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BUT IT'S NOT

by

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BUT IT'S NOT

Last night I watched Uncle Philip age and shrink through the year as the cancer devoured his bones, his body halving itself in the space between holidays. With a glass of wine in one hand and the other flipping pages, I go through my picture albums and memento books, my journals and funeral cards. Two nights ago it was Tom, my younger brother by a year—his face lent to me in photographs, memories not my own—as he went to the hospital with a fever and left there days later on ice, frozen at only four years old. And tonight, hands empty, I find myself in the pictures, trying to track my fall.

In the daytime, the city is busy, and no lull breaks the roar as in the evening hours. In this time I am hard at work, moving someone else's dead from the gurney to the cold slab, from the table to the drawer. Adding to catalogues and avoiding piles. When my hands are on another's dead, I cannot feel their pain. I cannot need the person to live again, or hope that their death was noble or soft, the end of a life lived right. It is in the evening that I feel, and the day affords me no such time—even if it did, I'm not sure I would take it.

The phone rings and Clark glances at the caller ID. "Platt," he says, and reopens his book, his interest in any news fizzling out in a way that makes my shoulders slump.

"Maybe you could answer this time."

“It’s your deal.”

I pick up the phone, knowing my husband’s growing annoyance at the doctor’s calls stems from the same deep ache as my growing despair. We have spent months, and thousands—of dollars, of tears, of needle pricks—too much for one last chance at being the parents that our 25-year-old selves were so excited to be but kept seeing in the future, saying *in the future*.

“Dr. Platt,” I say, putting on my coroner’s voice, a wall between me and all others. He has too much emotion in his usual delivery, too much piercing brightness; his *we can try again* comes like a death notice in E major.

“Linsie,” he says. I can feel his smile through the phone, and I have already climbed into Clark’s lap by the time Platt gets to the word *successful*.

Three months later we are newlyweds again, feeling the heat of our bedroom at midnight but unwilling to roll away, avoiding the edges of the bed where together we used to sleep alone. Clark suddenly has less to do at the office; he is home so much in the evenings that I have to kick him out with an errands list or a takeout request just to have a few minutes to myself. I miss him before he returns.

“You should cut your hours,” he says, placing my feet in his lap.

“Not pregnant enough.” I stuff a handful of white cheddar popcorn into my mouth, shudder pleasantly as it squeaks against my teeth.

“So many chemicals, though. So much death.”

“Death is the least of my worries.”

Clark eyes my belly, my hands. He does not say *your uncle, your brother*. He doesn't remind me that this is why we have waited, that my silly fears are why he's the only guy at the office without a kid. He rubs my toes thoughtfully, lets me feed him popcorn. I tell him about the names that I like, the colors I want, the future I see. I do not tell him *sharp pains in my back*. I do not tell him *my urine is dark*.

Looking through my family albums has always been a catalog of disease. The first time Clark came to dinner, my cousin told an off-color joke and Clark laughed and laughed, cheeks going so red I thought I was seeing inside him.

“That’s awful,” he sputtered, clapping Jim on the back. “You’re sick!”

Jim died not six months later, the third in his line with breast cancer.

After we got married I told Clark there would be plenty of time for kids. No need for them now, no hurry at all. He asked me if I was afraid, and I told him dinner was ready.

My mother calls each week to read to me out of a special pregnancy calendar she bought.

“The second trimester is known as the ‘honeymoon trimester’”—I should want Clark inside me, should feel hunger, not pain—“because even though you have begun to show, you are leaving behind the nausea, aches, and fatigue of the first trimester and—”

“Mom, what’s the fruit of the week?”

“Oh...” I hear her flip the pages and imagine her running her finger along the lines of text. “24 weeks. An ear of corn. Is that a fruit or a vegetable?”

“Actually it’s a grain.” I hang up and drop the phone onto the rug ringing the toilet. Each day when I come in I fit my knees into the dents I left the day before.

I visit my doctor in the middle of the work day because it is during the time I do not feel. Returning to the morgue means there is no place for my emotions. It will not matter what he says about things growing inside me. It will not matter that one grows too fast for the other. My test results are delivered to my office in plain white envelopes.

From Dr. Theodore Pratt, they are stamped, OB/GYN-ON.

An intern helps me roll an enormous man onto one side, then the other, pulling the body bag out from underneath. I send him back to his desk, preferring to clean the corpse myself. I need a stool to stand above the table because I cannot lean into the edge.

Death by gunshot, two large holes in his chest that suck his shirt in like red mouths. I shower him with water, scrub gently at the edges of his wounds. During the autopsy I find the carcinoid tumor in his lung. Later, in bed, I wonder if he’d been relieved when he saw the double barrels rise to meet him, if he’d heard release in the gun’s report. Or did he even know that it was there? Was he living like I used to, oblivious and free?

Clark is raging in the other room. An envelope somehow slipped through to our house. I sit on the sofa and imagine my husband as foreign, a beast. A rhinoceros in the savannah of his office. A noise like grass being torn from the ground by angry hooves. If he shreds the letter he found from my doctor, its contents will become untrue. If he puts my printed research between his teeth, he will grind my cancer into a dust that can pass out of me with my breakfast.

Dr. Platt looks like a sculpture of himself, a man made inanimate and stiff. When Clark demands the details of my illness, the doctor turns to me. I too am made of a material other than flesh, the sculptor's hands smoothing over my burgeoning middle to hide the imperfections underneath. The doctor is forced to make words, to string them like rough wooden beads on a length of twine, bumpy and mismatched when moved together.

Pancreas. Metastasized. A couple options. Months.

My husband's face is unfamiliar to me; he seems not to know mine either. He yells into the recycled air of the office, words like *betrayal* and *secrets* and *die*. I add them to the string of mismatched beads, slipping them around his neck in my mind.

"Of course we'll be trying the chemo," Clark tells whoever is on the phone. I've lost track of the people he's brought in on our tragedy, the number of times he's assured them that I will be taking steps I haven't yet agreed to. "There are some options that will be safe for the baby. I'll tell her you send your love."

I leave before he hangs up the phone. It is not their love I want.

The dinner table is our safe space, the neutral zone of our his-and-hers home. We have spent the days in our offices and the nights as our own guests, sleeping in extra beds while our own remains neatly made. But over something I've dug out of the freezer and made edible again, we can sit across from each other and mutter a few words into the space above the water glasses.

"The chemo would make me weak," I say, serving him casserole squares.

"You wouldn't be able to hold her."

"Pass the salt and pepper."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"There are risks no matter what."

"There's only one option here."

"I don't think this chicken is done."

In the relative vacuum of the autopsy room I realize I am coming unglued. The body I've been slowly taking apart is suddenly a person, somebody's grandson and somebody's husband. I cannot breathe. I find myself holding his hand for a while, straightening his limbs for comfort, explaining what I'm doing to him and why. The intern finds me staring into space with my mouth open, hands in a basin full of cancerous growths I have fished from a cracked open chest.

My doctor insists that I need to stop working, but the morgue is the place where I fit. None of my clients fret over me. They sense my capabilities and let me prove myself, trusting me to make sense of what they could not. They do not question my strength or resolve. They do not phone home about my progress. Instead they let me hold their hands and speak softly in their ears. Instead they let my belly bump against them and say nothing of my choices.

Last night I watched Uncle Philip age and shrink as the cancer devoured his bones. Two nights ago it was Tom, my younger brother by a year, frozen at only four. And tonight, tonight it is me.

Our wedding album is open on my lap, the tight spine held open by the roundness of my belly. Clark has his mouth open in nearly every picture: yelling, laughing, his joy overcoming any idea of silence. In the album he is loud, but in this room he is deafening; his refusal to speak even a word of encouragement or concern shakes my core like the cabinet speakers I used to sit on when he played guitar in the fraternity band.

Over dinner I told him I wasn't going to have the chemo. I used words like *unstoppable, prolong, extend*. "Clinging to the broken rope just means watching it fray."

"Fuck your metaphors," he said. "You're giving up." He scraped his full plate into the trash.

Now we sit across the room from each other, ten feet rapidly expanding to form a chasm holding every emotion that each of us feels but neither can share. Out loud, feelings are just words.

The flower girl at our wedding sits on top of Clark's shoulders, her face hidden from the camera because she has eyes only for him. My best friend, winking, offered to let us have her daughter, since she didn't seem interested in leaving his side. I declined, too firmly. Clark gave the child extra cake and let her put petals in his hair.

"Dr. Platt says that she will be healthy. I have enough time to be safe."

"But not to be her mother." He separates me from my child even though she will come from my womb. Because I will not raise her, he will not let me claim her.

"I suppose not. But it's the choice I'm making, to be with her while I can."

"If it's our child, then this is my choice too." Indignant, pleading.

I look at him now, search his face for the man in the album, the father he will be. I lack that tenderness even in health, and the revelation strengthens me. I am no mother. I am a test tube, a prop, a vessel for the dream we never shared.

"It's my choice too," he repeats.

"But it's not."

I am feeling at work and freezing at home.

"Where were you?" Clark demands when I arrive late.

"I was working," I say, pushing past him toward the kitchen. "I'd like to get as much done as possible before..." I let the clatter of dishes cover the fact that I cannot finish. A normal person would say "before the baby is born" or "before I'm home for a while." If my wall is not up I will say "before I'm on the table."

I picture my face on the women I cut open. I seem serene, never panicked, never sad. I have left my daughter in the hands of a loving and capable man. I have made the right choice. I find a corpse with a similar face and I think of her as my daughter. She has died in a car accident, quick and clean, age sixty-seven. She is twice as old as I will have been. And she has never heard the words like mismatched beads. She has never seen *cancer* on a string of twine.

Standing in the shower, I think *losing it*. I think *crazy*. I think *upside-down*.

Dr. Platt has warned me that I am reaching the end.

