of the ten o'clock news.

WANTED:

Someone who will tell me I'm too sensitive, who'll say that I don't pay enough attention to his moods and frustration and that if I did, then he wouldn't get so angry. Someone who will tell me it's my fault that the pair of wine glasses he bought me shattered and the table leg stubbed his toe and broke off as he moved it so I could put my feet up on it; it's my fault for his, "Fuck this and fuck you," as he slammed the door. Someone who I will call seven times after he leaves only to have a woman finally answer, "Hello," and I'll realize I must have hit the wrong person's phone number, so I'll hang up and turn my phone off. Someone who will apologize the next morning and that night take me fifteen minutes outside of the city to see more stars than normal because he'll know how much I like to look at them, but when we get there, he'll have nothing to say except, "Wow, I didn't realize there were so many," and I'll feel like he hasn't forgiven me yet.

WANTED:

Someone who, wearing his best pair of jeans and his only shirt without holes in it, will follow me into church on Sunday. Someone who will sit next to me in the wooden pews, the ones with vertical backs, an angle that no human can fit. Someone who will hold my hand as the congregation stands and prays to Our Father, who will squeeze my hand tighter and tighter as a test to see if I'm strong enough to maintain my grip, and by the time the prayer is finished, I'll notice my fingertips are white but still curled around his. Someone who will keep me company



as old grandmothers and young First Communicants in their white patent shoes and long veils squeeze their way over our knees to approach Jesus.

WANTED:

Someone who—when I begin to complain and whine that I hate packing cardboard boxes, that I hate the feeling of the two flaps grating against one another as I fold them together to secure his belongings—will remind me that this is his way of life, the life of a wanderer, a life of moving every nine months because that’s how long it takes for something to become viable. Someone who I’ll ask to go with, to leave with because I have nothing here either. Someone who will kiss me long and hard, who will guide me to the bare mattress on the ground, who will make me forget my question. Someone who, on his journey to find something somewhere other than where I am, will search to fill the void I hope I leave in his heart, who will find his way back to me because I’m the only one who fits in that space.

## Happy Mart

“Joe, hand in your lanyard,” Mr. Finner said to me.

“What about the display?” I asked him. “It’d reinforce the brand.”

Mr. Finner was the owner and my manager at Happy Mart. We had just received a new shipment of heirloom tomatoes, and I had a vision to recreate the storefront with the produce.

Most mornings when I got to work, I checked new shipments of groceries and planned how I could create elaborate structures with them. I wasn’t sure what the exact definition of compulsion was, but I figured it was something like how, when I saw crates full of onions or bags of cookies, I felt like they were calling out to me, longing for me to arrange and stack them in a way no one had ever arranged or stacked them before. Last week, I took a stand of bananas and made it into a cityscape. Mr. Finner had stared at it and whispered, “It’s art,” when he didn’t know I was behind him shelving bags of lettuce. Ever since that day, I saw Mr. Finner in the produce section of the store more, examining the displays and talking to customers about them.

Now Mr. Finner held out his hand asking for the thing that had sustained my mom and me after my father left us to pursue his lifelong dream of competitive fishing nine years ago and during the time when my mom’s collapsing arches kept her from working for a month and all we had to live on was my minimum wage income from the grocery store.

I untied my apron and slipped it and my lanyard over my head and gave them to Mr. Finner.

“Now, do something with yourself.” He patted my shoulder and walked away.

It seemed like Mr. Finner was doing me a favor by firing me, but at the same time I felt flimsy, like a tomato plant with no trellis to support and guide its stems’ growth.

I glanced over to cash register number five, where Kimmie, my part-time coworker, normally worked. Her light was off, and her lane was closed. Besides creating displays, my other favorite part of Happy Mart was seeing Kimmie. She had magenta hair she wore in two short pigtails, colorful tattoos that raced up her forearms and shoulders, and a nose ring hooped through her nostril. She was the kind of girl who would make my mom become still and quiet, something I rarely witnessed, but when I did, it thrilled me because my mom normally moved like a film on fast forward.

Kimmie had just turned eighteen and swore to anyone at Happy Mart who'd listen, which meant mostly to me while she was helping with my displays, that, any day now, she would blow out of this town like the tornados that ran through so often.

I imagined a wake of destruction left in her path. "Just don't blow through the apples. That display took me four days," I said.

She laughed, but when Kimmie's break was over and she returned to her register, I was left riling in emotions I didn't know I had at an intensity I didn't know I was capable of. I found myself hoping she would pull me up into her twister and bring me with her, at least out of Happy Mart, something I hadn't had the courage to hope in years.

Back in the locker room, Kimmie's lanyard was on the hook by the door. She mustn't have been scheduled for today. I couldn't leave Happy Mart without seeing her again. She often bragged that she and her friends hung out on the bank of the river underneath the bridge almost daily, so I figured she'd be there sometime before I was expected home tonight. I could either go home and sit through hours of worrying with my mom before going to sleep, or I could spend these next hours freely, follow Mr. Finner's advice, and do something with myself.

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I looked back at the storefront of Happy Mart. The reflection of the afternoon sun on the cars in the parking lot blinded me. I tucked my hands into my pockets and walked to the street. When I got to the sidewalk, my sense of duty and habit urged me to head toward home. But the chance to take advantage of these rare hours of freedom convinced me to visit Kimmie's hangout. I would go home when I was ready to confront my mom's disappointment and her mania. Well, I'd never be ready for that, so I'd head that way at the last possible moment, the absolute last possible second before my mom called Mr. Finner and found out I was fired.

So I turned left toward the apex of the bridge that crossed over the river.

I started working at Happy Mart after my mom and I had gone six months without our weekly money order from my dad. Around that time, I was thirteen and made the decision to become the man of the house. I walked home from school more purposefully than I ever remembered, opened and closed the front door like a man would, and announced to my mom, who sat in her rocker flipping through a catalogue, that I was going to get a job and take care of her. I thought I could jumpstart my career and begin living my dream by helping the city with the landscaping they were doing around the town welcome sign, but my mom had already made arrangements with Mr. Finner and also gotten herself a job at a nearby shoe store. I began abstaining from the weekly roller-skating social until we didn't even miss my deadbeat dad's cash. Eventually, my mom stopped working because we could survive comfortably on my income. I was proud of that and proud that I wasn't like my bum dad who left us for slimy fish.

After a few blocks, I looked back but couldn't see Happy Mart anymore. I rarely went this direction, and this side of town looked different, like everything was backward. The trees and bushes appeared angled to guide people in the opposite direction. Posters and lost signs littered the walls of abandoned stores. Window units had been ripped out of houses' windows.

Limp clothes hung on lines outside apartment buildings. It felt gritty, and I liked it. My mom's house was in a neighborhood of houses that looked alike, all symmetrical with the same type of bushes lining the façades and the same kind of trees at each front corner. Inside the house, my mom prevented the buildup of dust and dirt by covering furniture in plastic and wiping down every solid surface of the house at least once a week.

I asked my mom numerous times if I could plant some new flowers and trees in the front yard, to give it texture and depth, but she replied, "There are rules, ordinances, Joe," so I stopped asking.

On this side of town, none of the plants seemed intentional. Wildflowers grew up between the cement of the sidewalk and the brick of the buildings. Tree limbs grew in front of storefronts, blocking their signs. I saw potential with every weed. I knew I could've done better work on the welcome sign the city landscaped a decade ago. The sign could only be seen from one point in the road, but a few feet in any direction obscured the sign's welcoming message. And the plants and trees surrounding the sign were brown and dying, leaving a monotonous, depressing entrance. The annuals the city planted died after their first season, but no one replanted more flowers. Every time I passed by, I thought of the plans I drew up ten years ago. They were folded under the nature and design magazines stacked beneath my bed.

And I had ideas to redesign Main Street, too.

At one point, I rounded the corner of a dingy abandoned building and almost stepped on a homeless man lying on the sidewalk. He attempted what I assumed was a smile and stuck his hand up, but his toothless grin did little to comfort me, and I hurried past.

I finally reached the last stretch of street that led to Kimmie's bridge and stood behind a tree far enough away from the group that they wouldn't see me.

Kimmmie had described it to me before. “We discuss the important stuff, like GMOs,” she said as she was helping me construct a turkey out of squash one day before Thanksgiving. “It’s like a modern day French salon.” She stacked a green squash between two yellow ones. “You get a voice there.”

I went home that night and searched the Internet for a description of salons, but I couldn’t imagine Kimmmie in a hoop skirt with men in white wigs down by the bank of the muddy river.

Kimmmie wasn’t at the river now, but a group of six guys sat on milk crates in the shadow of the bridge on the riverbank. Their knees and shoulders formed oddly sharp angles underneath their skinny jeans and thin shirts. Some of them wore stylish horn-rimmed glasses, but they looked fake. All of them were skinny and pale, like they had hidden from the sun their whole lives. Beneath their black or blue hair, their faces glowed white from the reflection of the sun on the water. The small group intrigued me.

But they conveyed an impression of everything being so extremely important that they couldn’t smile or laugh. Kimmmie was different than these guys to me. No matter how much she avoided the sun, no matter how often she used an umbrella to shade herself when outside, her olive skin wouldn’t pale, and magenta dye couldn’t fully cover her naturally dark brown roots. “The curse of having Italian blood in my veins,” she explained to me. There was this complexity to the color. It wasn’t simply black or simply blue, like these guys under the bridge, these simple guys with their monotonous pallor. Kimmmie was anything but simple.

And she always laughed.

Turning to leave, I almost stepped on her toes. Kimmmie was standing right behind me with her eyebrow raised, and she was leaning so close to me that her chin almost rested on my shoulder.

“First impressions?” she whispered as if we were observing creatures in their natural habitat and didn’t want to alert them to our presence.

I opened my mouth to respond but felt like rubber bands hooked to my teeth were pulling it closed. I smiled and nodded. “Modern day salon,” I said.

“Everything you imagined and more?” she asked me. A laugh seemed to sit in the back of her throat, ready to be unleashed and work its magic on me.

Her eagerness rubbed off on me, and I shook my head vigorously, “yes,” because I couldn’t make my vocal cords vibrate.

Kimmie looped her arm through mine and pulled me down to the bank of the river. One of the guys broke away from the group and approached us. He looked like the others with his pointy chin and his skin stretched tight across his cheekbones. He cupped a cigarette in his hand and placed it between Kimmie’s lips. She still clung to my arm but accepted the cigarette and dragged on it.

I was conscious of the pudge around my waist and the soft curve of my shoulders and chin, and I found myself envying boniness for the first time in my life. “They glow,” I whispered to Kimmie when the pointy chin guy wasn’t paying attention.

“It wears off,” she told me.

Her friend looked at me again and made a noise between a laugh and a cough. “What’s with the shirt?” he asked and flicked the collar of my work polo.

I felt the Happy Mart sun logo burning into my flabby chest.

“Yeah, why’re you off so early?” Kimmie asked as if that’s what cigarette guy meant to say.

