

Spring 5-4-2023

Storytelling & Holistic Mental Health: A Fiction Collection

Grace Holmes
ghickey@skidmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/sdm_stu_schol



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Holmes, Grace, "Storytelling & Holistic Mental Health: A Fiction Collection" (2023). *Self-Determined Majors Final Projects*. 11.

https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/sdm_stu_schol/11

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Self-Determined Majors at Creative Matter. It has been accepted for inclusion in Self-Determined Majors Final Projects by an authorized administrator of Creative Matter. For more information, please contact dseiler@skidmore.edu.

**Storytelling & Holistic Mental Health:
A Fiction Collection**

Grace Holmes Class of 2023

Self-Determined Major– Religious Psychology

Readers: Prof. April Bernard, Prof. Peter McCarthy

Skidmore College

Apr. 15th, 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. "The Afterparty"... Page 3
2. "Now Who Will Water the Garden" ... Page 7
3. "This Must Be the Place" ... Page 20
4. "Go With God, Or Someone Who Has A Car"... Page 30
5. "Next Time We Will Look"... Page 49
6. "Next Time We Will Listen"... Page 59

The Afterparty

I saw him every week at the meetings, sitting at the back of the room, wearing all brown. His painter's cap was always tipped down like he was trying to sleep, but if you looked closer it was because he was always deeply focused on a knitting project. He left immediately after the books closed, so I couldn't ever ask him where he was from, or what he was knitting, or painting, or anything like that.

He was speaking today. He was at the front of the room, in the same position. The church was quiet— you could hear the shuffle of fabric, the creak of the stairs, breathing, coughing. We all watched him knit. We all fell still in our seats as he began to tell a story.

“So, today's my 20 years.”

Scattered applause.

“I've never told anyone how I got sober. One time, a while ago now, and also for the last time, I overdosed pretty bad. I had gotten out of treatment, three months, and I walked out of the building and scored right around the corner. It hit hard, and then I died. Right in the Walgreens bathroom, the one on 5th street. Then I learned something I'm gonna tell all of you, and I hope you think about it some more after I leave today.

There is a place, somewhere out there, somewhere secret or maybe right on top of the thing we live in now. Down a ladder, through a rabbit hole, I don't know where or how, but it exists. That's where I went after I died. The entrance to this place is a canal of sorts, filled with a liquid that I coulda sworn was pepto bismol, which flows at the smallest of angles so it is always moving forward but the current is so minor it can barely be felt. I think the substance is exactly the right density to keep a human body afloat, and if you find yourself in this dimly lit canal one

day, the tacky pink humour will softly and warmly leach your skin and you'll wonder if there is a place where you stop and this strange river starts.

There's other things you might find floating down this canal. When I made the journey, I found a large wet couch to hold onto. There were also upside down bicycles, and bowling pins like buoys, and rainjackets like jellyfish. I even saw a piano, only for a second, before it dipped under the surface and brushed its keys against my toes, like it was longing to be played. The river was so thick that the piano didn't make a sound. The canal was lit softly through its ebbing wet walls, casting everything in a sleepy electricity... And there's a sound, not from the lap of the slow tide, not from the clank of objects, but instead an ethereal tone, clear yet subtle, that permeates everything, but it's so consistent that you quickly learn to ignore it.

Once you float for what feels like a day or so, you reach a shore. This looks like a theme park, you might think. Where is the sky? There is a man who stands there, and has been standing there for a very long time, who waits for you. His identity is unmistakable: it's Elvis Presley, the king of rock n' roll, with his glittering eyes and big smile.

"Welcome to the Afterparty!" His famous voice will boom. He will help you onto the shore like a gentleman, making clever comments about your slimy disarray, and his attention and charm will make you feel quite warm inside. He stands in front of a dark tunnel, one that reminds you of haunted train rides you see in detective shows, where four people go in and three come out, but it won't scare you in the slightest. You'll follow him without hesitation, into the yawning arteries of whatever structure you have found yourself in.