“Of what?” I ask, though I know. My daughter moves inside me, her tiny feet kicking, hammering out her cry for freedom, for reaching the other side. I wish I could tell her that this was the only other side. I wish I could tell her to grab hold of each tumor, to bring them out with her like so much debris. We would leave them on the delivery room floor for the techs to sweep up with their brooms. We would smush them between our toes as we left, savoring their helplessness as they savored ours.

“You need to stop working now, Linsie,” he says. I channel my daughter and cross my fingers behind my back, nodding my consent.

Any day now, my daughter will be here. She is turning, dropping toward the inevitable end of our connection. I want to tell her to stay, with me and inside me, until it's safe to come out. Until the world is a place without the words printed on my test

results. Until there are no difficult choices. Until there are no husbands who try to make those choices for their wives.

Clark has tried to have me admitted against my will. I have presented evidence of my perfectly intact mental state. Clark has convinced Dr. Platt to prescribe the pills. I have found their dust in my oatmeal; I have started eating in secret. Clark has taken my car keys. I have taken a taxi to work.

Standing over a young woman with a head wound, I can feel my daughter struggling. I want to call her by the name I would give her, but Clark has chosen another. Why does it matter what I would name her? I am not her mother.

The intern calls to me softly. Dr. Simmons, he says. Can you hear?

He will say later on that he was quite loud. He will say he raised his voice as he shined the light into my eyes. He will not say that he held my hand until the EMTs arrived, but I will know he did. It will be the only thing I remember, a smaller hand gripping mine.

Clark has signed the admittance papers. My daughter lies in a NICU bed, rescued from my infected belly, soon to be cleared into his loving arms—the arms he crosses now, standing at the end of my bed. He explains to me what each tube contains, where each is headed and what it will do. As if he is the doctor now. As if I am the petulant child. He does not know what I have done, does not understand why I smile through his anger.

“She’s healthy,” he says. “Luckily.”

“I don’t want these medications,” I say. “I’m going to get these IVs out.”

“It’s not your choice anymore,” he says.

The doctor enters the room. I can’t remember his name, though I saw him not half an hour ago. When he came to check on my incision. When he took the paperwork I signed.

The chemicals are racing through me, prizewinning thoroughbreds from the gates of science. Cyclophosphamide’s Revenge races ahead of On And On And Oncovin. The Pride of Prednisone is neck and neck with Little Doxorubicin. But I can feel them slowing down. Their ankles are weakening, mouths foaming up. The finish line is sooner than they think, but none of them will win. They will not beat me to this victory.

“Mr. Simmons, we need to do some regular postnatal tests. Would you like to be in the room while we examine Linsie?”

“Linsie?” Clark asks. My eyes are closed, but I can feel him looking at me.

“Your daughter, sir. Linsie Claire Simmons.”

“My daughter’s name is Marjorie Claire.” I can hear his throat tightening even as I start to drift. I want to open my eyes, see his knucklebones straining against his skin. The doctor clears his throat, shuffles the birth certificate information that I have made official.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Simmons,” he says. “But it’s not.”

FROM AFAR

On the day of my father's funeral, I couldn't stop laughing. I laughed when my sister got her hand caught in the door of the church. I laughed when my mother nearly fainted upon finding a lizard in the altar flowers. I laughed when the crucifer tripped on his unhemmed robe as the procession started down the aisle.

The worst was the pictures—I shouldn't have laughed at the pictures. My mom and I stayed up all night printing, arranging, rearranging, and affixing nearly one hundred pictures of my father's life onto three large display boards. We agonized over the thematic divisions—childhood, Navy, hobbies, parenthood—and then lamented the unfortunate faded crimson color of the boards themselves, finally deciding to cover them with scrapbook paper in colors complimentary to the themes. The blade guards to my mother's picture shears kept slipping, and a few pictures were oddly cropped. At five in the morning we stood before the finished products, utterly spent in our effort of love, and marveled at our handiwork with glazed eyes and stinging fingers clasped tight together.

Lying in bed for the few hours I could, I ran my thumb over the scars on my right hand, likened them to the new cuts on my left. My father had come home for my seventh birthday completely unprepared.

"Good God, Thomas," my mother had hissed to him in the kitchen as she iced a large chocolate cake. "You've been to three different countries in the past year and you

couldn't bother to bring her a gift?" I pretended not to hear as I tied the sash on my party dress. My friends would be over any second and I still wanted to put a bow at the bottom of my braid. It was enough that my father was home. I swore to myself that it was enough.

Despite the angry whispers in the kitchen, there was a small box on my bed after the party, with a little tag that read *For my princess. Love, Dad* in my father's rigid all-caps print. I opened it hurriedly, ripping the paper and tossing it on the floor. Inside the box was a rather large and complicated-looking Swiss army knife. I marveled at its brightness, unmarked by fingerprints—I'd never even thought of wanting a knife before. Freeing the gift from its box, I carefully pried the knife open, starting a little when the blade popped out on its small spring. I pulled out the miniature tools: a screwdriver, a can opener, tiny scissors...when had he gotten it? He hadn't left the party; he must have had it all along, of course, and my mother just hadn't understood. I grinned and started toward the family room. I broke into a jog down the hallway, eager to find him and thank him.

"Daddy—" I'd begun, but as I crossed from the hardwood of the hall to the carpet of the family room I tripped on the threshold. The knife flew into the air and, without thinking, with only the reflex of saving my father's gift, I reached out and caught it, open blade and all. As my mother shepherded me into the car a few minutes later, a bloody towel wrapped around a hand that would need a dozen stitches at least, my father looked helplessly on.

"Really, Thomas?" my mother asked.

He mumbled back: "It's what I had on hand."

When I came home from the hospital, hand sewn up and bandaged, I ran straight into his arms. He'd been gentle and comforting but I could feel his anger pulsing underneath, could see the muscles jump in his arms as he held me. I asked if I could keep the knife if I promised to be careful.

“I don't think so,” he said. Instead I kept my scars.

I put the boards behind the casket stand and between the largest of the flower arrangements. The early arrivals to the funeral smiled at my father's black-and-white baby photos and the full-color pictures of him racing his dirt bike at age 55. There were no pictures of my father just before his death, when the cancer had turned him into a scarecrow husk. My favorite picture was from the Naval Academy: my daddy in blinding whites with a little cap and a navy scarf tied around his neck.

He gave me his Navy cap on my tenth birthday and I wore it to school, to bed, in the bathtub, to the park. It was in this last place that I came bouncing down the slide and plunged headlong into a massive mud puddle. The hat was ruined, but my father was strangely calm when I came trudging home—the only part of me not covered in mud was the top of my head, revealed when the hat was removed from its perch.

“I'm so sorry, Daddy,” I cried, unable to look at him. “I ruined your Navy hat.” I was surprised, confused when he chuckled.

“Silly Peanuttty,” he said, brushing my muddy hair back so he could see my face. “I'll get you another one next time I'm at the store on the base.”

Eyes wet, I hugged myself and turned away from the picture. At ten I hadn't known that a sailor could never give away pieces of his uniform. I knew it now, but logic didn't make it feel any better. For some reason I wanted to laugh again; I thought I might be going a little nuts.

When the service began—and when I regained my composure after the crucifer nearly sent the cross into the crowd—I focused on the picture boards. One of them seemed a little crooked, had a slight lean, and I wanted to step forward and straighten it. I began to tap my toes inside my shoe, the board's asymmetry making me fidget. My boyfriend scooted closer to me in the pew, pinned my foot down.

"It's okay," he whispered. I kicked him. The priest—a Catholic insisted upon by my mother, though Daddy hadn't been a believer—trotted forward to the simple wood podium at the head of the casket and shuffled the notes he had placed there.

"Friends and family," he began. His tone grated on me—too affected, too concerned. "We have come here today to lay our dear friend Thomas to rest. Let us celebrate his life rather than—"

A soft *slap* filled the space between his words, and I glanced at the tilting photo board. It wasn't crooked at all—the pictures had begun to slide down toward the lower left corner of the board. They scooted along, edges catching on the felt fabric of the board and causing the images to flip. This was the family section, I realized, and as I held my breath one larger family portrait broke loose and flapped to the floor, taking a pile of pictures with it. The priest said "Oooh!" and his white caterpillar brows disappeared into his sandy brown toupée.

My shoulders shook as I suppressed a giggle. A little blue-haired lady reached forward with a box of tissues, making comforting noises. I took them, feeling guilty.

When the second set of pictures fell, I lost it, a sob mixing oddly with my loud snicker. Once the first laugh came out, I couldn't stop. Blue-Hair gasped and reached for my arm. My mother stared straight ahead. I caught my aunt's eye and then jerked my gaze away to prevent myself from laughing even harder. The priest continued as the pictures crept to the edge of the board and leapt off one by one, like so many paratroopers, too close to the ground to let their chutes deploy.

I watched as my father's casket disappeared into the hole cut in the perfectly manicured grass of the cemetery lawn. Only my mother, my sister, and some sailors from the local VFW chapter were there to watch with me. I listened as the sergeant called the line of Navy men to attention, to arms, to aim, to fire. Three shots from seven guns, a salute for an honored soldier. I never turned to look at them. I didn't want to see their faces, didn't want to wonder if they had daughters missing them at home. If their daughters would stand here sooner than they'd planned. As I walked slowly toward the rented black town car that would drive me home, a hand grabbed my shoulder. I spun around so quickly I surprised even myself; the poor Navy man before me took a quick step back.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said. "I'm very sorry."

"That's fine," I said, before realizing I didn't know what he was sorry for, exactly.

“I wanted to give you this. It’s a custom. To remember.” Tentatively he held out his white-gloved fist, palm down, and I took a deep breath before opening my own hand and placed it palm up in the air underneath his. He opened his fingers and a warm weight settled onto my hand. I closed my fingers, keeping my eyes on his face.