I stuck my hands in my pockets and looked out toward the river. It wasn't moving. "I decided to skip out," I said with a shrug.

"That's so punk of you," Kimmie said. She smiled, and her whole face lit up. The reflection from the river couldn't do for anyone's face what her smile could.

One of the guys from the group cracked open a can of beer and handed it to me. It'd been a while since I'd last tasted the skunky flavor. One night a few years ago, my mom purged the house of all alcohol. She had been listening to a sermon on the radio that said temperance and purity were repaid with answered prayers. She poured all of the alcohol down the drain. There wasn't much. Five cans of beer and a fragment of a fifth of Scotch left over from my dad, which I imagined she kept in case he ever decided to get off his boat and come home for a drink. With each empty beer she crushed in her hand, my mom's hope seemed to increase. I was mildly sure what her prayer was.

Now, I took the beer from the guy who had blue bushy sideburns that reached his jaw. The group gathered around me, and I was fully aware that Kimmie was much more comfortable among them than I was, but I still didn't buy that she was one of them with their affected gravity. She laughed and joked, though the main response she received was a smirk.

The sun sank lower until it touched the water and was joined by its twin reflected in the river. The group was talking about some politician I had never heard of and the way he managed money, his secretary, and conservation. My mom and I watched *The 700 Club* instead of the local or national news, so I only knew how the latest Christian film helped convert the lead actress, which didn't seem like the addition to the conversation this group was looking for.

Kimmie leaned forward on her crate and picked up a handful of rocks. "My parents tell me I use too much toilet paper. My dad was like, 'Kimmie, conserve.' I told him when my body



stops crapping, then I'll stop using toilet paper." She laughed, and I laughed. The others just looked at each other and sipped their warm beers. Kimmie didn't seem to notice. Sideburns moved the conversation to some obscure band I had never heard of, and Kimmie started throwing pebbles into the river. The ripples obscured the sun's twin.

My mind wandered away from the conversation I couldn't contribute to, and I watched Kimmie as she tossed the rocks. Her hands were plump, with dimples appearing at her knuckles whenever she straightened her fingers. I could tell she chewed her nails and the skin around them. My full beer was heavy in my hand. I started tipping the can, feeling the liquid move from side to side, until a bit spilled out. The beer left a dark spot in the gravel between my feet. I kept pouring the beer out, and a small puddle collected between the rocks before absorbing into whatever earth was beneath.

"Want to head out?" Kimmie asked.

I looked up to see who she was talking to. I imagined she wanted to be alone with the pointy chin guy who gave her that cigarette earlier. All of the guys in the group were still talking. They looked at each other with such intensity it almost felt intimate. They didn't seem to hear Kimmie. I looked at her, and she was waiting for my answer.

She stood up and dropped the rest of the pebbles in her hand to the ground. "We're out," Kimmie announced to the group, and she held up two fingers in a sign of peace. She extended her hand to me. I dropped my empty can and grasped her hand. The guys barely looked up as Kimmie led me out from under the bridge.

She knew her way around this town. Kimmie turned corners and took short cuts through parks and empty lots with the confidence of a street kid. We passed the homeless man I had seen earlier in the day, and Kimmie informed me that his name was Sal and that he was harmless. The

only thing he did was grin and holler. All you had to do to calm him down was give him a high five. Kimmie walked over and raised her hand for Sal to smack. He missed, and the pair laughed.

We kept walking wherever she wanted to go. I didn't see any logic to where she led me. We walked in circles and made U-turns whenever Kimmie wanted to. I didn't say much, but Kimmie chatted enough for both of us, and I liked to listen to her. She talked about her dreams to become a masseuse—"That's why I'm a lousy cashier at Crappy Mart," she explained. She talked about coming home on her birthday after starting the sleeve on her right arm and the way her parents flipped out. "They're cookie-cutter yuppie types," she told me. Apparently, their two favorite colors were beige and khaki. "White and black," she claimed, "are too complex and interesting for them to like." I smiled and laughed, but not too much, and tucked my balled up hands into my pant pockets

We passed by a group of upside-down bicycles chained together and stacked on one another and a cluster of bushes that were growing wildly and tangling together with their black berries. I didn't recognize where we were, but Kimmie could have led me across the state line, and I would've followed blindly. Being with her changed the town. She pointed out and analyzed graffiti I overlooked, and she talked about the art of the lettering, how it's bubbled together to create a picture and an emotion that rouses and even disturbs the viewer.

"The words aren't just words. They move you," Kimmie said. She waved her hands back and forth in front of me. We sat on a curb and looked at a wall covered in letters that looked like they were dripping paint. "Art can be anywhere," she told me. "On the street. On your arm." She held out her arms for us to examine.

I only ever saw the edges of her tattoos at work. Mr. Finner made her cover up her arms, for the old ladies' sakes. Now, with her arms outstretched, she was inviting me to see her. "It looks like graffiti," I said before wishing I hadn't.

Her smile said she didn't take offense. "A street artist did it," Kimmie said with pride. "It'll send good energy into my hands."

I couldn't force my gaze away from her colorful arms with the way the blonde hair on her forearms made the ink slightly hazy and the way the tattoos clung to the curves of her muscles like honeysuckle vines growing up an arbor. I touched the tips of my fingers under one of the arms she held out and gently turned it so I could see the tattoos on her inner arm. The more I looked at them, the more I could make out letters folded into pictures, angel wings and cat eyes, bolts of lightning on one side of her arm and yellow rays of sun on the other. I felt like I was deciphering a secret code that would give me the key to unlocking Kimmie. Between the bolts, thorns twisted together and dripped blood. Between the rays, trees grew and flower petals dropped to her wrists. I imagined the petals at her wrist having a floral scent.

With my thumb, I touched one of the flower petals, expecting it to feel just like the roses I had planted for my mom in our backyard one Mother's Day. Kimmie shivered and goose bumps appeared on her skin. She laughed, pulled her arms to her chest, and rubbed the bumps away, but she wouldn't look at me as if she suddenly became shy. Kimmie stood up, I did too, and she grabbed onto a stop sign post and began twirling around it.

Normally, I would've angled away from Kimmie, the way I did at Happy Mart, not letting her know I was staring at her, but it felt right to watch her as she spun around. I thought I looked too eager and too enthralled, but I wanted her to know that she was enthralling.

It was silent for the first time all night. The only thing I heard was the slight shaking of the stop sign from Kimmie's twirling.

"So," she started. "What are your dreams, Joe?" Her short pigtails bobbed near her ears as she revolved.

I shrugged. "Manager, one day." As she spun, the images on her arms came to life.

Kimmie stopped twirling and faced me. "No, that's not it." She waited for me.

I looked at Kimmie's eyes, which were so big and so inviting. They wanted to accept what I had to offer. "Landscaping." I hadn't told this to anyone since I was thirteen, and that person was my mom, who laughed at me and asked me if I was going to leave her like my bum dad did. "At least your father left me for fish. You'd leave me for flowers," she said. The accusation in her voice drove my dreams to live in the nature magazines I bought at the store and snuck home under my shirt to flip through before bed and in the displays I created inside Happy Mart.

Kimmie grinned, rounding her cheeks. "Let's do it."

She led me to the other side of town where the welcome sign was. We found a couple plastic cups that we used to dig flowers from their spots in the ground. Kimmie pulled empty plastic bags from the trash and wrapped the plants' roots in them. I snuck a few small potted trees from outside of the hardware store nearby, and Kimmie left an IOU with a peace sign on it along with a suggestion to check out our handy work at the welcome sign and to refer anyone looking for a landscaper to me. I broke off some of the small branches in front of the sign, and we positioned the trees on either side in diagonal lines, making the sign the focal point. The rays and lightning bolts from Kimmie's arms inspired me and seemed to water the ground as we worked. The dead plants were easy to uproot, hardly resisting when I tugged them out of the soil,

and we planted the new, blooming flowers into a symmetrical arrangement. The welcome area started to reflect what I envisioned.

“Not bad, boss,” Kimmie said as we admired the finished product.

She patted my shoulder with her dirty hands, and for the first time all night, I felt my full, rounded shoulders were useful for something. I couldn’t discuss politics or current events like those bony guys by the river, but I could muscle vegetation from the earth.

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Kimmie and I lay on the ground behind the sign and looked up at the sky. Clouds blocked the view of any stars, but I projected images from Kimmie’s arms onto the dark background. When I finally looked at my watch, I realized it was past the time I would’ve gotten off of work if I still had a job. It was time to face reality and my mom.

Kimmie walked me to the edge of my neighborhood. “This is as far as I go. The old ladies might attack me and rub my arms raw trying to erase my ink.”

I traced the line of a tattoo on her arm and looked down at our feet. Kimmie’s combat boots were muddy, and my white sneakers weren’t white anymore. I didn’t know if I’d see her again before she twisted out of town. “I got fired.”

Kimmie looked like she was started to say something, but I didn’t want her pity or her advice.

“I still want to see you, though,” I said. I slipped my hands into my pockets and felt the dirt gathering at the bottom of them. I imagined burying microscopic seeds in the little piles and seeing the plants sprout.

“I’ll tell you what, when I become a masseuse one day, you can be the first client to harness the energy from my hands.” Kimmie tugged on one of her pigtails, which became lopsided. “No charge,” she added with a wiggle of her eyebrow and a quick wink.

If I didn’t know her, I would’ve thought she was encouraging me, but I had seen her wink at plenty of customers at Happy Mart, especially the old men who flirted with her, playing along just enough to let them know they flattered her.

I smiled and shrugged. “Time to face my mom,” I said. I reached out for Kimmie’s hand, and she placed it in mine. I bent and softly touched my lips to her knuckles, gathering strength from the energy pulsing down the bolts of lightning and the rays of sun. Her wrist didn’t smell like flowers.

It was only three blocks to my house, but in those blocks, I attempted to piece together a story that would win my mom’s sympathy. I blanked, though. All I could imagine was my mom’s face when she saw my clothes and heard that I’d been fired. As I walked along the perfectly poured sidewalk, I missed the flowers that grew up between cracks in the cement near Kimmie’s bridge. The white stucco exterior of the houses was bright, like the full moon reflecting every bit of light in the night. They lit the path to my mom. But by the time I got to my house, I only had time to plan an apology for being dirty.

I stood at the front door with my hand on the handle, but before I could push down the lever, my mom opened it and stepped back from the entrance. She wore her floral muumuu and held a knitting needle in her hand. She pursed her lips, lines bursting out around her mouth like the rays from the Happy Mart logo sun. “Work run late?”

I wiped my feet on the doormat, stepped inside, and closed the door. “No,” I said. “Not exactly.” I had cuts and scrapes on my arms, grass stains on the knees of my pants, and dirt all

over my white work shirt where I had rubbed my hands and where Kimmie had rubbed hers on me. I smiled slightly thinking of this and remembered what I had resolved to tell my mom.

“Not exactly?” my mom said.