You'll walk for however long you're comfortable; I walked until I knew I had been walking for long enough. You walk until you don't want to anymore, but you may want to for a while, because Elvis is quite the entertainer; he makes you laugh so hard your head spins, your

jaw aches, you will feel like you're floating again, back in the river, warm and surrounded. This will go on for a while, longer than you'd expect, before you start to realize the tunnel is getting smaller and darker, and you can no longer see the striations in the flesh-like walls.

Then you'll start to hear the noises of company. You'll hear the clink of wine glasses, kissing in greeting, you'll hear whispers of movement. Then you'll see something at the end of the tunnel that reminds you of the northern lights, if they were trapped in a box and starting to panic. Elvis will direct you to get in line. What line? You'll be thinking. Then people will come into view, waiting, jumping around, acting like maniacs. They are all high, and you realize you are too. Then it's your turn, and you discover what they're all waiting for, an entrance to something, a hole in the wall, tunneling through the membrane, and you decided you're definitely dreaming, and then you slip into it and find yourself in a space so beautiful your heart will pound even harder than it was before. It's a nightclub, but for gods, or maybe fairies, or maybe rich people, or maybe it's a normal nightclub and you're somehow tripping shit.

You thought you met the only Elvis, but there are many more. They are wandering and socializing. One might hand you a business card with a wink.

*Welcome to The Afterparty, the Forever Disco. Had a bad run in life? You're in luck!
Everybody deserves to have a good time. Congratulations, you get to party for eternity.*

The Forever Disco crackles with stellar energy, disco balls smudging spots of green, blue, red, bouncing off walls and bending through the corneas of frenzied patrons. Everyone ricochets like jumping beans, limbs and necks wiggling in tandem to a throbbing beat, the hearty whine of the Bee Gees spilling in and out of ears, masking that tone that you may have heard earlier.

I had a bad time there, man. I couldn't gain my bearings. I kept getting knocked around. The sweat on my skin wasn't mine, neither was the breath in my mouth, and I swam through a

warm soup of evaporated fluids, glowing pink in the heavy air. I wanted to see the sky. I wanted to see the clouds, pigeon-gray, cool as pillows. I just wanted to breathe.

I caught an Elvis by the elbow. “How do I get out?”

“Why would you wanna get out? This is the spot, baby, this is where it’s at.”

I darted through the crowd, a many-limbed beast, flickering and convulsing, its nails raking across my back as I ducked under its wheeling arms.

I fell to the wall, dark and warm, and felt for the holes, my hands slipping over the oily soft surface. Then suddenly I was falling, because the hole I had found wasn’t to the side of me but below me, and I was leaving the warmth, leaving the softness, slipping into something cold and raw and harsh and unforgivable and familiar, and then my eyes opened, and I realized they were closed the whole time, and I was in a hospital.

The clear tone was a flatline. It came to life, mocking my heartbeat. Doctors surrounded my bed like graverobbers. They were talking wildly and moving quickly all around.

They told me I had died. That I was only out for a minute. The nurse was holding my hand, and she said to me, “You can’t party like this forever, hon.” Elvis would have something to say about that, I thought.

I don’t know what I did to end up in that place, or what kind of person gets sent there, but it definitely turned me around. That was the last time I touched shit, for fear of returning. I don’t know how I got out, it was pure luck, really. I got a little picture of Elvis in my bathroom mirror, reminding me not to fuck up. Coming out of rehab that day I was thinking to myself, I’m gonna get loaded until I die, and then it will be over. I’m here to tell you, afterlife or afterparty, it’s not. You probably didn’t believe a word, but I hope this keeps you up at night. Don’t do drugs, kids. Anyways, I always talk your ears off. Someone else go.”

Now Who Will Water the Garden

I was walking home and I was thinking about drugs. Everybody has been freaking out about them but here's my take. I live in a coastal Maine town where everything is the same shade of grey and winter locks everyone up for half the year. It's not the drugs that are killing people, it's the town. It's the fact that it's freezing and silent and full of trucks and rotting fish and every single building is the color of a dead seagull. Everything is dismal until the lobstermen bring in their powders and pills from up the coast and make everyone's day. So it's not drugs that turn this town into a place to be avoided, not at all. In fact, it's drugs that make the flowers bloom in the spring, that heats those gray buildings. It's drugs that make the snow warm. It's drugs that make it easy to run into the ocean in the middle of January and laugh the whole time. And at night, it's drugs that make us fall asleep so easy, like we're just dipping underwater, like we're just stepping into another room.