“Thank you,” I said, and the young sailor nodded, already turning away. I waited until I was in the car to open my hand. Nestled in my palm, now nearly cool, was a 30-06 shell casing, its brassy surface darkened by the heat of its ejection.

I went home to my cat and the stranger who shared my bed. He wasn’t really a stranger, I have to admit...more like the ghost of a former friend, not quite dead but robbed of remembered life.

Honestly, sleeping with him was just easier. So he drove me crazy. So I hated his incessant fidgeting and his terrible jokes and those sunglasses that were way too big for his face, but *designer* so he stood by them. So he would never be the man I loved, the man I would marry. I really didn’t have the energy to figure out what he was to me anymore.

Sometimes at night I would press myself against his hips and imagine what he’d do if I called him the wrong name. I bit my tongue.

When he was done, I would softly stroke his hair and run my fingers across his throat, wondering if I could squeeze it. He closed his eyes, which didn’t help. He asked me how it was for me, always in the same plaintive voice that begs a lover to lie, and I always did.

He brought me flowers sometimes. I'm sure the florist adored him. My tortoiseshell tabby, Franklin, certainly did; I usually took the buds out of their vase after he had left for work and wiggled them in front of the cat's whiskers. Franklin batted at them until all the petals were gone.

I sat in my bedroom, six years old, ear against the wall I shared with my parents' room.

"You told me you were done sailing!" my mother said, slamming the drawers to her bureau as she dressed.

"I was. They told me that six years ago when I asked to stay here with you and Jackie. They told me I had to give up the sea."

"Don't use dramatics, Thomas. You gained a *family*." I could picture my mother's wide eyes flattening out into long, squinting lines. It was the most telling feature of her anger.

"You think I don't know that? I love you and wouldn't change it—"

"—except you would!" I bit my lip. I wasn't sure why my mother was getting so shrill, why my father didn't comfort her.

"Charlotte...I grew up in the desert. We settled in the mountains. This is the only way I can have the sea." I leaned into the wall, willing it to thinness. It felt so thick, so separating, as though brick and mortar and steel sat between the rooms instead of wood planks and plaster.

“You can say no. We can take a trip to the beach.” My mother’s voice cracked and my father never answered. I got out my bathing suit just in case.

The stranger who shared my bed was actually named Chris. I had to bring his name to mind every once in a while as I watched him fidget around the apartment. So I wouldn’t forget that he was a human being. So I wouldn’t call him something crazy, like Thomas. Like Dad.

At the funeral—after I kicked him—Chris hadn’t spoken a word, had squeezed my hand too hard. That painful squeeze meant *I’m here*, I guessed. It meant *I understand the magnitude of this situation*. I supposed it was supposed to mean *I love you*, but I wasn’t interested in his love as long as I had his presence.

“Let’s talk about it,” he was saying. I stirred myself, remembered his name.

“Let’s watch a movie,” I said, and went to the bookshelf of alphabetized DVDs. I heard him start the microwave in the kitchen. I thought of the popping kernels as cover fire, a shield for the space between us.

Fifteen minutes later he found me sitting cross-legged in front of the bookshelf with a stack of five movies in my lap. I handed them to him without looking up. *Run Silent, Run Deep. Mutiny on the Bounty. The Last Detail. The Hunt for Red October. Master and Commander.*

“Sailor movies,” he said. “I can’t.” He grabbed his keys and left the apartment.

I tried to talk to Chris, but I could only hear the word *wallowing* so many times. The funny thing was that I wasn't wallowing at all. If I *had* been wallowing, I would have said that my father had never loved me. I would have said that I would rather tell people he was lost at sea than that he chose to stay on the ship for just a few more months after he learned he had cancer. I would have poured out all of my sorrows about never knowing my father and how I felt like our time was wasted because he was never home and when he was I had to meet him all over again, but I loved him dearly anyway and couldn't quite blame him. I would have said that Chris was nothing like him, and I hated him for it.

Instead I told him that I was going to think of this as another deployment. Death is a Navy man's longest deployment.

I met Chris in a crowded coffee shop just after I turned nineteen. He invited himself to sit down at my table and launched into a tirade on the closing of the local record store. He never even asked if I liked music; his righteous anger was enough for both of us. He was all graceful lines—curve of the ear to long edge of the jaw, severity softened by a well-shaped beard. He had a ready laugh and once he had finished his damning of corporate entertainment practices he wanted to know everything I could think to tell him. I realized that I never got to tell anyone about my life. My mother wasn't particularly interested. My father hadn't been home in months, and my letters and Skype calls had gone unanswered, as they almost always did. For the first time I began to wonder if there was somewhere to go other than home.

By my twentieth birthday Chris and I were living together in our own apartment. My mother did not approve; my father wouldn't know for months. Chris fulfilled all of my cravings for intimacy and domesticity—cravings I never realized I had until he was already fixing them. He loved music, gourmet food, and quaint things like ballroom dancing and pocket watches on chains. He was two years older than me and had therefore already experienced the world, or so I thought.

He laid me down on the floor of our new apartment the night we signed the lease, cradling my head with his hand because we hadn't yet laid any rugs on the hardwood floors. Afterward he dug some pots and pans out of a box and made me chicken in white wine sauce and ratatouille, filling the kitchen with jazz and kissing me deeply each time Sinatra sang the word *love*.

The Christmas after my father died, I went home to be with my mother and my little sister. Neither of them had forgiven me for laughing at the funeral. On Christmas morning I found Mom in the kitchen making waffles. I chopped fresh fruit and watched as my mother ruined the first batch of batter because she confused the portions of milk and flour. The second batch she cried into. When the second bowl of batter was dripping down the drain, I got up and put a hand on my mother's shoulder, gently moving her aside and handing her the knife for the fruit. Mom sat down and sniffled over the strawberries while I mechanically mixed ingredients together. I scooped out enough batter for the first waffle and put it in the old iron.

“I’m sorry,” my mother said. “It’s stupid of me to cry on Christmas.”

“It’s alright,” I said. “You’re only crying because it should feel so different but it really doesn’t.” My mother stared at me, then nodded slowly and started gathering the chopped fruit in her fingers, separating the pieces into three piles. I recognized the organization. *No pineapple for Amanda, no cantaloupe for Jacquelyn, no kiwi for Charlotte.* The one Christmas morning Dad was here—one, in the nineteen years since Amanda was born—he had grouped the fruit into four equal bowls and completely forgotten our preferences. Mom and I had eyed each other and then eaten it anyway, leaving the unwanted pieces in the bowls. Amanda, however, full of teenage angst and daddy issues, catapulted a piece of pineapple off of her fork into his orange juice, splattering his glasses. “I don’t want it! I hate pineapple! If you’re going to miss everything, at least try to catch up!”

Clutching a mug of Earl Grey so hot that the cup threatened to remove my fingerprints, I folded herself into a chair in my apartment’s living room. I liked the ugly orange chair the best because there was barely enough room for even my petite frame between the arms. It felt like the chair was giving me a constant, slightly claustrophobic hug.

I watched as my companion fiddled with his record player across the room, mumbling to himself like a mad scientist. He usually listened to records after we fought, and we’d just finished a huge blowout about my refusal to go back to school, my refusal to move on with my life. *You’re always somewhere else in your mind,* he’d said. I’d

shrugged. *Maybe I am. Maybe I like it there.* He'd slammed the door to our bedroom, his yell cut off by the latch: *It's hard but it's been months. You have to live in the present. Why can't you be*—I wondered what the last part was. *Here? Mine? Normal? Whole?* I couldn't have answered any of them. Now we were in the room together again, the air clearing as he sought solace in music, I in tea, and both of us in the comfortable awkwardness we had grown used to and named our relationship.

“What's wrong with it?” I asked, blowing on my tea.

“Damn thing won't spin,” he grunted, “and you can't play a record that way.” I smiled into my mug and tentatively tilted it. The music started up and the man whooped in triumph just as the scalding tea hit my upper lip, and I jerked, nearly spilling the whole of it in my lap. Trying to recover, I sucked on my lip and set the mug down on the coffee table.

“Satchmo is a good choice,” I said, hearing the familiar raspy voice. I felt a twinge of tenderness as he grinned boyishly and extended a hand. I struggled out of the chair and took his hand, winding my other arm around his shoulder. The man could dance; it couldn't be denied. As Louis's distinctive muted cornet took a solo, I clung tight, letting the music and the man move me.

When the needle began to jump, he flipped the record over and lowered me to the floor. He made love to me while Louis crooned “Let's Do It (Let's Fall In Love),” and Ella joined in for “Dream a Little Dream of Me.” As he caught his breath, I sipped my cold tea and remembered the way my father had sung everything in scat when he didn't know the words. *I'm channeling Louis*, he'd said.

As the “Summertime” trumpet intro rang through the high ceilings of the house, I lay back on the area rug. I felt my lover’s hands on my thighs, his lips on my belly, and I opened my legs. Twining my fingers in his hair, I let my mind wander and my body respond on its own.

“Do you think my daddy wanted to die at sea?” I asked suddenly, and I felt a gust of air as he choked on his surprise.

“Jackie. You wanna talk about your *dad* right now?” I raised myself up on my elbows and looked down at him. He stared up at me, eyebrows knit, the seriousness and anger swirling on his face forming a sharp contrast to his slender body lazily sprawled out on the rug past my legs. “That’s fucked up.”

“Yeah...yeah it is. Sorry, babe.” I lay back. After several seconds, I reached down and resumed stroking his hair, encouraging him to lower his head again. I wanted to cry. Thinking about my dad calmed me even as it broke me down. A small trickle of water smoothing a jagged stone. Suddenly I couldn’t tell whose hands were under me, whose mouth was on me. Chris was gone and the stranger was back.