I let Kimmie’s energy strengthen me. “It was more like an unofficial job interview.” I moved into the kitchen to wash my hands at the sink. The water ran brown from the dirt.

“Great, now I have to get dirt out of the sink.” As soon as I finished washing my hands, my mom started scrubbing the basin of the sink. “And your shirt.”

“I won’t need these clothes tomorrow,” I said.

“You are going back to that store.”

She must’ve called the store to find out why I was late.

“Mr. Finner told me not to.”

My mom scrubbed furiously and rinsed the sink twice. Grabbing a neatly folded towel from the counter, she dabbed her fingers and put the towel in my hands.

I opened the refrigerator and pulled out some ham and cheese.

“What, you’re just going to laze around and waste your life now?” My mom reached down to rub the arch of her foot. “You’re just like him,” she said.

I walked over and grabbed her orthopedic slippers from the floor by the sofa and dropped them near her feet. She stepped into them. I leaned against the counter and faced my mom as she sliced some bread for my sandwich.

“I’m going to landscape,” I said and grabbed the slices of bread.

My mom watched as I moved to the table to make and eat my sandwich. “And who will employ you?”

I could feel her doubt, but I could also feel her desire to call Mr. Finner and negotiate me back into my job. This moment in our lives was uncomfortable, like that moment you pull the first bit of husk from an ear of corn, afraid of what you'd find in the silk because the last ear you had was worm-ridden or when you see your grass browning in spots and you feel helpless, unable to breathe life back into the blades. My mom seemed scared more than anything.

But I wasn't.

"The city," I said before taking a bite of my sandwich. After Kimmie helped me realize my vision for the welcome sign at the town line, she convinced me to write a note and leave it in the mayor's mailbox, telling her to check out the welcome sign and, if she liked it, to call me. Kimmie claimed there was no way the mayor would refuse to take me up on my offer. I had never encountered confidence like hers. I was ready to peel back the rest of the husk and silk. I was ready to build my own trellis.



## Funeral Kegs

The morning of Garvin's funeral, Marjory tapped one of the kegs and pumped out a few cupfuls of foam so the beer would be flowing when the attendants arrived for the reception. Marjory had never hosted a kegger before but was sure that the idea made her husband chuckle from beyond the grave. Before dying, Garvin requested Marjory put a couple kegs right next to his casket so everyone could chug their goodbyes to him. Father Jude wouldn't allow the kegs in the church, so instead they flanked the dining room table that Marjory converted into a buffet for the funeral reception.

She poured the foam into the sink, and her cell phone buzzed quickly with a text message from Lacey, Marjory and Garvin's only child. It said, "I'll be there." Though a text message was better than nothing, Marjory was disappointed that Lacey didn't call her. They hadn't spoken in over three years, but Marjory hoped that they could carry their grief together.

The day Garvin passed, Marjory called Lacey. The phone only rang once before going to Lacey's voicemail greeting. She preferred to talk directly to her daughter. Marjory hung up and tried again, but it still rang just once. The third time she tried to get through to Lacey, it didn't ring at all, so Marjory left a message. She was hoping Lacey would help her with the preparations and accompany her to the funeral, but after waiting for Lacey to call for a day and a half, Marjory couldn't wait anymore. She enlisted the assistance of her neighbor, Ellen Sue.

In their nine years of being neighbors, Marjory often spotted Ellen Sue gawking from the other side of their privacy fence or parting the blinds on her window to watch the neighborhood. Marjory rarely spoke more than a greeting to her, and if she lingered too long, Ellen Sue would share little tidbits she recently gleaned from her voyeurism, such the mailman's lack of wedding

ring in the last week, the school bus driver's lunch habits, and the new young priest's proclivity for wine.

After Garvin received his terminal prognosis, Marjory tried to take up the housework that he used to do in the hopes that rest would strengthen his body and ward off the production of cancerous cells. One day, Marjory brought Garvin's toolbox out to the front of the house to change the burnt out bulb in the front porch's fixture, and Ellen Sue approached her. Marjory figured her presence in the yard, especially with a toolbox, must've signified bad news to her elder, perceptive neighbor, bad enough for Ellen Sue to call her husband out of the house to fix the lights and clean the gutters, while he was at it, so Marjory wouldn't have to.

Not having an able-bodied Garvin was hard for Marjory, who only knew how to cook a few meals and call the young neighborhood kid to cut the grass. Ellen Sue started bringing over dinner for the couple almost weekly, and Garvin joked with Marjory that they were doing the poor broad a favor by humoring her maternal impulses. When spending time with Garvin became more important to Marjory than mopping the kitchen floors and dusting the ceiling fans, Ellen Sue took up those tasks as well, declaring, "Cleanliness is godliness." And after Garvin's death, Ellen Sue drove Marjory to the monk's abbey to buy the casket and to the liquor store to pick up the kegs for the reception. More than anything else that Ellen Sue helped with, Marjory found herself grateful that Ellen Sue would spread the news of Garvin's passing to friends and neighbors so she wouldn't have to.

Ellen Sue had offered to drive Marjory to the church for the funeral Mass, but Marjory was composed enough to drive the short distance. Her parking spot was near the side entrance to the church, but she wanted to experience the effect of walking through the front doors and down the aisle. She opened the heavy wooden doors. Standing alone in the aisle while Garvin waited

for her near the altar reminded Marjory of being a bride. They were married in this church with its marble Communion rail, its gold tabernacle surrounded by stone angels, the fleurs-de-lis and trinity knots carved into the ceiling, and the reds and blues reflected from the stained glass windows onto the floor. She processed up to the front of the church. All Marjory needed was a white dress.

The monastic style cypress casket sat in front of the steps leading up to the church's thick marble altar. The casket underwhelmed compared to the beauty and intricacies of the church. Garvin had requested Marjory buy the simplest casket from the nearby monks, even though she thought he deserved a more comfortable resting place.

A few attendees were already gathered in the pews. Some of them gripped rosaries in their hands and others chatted casually with people around them.

Marjory sat in the first pew as the church filled with people coming to memorialize Garvin. She let the echoing hum of the attendees' voices hypnotize her as she stared toward her husband's lifeless body. The attendees queued up. After kneeling or standing in front of the casket, the open half of which revealed Garvin's painted, gaunt face and the closed half of which was decorated with a spray of white and blue flowers, the attendants shuffled up Marjory's empty pew to give her brief words of condolence before leaving Marjory by herself again.

Ellen Sue and her husband walked up to the casket. Ellen Sue came over and bent down to kiss Marjory's cheek. "Look strong," Ellen Sue whispered. "Everyone's eyes are on you." Someone caught her attention and waved her away before Marjory could respond.

The only eyes she ever cared about were Garvin's. All of her life, Marjory gravitated toward the periphery of any setting and the edge of anyone's attention, but when she met Garvin and became his focus, she found herself cherishing it.

The funeral would begin soon, so most of the attendees crowded into their pews. Only a few stragglers walked up to give Garvin their hurried goodbyes. Marjory heard children chattering and heels clacking on the marble floor of the church, and she knew instinctively that it was Lacey with her three children.

As they got nearer to the front of the church, Marjory prayed that Garvin's death would be enough of a reason for Lacey and her to reconcile. She prayed that Lacey would sit in the same pew as her or at least right behind her so she wouldn't have to be alone. She asked Garvin to help her out. He had always been so good at convincing Lacey to give Marjory a chance.

Lacey hadn't been in this church since her First Communion when she wore a white veil on her blonde hair and white patent leather shoes on her feet. Now, Lacey wore a floor length black dress, and her hair was her black veil. Marjory always hoped to plan Lacey's wedding and her children's Baptisms here, but Marjory never saw her daughter get married here. She never saw her daughter get married at all. But she saw her daughter have children by multiple men. Marjory saw those men leave Lacey emotionally broken and physically bleeding and hysterically laughing that this was why she could never marry any of them. When Lacey became pregnant the last time, Marjory accused Lacey of enjoying and seeking the abuse, and with that, Marjory and her daughter became estranged. Not long after, Garvin was diagnosed. Only Garvin's death could bring Marjory and Lacey into such close proximity again.

But Lacey and her children filed into a pew across the aisle from Marjory. She had met the two older children, Lacey's sons, Aiden and Ryder. Marjory remembered them as babies and hardly much bigger than that. But neither Marjory nor Garvin had ever met the youngest, Jacqueline. Garvin showed her the photos he received from Lacey in letters and emails that she

addressed only to him, but looking at the pictures too much reminded Marjory of the contempt her daughter had for her.

Marjory's grandchildren all looked so different from one another. The boys were tall and lanky like Lacey before three pregnancies. Aiden had straight blonde hair, and Ryder had curly brown hair. They could pass for full brothers. But Jacqueline hardly looked like she belonged to Lacey. She was three years old, just past her toddler stage, Marjory's favorite stage. A red headband pushed back her nappy hair, which stuck out in all different directions, and her light brown skin stood out among the mostly Anglo-Saxon attendees. But Jacqueline had Garvin's blue eyes, which darted around the church. Marjory thought Jacqueline looked like she'd never seen pictures that couldn't be swiped or clicked away with her fingers. Jacqueline turned completely around in the pew to look at the choir loft and the carvings in the ceiling, and Marjory realized she was smiling as she watched her granddaughter's delight.

Jacqueline wore a black dress with red roses on it and sparkly red shoes, the kind that Lacey used to sneak on in the morning while she was still in her nightgown even though Marjory told her they were only for special occasions. When Marjory caught her, Lacey would say that morning was a special occasion. Marjory thought how Garvin would have liked Jacqueline's dress, how he would have loved to have known his granddaughter. He would have spoiled her like Marjory never let him spoil Lacey.

Once the children were settled into the cushioned pew with their silenced electronic games, Lacey approached Garvin's casket and stood by the open half. Marjory hadn't stood there too long. She knew what Garvin looked like, and no mortician could recreate it. His face, hands, and shape made him almost unrecognizable to anyone who hadn't seen him in months. Lacey looked like she was meeting her dad for the first time since his illness took full effect, like she

was trying to replace the memories of her dad with this body. She leaned near him and whispered something before kissing his forehead. Lacey turned without looking at Marjory and sat next to her children. Marjory tried to make eye contact with her, but Lacey angled her body away from her mother and rested her arm on the back of the pew behind her children's heads. Marjory could see the tag sticking out of the neck of Lacey's dress and her hand rubbing her daughter's curly hair.

The church's small bells by the sacristy tinkled, announcing Father Jude's entrance into the church sanctuary. The attendees quieted as the altar servers, bearing candles and a crucifix, led Father Jude to the altar set with a gold chalice and paten. Marjory hadn't attended Mass in this church without Garvin next to her since she married him. Aiden and Ryder sat hitting buttons on their devices, but, as the congregation rose, Jacqueline stood on the kneeler, making her a few inches higher off the ground. Lacey tentatively followed her daughter and rose. Though she didn't participate more than standing and sitting, Lacey at least paid that much respect to her dad's faith. Marjory traced the Sign of the Cross over her body and lifted her eyes to the dome ceiling. A host of seraphim surrounded the Virgin Mary in Heaven, and her Son placed a gold crown on her head.