I was thinking about drugs because Danny was really high in bio and got water all over the lab table. It was one of those black tables that is supposed to make water evaporate fast. Our bio teacher has been trying to do a bean sapling project for weeks, but it hasn't really been working. Then something started to happen, like little leaves or whatever and the teacher was chastising us for having a lack of faith, but they're only a couple inches tall anyway. They still didn't have much going on.

But anyway, Danny was watering them, and he zoned out and started watering the table. I screamed and grabbed the watering can out of his hands and started laughing, in the way where I thought he was laughing too, so it took me a second to realize wasn't and then I stopped and felt horribly out of touch. But it was Danny who was out of touch. He wasn't laughing at all, he was

just staring off into the distance, and then he came to and sat down without mentioning it. If you're gonna act stoned, you have to at least be funny about it. The rest of the class, I drew things with my finger in the giant puddle on the table. I drew a million eyes. I drew a tree with a million roots. I drew a naked mermaid holding a martini.

After I got home, I found a fur trapper hat on the table and put it on. I felt like a hot ticket. My dad came in the room and started joking around and yelling at me. He got it on Amazon, he said, he wanted people to think he was a rugged blue-collar man. I ran away with it. He tried to grab it off my head, and I ducked under the piano in the middle of our living room. The piano is full of dust because we only use it occasionally as a prop for comedic effect. I was covered in dust and I had a fur trapper hat on. I got it in my mind that it would be my new thing, and that I would never take it off, even when it got a little dusty.

Anyways, that's what happened today. The end. You probably want to hear the interesting stuff so here goes. My best friend Helena died six months ago. Everyone is talking about the opioid epidemic or whatever but it wasn't really the overdose that killed her. If she wasn't so bored she wouldn't have done it in the first place. She died from lack of entertainment. But anyway, she has been haunting me ever since. I don't think she's haunting me because she wants to prolong my suffering, I think she's just looking for things to do. Death doesn't suit her. She's one of those people that you can try and try but you can never imagine them in a casket. When I went to her funeral, I stared and stared and stared. I waited for her to start laughing. To jump up and grab my hand and whisk me out the door. To at least shoot me a wink or something. No such luck.

My teletherapist thinks I feel guilty for her death, but I don't. I wasn't the one who swallowed a whole bottle of Dilaudid. What a random choice. I was so mad at her for that. Out

of all the things to kill you, you had to pick Dilaudid. The morning she died she poked her head into my English class and shook the bottle like a rattle, showing off. She was wiggling her eyebrows like, Sophie, let's go, what are you doing, wasting your time with How to Kill a Mockingbird, or whatever. But I happened to really like that book. I liked the part where the little girl tells on her stepdad for raping her and he gets the shit beat out of him. I think it's pique fiction. I love being surprised.

Helena got loaded at school that day. She was laughing at everything I said. She sang me Christmas songs and made up the lyrics. She was holding my hand down the hallway. She fell asleep at our school gathering. We were sitting on the floor and she put her head in my lap and then took my hand and put it on her head, like she wanted me to play with her hair, like she had forgotten that I wasn't her mom, and she wasn't a child anymore, and that we were in the middle of school gathering, and then she passed out. So I drove her home and put her to bed. She was awake when I left— she was smiling, she had that foggy look in her eyes, I knew she was blacked out and wouldn't remember any of this tomorrow. She grabbed my hand and kissed it. And then must have taken more, because she was with it when I left. I remember that. She must have taken more, certainly, because later that night she walked out into the woods and died under a tree like an outdoor cat. She wasn't wearing a coat. Her mom found her with her eyes closed. It just looked like she was sleeping.