In a letter to my father late last year, I told him I was never going to marry Chris. *I don’t know who he is*, I wrote. *Some mornings I forget he’s here until he walks in with my coffee.*

He wrote back: *The man you love should never be a stranger to you. Do what you need to do.* Two paragraphs down, he told me he had cancer. Three paragraphs down, he said he’d see me soon. *Soon* turned out to be four months. Four months of knowing he was dying, of watching my mother crumble every time she saw a married couple in

public, of punching my pillows when Chris was out of the house and having angry, wordless sex with him when he came home.

When I saw my father again, he wasn't the man I remembered. He looked like the Nazi from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, just before his face melts off—eyeballs loose in too-big sockets, cheeks sucked in between his teeth. His uniform looked like some other sailor's, like they'd mixed up the laundry bags on board. When he hugged me to him, his ribs pressed against my chest like a ship's railing. My father was gone, even standing in front of me. Less than two months later I was laughing at his funeral.

Chris was still with me, though. He was here, much more present than I was, and doing his best to bring me closer to him. I tried to bring myself back into the moment, feel the things I felt when he was new, just a crazy idea my parents wouldn't like. When I was the girl whose father was going to come back someday to pass judgment on her choices.

Chris didn't want to be a stranger, was fighting against it, even as his insistence on our love pushed me further away. *Do what you need to do*, my father said.

Minutes later I came, my back arching until it cracked, my fingers grasping desperately for any part of Chris I could reach. *It's fucked up, Jackie. It's all fucked up.*

After the funeral my mom gave me that picture of Dad at the Naval Academy. I put it in a frame that reminded me of him, though I couldn't figure out why. Something about the grain of the wood, I guess, the way it slipped through my fingers even as my skin caught on the rough places.

I sat on the bed, gripping the frame in both hands, searching for him. The sailor in the picture was just that, a sailor. Where was my father? Where was the man I kept expecting Chris to be? I studied his face, unlined but for the squint in the September sun off the water. His hands, long-fingered and tense, nearly in motion even in the still life of the photo. The sloping shoulders I got to ride only a handful of times before I got too heavy.

I wasn't sure why I loved my father, exactly. Why he was still Daddy in my mind, when he really hadn't been around for the parts of my life where that bond was forged? Sometimes I feel like a fatherless child—isn't that how the song went?

I stared at the sailor. He was a partial stranger, just like the man who shared my bed. But I never forgot who my father was, never thought to want another father I saw on the street. When Daddy was home, there was fighting. There was pineapple flipping and yelling and there were tears that had been saved up for months at a time. I loved him most when he was away, when I could read his occasional letters, trace his severe block print with my finger. When I could make him anything but what he was.

It occurred to me that in order for Chris to be the man my father was, he couldn't be close to me. He would have to be something I loved from afar. Something I could laugh at when I thought I might explode.

Walking out into the living room, I found Chris on our couch, restringing his acoustic guitar.

“You okay, babe?” he asked, but didn't look up.

“Damn the torpedoes.”

Now he looked up, and the confusion in his face nearly broke me. He was about to be ambushed and his radar was clear.

“Are you happy?” I asked. He raised his chin, about to nod. Then he shook his head.

“Then damn the torpedoes,” I said. I opened the linen closet and took out a box. Held it out to him. “And full speed ahead.”

FATHER AND SON REUNION

Not until this moment had it occurred to him that he could kill her. Through the first fourteen days of her annual visit—which usually lasted about twenty-four days, which was about twenty-two days too long—he had stared at his mother over the rim of his coffee mug and hated her a little bit more with each useless anecdote about someone else’s grandchildren (he had given her none, and she seemed to find it nearly unforgivable) or each of the extensive and unnecessary ways in which she broadcast her emotions—mouth puckered into a raisin for distaste, eyes made painfully wide for surprise (he especially enjoyed avoiding her gaze while she held the surprise face, finally turning to her when her eyes had begun to water and a tic was convulsing the skin of her right eyelid). He couldn’t help but think of her faces as stage directions, because a terrible script seemed the only appropriate place for them.

On this the fifteenth morning of her visit, his mother was busily fixing waffles and strawberry syrup—“Your favorite, oh boy!” *excited face*—and he was drinking coffee and considering the best way to kill her.

“And Veronica, she says—she’s the one from California, I told you—she says that tummy tucks are just the only way to go, the one and only, and then you start off your diet skinny and you can have a clean slate. A clean slate of a body, says Veronica! I’m talking to her doctor right when I get back.”

He didn't bother to point out that she was emaciated as it was, and that her seventy-six-year-old "tummy" didn't even cause a disturbance in the fabric of her dress. He also didn't tell her that Veronica's search for a dietary clean slate most likely indicated a need in other areas of her life that she wouldn't dare reveal to her trendy grandma friend group, and that if his mother had ever had a weight problem (she had not), it probably would have had something to do with the fact that she still ate like a twelve-year-old and encouraged her children to do the same—she was, even now, shaking a can of Reddi-Whip with both hands—and, in perhaps what could be called a fit of nostalgia for the sixties, with the added pounds of can upon can of hairspray holding her hair up like cotton candy.

"That's ridiculous," he said.

"Ridic—well. I don't think so." She set a heap of waffles in front of him. She had used nearly the entire jar of syrup; his breakfast seemed to bleed.

"Ridiculous," she continued, pulling down the corners of her mouth and knitting her eyebrows (*sad face*), "ridiculous is this big house in a nice city and no people in it—"

"I'm in it—"

"—Ridiculous is how lonely I have to be when I'm here and you're at work because you can't settle down with any of those sweet girls I've met and make babies, that's all I'm asking for, you know, is babies, and I do believe..."

He wrapped his hands around the Mason jar containing his orange juice and imagined it was a neck. He could tell her to fuck off. He could tell her she was an idiot. He could tell her that his younger brother Henry had knocked up his girlfriend and that

there was actually a grandchild in the future, so she could stop bitching anytime. Instead he said nothing, thought about the price of a tummy tuck. It would be silly to let that come out of the inheritance.

Brian Haskins was a man who liked his money. What he liked even more was taking other people's—before they did something stupid and lost it all, before it was put in less capable hands—and so he'd become a businessman of sorts. Brian was top-notch, of course, not one of those check-forging fools, but rather a man who convinced grandmothers and slick young dot-commers alike to hand over their savings in one great leap of faith (“Heaven knows that the wisest people have more faith than sense,” he liked to say, and they would nod, smiling but uncomprehending) that always ended with him in another country for a while imagining them bawling their eyes out (yes, even those indefatigable slick young dot-commers) to anyone and everyone about the unassuming, flannel-wearing thirty-year-old with the deep, trustworthy eyes who snatched their savings right out of their hands and their bank accounts. Or the suave, casually overdressed man in his mid-fifties who didn't mind pulling his shirt sleeve up too far past his wrist multiple times so that they couldn't help but notice his Rolex, but put them at ease with his knowledgeable money talk and his marble cardstock resume. In truth, Brian was forty-seven, but he'd learned early in his career that the presence or absence of facial hair and a certain amount of specialty makeup could transform a person. His last client had been a twenty-something with fake boobs and a cozy little nest egg; with a buzz cut, a shave, and some extra workouts, he had her wrapped around his ex-Army-and-

therefore-obviously-honest-and-dutiful finger. Brian Haskins was a man who liked his money, indeed, and he could be anyone he wanted to get it.

But his mother was a problem. Mrs. Gloria Haskins, age seventy-six, mother of four, widowed twice and divorced once, was definitely a problem. She had already disinherited two of her four children—the oldest child, Edmund, had taken a vow of silence and joined a monastery after returning from less than two years in the Peace Corps (“I told him he wouldn’t like it, traveling wouldn’t agree with him,” she’d clucked); the third child, Sarah, was a lesbian (“So much for her children!”). Brian was the second child, and he had determined that his mother was fickle enough to leave either him or his youngest brother, Henry, out of the will if she could make up a good enough reason to put them in the doghouse. They had all been there, in Gloria’s Doghouse (“Filled by Fickleness, Run by Spite!” was the sign above the imaginary door); she was just waiting for a way to make them sit and stay there.

She loved to spend money on anything and everything, except perhaps the things she needed most (a therapist, a financial advisor), and between her birth and her marriages, she had plenty of it to waste. But Brian didn’t want it to be wasted. He wanted it to be invested, reallocated, and used in new and exciting ways. A tummy tuck? Lord. Why not a trip to India instead, or a bottle of Macallan “M”? What was the point of living as if you would never stop? He stabbed at his bleeding waffles, tried to find reasons he loved her.

His mother's life had always been a source of exhaustion for him, but only recently had it become a crisis in his mind. For one thing, he was running out of money. He hadn't run a job in nearly three years. The economy had faltered—bankers, apparently, couldn't keep track of their own money, much less anyone else's, which made Brian feel superior even as he watched his funds dwindle—and no one wanted to invest in new projects or give their money to an exciting new person in their life, no matter who he managed to be. Now he was posting Craigslist ads and selling off a few things at a time, things he liked, damn it, things he deserved.

And now this new thing—Henry had called him nearly a month before: he was in love with the daughter of the local grocer, and both of them were pretty broke. The grocery was failing ever since Publix moved in just across the way (Brian did not mention his love of walking through the new store with his head leaned back, taking in its faux-wood aisle headings and its pervasive green and white color scheme), and Henry knew that if he asked his mother for money he'd have to tell her about the baby, too.

“A baby, Henry?”

“I'm afraid that our family won't be good for him, you know?”

“You have to tell her, Hen. All she wants is a grandchild.”

“I know that, Bri. But she is exactly who I'm afraid of.”