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After the funeral Mass, Father Jude invited the attendants to the interment at the cemetery. Marjory saw Lacey arrive right as the short ceremony began. She held Jacqueline on her hip and stood at the back edge of the large group gathered around Garvin's grave. Aiden and Ryder chased each other around headstones. They left as soon as Garvin was lowered into the ground and Father Jude concluded the prayers. Marjory doubted Lacey would attend the reception, but

she yearned to reconcile with her daughter. Still sitting in the foldout chair in front of the burial site, Marjory pulled out her phone and texted Lacey, "I would love to see you at the reception."

Marjory arrived at her house just as the first guests did, and each time she opened the door, Marjory was greeted with hugs and condolences and casseroles she had nowhere to put. She busied herself with keeping the ice bucket filled and the paper products stocked. But she wasn't too busy to see Lacey and her three children enter. Marjory was so excited that she put the plastic knives in the refrigerator. She waved, but Lacey ushered her kids toward the food.

Aiden and Ryder ran off in different directions around the house, and Lacey pursued them, leaving Jacqueline standing alone among family she had never met. She had on a necklace made of clover flowers.

Marjory knelt before the girl and held her hand. "Hi, Jacqueline. I'm not sure you know me, but I'm your Mimi. I'm your mommy's mom."

Jacqueline looked straight at Marjory and smiled. Her teeth were tiny. Marjory forgot that children could be so tiny. "I like your necklace," Jacqueline said. She touched her finger to the pearl dangling around Marjory's neck.

"Thank you," Marjory said. "Your Paw Paw gave it me, your mommy's daddy." Marjory touched one of the clover flowers. "I like yours, too."

Jacqueline touched her handmade necklace with both hands as if she'd forgotten she wore it. "I made it at the cemetery," she said.

Ellen Sue came up to the pair. "We're about to start the toasts," she said, motioning to a chair saved for Marjory beside her own.

Father Jude stood by the kegs with a full cup of beer in his hand.

Marjory was glad the pump worked and the beer wasn't too foamy. She looked at Jacqueline. "Would you like to sit with me?"

The girl nodded, and they held hands as they walked to the chair. Marjory sat down and Jacqueline climbed onto her lap. Marjory bounced the girl on her knees, and Jacqueline laughed. Marjory liked knowing she could make her granddaughter laugh. Everyone else was either standing or sitting somewhere in the room almost as reverently as they did at church, like this was another sacrament. With every cup of beer Father Jude pumped and every person who finished it in Garvin's memory, Marjory hugged Jacqueline tighter. Sometimes, Marjory tickled her ribs or rocked side to side or buried her nose in the crook of Jacqueline's neck. She smelled like coconut. It was harder for Marjory to be sad with a happy child in her arms.

Marjory didn't even notice Lacey reenter the room until she walked up to Father Jude. He pumped the keg and opened the plastic faucet, filling Lacey's cup with beer. He handed her the drink and patted her shoulder.

Marjory couldn't tell if Lacey was looking at her or Jacqueline, but it was the closest they had come to looking at one another all day. Lacey tucked her black hair behind her ear, and Marjory remembered all the nights she detangled Lacey's wet hair when she was young. Marjory would take a comb and hold the strands of hair, gently picking the comb's teeth through the knots. Lacey would sing whatever song came to mind, even making up original lyrics to well known melodies. If Marjory could, she would catch on and harmonize with Lacey until her daughter's hair was perfectly smooth.

"To Dad," Lacey said. She raised her cup, and everyone else raised theirs and drank. When Lacey finished her drink, Jacqueline ran up and hugged her legs.

Ellen Sue leaned close to Marjory. "The world is in chaos."



Marjory looked at Ellen Sue and saw her friend staring at Jacqueline. Marjory didn't understand, and it seemed Ellen Sue recognized that.

"When a child has no place in the world," Ellen Sue said, motioning toward Jacqueline. Ellen Sue looked up and something startled her.

"No place?" Marjory asked before glancing up as well.

Lacey and Jacqueline stood in front of them. Marjory rose and smiled. Finally, her daughter had come to speak to her, to reconcile. This was what Marjory wanted, and she knew this was what Garvin wanted. Every time he had spoken to Lacey on the phone, he asked Marjory if she wanted to talk to Lacey. Marjory didn't often respond, though she wanted to, because Lacey would say something that caught Garvin's attention again. He would return his full attention to the phone and ask if she was sure, and then they'd say their goodbyes. But he tried every time without fail. Garvin's consistency and persistence were some of the main reasons Marjory fell in love with him.

Marjory reached for Jacqueline's hand. She was ready to be a family again, a non-traditional family but a family nonetheless. But Lacey grabbed her daughter's outstretched hand before Marjory could.

"Are you talking about my daughter?" Lacey looked at Marjory and then down at Ellen Sue, who stayed seated with her lips pressed flatly together. She didn't look at Lacey or Marjory and acted as if no one stood in front of her.

"I was letting Jacqueline know who I am." Marjory smiled down at her granddaughter and then up at Lacey.

"We're going, Jacquie." Lacey started to walk away from Marjory.

Marjory gently grabbed her daughter's arm, and Lacey turned back toward her mother. She didn't look like Marjory's little girl anymore. Marjory couldn't see the child who tiptoed into her bedroom one Saturday morning when Garvin was showering and hid under the covers with her so they could scare him in a rare moment of recklessness. Marjory couldn't see the child who didn't let her kill gnats and mosquitoes because she wanted to catch them and let them be free and prosper outside. Marjory couldn't see the child who helped up the player on the opposing soccer team when she accidentally knocked him down. Marjory hardly got to see Lacey be a child. Before she graduated from high school, Lacey had her first son. And before she got her GED, she had her second. Marjory had felt that Lacey's childhood had been ripped away from her, that she and Garvin had been robbed of Lacey's childhood, too. Marjory had offered to help Lacey take care of her babies so she could lead a normal life, but Lacey assured Marjory her boyfriend was honorable and they could be responsible for these babies themselves and who's to say what's normal anyway.

Something stirred in Marjory, but she wasn't sure it was the Holy Spirit. "She didn't know her grandfather." She felt bold. "You'd keep her from her grandmother, too?" But more than bold, she felt heartbroken. "Your dad doesn't want that."

Lacey put her hands on Jacqueline's shoulders. "Well, Dad's dead now." Lacey led her away from Marjory.

Jacqueline looked back at Marjory and broke free from Lacey's grip. She took off her clover necklace and placed it on Marjory's head. "Bye Mimi," Jacqueline said. She ran to catch up with her mother and brothers who wove through the crowd.

So many people stood in the room that Marjory couldn't even see Lacey and her children when they got to the front door. All she saw was the top of the door. It opened. Marjory knelt

down and looked between her guests' legs. She saw two sparkly red shoes. The door closed, and they were gone.

Marjory's black pants were covered in dust and smut from the floor, but she didn't wipe them off. She retook her seat by Ellen Sue whose mouth was no longer sealed shut from embarrassment.

Ellen Sue leaned close to Marjory as if letting her in on a discrete piece of advice. "Kneeling on the ground isn't worth the filth," she said.

Marjory began to grasp Ellen Sue's meaning. "You mean my granddaughter?"

Ellen Sue raised her eyebrows and looked at Marjory but didn't say anything else.

Marjory felt the top of her head to make sure Jacqueline's flowers still adorned her. Ellen Sue's help wasn't vital to Marjory. Like Garvin always said, they were only humoring her by letting her help them.

Marjory leaned toward Ellen Sue as if letting her in on her own secret. "And where's your crown?"

Ellen Sue glanced up at the clover flowers on Marjory's head, shifted in her seat, and turned to the person on her other side.

Marjory didn't think she'd miss Ellen Sue, but she would miss Jacquie.

## On the Levee

Jonas sat on the levee of the lake as he watched the setting sun turn the sky orange. It was the only place he could go and smoke his joint and drink his Coke in peace. He watched the pelicans play tag above the rippleless water. The only time the mirror effect was broken was when one of the birds landed or touched its wing tip to the surface of the water.

Jonas could find no peace at home with his mom's new boyfriend, Victor, always around, giving Jonas's mom tongue at the dinner table or keeping about a dozen of his porn DVDs under their boxy television in the living room. Jonas couldn't smoke his weed anywhere near the house. Victor had searched his school bag, found some, and declared it an unacceptable presence in the house to Jonas's mom. Not that Jonas wanted to smoke there, but it was the principle. This man wasn't his father.

He didn't know where his dad was since he left his mom. Jonas just knew his dad wasn't where he was supposed to be. But at the lake, Jonas didn't have to think about his dad's absence in the past three months or his mom's new boyfriend.

When his parents were still together, Jonas saw Victor walk his mom home from the bar where she worked at night when his dad was working offshore. She lingered outside their front door talking to this handsome, well-built man with black hair and a pointy face. Jonas didn't like this guy, but his mom smiled more during the days after Victor walked her home. She hummed and laughed even when she was alone. The last time Jonas's dad was offshore, he saw his mom move closer to Victor after he walked her home and kiss him.

Not long after his dad left, Jonas came home to see Victor sitting in his dad's spot on the couch. Jonas's mom sat pressed up against him. Victor had one arm around her shoulders and the other up her blouse. After that, Victor stayed over most nights, and Jonas started buying weed

from this guy at school with cropped hair and wire-rimmed glasses and skipping math club meetings to go to the levee where he could lose his mind and let his body disintegrate.

Jonas's mom explained Victor sleeping over to Jonas and his little sister, Lillie, as an adult slumber party. Sometimes she legitimized his presence by claiming he was helping take care of Lillie and Jonas while she worked, as if Jonas was a child like his nine-year-old sister. If his mom had asked his opinion, he would've told her he was a man, dammit, and could take care of himself and Lillie. But now that Jonas had to fold Victor's socks along with his own and set out a plate for him at breakfast, his mom no longer made up excuses.

The pelicans stopped screaming and took their spots huddled into the surface of the lake water. Jonas watched the sky fade from pinks and oranges to different greys within minutes. This had become Jonas's favorite time of day. It almost felt like an addiction, like he wouldn't be able to get through the next day without knowing he'd be able to come back to the lake and smoke. But he noticed that most people left with the bright colors. They came for the action and left when it was done. Stupid people, Jonas thought. They would never appreciate that a grey sky changed just as much as a pink sky. It just wasn't a spectacle.

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The next day Jonas came home after school to find his mom dancing by herself in the kitchen. She didn't work at night anymore. Victor had convinced her to quit her job at the bar so she could be home with her kids, and he'd help her with some of the bills. Now, she cooked at night and they ate dinner as a family with Victor.