Helena made everything seem like it wasn't real. Like everything was a game. It was like she had seen the matrix, cracked the code, and found it to be the funniest thing ever. She simply didn't care about anything, and knew that the only thing in life worth anyone's time is laughing and getting high and doing things that surprise people. She would always come to school

wearing neon pink skinny jeans, knee-high leg warmers, crocs, and a hunting jacket. You could spot her from a mile away. It was like her uniform. It made everything she said so much funnier.

But maybe I fed into it, I don't know. We never really checked each other. But we didn't really cause too many problems either. We had a phase where we tried to trip on sleeping pills. There was a night where we completely blacked out and did a bunch of weird shit. I made a bunch of statues out of clay that looked like they could be cats if you were born blind and tried to imagine a cat based on a verbal description. We put all our socks in the sink and filled it with water and then stopped it up so they were just floating in there like rain clouds. We woke up on my bed wrapped in Christmas lights. I knew we drove my car somewhere because the keys were on the floor of my bedroom, and when we went outside to look, there were leaves in the cup holders.

Helena was incredible at math. She did everyone's homework. One time in algebra class, she called the teacher over and said she had figured out a way to do algebra faster. Her teacher told her that what she had discovered was calculus. She tried to explain it to me later, when we were sitting outside the gas station drinking the vanilla lattes that came out of the machines. She was drawing it on the fog in the window. Steam from the coffee spilled from her mouth like she was some kind of oracle. Her plastic spikeball earrings were the only pop of green in the entire world. In her big hunting jacket she looked like an elder wizard. But I knew she was full of shit.

That's why we ended up hanging out a lot. Because I wasn't too impressed by her. Everyone at school thought she was the coolest. I was never shy to remind her that she was terribly irresponsible, even as we drank vodka out of our Nalgene's in the dugout shed during second period. I told her she had amazing potential if she could just summon a scrap of ambition.

I told her she had piles of homework to do. I told her that her hair looked terrible and that she needed to take a shower. No one else talked to her like this.

I feel like I can't mourn her at all, like I'm not allowed, because her mom has it so bad. When Helena was fourteen, her dad overdosed too. The messed up part is, Helena was the one who drove him to pick up. He couldn't drive that day because he had been drinking and his car had one of those court-mandated breathalyzers in it. So she drove him. When they got home, he ran inside all excited, like boys do when they get their hands on something. Helena went back to minding her own business.

He died upstairs in the bathroom. He had all his gear on the counter. They found him bent over on his knees like he was looking for something.

Her dad and my dad used to be really close. We used to all hang out, driving around in the truck. They would drop us off at the mall, or the skatepark, and give us a little bit of weed folded up in a lottery ticket. Chris would tell us not to spend it all in one place, and my dad would lose it every time.

But anyways, her mom must be losing her mind. She used to rag on us all the time and ask us when we were gonna have babies. She wanted grandkids, she said. She said she wanted her house to be filled with babies. She wanted to take them to the pool and put them in little floaties and float around with them. That was her dream.

When Helena died, I started drawing way more. I get high and draw flowers. Because there's nothing like eating a bunch of Oxy and looking at flowers. I like to draw the ocean too, because it's so beautiful in the winter, steaming with sea smoke, glittering like its full of crystals. I can never get it right. When I come down, my drawings look like shit. I still put them on my wall. I have shitty, ugly, inaccurate pictures of the ocean all over my wall.

I did a really good one of Danny the other day. He was stacking oranges at the lunch table. He was so proud of himself. I took a picture because I thought he looked stupid with his pile of oranges. But in the picture, he looked so happy, so I tried to draw it. I stared at it for a while because I couldn't believe I had drawn something so good. I knew if I gave it to him he'd be weirded out, because that's not really our friendship, and I couldn't hang it on my wall, because I didn't want Danny on my wall. So I threw it away.

Something that messes with me is that everyone we hang out with doesn't understand that Helena is gone. They still act like they're trying to impress her. They still say the things she used to say, make the jokes she used to make, like she's gonna turn the corner and judge them on how interesting they are. Angie asked me if I wanted to go get fucked up in the dugout with her. I've only ever done that with Helena, and we never invited Angie, and I didn't even think she knew that's where we like to drink. But I guess she had been holding it in the whole time. Like she'd been waiting to ask me, as if she was hoping Helena would walk in and get jealous, even though she definitely wouldn't, because she's dead.