“Why? Besides, you don't have enough money for a kid, man.” Brian didn't mention the money he was going to wire into Henry's account after they hung up, the money he'd been siphoning into the account every couple of months for a long time, smiling to himself whenever Henry patted himself on the back for his responsible

budgeting. (“Budgeting,” for Henry, meant checking his balance and finding any money there. He must have saved it somewhere along the way!) But he wasn’t going to be able to do that many more times with the way his own budget was going.

“Haven’t you ever wondered how she managed to marry three guys and end up with all their money, but not them?” Henry was hoarse, nearly whispering. “Who dies after drinking a milkshake?”

“He had a heart attack, Henry, for God’s sake. Dessert was coincidental.” Brian waited for Henry to shake himself on the other end of the phone, to switch gears to something more logical. But Henry, since he had first started to reveal his secrets to his brother in childhood, had never stopped when he felt that he’d found a sympathetic ear for his fears.

“I just don’t know if I can ask her for advice. How can I ask a killer for parenting advice?”

“You don’t know she’s a killer.”

“I know she prevented us from having a father. Three times.”

“Does that matter? You told me fathers are just—”

“It matters now.”

Brian tried one more time even though he knew the answer.

“You should ask her for help.” The answer came as expected.

“I won’t.”

Brian nodded sympathetically, realized Henry couldn’t see him.

“Brian, can you help me?”

“With money? Sure. The firm’s doing well.”

“No, man.” *Don’t ask me, Henry*, Brian thought. *Don’t say what I know you’re thinking*. “With this dad thing. You’ve basically been a dad to me.”

Henry had been only six when he had walked into the kitchen just in time to see his father die. After the funeral he had climbed into Brian’s bed and wept into the folds of his brother’s pajama shirt, plagued with guilt (for he had, upon entering the kitchen, been very upset that his mother had told him to go play by himself and had not invited him to have a milkshake) and the grief that only a child can feel, grief characterized by an overpowering, incomprehensible lack of understanding, a helplessness in the face of adult troubles visited upon an innocent heart. When Henry had cried himself to sleep, he rolled away to clutch the corner of the bedspread, and Brian was left with a cold wet spot over his left breast, one that didn’t seem to warm up as it dried.

When their first stepfather died, Henry was eighteen and away at college, and Brian had gone to pick him up and bring him home for the funeral. Henry had assumed a stoic disposition that did not suit him in the slightest (“for God’s sake, Henry, you’re not fooling anyone!” *annoyed face*, said his mother in a fit of grief), but again Brian had found himself shielding Henry and catching his tears, this time in the corner of a room full of people, their mother receiving condolences with an expression that Brian had never seen, could only describe as *bored face*, leading to a conclusion which he quickly discarded in light of its obvious impossibility.

Finally, there was Greg. Greg, the stepfather in whom wayward-postgrad Henry had most confided (who knew about Henry's first job and the secretary whose inability to dampen her coital shrieks had gotten him fired, who took Ecstasy with Henry so that he would be in a safe place his first time, who took the side of every one of Gloria's children so readily that she finally refused to have any sort of discussion with him about them, who wrote letters to Edmund in the Peace Corps and took him to counseling upon his return, who invited Sarah's girlfriend over for dinner and called her that exactly, Sarah's *girlfriend*, and chastised Gloria for her bigotry—despite the fact, Gloria retorted, that if any of the children had brought home a black significant other, he would have had a fit, to which he replied that of course that was quite different) and who said “Goodnight, love y'all” and walked out the door one Tuesday night five years before, never to return, having slowly spirited away his most valued possessions in the name of spring cleaning and left all the others. A month later Brian had fished Henry out of a ditch where he had intentionally crashed the car that Greg had bought him, missing the pole he meant to hit because he had swerved to avoid a deer, and Henry had sworn (drunkenly, desperately) that he didn't care one bit, didn't give a flying fuck, about fathers because there are none, Brian, there are none. Fathers are just men who fuck women, that's all. Every man is a father once he's had his first, and Brian, Brian are you listening I'm telling you I don't give a fuck about them.

If his mother was a killer, Brian hadn't thought of it before. Maybe she was a better con than he was. Maybe her endgame was just more permanent than his. No matter what, he had decided, it was time for her money to be reallocated once and for all. Henry

needed it, but he wouldn't ask, and their mother would see right through a request from Brian since he was the financially successful child. He looked in the mirror, studied the angles of the face his mother had made. It was time for a change.

Brian flipped through a stack of newspapers, looking for new clients. He would never admit to being an ambulance-chaser—amateurs, like check-forgers—but he could admit that people who had recently experienced either an uplifting windfall or a depressing downfall were easier targets. He came across a few headlines that looked promising (“Woman Hit By Car Becomes Nymphomaniac” was sure to be an entertaining read if not a lucrative one) and took note of the page numbers so that he could come back to them later. His primary mission was not in these papers, after all; it was sitting across the room with its hands and feet under rows of ultraviolet lights.

He was in Madame Divina's Hair Palace, his mother's favorite salon since before she'd had children (he had, at the age of seven, once drawn his mother a picture of Madame Divina's, in which several stick ladies sat together inside what looked like a bale of hay; she hadn't been amused in the slightest, mistaking his inaccurate portrayal of a palace made of hair for some kind of joke about a barn). He had made an appointment to have a Manly Man's Toe Job (a pedicure, which he would have preferred to call by its name and could barely keep a straight face while booking), and was nearly fifteen minutes early. Gloria Haskins loved men who got pedicures. She loved men who considered “on time” to be synonymous with “late.”

She also loved men who were secure enough to wear pastel pants with their sport jackets, maybe even seersucker or madras on Easter. Men with enough hair to put product in but nothing past the ears, men with well-groomed mustaches. Men with green eyes, always green eyes—Gloria Haskins was openly disappointed that none of her sons had inherited that trait from their father.

Brian Haskins sat across the salon from his mother and waited for her to notice the man of her dreams. His name was Ronald Richards, and his fake driver's license rested heavily in Brian's new wallet. His new car sat outside—leased yesterday with an infrequently used credit card—just close enough to Gloria's for convenience without the idea of planning.

As Brian watched his mother inspect her new acrylic nails and prepare to move to a hairdresser's station, he became more disgusted by her with each moment. He couldn't imagine how an actual stranger could find her attractive. Her gossiping carried across to the waiting area, and she made sure to capture the eye of every woman on her side of the room, sure of her place as the only entertainment. Her high heels clacked across the tile floor as she gushed with all of her temporary friends about the best seasonal colors to wear, the cheapest chardonnay that still had some class, and the joys of being able to get their gray heads dyed pink, or blue, or whatever they felt like every three weeks because they had money, oh they had money and darling wasn't it so nice to spend it on the little things?

Meanwhile Henry and Chantelle were struggling to find a house they could rent, Chantelle's father wringing his last cents out of the depleted grocery shelves so that she

could have prenatal care. Gloria always told Henry he was lazy and needed to work longer hours if he wanted to eat, and then in the same breath complained about the less-than-stellar service she'd received at the spa that afternoon. Brian was certain that if Gloria knew about the baby, she'd have plenty of opinions, but her pocketbook would stay clutched in her fingers, the stacks of gold rings on her knuckles like rows of locks.

Brian leaned his head back against the wall, fighting the dizziness that came with his anger. The glue under his new mustache smelled like mint (a smart choice by the makers, of course, but he hated mint), his tinted contacts were stinging, and the periwinkle slacks he'd bought the day before were a little tight around his essentials. He closed his eyes and tried to refocus. His mother nearly scared him off his seat when she plopped down next to him.

"Hello," she said, letting the *o* linger like a smoke ring. "Are you alright, dear?"

"Oh," Brian said, his stomach churning, "I just can't wait any longer for my pedicure."

The look on his mother's face was what he imagined a spider's might look like to a fly caught in its web; she was on the hunt. He tried to keep Henry's face behind his eyes as he turned on the charm.

Two months later Chantelle was showing and Henry was beginning to crack. Brian sat with them at the diner between Publix and Stefan's Speedy Grocery, forcing himself to eat cold, stringy French fries as Henry told him all about their mother's new beau.

“He works at some law office downtown, wears pastel pants. Perfect for Mom. Probably a perve or something. She mentioned to me about five times in one conversation that he’s only a few years old than you. Skeezeball.” Henry downed the rest of his root beer and signaled for another. Brian gulped from his water. The French fries felt like limp fingers in his throat, reaching down to drag the truth out of his mouth.

“Disgusting,” Chantelle said.

“You don’t even know,” said Brian. “I hope they haven’t—”

“Stop.” Henry brandished his fork at Brian, and Brian shuddered with him.

Henry’s was disgust; Brian’s was disgust tempered by the tiniest bit of relief. Ronald Richards had been playing hard to get, and he’d only had to endure a few escapades of his mother’s drunken tongue down his throat. He gagged and gave the fries to Chantelle, who gladly wolfed them down.

“So you haven’t met him?” Brian asked.

“No, no, but Mom is insisting I invite him to our family dinner. Oh, we’re having a family dinner on Friday.” Henry bit his lip and looked at Chantelle’s stomach, then leaned over to kiss her, but she jerked her head away.

“It won’t be any fun,” Brian said, trying to reassure her. “I think I’ll have to miss it, too.”

“No, Bri, please,” Henry moaned. He changed tacks, played the card Brian knew he would. “I’m making lamb. Lamb, Brian.” His favorite.

“I hope Ronnie’s a vegetarian,” Brian said. “Gotta go.”