The radio was turned up to its maximum volume, playing some classic rock song that reminded Jonas of being in his dad's truck with the windows cranked down and his little sister seated between him and his dad, right where the stick shift would hit her knees. They used to

laugh in that truck. His dad would drum his fingers on the steering wheel, often off beat but full of energy. Lillie would giggle and kick her feet. One time, when she was four years old and Jonas was ten, she knocked the stick shift into neutral with her knee while they were driving. Jonas's dad was singing at the top of his lungs, his eyes closed for a moment as he hit a high Led Zeppelin-grade note. Lillie didn't even notice, but Jonas did.

"Dad!" he yelled. Jonas feared they would run into oncoming traffic, an eighteen-wheeler or a minivan carrying a mom and her kids to a soccer game. He imagined his dad's truck would develop a mind of its own and head them straight for a tree, a hundred-year-old oak that would jump over the curb, into the street, and right in front of them. Jonas was less afraid of himself dying and more afraid of his dad dying and leaving his mom partner-less. He was afraid she would die from grief and leave Lillie mother- and father-less. He was afraid Lillie would be forced into an orphanage away from Jonas and what little protection he could offer her if their parents both died, which would have been imminent if one of them had died because they were so in love.

But no one died in that moment. Jonas's dad opened his eyes, still holding that note as if his lungs were as deep as the lake's twenty-mile bridge was long, and he shifted the gear back into drive. Jonas's dad thumped his fingers on the wheel, finishing the song with a flourish and a hit of the imaginary cymbal that hung in the air. Lillie never even knew.

Now, Jonas watched his mom dance to a similar song. She sang as a pot of something that looked like rice boiled on the stove. With one hand on her stomach and the other in the air holding an imaginary hand, she spun and saw Jonas. She grabbed his hand and pulled him into the dance. He resisted at first, but it was mostly for show. He at least had to maintain the appearance that he didn't want to dance with his mom, but after she lifted his hand and spun

herself underneath a couple times, Jonas couldn't help but smile and let himself go. He started singing the words along with her. At the bridge of the song, his mom pulled away from him, closed her eyes and pointed her finger to nothing in particular as she sang the words. She lifted her hand above her head and spun so quickly that her floral apron spread out around her. Then she started swaying down into a squat as the music trailed off. When the song ended, Jonas's mom grabbed his face, licked her lips, and planted a wet kiss on his cheek.

"Jonas, feels like you'll need to start shaving soon." She rubbed her nose. "Becoming a man overnight." She affected a snuffle and a small cry. They laughed together.

Victor walked into the kitchen. "Hola," he boomed. He walked up behind Jonas's mom and slapped her butt and winked at Jonas. His mom stopped laughing, stepped aside, and got plates and silverware to set the table.

All Jonas could think was that his parents weren't even divorced yet.

Something started hissing and splashing. Jonas looked over to the pot on the stove. It had grown a head of white foam that was spilling over into the gas fire underneath.

"Shit," his mom muttered. "Shit, shit, shit." She started getting louder. She turned the fire down and plunged a spoon into the pot, stirring the foam away. "I'm sorry," she said to the room. Once the rice and water had settled back down, Jonas's mom started cleaning up the sticky starch on the stove with a towel. One corner hit the blue flames and caught on fire.

"Mom," Jonas said.

Jonas reached for the towel, but Victor grabbed it quicker and threw it into the sink. He turned on the water, quenching the small flames. "Be more careful, woman."

His mom stood at the stove, still stirring the pot. All hints of her romp with Jonas had been extinguished with the fire. His mom's earlier fluid shoulders were now rigid, and her floral

apron fell flat against her dress. Jonas asked his mom if there was anything he could do to help, but she hardly noticed him speaking. All of her attention was now on the pot on the stove as she pulled out spoonfuls of rice every few seconds to taste a grain and make sure it was perfectly done.

“It’s just rice,” Jonas said. “It doesn’t have to be perfect.”

Victor stirred up the pot of beans. “No meat?”

“There’s some ham in there,” Jonas’s mom replied. She had barely looked up since Victor walked in.

“I gave you grocery money because I wanted meat.” Victor walked out of the kitchen. “If I wanted rice and beans, I’d go to Mexico,” he called over his shoulder. He sat on the couch, slipped off his shoes and dirty socks, and turned on his porn. He wasn’t even jerking off to it. He just watched it like a sitcom or something.

Jonas picked up his backpack and headed for his bedroom to do his homework.

Victor called to him from the couch. “Jonas.”

Jonas stopped in the doorway to his bedroom and looked back at Victor.

“Jonas, see how in this scene he grabs her hair. Women like that. But this guy, he pulls too hard. You can see the way her eyes turn empty in this moment. You don’t want that.”

Jonas looked with disbelief at the man who was analyzing porn as he sat on the couch Jonas’s dad had bought, the same spot his dad used to occupy. When some racy show would come on as the family watched TV together, his dad would flip to another channel and say, “Time to edit,” even when Lillie and Jonas’s mom weren’t in the living room with them.

“Look, look at the TV,” Victor said and pointed to the screen in what seemed to Jonas like a perverted attempt to bond with him.



“I have homework,” he said.

His mom looked through the kitchen doorway, and Jonas saw her sigh like she was relieved. As Jonas walked to his room, Victor called his mom to take a break from cooking. “Come sit on my lap so we can practice,” Victor said.

Jonas didn’t look to see if she did. He closed his door and shoved earbuds into his ears before opening his textbooks. He turned his music up as loud as it could go, but he could still hear the moaning, and he could still hear Victor’s howls of laughter.

Before Jonas answered his second homework question, someone knocked on his door, and his mom opened it before he could reply.

“You know the rule,” she said without looking directly at Jonas. She seemed like a different woman than the one who greeted Jonas when he got home.

“Unless my homework is to watch your boyfriend’s porn, I’ll be in here.” He replaced his earbuds. When he looked back up, his mom was gone, but his door was open.

When it got close to 4:30, Jonas left his room. His mom was hiding in the kitchen, opening and closing drawers and cabinets without taking anything from them. Just as Victor was laughing at some move or scenario, Jonas walked to the television and clicked it off.

“What—”

“Lillie’s about to be home.” Jonas didn’t think he should have to explain this. He moved his schoolwork to the kitchen table.

Less than ten minutes passed by before Lillie walked through the front door, letting it slam shut. “Lillie, the door, please,” Jonas said.

“Sorry,” she called back. “Hey Victor.”

Victor was now watching a stand-up comedy show actually allowed on cable.

Lillie skipped over to Jonas and pecked him on the cheek.

“Good day?” he asked.

“Uh huh,” she replied. She looked like an incarnation of his dad with her curly blonde hair and brown eyes. When she was outside all day, especially during the summer, Lillie’s hair looked like it was bleached white, similar to their dad when he returned from working on the rig and his hair was almost white as if those weeks on the Gulf imparted wisdom to him.

Jonas ruffled Lillie’s hair, and she smiled at him. “Hey, you lost a tooth today,” he said.

Lillie smiled even bigger and turned her head so he could see better.

“You got it?”

Lillie held up a tiny baggie with a white tooth inside.

“Go show Mom—”

“Little Liliana,” Victor called from his spot on the couch.

Lillie ducked around Jonas and ran to Victor.

“Lillie,” Jonas reminded him. “It’s Lillie.”

She jumped up and sat on Victor’s lap.

“Get it right,” Jonas finished.

“Liliana,” Victor said. He blew in her ear, and she laughed. “Let’s go practice our soccer skills.”

Lillie nodded. Victor patted her thighs and slid her off his legs. She ran to get her cleats from the shoe pile by the backdoor in the kitchen. She gave her mom a quick hello.

“She has homework,” Jonas said. He followed them into the kitchen.

Lillie sat on the floor and laced up her shoes.

“Lillie, you have homework,” Jonas said.

“Let her be a kid,” his mom said.

Lillie led Victor out the door to their small backyard.

“Don’t forget, plant your foot and then pound it,” Victor said.

Jonas stood next to his mom. “What do you see in this guy?” He leaned against the counter. His mom swatted near his hip, so he stepped aside to let her get to the drawer he was blocking.

She pulled out the tongs and moved back to her half-assembled salad. “Will you reach in the fridge and get me the tomato?” she asked.

Jonas opened the refrigerator door but didn’t look. “I don’t see it,” he said.

“You hardly looked,” his mom said. She moved beside him and pushed milk cartons and leftovers around.

“Mom.” Jonas wanted her to answer him.

“He’s good with Lillie,” she said.

“Dad’s good with Lillie.”

She paused, her head almost between the refrigerator shelves. After a moment, she straightened and turned toward Jonas.

“He doesn’t want me anymore,” she said.

In an instant, she aged. Her eyebrows pulled together with a crease so deep between them that Jonas thought it could never smooth out again. The corners of her mouth turned down so naturally that Jonas realized his mom must work constantly just to make her mouth a straight line. But her eyes seemed to tell the most honest tale. They told Jonas that she deserved nothing better than Victor and nothing as good as his dad.

Jonas had always thought his mom was a woman confident of her value who would teach Lillie and him their own worth. He thought she knew how much she meant to her family, and he thought their love was enough for her. Jonas had never been ashamed of his mom, but in that moment, he was disgusted because she had a family that loved her and gave her better, and she traded it for Victor.

Jonas grabbed the tomato from the open refrigerator, shoved it into his mom's hands, and closed the door. His mom started to ask something, but he didn't care.

The television was still on with Victor's comedy show. Jonas walked by right as the comedian laughed about choking someone's mom when he stuck his dick down her throat.

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"A dollar and seven cents?" Jonas had counted out ninety-seven cents perfectly as he waited in line at the convenience store. "Last week it was ninety-seven."

"Well, life's tough," the burly clerk said. His double chin had white stubble carpeting the bulge. His white shirt had brown stains on the front and yellow stains under his armpits. His hand seemed to hover over the can of Coke, ready to reclaim the merchandise.

"Luckily," Jonas replied, "I have a dime right here."

"Goody for me." The clerk snatched the coin from Jonas's fingers and dropped it into the cash register tray.

Jonas grabbed his Coke and headed for the levee. It was almost sunset.

Once he got to the lake, he walked along the paved path. It looked like a miniature road with a yellow dotted line trailing down the middle of the asphalt or maybe like a black ribbon with yellow thread running through the center. Jonas walked along the dashes, trying to keep his

feet on the line without losing his balance, but when other walkers or riders came by, he moved himself to the right side of the little road and turned his head toward the lake.

He rarely chose the same spot on the levee. It was hard to tell one spot from another, but Jonas used his distance from the pier as a marker. People liked the pier, so Jonas walked away from it. Tonight, though, he didn't really see anyone. He walked until he had a perfect view of the fading sun, and he sat in the grass and lit up.

The sky looked tie-dyed like someone had twirled up the fabric of the sky and doused it with oranges and pinks. Jonas lay back in the grass and sipped his Coke, swishing the sugary drink around his mouth while the carbonation popped against his cheeks.

Someone started up the levee toward him.

“Jonas.” It was his dad. “Hey.”

Jonas hadn't seen his dad since he left them, and Jonas didn't know how he knew to find him here. They'd spoken on the phone, but every call that ended with his dad telling him he loved him convinced Jonas even less.