They also do way more drugs than they used to. They started selling too, for some godforsaken reason. They're selling joints to eighth graders. They pack them at lunchtime and cut them with so much oregano, and then they smell like oregano all day. They make the whole lunchroom smell like oregano.

It used to be just me and Helena, taking whatever the hell we could get our hands on, running through hallways, stumbling up staircases, passing out in bathrooms. But I haven't touched anything since Helena died besides weed and painkillers. I couldn't imagine leaving them behind, and I don't think she would want me to.

And of course I wonder if she knew what was going to happen. You'd think someone capable of inventing calculus could figure out that a bottle of Dilaudid to the face would make your heart stop. But I guess not.

I always end up thinking about her in art class. It's a weird environment in there. In other classes we are supposed to act smart, pay attention, pretend we're with it, but in art class we just look at each other, look around, and look at ourselves in the portrait mirrors. The teacher is friends with Helena's mom. They believe that everyone in the town is either bad or good, and they stay up all night on the phone deciding who's who. I guess they think that I was the bad influence. That it was me who got us into messing around. But it was a joint effort. That's what I end up thinking about in art class, instead of getting any better at art. You can't do art when your art teacher is mad at you. You can't do art when your teacher thinks you killed her friend's kid.

When I found out she was dead I didn't even cry. I screamed my head off. I went outside with my dad's axe and I hacked up a tree that had fallen down. It was just like her: wasted, indifferent, pale and skinny and passed out in the backyard. I cut it into hundreds of pieces. We had made plans that weekend. We were going to drive to the flea market and buy paintings. We were going to smoke under the bridge and try to catch fish with our hands. She didn't give a shit that we had plans that weekend. She didn't give me a heads up.

I tried painting her. I was afraid to— I thought I would sporadically develop some kind of uncanny talent and produce a photorealistic portrait. I thought she would come alive on the canvas and it would scare me to death. But none of that happened. She is so hard to paint. My first attempt I just started laughing because it was so terrible. The thing is, I know exactly what she looks like. She is always mocking me in my brain. Images of her face— smiling, laughing, blitzed out— assault my mind on the daily. But in my mind is where they stay.

By the time she had died, her eyes were turning yellow. She said she had a genetic liver disease and it had nothing to do with the drinking. It kind of made sense. She was tall and skinny and always smiling about something secret. Towards the end she looked like the Cheshire cat, with her dreamy eyes and her wild grin. I should have known something was going to happen.

The thing about this town is that there's literally nothing to do. Anything interesting that happens gives you a new will to live. When someone has a baby it's like the second coming of Christ. But Helena always kept everyone on their toes. She wore weird outfits. She always stressed us out by going off and *doing* things— driving to waterfalls in the winter, going to boy's houses, skipping class and disappearing and returning frizzy-haired and wild-eyed with some kind of story. She brought about so much life. Even when it seemed impossible, even when you looked around and saw a thousand grey buildings and cars and sidewalks, there she was in her pink jeans in a hunting jacket, making someone scream in laughter.

Someone like that can't be buried. There is no way she's in the ground. She's in the rosehips on the side of the road, I was thinking, when I was walking home. She's in the neon signs in the windows of the gas station, glowing red, tweaking and buzzing. On the bus I was looking out at the grass, swaying in the cold breeze, and maybe it was because I was pretty high but it was so beautiful, *so* beautiful, and I know if Helena were here we would run up to the front of the bus and demand to be let off, so we could run through it, so we could feel it between our fingers. But of course the bus kept driving because there is no way I was getting up and asking to be let off in the middle of a field. Because only crazy people do that. But dead people get to do whatever they want. You can imagine your dead best friend doing anything and they might as well be doing it. Because there's no way they could be underground.

I went to 7/11 to get soup for me and my dad. We are like Victorian era ghosts. We float around the house and eat buttered bread and soup for every meal. We are in total concurrence about which soup is the best. He loves Irish butter. He opens the fridge, if there's new butter he goes, "Aw, yes..." and pats it lovingly. He leaves me a 20 in a cup so I can get butter and bread and soup.