Brian could tell that Henry was already regretting his decision to host the family dinner. Here he was, coming into his brother's house as his mother's new whatever-he-was (lover? boyfriend? definitely not friend), and he was well aware of the drama that had already gone on behind the scenes because Henry had called him last night just as he dropped his mother—*Gloria, good God don't call her Mom*—off at her house after a dinner date. Sarah had been seesawing about whether she would attend because she found her mother's behavior repulsive (“repulsive, I tell you! And besides, I won't let her abuse Alaina like last time”), and Edmund wasn't going to speak a word as usual, despite Henry's begging that he spare a few phrases for his family. At any other dinner like this, Brian would have been the only support for the overly nervous Henry, but instead here he was coming through the door on his mother's arm (Gloria wouldn't be on his arm, oh no), watching his own siblings squirm as they tried not to acknowledge his role as the man who might want to bend their mother over a high-rise office desk.

Gloria introduced him with a pride that nearly made him gag (less because of the actual moment and more because he knew she thought it would appeal to his ego, maybe turn him on)—“Ronald Richards, but you can call him Ron. Oh, hello Alaina. Didn't think you'd be here. I'll definitely be needing some wine”—and he winced as his sister Sarah's fears about his mother's treatment of her girlfriend were confirmed. Sarah left the room at a speed that defied her wide hips and short legs, and Brian heard her destroying something on the cutting board. From the sound she could have just been banging the blade against the wood, no vegetables required.

As Gloria babbled on, Brian took stock of his own body. He had practiced for hours in front of the mirror, his mother's voice ringing in his ears: rounding his shoulders ("I hate when a man's shoulders make him look square; a real person isn't *square*"), walking back and forth with the new lifts in his shoes ("I want a man to look tall whether he is or not"), adding a bit of a drag to his right step to show an old sports injury ("Athletes work hard, play hard, and make money"), and talking with his hands ("If his hands can talk, they can do much more").

Henry handed Brian a glass of wine. "Here ya go, Ronald."

"Ron's fine," Brian said into the glass. If anyone was going to recognize him, it would be Henry.

He'd worked on his voice, too. He stood in his bathroom and yelled until he was hoarse, sang along with the opera recordings he'd studied for his job with a young debutante.

Gloria pressed on. "Henry, will dinner be ready soon?"

"Sooner than it takes for you to change your mind." Henry hurried after his sister.

"Change your mind about what, Gloria?" Brian said, playing his part.

"Oh, anything really," she answered. "You have to be careful about me!"

The hour before dinner was nearly unbearable. His mother guzzled wine and kissed his cheeks with increasingly parted lips. Sarah and Alaina seemed determined to ignore him, and he tried not to smile too knowingly as the couple chattered on to the pleasantly silent Edmund about their new loft apartment in Manhattan, a place that Brian had visited the previous month. Brian took his siblings out to the curb to see his new

Mercedes, a car his mother had always wanted and therefore loved to see her man in, and they proceeded to admire it with tired exclamations (except for Edmund, who wiggled his eyebrows).

By the time they were called into the dining room (Gloria noted that she had changed her mind several times already—*haughty face*—and Brian wanted to shoot Henry a sympathetic look but settled on a confused one), Brian wasn't sure if he'd be able to keep his food down. Henry's refurbished dining set sat eight, and he had put place cards at six of the seats, three on one side and three on the other, leaving the head and foot of the table clear. Edmund, Sarah, and Alaina sat down on the far side of the table, Henry took the place closest to the kitchen, and Brian—*Ron, I'm Ron*—pulled out Gloria's chair, ready to take the seat between her and Henry.

But Gloria was having none of it. Sniffing, she picked up Ron's place card and walked to the head of the table, setting it down with a nearly imperceptible flourish. She then put her own card in front of Henry and moved his to the middle seat.

"There," she said, and nudged Henry's shoulder with her hip.

"Mother." Henry ground his teeth.

"Gloria," Brian said, still holding the back of the middle chair. No, it was holding him. He thought he might faint, and if he did he couldn't catch Henry, who looked like he was contemplating the same thing. Gloria ignored them both and pulled out the armchair.

"Gracious, Henry," she clucked, dusting the seat off with her napkin, "it's as if no one has sat here for years."

Henry muttered something, his face white. Brian tried to relax his jaw; he thought his molars might crack. Henry was adamant about the captain's chair remaining empty. He had told Brian that he could never seat anyone there, having realized that he would never stop thinking of it as a father's chair, Greg's chair.

"Well," she said, and indicated that Brian should take the seat. Brian shook his head, a small, jerking motion. Smiled weakly.

"No need to rearrange," he managed, his attempt at joviality coming out more like he was suppressing a fart.

"Ron, dear, Henry's just a silly. This seat should have a man in it." She tapped her nails on the wood of the chair. Her smile hardened, and Brian saw the woman Henry feared. It was enough to make him move. He took a deep breath and lowered himself into the chair, trying to avoid his brother's eyes. He hoped that Henry would appreciate how uncomfortable he looked, perching on the edge of the armchair as if it might swallow him whole if he settled into it.

The dinner progressed slowly; Brian felt like he had never chewed a piece of meat so many times before swallowing. At one point he retched and had to force down both the meat and some bile because he had lost track of chewing in his preoccupation with his betrayal of his brother. He had decided not to fulfill Henry's wish that Ron be a vegetarian, but he had intended to be a beef-and-chicken-only kind of guy. Now he desperately wanted to eat all the lamb.

"Real good," he mumbled.

"Family favorite," Henry said.

It seemed that everyone around the table was experiencing the same sort of hell. All except for Gloria, of course, who reveled in her part as matron and chattered incessantly, looking repeatedly at Brian, who, as Ron, had to act as if he was gobbling up her words like long strings of licorice.

Brian reasoned that Henry couldn't be angry with "Ron" (except in the way that you're angry with an idiot for being such a damn idiot), because he was obviously crazy about Gloria and couldn't have known. Brian was, however, using his green beans as a target for his fury with his mother; several times he stabbed them so viciously that Gloria knuckled his leg beneath the table, raising her voice over the shrieks of silver meeting china.

Brian could see Henry's shoulders shaking as he washed the dishes after dinner, refusing help from anyone. Activating an alarm on his phone, Brian excused himself to take an important phone call and left Gloria to ride home with one of her other children.

The air in the Mercedes was getting stale. Brian sat in the driver's seat, keys still in the ignition, forehead resting on the steering wheel. He exhaled and his breath was pushed off the wheel and immediately back into his nostrils, his afternoon cheeseburger mixing with the smell of new leather.

Raising his head, Brian looked out at the street in front of his mother's house. It was empty but for a woman pushing a stroller. The child inside was hidden under a pile of blankets. Protected. Brian watched the wind displacing the perfectly coiffed hedges, turned his head to look at the presumptuous brick-and-stone façade of his mother's house

between its aluminum-sided neighbors, lowered his gaze to the gun in his lap. What was he doing again?

He had come to confess to his mother. After the dinner at Henry's he'd been too sick to look at himself in a mirror or answer his brother's calls for three days. He couldn't hear Henry's devastation. And he knew that's what waited for him on the other side of the phone. Sitting at the head of Henry's table had made Brian feel worse than any con ever had. It had even erased his mother's open-mouthed kisses and her aggressive thigh-grabbing. It was the end of it all.

Conning his little brother into thinking that he was a bumbling bachelor unknowingly intruding on a sacred space made Brian feel pretty shitty, but what really got him was the other con, the one he'd realized he'd been running all his life without even trying. Somehow he was Henry's dad, not his brother. Somehow he'd put on an air of loving responsibility, of protection. He wanted to wash it out like dye from his hair, wanted to take his kind eyes out like a pair of no-prescription contacts. Instead he was stuck in it, and he knew he couldn't pull it off. As himself or Ronald Richards or anyone else in the whole fucking world.

So here he was at his mother's house, rewriting the careful plan he had made three months before. Ronald Richards was going to charm Gloria Haskins, charm her until she couldn't imagine being without him, and then suggest they move in together, get married even, a process which inevitably involved opening a joint checking account. Then he would disappear—sell the pants, throw the ridiculous mustache in a dumpster

somewhere, and grow out his hair. Brian would lament his lost inheritance even as he slowly doled it out into the accounts of his siblings. And none for Gloria Haskins.

That was supposed to be the plan. Instead, Brian was going to walk into his mother's house and reveal the entire con. She was going to react in her natural Gloria way and write him out of the will right then, and she would embrace her youngest son and his grocery store sweetheart, thankful that just one of her children wasn't too much of a disappointment. Brian wasn't sure why he still had the gun with him, but now he was at the front door and it was tucked in his waistband and he wasn't going to take it out and throw it into the rosebushes. He sure as hell wasn't going back to the car.

He closed his eyes, laid one finger heavily on the doorbell. His mother's face (*annoyed*) appeared in the side window, her hands out of view as she fumbled with the lock.

"Good God, Brian. I heard the doorbell the first five times it rang."

"I need to talk to you." Brian pushed her backwards (*offended face*). He caught her wrist and pulled her over to the couch. He was insistent. He was not rough. He let go of her arm and gestured for her to sit down. She did.

"Mother—"

"God, Brian. You always spit that word out."

"Mother," he said. "I'm Ron."

"Ha!" Her amusement grated on him. "I'm pretty sure I know you apart."

"I'm not joking, Mother." He deepened his voice, slumped his shoulders. "I've made a career as a con man and my latest con was supposed to be you."

“Well,” she said. It was not the beginning of a sentence. Brian cleared his throat, regained his posture as he searched for his voice.

“I know you’ll redraw the will now. So Henry gets all of it.”

“Please, Brian. It’s not as if being a con artist is the worst thing you can be.”

“What is? A murderer?”

“Perhaps,” she said, and leaned into the couch cushion. Brian stared at her. The gun slid a little bit in the sweat trickling down his back into his pants. “You know you’re a horrible kisser?”

Brian closed his mouth, which had been hanging open. He opened it again, closed it.

“Yes,” said his mother, “a bit like that.”

“Mother,” he said. “You didn’t.”