Jonas sat up but didn't say anything. He felt oddly violated in this intimate moment reserved for himself.

His dad took a seat beside Jonas, pulled open a bag of salty potato chips, and popped the top on a ginger ale. “Cheers.” He sipped his drink.

Jonas raised his joint to his lips and inhaled deeply. His dad watched. Jonas tilted his can of Coke all the way up, draining the last sip.

“I didn't know you smoked,” his dad said. He motioned toward the stub of a joint.

Jonas shrugged, looked at it, and offered it to his dad, who shook his head and pulled out a cigarette instead. His dad inhaled deeply a few times on his lit cigarette, munched on some chips, and drank his ginger ale.

They were silent. The sky was losing color, and Jonas wasn't relaxed. He kept looking at the sky hoping his mind and body weren't connected so he could still unwind even though his dad was intruding.

"I thought you had math club," his dad said.

Jonas had wanted his dad to come back for three months, but not just to him and not in secret on the levee. "We're both supposed to be places we aren't, then," Jonas said.

His dad looked at him. "I'm here for the next few weeks."

The sky had changed, the clouds diffused.

"Are you going to fight for her?"

"Son," his dad began with a sigh. He ran his hand through his thinning white blonde hair. "Some people don't want to be saved."

Jonas felt his eyes rolling before he even made the decision to do this. "You're just a pussy."

He was done. There was no relaxing now. "I've got to get home to have dinner with your wife and her boyfriend." He inhaled whatever he could out of the remainder of the joint, stubbed it out in the grass, and dropped it into his dad's full can of ginger ale. His dad just sat there, but Jonas stood up and brushed grass off his pants, before trotting down the levee.

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Jonas walked around his neighborhood, waiting until it became dark to return home. His mom and Victor weren't in the living room or the kitchen. Lillie sat before the television watching her one show she was allowed each night before bed.

“Hey Lillie.”

Her “hey” was drowned out by the sounds from the television, the volume of which was turned up more than his mom liked. Moans and screams drew Jonas out of his own head. He looked at the screen to see one of Victor's movies playing.

“What the hell?” Jonas jumped between Lillie and the TV and fumbled for the power switch, turning the screen to black. Before he did, though, he saw an image of a girl, probably about his own age but made up with blue eye shadow and red lips to look older, surrounded by half a dozen men wearing animal masks and holding leashes strapped to the girl. “What were you doing?”

Lillie glanced up at Jonas, unknowing and innocent. “What was that?”

Jonas ejected the DVD from the player just as his mom and Victor walked through the back door into the kitchen. Jonas snapped the disc in two. And then snapped the pieces again.

“What the fuck?” Victor said when he realized what Jonas was doing.

“Victor, language, please,” Jonas's mom said.

“Kick this jerk out.” Jonas ignored Victor and spoke only to his mom.

“Jonas—”

“Lillie was watching this.” Jonas looked at his mom and entreated her. She didn't move. He held up the pieces. “The porn that your boyfriend keeps here.”

She glanced at Lillie, still sitting on the ground in front of the television.

“Why do you let him bring this in our house?” Jonas asked his mom.

But she didn't move or speak. Victor's eyebrows pulled together over his black eyes, and his oily hair stuck out in all directions.

Jonas grabbed the DVDs off of the TV set and opened each case.

"What are you doing, son?" Victor said. He didn't yell. Jonas would've felt less afraid if he had. But nothing could stop him now.

"Burning this shit." Jonas snapped the discs and threw them into the kitchen sink.

"That's my property." Victor grabbed Jonas and tried to stop him.

Jonas yanked his arm away and snatched up a matchbox. He lit a match and dropped it on the pile of disc pieces in the sink. They didn't ignite, but the fire distorted and discolored parts of the DVDs. "I'm not your son."

Victor took a deep breath. He left for the backyard. The door clicked closed behind him. Jonas heard a loud thump as Victor kicked the soccer ball at the fence. Jonas could see him standing out behind the house. He wasn't leaving.

Jonas's mom walked up to him and put her hand on his shoulder. He looked at her, and she smiled. It was a small smile. It looked proud of him but sad for herself. She quickly let it drop. He didn't know if she would let Victor back in, but Jonas would be there to remind her that she already had a man in her life.

He looked at the disc pieces in the sink. Only a few had melted. But those that had were destroyed beyond repair. Jonas just had to keep lighting the rest on fire.



## Apish Ira

It had been three years since Dian had seen her mother, but she looked the same as she stood in the doorway of Dian's studio apartment. Her grey hair was flattened back into a bun at her neck, her pink floral dress reached below her knees, and her white stockings stretched up her legs. Dian's mother gripped a battered rectangular suitcase small enough that it wouldn't even hold all the articles Dian had submitted for publication to the best scientific journals while working on her dissertation on the evolutionary significance of brachiation in primates, though all of her articles had been rejected.

After the initial shock of seeing her mother, Dian's heart sank. "Is it Dad?" she asked. She expected her mother to bear the news that her dad finally had that heart attack about which Dian had been warning him since she understood the link between a high fat diet like his and cardiovascular disease. She often called him and tried to convince him to cook with healthier alternatives than butter and to eat vegetables that weren't deep fried, but he didn't.

Instead, Dian's mother grinned and pushed past her into the unit. "I want to help you plan everything for the baby," her mother said. She unlatched her purse and pulled out a baby catalogue. She had dog-eared some pages and circled different items like she used to do with magazines she left around the house near Christmas time in case Dian or her dad needed ideas on what to get her.

Dian took the catalogues without looking at them. Her mother hadn't visited on her birthday or when she received her Master's in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, but apparently the news of her pregnancy warranted a visit. And she was normally more careful when she had sex than she was recently.

Everything Dian learned and studied told her procreation was what her female body was designed to do, just like it was designed to perspire and to urinate. Thinking back, she didn't know why she had called her mother to tell her. After the test revealed a positive response to gonadotropins, Dian felt her stomach twist and contract with anxiety and loneliness. She felt compelled to tell someone and had chosen her mother instead of the father of the fetus or the therapist she'd been visiting for three years. Dian attributed her lapse in judgment to some obsolete instinct to bond with other females caused by the dramatic increase in her estrogen.

But part of her, the part to which she didn't like to admit, thought her mother could give her good counsel. Dian didn't know whether or not she'd see the pregnancy through to the fetus's viability, much in the same way she didn't know if she'd ever see any work she started survive to maturity. But, when Dian told her, her mother only yelped in excitement, hollered at Dian's dad to tell him the news, explained how they'd been praying for a grandbaby, and quickly ended the phone call. That was the day before she showed up at Dian's door.

Dian's mother stood in the middle of the apartment and maintained her smile, but as she looked around, subtle changes in her face, the narrowing of her lips or the twitch of her nose or the slight raising of her left eyebrow, revealed her distaste for certain details. Dian had learned how to read her mother after a lifetime of watching her and years of therapy. Having another person in the room made Dian realize how little space in which to live she actually had. Textbooks, library books, magazines, and revised copies of Dian's own articles littered the tables, chairs, and countertops.

"Sweetheart, invite me to sit," her mother said. "What good's that degree if you don't have basic manners?"

Before Dian finished high school, she argued with her parents about going to college. Her dad didn't have as much to say as her mother did, but no one ever did. Her mother emphatically discouraged Dian from attending university. "You don't need a degree to find a nice husband," she said. But Dian wasn't looking for a husband, so when she graduated high school, Dian accused her mother of suppressing her individuality and independent thinking, moved away, took out a loan, and started college classes. She hadn't stopped or been back to her hometown since.

Dian pushed aside a pillow and gathered up notebooks and pencils slipped between her pleather couch's dark cushions. A fellow doctoral student had given it to Dian. He wouldn't let her pay him for it, but Dian dropped a twenty by his nightstand one morning as she left his apartment. He was also the father of the fetus for which her mother was shopping.

Her mother sat, let go of her suitcase, and rested her purse in her lap.

Dian remained standing with a notebook page in her hand. It had scribbles curving around the corners and arrows in every direction. Dian wasn't sure she could decipher her own notes.

"Sit, baby," her mother said. She patted the couch next to her.

Dian sat rigid next to her mother and remembered to pull her shoulders back. Her mother's scrutiny wasn't limited to furnishings and living quarters.

"Those cotillion classes paid off," her mother said. She patted Dian's knee, but before she finished, she glanced at Dian's midsection and smiled. Dian saw her mother's eyes tear up. "I can't believe I'm going to have a grandbaby." Her mother swiped quickly under her eyes and patted her cheeks. She took one of the baby catalogues and opened it to a page on which she had circled and starred almost every item. "Now, we absolutely need these," Dian's mother said. She pointed to a chandelier lamp and then reached over and touched Dian's stomach.

She was twenty-nine, unable to create work that the world found valuable, hardly able to cook a decent meal, just able to afford her rent, and pregnant. Dian tried to calm the ensuing nausea she felt, but couldn't. Standing from the couch, she knocked her mother's knees and wove her way through the apartment. Nothing was coming up, but Dian needed the privacy of the bathroom. She crouched down and put her cheek against the cold tile floor. Her breaths became heaves, but she kept gulping down air.

"Honey?" Her mother knocked on the bathroom door. "I'll make you some herbal tea."

Dian heard her mother shuffling away from the door. Listening to her turn on the water at the kitchen sink and put the teakettle on the coil stove soothed Dian. She focused on these noises and the greyed grout between the tiles on the floor, and her breathing returned to normal.

When Dian finally left the bathroom, her mother greeted her with a steaming mug.

"The baby'll like it, too," her mother said.

Dian held the hot ceramic in her hands, and it felt almost as good as the bathroom's cold floor. But when she took a sip, hoping it would warm her insides the way it warmed her fingers, the liquid burnt her mouth. She swallowed, and the tea scalded her throat, making her eyes water.

"Honey, it's too hot," her mother said and took the mug out of Dian's hands.

Dian blinked away the tears in her eyes. "I didn't know you were coming." She folded her arm over her chest and rubbed her shoulder.

Her mother blew on the hot tea.

"I don't have anywhere for you to sleep," Dian said. "Or much to eat."

"Yeah, moldy cheese and rotten vegetables." Her mother put the mug down and grabbed her purse. "The baby's going to need something better."

Dian didn't even have the chance to take another sip of her tea before her mother led the way out of the apartment and down the street like she had been the one living in Chicago for three years. Her mother found a little bistro down the block where they took their seats. Dian had never been here. It was romantic with its dim lighting and red upholstery. Each table had a small candle next to a flower at the center, and most tables only sat two. The other couples in the restaurant leaned forward to be close to one another and touch hands. Dian's last date involved heating up flash-frozen lasagna and playing Scrabble because she had run out of things to say to the guy.

"Mother, this place looks expensive." Dian would've been fine with the diner on the next block. She frequented that restaurant, but there it was less intimate, more brightly lit, and the tables were large enough that she could fill them with her books and papers and not feel so lonely.

Her mother already ordered herself a Coke and Dian a Sprite. "One day, when we visit, we can bring the baby." She took a long sip of her drink.

For the next hour and a half, Dian hummed and hued as her mother talked about the fetus. Her mother wondered if it was a boy or a girl, though, of course, she wanted a little girl who she could mold into a proper Southern belle, teaching her how to make hummingbird cake the way it's supposed to be made, not worried about how healthy it is, and taking her to the same cotillion lessons Dian attended when she was a girl.

Dian couldn't remain silent. "But she'll grow up in Chicago, so she w—"

"Chicago? Honey, you'll move back with us." Her mother laughed and flicked a piece of lettuce on her plate aside with her fork so she could stab the tomato hiding beneath it. She looked up at Dian, and her eyebrows were raised, challenging Dian to dissent. Her mother's gaze drifted

down to Dian's plate and to her abdomen before she returned her attention to her food. "Eat, honey. You're making a baby."

Dian returned to her murmurs of agreement and left her opinion to herself, as she knew her mother liked. They finished the meal, her mother with renewed vigor and Dian with her food mostly eaten, as her mother desired. Dian's mother paid for the dinner and led the way home. When they were about to cross the street and Dian was stepping off the curb without looking up, her mother stopped her from getting clipped by a biker. "Keep your eyes open, Di," her mother said. She massaged Dian's back with her knuckles right on the spot where she usually tensed up. The feeling of her mother's strong hands on her back made Dian feel like she was fourteen again, studying for a school exam as her mother did the same thing to help her relax. Her mother had this magical way of making Dian love her in moments like these.

When they made it back to the apartment, her mother heated up in the microwave Dian's tea from before dinner. Dian sat at the table with the piles of papers and stacks of books mocking her efforts to make some meaningful contribution to the world of evolutionary biology.

"When will your paper be done?" her mother asked as she stood by the microwave.

"My dissertation? Another six months." Dian straightened the corner of a stack of books in front of her. She wanted to tell her mother about her visits to the primate research center and her research on the variations in movement in different regions, especially plains compared to mountains. No one outside of her department was interested in discussing these topics with Dian, but she wanted her work to relate to all people. If she could get her mother interested enough to ask about her dissertation, she believed she could convince anyone to hear what she had to say. "I'm at a critical moment in my research, trying to understand why certain species of monkeys have the ability to brachiate—"

Her mother sighed. “When will you come home?” she asked.

“I don’t get much time off.” Even if she did, traveling to her hometown wasn’t her idea of vacation. She’d rather be documenting the various methods by which monkeys and apes swing around their habitats or be sitting in the library with her large coffee and a new mound of unread journals.

“You need to come home.” The microwave beeped. “You don’t know how to raise a baby.” Her mother held out the tea for Dian to take.

Dian took it and sipped it. She had gotten into college on her own and paid her way through undergraduate and graduate school. She didn’t need her mother’s help. “I can raise a child on my own.”

Her mother pointedly looked around the apartment. “Where would her crib go?” She moved closer and stood over Dian. “Where would her changing table go? Where would you store her diapers? Do you have money for any of that?”

Dian swallowed a mouthful of lukewarm tea. It tasted like metallic tap water.

Her mother seemed to think she won the discussion. She straightened up and then rubbed Dian’s shoulder. “You’ll move home.”

Dian stood up. “I’m done.” She dumped the rest of the tea into the sink and faced her mother, who pushed by her and started scrubbing the used mug with a small yellow sponge and a drop of dish soap.

“It’s best for the baby,” her mother said, as if Dian were fourteen and needed her to dictate her life decisions.

Dian was convinced her mother only wanted her grandchild to be in her life, not her daughter. “You wouldn’t be here if I weren’t pregnant, would you?”

Her mother looked up from her chore and smiled as if trying to explain to a child that the earth under her feet was spinning even though the child didn't have the reasoning to fully understand. "But you are," she said.

"Not anymore," Dian said, lying. She remembered learning one of the Commandments that said, "You should not lie." At least, that's how they worded it at Sunday school. Dian had never read the Bible's version for herself.

Her mother stopped cleaning and looked at Dian for what felt to Dian like the first time all night. She wasn't looking at Dian's stomach or at her apartment or at a baby catalogue. She peered into Dian's eyes, and Dian felt seen.

If this had been an observation, Dian would have noted the way her mother's posture shifted. Her shoulders lost their square shape, and she left the half-washed mug and the sudsy sponge in the basin of the sink, something for which she normally scolded Dian or her dad. Her mother smoothed her hair down even though she had soap on her hands.

"But your sickness?" she said. Dian could tell her mother was trying to prove her wrong, to prove that the daughter she raised would not have committed such an egregious sin against her.

Like the primates that committed infanticide in order to increase their own survival or overall fitness, Dian decided she was engineering a sort of emotional infanticide in order to benefit her own survival and success independent of her mother. "Before you came," Dian began. She crossed her arms over her stomach and forced herself to reciprocate her mother's gaze. "I aborted."

"Your baby?" her mother said.

"The fetus," she corrected.



Her mother leaned against the kitchen counter, and a line of water darkened her dress.

“The baby,” she whispered.

She looked sad and defeated, and Dian began to feel sorry for her mother and for stealing this joy from her. Dian let her arms fall by her side and reached her hand out. “If you still want to stay—”

“I don’t.” Her mother stiffened again.

Dian dropped her hand. This confirmed her hypothesis: her mother wouldn’t have visited if Dian hadn’t been pregnant. She picked up her mother’s baby catalogues and tossed them into the trash bin that held crumpled sheets of paper torn from her dissertation in moments of frustrated editing.

Dian’s mother left without hugging her goodbye.

Though their relationship had been tense since Dian was in high school, she believed this was the moment she lost her mother’s love. With her mother gone from the apartment, Dian only had the company of her research and her books, the stillness of which was conspicuous in the absence of her mother. She sat on her couch and thought about calling the fellow doctoral student from whom she got the couch, but she was concerned he’d perceive her pregnancy with the decrease of his testosterone and the change in her pheromones, and she wasn’t ready to confide in him or invite his opinion.

Thinking that she could work on her dissertation, Dian stroked her abdomen unconsciously. She was sure it was only her imagination that made her stomach feel tighter and fuller, or maybe she ate too much at dinner.

The primate research center she had visited recently had a pregnant ape, and when the female gave birth, the infant offspring looked so satisfied to be held and suckled by its mother.

The mother also looked content as she hadn't in the weeks Dian had observed her. Finally, the female sat still, she rested, and she lazed around with her eyes languidly half shut as she observed her own child. She restructured all of her activity around the infant. If Dian believed in any miracles, she believed in evolutionary miracles, and this, she decided, qualified.

She imagined the playful infant ape and stroked her stomach consciously now. "My own little monkey," she whispered. Dian decided she'd allow this fetus to grow in her, but, unlike her own mother, she resolved she would never lose her child's love.

Eight months later, after successfully finishing and defending her dissertation, Dian lay sweaty and stiff on a hospital bed. "It's nice to meet you, Ira," she told the little baby in her arms.

"She has all of her fingers and toes," the doctor said. "But her big toes stick out at an odd angle. They work fine, but you can get them fixed."

Dian had labored for thirteen long hours to deliver, and her body had worked hard for nine months before that to create this evolutionary fascination. "I'll take her just the way she is," she said. Dian saw the odd big toes as a remembrance of the ancestors from which humans came and for whom she would always be grateful for giving her her own person to love now.

Dian was alone for the delivery. She hadn't spoken to her mother since she left Dian's apartment nearly eight months ago, and, except for calling her dad a few days after that and hearing her mother mumbling something in the background about a Christian home and a God-fearing family before her dad told her he couldn't talk, she hadn't spoken to him since then either. Dian hadn't told Ira's father. She didn't feel the need to involve him and, after a cursory search on the Internet, thought the hassle of establishing and abiding by paternity rights was not worth it.

Dian didn't want to share Ira.

Her little toes slipped out of the loose swaddling and wriggled. Ira's big toe looked more like a thumb. Her skin was purplish blue.

"Is that normal?" Dian asked the nurse who came in to write some notes on her charts.

"Yeah, baby," the nurse said. "Swaddle her up tight. She's cold." The nurse left.

Dian only theoretically knew how to swaddle. Other than the nursing aide who showed her right after delivery when Dian was still riling from labor, no one ever taught her, and she figured it'd come naturally, that it was a feature of maternal instinct.

She was alone with her new sleeping baby. Dian opened her legs to look like a V on the bed, and holding Ira behind her delicate neck, she placed her daughter between her legs and unwrapped the blanket. The remnant of Ira's umbilical cord was tied and clipped, and her little body looked healthy with small rolls of skin on her thighs and arms. Lying unswaddled on the bed had straightened out Ira's body, and she started crying, revealing her pink gums and her little tongue. The nurse rushed back in.

Dian raised her hands. "I was trying to swaddle her."

The nurse picked up Ira and placed her in the newborn bassinet. She folded the blanket tightly around the baby. Dian was afraid it would cut off her circulation, but almost instantly Ira's cries died down, and she fell back to sleep. "Here, baby," the nurse said, handing Ira back to Dian. "I'll get you a flyer."

When they were alone again, Dian held Ira close to her chest, afraid to move her too much in case she hurt the baby, who seemed so fragile. Dian looked around the room. Plastic flowers sat on the table near her hospital bed. A banner hung around the pot that said, "Congratulations." The leaves and petals were dusty. Dian looked at Ira's round cheeks and the dry skin on her forehead. "It's just you and me."

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Dian and Ira moved into a bigger apartment in Chicago, and board books, plastic lipsticks, and washable markers replaced the textbooks and journals that had filled Dian's studio apartment. Like the mother ape Dian had observed so many years ago, she also reshaped her life around her offspring. Dian finally published her doctoral work in a marketable book that included the societal and personal implications of her research and that would be sold in major bookstore chains, and she accepted a position with a prestigious evolutionary research organization.

Ira was all Dian needed and wanted in her life, but, around the time Ira turned four years old and realized other children had grandparents or half a dozen siblings, she asked Dian if she had a mother, too. Dian said, "Yes," and when Ira asked where she was, Dian simply said, "Not with us." She did her best to answer vaguely without lying to Ira. The hardest questions were about Ira's father. Dian had expected these questions eventually, but they still made her feel like she wasn't enough for her daughter. Often, Dian diverted Ira's attention by making up risible stories about him to amuse her. The tales used to make Ira giggle. Now that she was nine years old and accustomed to her mother's fabrications, she only smiled modestly, but Ira didn't ask as often anymore.

Dian considered Chicago to be the mom her own mother never was for her, embracing Dian and all of her flaws in a way her mother wouldn't. Unlike Dian's family, Chicago was good to her. So when her company decided to transfer Dian, she formally complained, explaining that the small town where they were moving her would not yield any useful research material for her projects. They disagreed, but Dian received assurance from her boss that she and Ira would be there no more than three years.