She shook her head. *Bless your heart face*. “Of course I knew, Brian. God, your opinion of me is so low. I’m not an idiot. I also know about Henry and his little grocery whore.” Brian tried to recover.

“He’s going to be a good dad.”

“I’ve never met a man who is,” she said, pulling out a compact.

“Dad was. Greg was. Henry will be. He’s spent his whole life waiting to be a dad, so he could give his son what he didn’t have.”

“He had a mother. That should be good enough.”

“It screwed him up, not having a dad.”

“He was screwed up all by himself. He didn’t need a parent for that.” Brian considered her face. She seemed confident in her dismissal of familial ties. He had never seen her lack of remorse before. She never felt sorry for anything.

“You knew all along that I was Ron?”

“Of course. You had everything I ever said I liked. There’s not a man on Earth like that. It’s too bad you decided to end it, really...it was pretty fun watching you flounder. You’re so much like your father.”

Brian closed his eyes. She’d never told him that before.

“You’re a manipulative bitch.”

“That’s your profession, isn’t it? Stealing money from stupid old ladies?”

“My client base is a little bigger than that.”

“Your pride is adorable.” She finished touching up her makeup, crossed her legs. “It’s amazing to me how I’ve been cursed with such ridiculous children. A mute, a dyke, a sissy who couldn’t shoot above the local grocer’s daughter, and you.”

“And what am I?”

“You made out with your mother. There are plenty of names for that.”

Brian could barely see her, realized he was squinting. *Not that I’ve ever seen her clearly before*, he thought. The quiet living room felt like a totally different one than he’d grown up in. He tried to remember his father there. He couldn’t hear him or see his face anymore, and he realized that everything Henry had said was true, even if his mother hadn’t killed her husbands. They were gone, and it was her fault. She had pushed them

far away, had made sure that her children would never have anyone but her. And she was the worst thing they could have had.

“Did you ever love any of them?” he asked.

“Of course I did,” she said. “I needed them.”

“We did too.” She shrugged. Brian felt a tickle above his left eye.

After some silence Gloria said, “Why haven’t you ever tried to steal my money before?”

“You’re my mother.” The tickle became a sharp tapping.

“Is that significant?”

“I suppose not,” he said, pulled out the gun, and shot her in the face.

She lay across the couch, almost gracefully, a sophisticated lady—perhaps the only time he could have called her that—on a velvet backdrop, spotless but for the blood and brain matter scattered around her misshapen head.

As he was walking back from the neighbor’s dumpster, his hands clean and already forgetting the weight of the gun tossed in between the bags of banana peels and soiled diapers, Brian heard the popping of his brother’s car. The beat-up Datsun B2-10 had a catch in the motor, a loose cap or something (Brian never kept a car long enough to know what problems it had), and Brian knew the sound like his brother’s voice. Henry was here, but why? And what could Brian do? He ran for the garage, hoping that his mother hadn’t blocked off the door to the storage crawlspace.

She had. Not knowing what else to do, he climbed into the Oldsmobile and turned it on. The deafening rumble in the stuffy garage was somehow soothing. It was hard to hear the car from the house, and by the time Henry thought to come out here, Brian would be past the point of having to face that he'd broken his brother's heart once and for all. The con was over in every way. He was not Ron. He was not Brian. He was not brother. He was not Dad.

Brian woke to sobbing and a peculiar feeling of paralysis. He told his body to move and it didn't quite respond. Still, he managed to turn his head enough to see Henry.

"What's with all the crying?" he said, forcing his lips and tongue around.

"Brian!" Henry threw his arms around him. Brian wondered how long they'd been lying in the driveway. How close had he been to success? Had Henry gone inside?

He had. Brian listened as Henry bawled his way through the story—how he had come to ask Mom about her husbands and to tell her about the baby, and maybe ask her for some money, and then he'd found her dead ("Who kills an old lady, Brian? Who?"), and then he'd heard the car running and found Brian, and he thought Brian was dead, too.

"And I don't know how long you were in there, but—" Brian watched Henry's face bloom with scarlet as his falling adrenaline finally allowed him to make the assumptive leap he should have made an hour before. "Brian. *Brian.*"

Brian's brain kept misfiring. Henry needed a parent. Someone who could reassure him. Who wasn't a horrible scheming person. Who wouldn't take things from him. Who wouldn't leave him. Who could do that? Synapses connected, current flowed.

New con. Give money and advice, receive thanks and admiration. Give security, receive absolution. Genius, and wonderful—and worthy, though of what exactly he did not know. Perhaps brotherly love. Perhaps fatherly.

“Mom’s dead?” Brian moaned, staring up at the sky. “Bastard must’ve drugged me. Goddamn it. Fuck.” Henry buried his face in Brian’s shirt. When he pulled away, there would be a spot over Brian’s heart.

SNOW

Simon thinks: she cannot sit there forever. She will come back; she's never been gone this long. He picks at his cuticles where they are already bloody. *She* is his wife, Diana. *She* is sitting in their bay window, her body barely filling the space beneath a large blanket, a gift from her mother for their move to Michigan.

I have to tell her soon, Simon thinks. Diana's mother is dying. Diana's mother, the only person who can pull Diana away from the window and back into herself, who can tell her to brush her teeth and get some sleep and eat a meal or two. Who tells Diana *you may not go out into that snow; you may not leave us behind*. Simon wonders: But where would she go if her mother was dead? Simon, you must tell her; she needs to grieve, needs to heal. But when do I grieve, Simon wonders, for the wife I used to have? For the children we never raised? And how do I heal when I'm watching my love disappear through a window to the snow?

It's winter again, has been for ages. I am always inside but my thoughts are without, trudging through the snow until they bury themselves, curling up to preserve their warmth, their strength, hoping to be dug out by the sun's return. For weeks the sun has not obliged, and I have spent whole afternoons losing my thoughts to the white. Blankness, I say, blankets of blankness. Simon shakes my arm. *What? What did you say?*

Blankness. He is worried. *You haven't taken your medicine, Diana. Will you eat something, have some tea?* I'm not really interested in those things, though. The snow is still falling, but my mother is supposed to visit today. I ask Simon to salt the driveway, to shovel the walk to the front door. When my mother is here I will eat, perhaps. She will tell me the sun is coming out, and I will believe her, even if I do not see it. Simon stands out in the snow, his coat like a bleeding hole in the white. He shovels slowly, unevenly, as if the job does not matter. As if he knows somehow that her plans have changed.

Nine years before, Simon had come home from a lecture and found a woman on her hands and knees outside the front window of his house. He thought she was hurt, ran to help her.

“What happened? Do you need help?”

“Yes, actually, if you wouldn't mind, hold these”—tiny orbs in his palm—“so I can use both hands.”

“What are you?”—she made thumbprints in the dirt as he asked—“who are you?”

“I like to watch things grow,” she said, and began to dig deeper.

A year later, almost to the day, he asked her to marry him. “Diana,” he said, his hands on her face, “would you like to grow with me?”

“Forever,” she said, and pointed to her belly. “In fact, I think we've already begun.”

Now Simon thinks to himself: we are doing the opposite of growing. Our family just gets smaller.

I feel better today, so I sit next to Simon in the kitchen. I read him the funnies from the paper, listen to him laugh into his coffee mug. The sound echoes against his face, just a half-second of extra chuckle, and the steam from the mug reddens his cheeks as if he has been laughing for hours.

We used to laugh for hours. When we lived in Georgia. When *depression* was a word in the medical textbooks he stacked on his desk.

When summer came we sat in the shade of sunflowers, left the shapes of our backs in the soil. I would stretch my hand up but could not reach the stalks.

“Out of our control,” I’d say.

“Only some things,” Simon would reply.

The things that Simon says are almost always true. The things that are out of our control are always the ones that matter.

“Diana was diagnosed with severe clinical depression over five years ago,” Simon says. “I had a colleague of mine examine and interview her after she refused to get out of bed for nearly four days.”

“But she’s on medication,” Emily says, as if that was the end of the issue. Emily is Diana’s sister. She has not ever visited them, but she’s in town to say goodbye to her mother. Simon corrects the thought almost as soon as he thinks it. Not Emily’s mother. Diana’s mother. The two of them make up the whole family. No one has what they have.

“Yes, the medication was enough for a while. But after the children—”

“The children made it worse?” Emily types with both thumbs on her phone, her nose three inches from the screen. “I mean, I know it was horrible, of course. I’ve struggled with some trauma myself. I lost my job to a brown-nosing secretary, lost my fiancé to the same woman...”

Neither her fingers nor her lips seem close to stopping their constant motion. Simon wants to say: but Emily, you have never lost a child. Instead he says: “I do everything I can.”

I can hear them talking in the kitchen. Simon sounds angry. He has the tiniest hitch to his voice when he’s mad, like the song of a bird that has eaten too much and must push against a full stomach to keep the notes flowing. I saw a bird like that once, full to bursting. I worried that his call for love would kill him.

I move slowly around the room, touching and tending my plants. I whisper to them when Simon is gone, on the days he sees his few patients who cannot come here to the house. When my mother is here she sings to them with me. She helps me check for water lines, digs into the soil with her fingers. She brings me bigger pots so that my plants can always grow. She teaches me to keep planting.

In Georgia, I planted every year until the house was surrounded. We lived in a place where the winters were mild, where the sunflowers bowed to nothing but the breeze. Simon planted his own seeds, too. Seeds that stuck to the skin of my thighs on hot summer nights, that blossomed inside me, buds with little petal fingers and leafy noses,

reaching and growing faster even than the zinnia I put outside the kitchen windows—but all of his flowers failed. They were too small, too soon, too sickly, too many.

After his flowers died I tried to kill my own. I tore at the stalks, wrapped my hands around their slender trunks and tried to strangle them. *Does the earth feel the roots leaving?* I wondered aloud to the swampy summer air.