When Dian broke the news to Ira that her work required them to move, Ira was excited. She went on for hours about the new experiences and the new people she would get to know, but Dian told her, with only a few thousand people in the new town, they'd meet everyone by day two. This didn't curb Ira's enthusiasm. If anything, Dian believed the thought of knowing everyone and being known by everyone so intimately appealed to her daughter, as though each stranger would become part of the large family Ira didn't have. Unlike Ira, the ability to disappear in the big city, the anonymity comforted Dian.

The moment she drove past the provincial, brown welcome sign on the town's main street, Dian knew she wouldn't be able to be unknown here. It reminded Dian of where she grew up, with flowering bushes grouped under the windows of square brick buildings and with brown wooden signs nailed up on walls or posted in the ground to mark every minor historic event that characterized the town and to remind everyone that this town was not to be forgotten. Dian thought of the siamang ape, hooting and howling because it wasn't good for much else.

Ira looked intently out of her window as if it were a television playing her favorite show of which she wouldn't miss a second. They waited at a crosswalk as an elderly couple holding hands shuffled across the street. "Everyone moves so slow," Ira said. The man saluted Dian and Ira, who vigorously waved back at him. He chuckled and whispered in his wife's ear before she waved as well.

Dian gripped the top of the steering wheel with both hands, and her back was straight and barely touching the seat. "Everything does," she said. "Except their opinions." She was beginning to feel like an adolescent again, anxious about fitting in though she knew she wouldn't. But now, with her own child, she resolved to provide Ira with an example of confident distinctiveness. With each flashing yellow light or stop sign they passed, Dian vowed not to let

this town suppress Ira's individuality and independent thinking like Dian's mother had tried to do to her.

Ira turned and patted Dian's forearm. "That must be my new school," she said, studying the building. It was Sunday, so the grounds were vacant and still with only the rope on the flagpole moving in the wind and clanking its clips on the pole.

Dian found it difficult to match her daughter's enthusiasm for the situation. "Now we know where it is," she said, trying to exhibit positivity.

Dian would've liked to have a choice of schools to which she could send Ira, but this town only had one school comprised of all grades, and it only had a twenty-seven percent graduation rate. She would work her hardest to keep Ira aligned with her liberally educated peers in Chicago, maybe even talk with the principal to move Ira up to the fifth grade where she'd be more appropriately challenged.

They turned off of the main street and found the simple house where they would be living. Because buying implied permanence, Dian rented instead. She cringed a bit whenever Ira referred to it as "our new home," for it wasn't technically theirs, and Dian could never see herself considering it home. The movers had already brought the furniture and the boxes that wouldn't fit in Dian's car into the house, though they didn't have much anyway. That night, Ira convinced Dian to build a fort with her under the breakfast table with pillows and sheets that they had yet to tuck around their mattresses.

The next morning was Ira's first day at school and Dian's first day at the new outpost. Boxes still sat on the kitchen counters and in the corners of the living area, and Ira, dressed in the new shoes Dian had gotten specially made to accommodate Ira's nearly opposable big toes, sat at

the breakfast table. Dian thought how cramped Ira's poor toes must've been, even with the widened sole and the extra material added to the black and white saddle oxfords.

Dian walked up behind Ira and ran her hands through her daughter's silky light brown hair. "Are you ready?" Dian asked.

Ira shook her head and mm-hmmed her assent with a mouthful of cereal. She held her spoon in one hand and the cereal box in the other, devouring the words on each panel like they were the little honey flavored Os in her bowl.

"Would you like a French braid?" Dian asked. In Chicago she didn't normally have time to plait Ira's hair into an intricate braid, but travel time in this town was considerably less, and if her mother taught Dian one thing of value, it was to present your best self, especially when making a first impression. Dian finished the braid and kissed Ira on her warm, round cheek.

After Ira slurped the dregs of milk from her cereal bowl, Dian filled up her to-go mug with coffee, and they left for Ira's new school where Dian would meet Ira's new fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Marchand, before class began. Dian tensed up as she walked Ira down the school hall. She expected to see her mother coming out of the principal's office where she had been chatting with her best friend, the secretary, or to see her high school boyfriend reclining against a row of lockers so he could watch Dian and make sure she didn't leave with her chemistry lab partner whom she had begun to prefer to her boyfriend.

They made it to Ira's new classroom, and Dian peeked her head in the open doorway to find Mrs. Marchand sitting behind her large desk. Her youthfulness and eagerness made Dian feel even older than she did when the arthritis in her fingers flared up, always right when she was setting the ball for Ira to spike. Ira insisted that they practice together so she could get as good as Dian was in college.

Mrs. Marchand looked like she was just out of college herself with her enthusiastic eyes, manicured fingernails, and color-coded index cards. Dian wasn't sure if she trusted this girl to teach her daughter what she needed to know for life, nevertheless for the fifth grade.

Mrs. Marchand straightened the pens next to her calendar before folding her hands together and noticing the pair in the doorway. Dian walked Ira toward Mrs. Marchand's desk. The laminate was peeling away from the plywood to which it was glued. A grinning Mrs. Marchand stood up and walked closer to Dian to greet her.

The teacher reached her hand out. "Mrs. F—"

"It's Ms., but call me Dian." She shook the proffered hand. Standing in front of Mrs. Marchand, Dian realized she had a few inches on this girl, even though the teacher wore heels.

"Dian," Mrs. Marchand began again. "We are so excited to have Ira."

Ira returned her new teacher's grin and urged forward, but Dian clutched her daughter's shoulders as if this teacher was attempting to kidnap and brainwash Ira. Dian had the desire to mess up Mrs. Marchand's perfectly organized desktop and knock over her stacks of papers before fleeing with Ira.

"I only require that you foster her creativity and avoid imposing any normalizing philosophy," Dian said.

Mrs. Marchand looked puzzled, but her confidence returned promptly. "We do plenty of creative activities," she said.

Dian wasn't quite ready to release Ira.

"All right," Ira said. She turned and hugged Dian around her hips. "Bye." She let go of Dian and walked to Mrs. Marchand.



Dian left them huddled in front of the large desk. As she turned to wave one last time to Ira, Dian saw her grab Mrs. Marchand's hand and pull the teacher to the cubbies as if Ira were the one introducing this room to her.

By the end of the workday, Dian was anxious to recollect Ira and return her to a stabilized environment in their rental house. She made her way down the hall for the second time that day, but the anxiety she felt earlier had lessened. Dian looked through the small square window in the closed door of Ira's new classroom. The children had moved the desks into irregular shapes so they could congregate more uninhibitedly. Ira sat in a front desk reading one of her textbooks. The little hairs around Ira's face had fallen loose, and bits of the braided hair were hanging out. Dian imagined Ira climbing on the monkey bars or jungle gym when they came loose. She was an adventurer and confronted any elevated surface as a climbing challenge.

Dian opened the door, getting Mrs. Marchand's attention. The teacher called Ira, who looked up and jumped out of her small desk to run to Dian.

Mrs. Marchand approached Dian. "Ira, honey, go grab your stuff from your cubby."

Ira nodded and wove her way through the maze of desks.

"Miss Dian," Mrs. Marchand began. "There was an incident today."

Dian readied herself to hear a complaint about Ira's critical methods of thinking, maybe that she touted the reasonability of evolutionism over creationism.

"Some of the children asked Ira about her peculiar shoes, so she proceeded to take off her socks and show them her toes. Some of the students bullied her and made jokes about her father being a gorilla."

Dian watched Ira recoil as the other children looked her way, and Dian had the impulse to shepherd her daughter out of the fray she had to cross to return to the doorway. “What are their names?” Dian asked. She would do what she was sure this teacher wouldn’t.

“Miss Dian, it got so bad that she wouldn’t come down from on top of the monkey bars at the end of recess,” Mrs. Marchand said.

Often Ira just needed space. She could get worked up, but all she needed was time. Dian knew that. It wasn’t anything new. Space and time. She’d recover; she’d be okay. “Well, she’s down now,” Dian said. Ira had made it back to Dian and Mrs. Marchand.

Dian thanked Mrs. Marchand, and she and Ira walked to the car and buckled themselves into their seats before driving to the new house in silence. When they arrived, Ira sat at the table and pulled out her math workbook. Dian sat across from her.

“What happened today?” Dian asked.

“I told them I didn’t know my dad and grandparents, so they said maybe they’re gorillas and that’s why you won’t tell me about them.” Ira diligently worked in her book, but it looked to Dian like she was only making random marks on the page.

“Who said that?” Dian asked. The school must have a directory. She’d bypass the middleman and directly confront the source of the problem, those kids’ parents.

Ira stopped moving her pencil and looked up at Dian. “I want to know about them,” she said.

Dian was afraid that telling her daughter about them would isolate her from Ira, making her vulnerable to aggression from others, as was common with the apes she studied. Dian took pride in arranging their relationship into a successful female-infant social group independent of males or extended relatives.

And Ira was all Dian had. “Knowing won’t change anything.”

Ira looked slightly disappointed but more defiant. It was a new look that Dian had never seen in her, and she was almost proud that her daughter was beginning to fight for what she wanted. “Why can’t I know about them?” Ira asked.

Ira stared straight at Dian, who thought nine was much older than anyone ever told her. She had to blink and look away toward the bare living room. The only decorations were three pictures of her and Ira through the years, which stood in frames on the side table by the same dark brown leather couch Dian got during her doctoral program. On the same table was the chandelier lamp that Dian found at a thrift store after her mother’s visit and decided would be the perfect fixture for her developing child’s nursery.

Dian glanced back at her daughter, whose gaze hadn’t wavered, and couldn’t remember why Ira ever reminded her of a monkey. In all of the primate activity Dian had observed over the years, she never witnessed apes looking at each other with such intensity and intention as her daughter looked at her now. Dian decided she would give her daughter the respect she was demanding.

“Your grandparents,” Dian began, “and your father.” She could barely form her mouth around the words. She lowered her eyes to the table. “They don’t know about you,” she said.

Dian covered her face with her hand, afraid to look at Ira.

When she did look up, Dian expected to see in Ira’s eyes the same betrayal Dian had felt when her mother left her apartment ten years ago. Dian expected Ira to shut her out the way Dian had shut her mother out. She expected her daughter to dissociate from her and seek a maternal figure in Mrs. Marchand. She expected her duplicity to shatter Ira’s heart beyond recognition.

“I understand if you’re angry,” Dian said.

Ira smoothed back the little hairs around her face and tucked them behind her ear. “I’m sad,” she said. Ira’s cheeks and ears were red as if she’d been crying, but her eyes were tearless. “I want to know them.”

Dian nodded but wasn’t sure if she meant she also wanted Ira to know her grandparents or if she wanted to reacquaint with them herself. Dian decided it was both.

## Vita

The author was raised in Mobile, Alabama. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from Louisiana State University in 2013. After graduating, she joined the University of New Orleans' Creative Writing Workshop in pursuit of a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing with a concentration in Fiction.