I searched my books for pictures. *I want to find where they have gone.*

We need to move, Simon said. *Start a new life away from this.* He showed me pictures of hospitals, brochures full of glossy rooms. I knew what he was asking with those images, what he couldn't really say. I took scissors and tape to them, and made them into snow.

Simon found a new house that was close to my mother. The Michigan winters looked just like my pictures, like the place I thought my babies had gone. But when we moved, I tried to plant, to make a new garden in my new life. The sunflowers, planted, all failed. I watched through the window as they bent their knees to the ice. The new seeds were trapped under white.

After years of searching the world outside my window, I still have the same question. Can the unborn feel cold? I make forehead marks on the glass.

Now Simon takes my hand. "Come back to me."

"I'm here."

"Where did you go?" he asks, and I look down at my hands on my belly.

Sometimes I find them there, like they're reaching without my knowing. Trying to find the children that should be there.

“To find them.”

Simon finds his wife sitting on the floor of the bedroom, the contents of her drawers scattered around her. He drops to his knees on the carpet, just like that day in the yard. Just like the time in the bathroom of the old house, blood bright on her slacks.

“My mother has two drawers full of dime-store reading glasses,” Diana says.

“You don’t need glasses, though. I think you were right to make us eat all those carrots.” Simon wiggles his eyebrows, grins with all his teeth.

“‘Where have I put my glasses?’ she always says. ‘Where did my eyeballs go?’” Diana turns away, begins rummaging through another pile. “I am always laughing and Mother laughs but she’s afraid. I see her sending thoughts into her room, out to the car, her desk at work. *Where are you, spectacles?* She cannot see without them.”

I’m going to have to tell her, Simon thinks. She can’t go on like this.

“Simon? Will you go to the store? I’m worried this is why she hasn’t come to visit. I’m worried she can’t see where she’s going.”

When I look for things I do not find them. Only later, when I haven’t thought about them for days, or weeks, do they suddenly appear—right in front of me, *I’ve been here this whole time, hello*. And it’s not just little stuff, bobby pins and mechanical pencils, things you can replace until you have drawers and drawers of them *somewhere, somewhere*. It’s big stuff too, heady stuff, self-respect and memory and pain. Stuff you

need around, need close. Stuff that you don't want to lose because when you find it again *and again and again*, when you find it again you will wish it had stayed lost.

Simon makes another pot of tea. Emily dices an onion. Simon cannot tell which of her tears are real.

“How long has she been like this, Simon?”

“Too long.” He studies his wife, her small shape against the wall of white shining through the window.

“She's gained weight,” Emily says, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. The knife lingers in the air above her head. Simon looks at Diana again, confirms the swelling of her face and middle, the way her breasts push against her sweater. He hadn't noticed the physical change, as concerned as he was with her mental state. It had been several months since they'd been intimate. When she'd come to him in the middle of the night, kissed the small hairs at the base of his neck, he'd begun to hope that she was getting better. He'd begun to hope for a lot of things.

“Do you think she's—” Emily starts, but Simon leaves the room. He doesn't want to think, especially about that. He has learned not to put any faith in possibilities.

I do not want to hear Emily crying. Still, she sits there. She calls my name, and I wonder why it is that she has come. I know what has brought her, but not why she has accepted it. Instead of struggling, instead of planting hands and feet on the doorframe *no no I won't*.

My mother is dead. I thought I would see her today, when the car pulled up to our house. I even got up and put my slippers on, went to get a hairbrush. She loves to brush my hair. But the car held a man, and he spoke to Simon and Emily in the kitchen, told them that my mother was dead, and that one of them would need to collect her. *Should we tell Diana?* my sister asked. *When she's ready,* my husband replied. They do not know that I heard, and they still have not told me. Simon will never think I am ready. He is frustrated that he cannot treat me like another patient, that I will not listen when he talks. But I do listen; I guess I just hear what I want to hear. Except today. I want to bury my head in the drifts outside, let the snow fill my ears until the words from the kitchen are nothing but winter wind.

Simon tugs my feet into his lap, rolls his knuckles down their length. His hands are warm, *as always as always*. I find a memory of his hands, but they are not on my feet. *Let me touch you*—fingers on my belly, like a shadow over dunes—*let me*. It was only a few months ago, our happy time together. Emily, leave us alone.

When the man in the car drove away, there was a gap in the snow on the driveway. Like the first flowerbed of spring. Like a new and freshly dug grave.

Simon feels like she might never move again. It has been a week since the funeral. Diana did not go. She screamed when he brought her a black dress, beat at him with her childlike fists. The blows seemed to take all her strength; she slept in the chair by the window.

Emily keeps pointing out the signs. “She’s tired, Simon, and gaining weight. She’s sick on whatever we feed her.”

“She’s depressed,” he says, “and grieving. Her mother is gone.” Emily does not remind him that it was her mother, too. But she does call the doctor, and she hands the phone to Simon. The doctor agrees with her, tells Simon of the dangers of an unacknowledged pregnancy, a lack of good diet and exercise. Simon thinks to himself: none of those things ever helped her before. Simon says to the doctor:

“Can you come by on Friday?” Just before he hangs up the phone, he adds, “You might want to bring two men.”

Even if I felt like talking to Simon, I wouldn’t. The doctor and his assistant are standing in the corner, eyeing me like I’m a rare rose varietal and they’re judges at the state fair. Simon gave me a pill earlier, *something for your nerves*, but I wasn’t nervous anyway. The doctor can poke and prod all he wants. I know there’s a child inside me.

I thought maybe if I ignored it, things would be different. I had a batch of zinnia once, a whole bed of them, that refused to grow no matter what I did. I cultivated the soil, I tried purified water, I spaced them differently and talked to them and did my best to keep the animals out. Still they died. It wasn’t until I threw up my hands and walked away, told them to fend for themselves, that they eagerly sprang from the dirt.

I won’t take vitamins and I won’t do yoga. I refuse to eat specific things; I don’t even feel like eating. I think about not even letting them get their urine sample, not even letting them confirm the tiny life I hold. But the doctor and his assistant are bustling

around, preparing in that brisk way that is impatience wrapped in friendliness. *We don't have time for her feelings*, they say to each other with their eyes, the little huffs they let out of their mouths. They are like moles in the zinnia, deer in the roses—trampling, poking.

Simon is helping them. I try to remember that this is his job, what he does with many other people but cannot seem to handle with me.

“Hush now, it's fine,” he says, touching my hand. I grab his fingers but they slip away, limp. He doesn't want to know that I'm pregnant, either. If the words are said out loud, the baby is real, and he or she can grow and grow until suddenly there's not enough room or there's not enough air or there's not enough love but there's too much pressure or there's too much poison or there's too much blood and the baby will die. Before I see her face or while I hold him in my arms, my flower will die. It always does.

I look into Simon's face as the doctor takes blood from my arm. It is both totally white and flushed with pink—the face of winter, of purest cold.

The doctors have come and gone. They have done their tests, gone to their lab, gotten their results, come back. They have talked to Simon, talked to Emily, talked to Diana. Well, Simon thinks, talked *at* the woman at the window. There may be no reaching her now, with her mother gone. But what about the news? What about what the doctors said?

“In the end you must tell her,” one of them said to Simon.

“I think she already knows.” Surely she must know; it's her body that's changing.

“But you must make it clear. As crystal. As glass.”

Simon thinks: as new paths in snow.

Simon has told me. Emily has told me. My mother is dead. I was already looking for her, and now I know she is here to be found. Like memory. Like paper clips. Perhaps she is with my thoughts, buried under the snow. Perhaps she is with my children. Curled up, freezing, waiting for sunshine and the melting.

The doctors say I’m pregnant again. They say a new seed is growing. But it’s winter, and seeds don’t grow here. I have already watched too many of them die. My mother will know what to do. Where are my shoes? Simon and Emily are cooking dinner. I am not hungry. I’ll wear my yellow jacket, the one with the sunflowers on it.

Simon thinks in a flurry of words: Where is she where is she *where where where*. There is snow in his shoes. Not shoes, more like slippers, the first thing he found when he couldn’t find his wife.

“Oh God, Simon, you said—” Emily is gasping, struggling to keep up—“she hadn’t moved in days.” There are twisted ankles, cracking of either ice or bone underneath the huff of their breath.

“Emily, she hadn’t. She hadn’t moved.”

“The baby—”

Simon holds up his hand and turns in a new direction, leaving Emily and her words behind. The flurry continues in his mind: where is she where where *just find her*.

The snow is not cold if you join with it. I brought all the sunshine I could carry, heaped it on my back. I've been collecting it through the window. I am digging, burrowing with the sunshine behind me; it gives me strength. I will find them. All of those seeds I planted, and the ones Simon planted, too. They will bloom. Simon and Emily will not find me until I come back with all of my seedlings, until I can say *see, I knew where they were all along*. Melt the ice with my body. Curl up. The snow is not cold if you join with it.

Where *where where where*

—everywhere white—

“Simon find her—”

“I'm trying—”

“Oh God”

—yellow raincoat—

there *there there*

They are here above me. I can hear them, barely, through the white.

Diana.

I curl my fingers around the roots I've found, pull at them, testing their resolve. I will not let Simon and Emily down here. I think I am close. Getting closer.

Diana.

My mother is here. She rocks a cradle with each hand. The frames are made of ice, the sheets of snow. I reach for the bundles of sunflowers swaddled inside. Their wide faces turn toward me, seeking my warmth.

Diana.

They are shoveling toward me, growing louder. My husband, my sister—didn't I teach them to be more careful with the ground? Didn't I tell them not to disturb the seeds?

My mother smiles at me with teeth like icicles. I realize just how cold it is. Too cold for flowers. Too cold for life.

Diana. Diana. Diana. Diana. Diana.

The words make holes in the white, punched through like so many wounds.