Whenever I have a dream it's always set in the same 7/11. Every plotline my sleeping brain comes up with somehow makes it way to the soup aisle in the 7/11. I only go at nighttime, like I did today, so maybe that's why, it swims around in my brain before I go to bed. It's a problem though because whenever I go there it feels like I'm in a dream and I can do whatever I want and nothing will happen.

That's why it was weird, this time, when Helena's mom was in the soup aisle and she was staring at me like a rabid coyote. She was all bristly, her mousy hair scraped into a bun, her parka falling off one shoulder, her boots scuffed with dirt, her hands full of jars of tomato sauce. I felt like I got punched in the chest because I had been doing everything in my power to not think about how alone she was, in her house, and how all her family is in California, and how she moved here for Helena's shithead dad who went and died in their bathroom, and how they made a shithead daughter who went and died under a tree, and now she was alone, in the soup aisle with me, and we both had to remember at the same time exactly who we were and what was happening.

She dropped the thing of tomato sauce. It fell to the floor and it became the only spot of color in town, there on the 7/11 floor. A thousand rosehips bloomed at once. Blood welled from a thousand pinpricks. It smelled like Italy, it smelled like lunchtime, it smelled like a summer that was stolen from somewhere else, and it was a pond of red between us that neither of us knew

how to cross. She wanted to kill me, I thought. Or maybe she wanted me to move in with her, and take me to the pool, and put me in a floaty. I couldn't figure it out. I turned on my heel and went home with my soup.

My dad was working so I ate it alone in my kitchen. It was suddenly then that I could cry. I fell to my knees in front of the piano in my fur-trapper hat and I cried. I raked my nails across the wood of the floor and I cried. I thought of tomatoes and rosehips and blood and all the color that drained from the world after Helena died it all broke my heart so I cried, and cried, and cried.

I didn't finish my soup. I went to the paint store instead, still wearing the fur hat. Helena's mom wouldn't be at the paint store. Grieving women don't paint their houses right away. It takes a year or so.

It was there that my shopping cart became a righteous garden.

I put green in there, because it wasn't quite May and I was trying to summon the pea shoots from the wicked earth. I was trying to coax the fiddleheads from the snow. I was begging those sprouting things, the unborn things, to tap, tap, tap on the ice and wait to be let out so they could reach their tiny green arms up to the white spring sky. I was trying to resuscitate the dead.

I had orange in there because of what me and Helena did in the summertime. When we would buy shrooms from the lobstermen and eat them in the afternoon and go to the hill and watch the sun explode. We would watch it burst into sweet running rays and we would taste it on our tongues and listen to the birds cry in ecstatic joy, *we get to do this tomorrow too, the sun keeps going around and around.*

And I had red, of course, because when we went to prom together her dress was the color of chili peppers and she looked like a supermodel. I had red because she would wear lipstick

sometimes, only when she felt like it, and in the strangest of moments, like when we were in the car headed to CVS at two in the morning and she would be putting lipstick on, and it was such a surprise, that her lips were the color of cranberries in most inconsequential moments, like opening a book and finding a rose pressed between the pages, secret and fragrant and laughing at you for thinking books were supposed to be black and white. And I had a shade of red for every traffic light she had blown through in her Volvo. I had a shade of red for everytime her nose bled, spattered on the bathroom sink, dripping onto my sweatshirt, smudged across her skinny brown hands. I had enough red to fill her back up again, I thought. I think I had enough.

It was the wall behind 7/11 that I chose. I thought maybe I would get it right if it was kind of dark, if I couldn't see what I was doing, if I begged God hard enough to guide my hand. Maybe I had failed so far because I was painting in conditions that were too perfect. Maybe I needed a little rustic inspiration. Maybe I needed to paint like a caveman, by the light of my battery operated headlamp.

I knew Helena was already in the paint, because there was nowhere else in this town she could possibly be. The rosehips were dried up on their branches, rusted and withered by the winter air. The grass in the fields had been chewed up by the snow, mashed into the dripping earth. The tomato sauce in the soup aisle had been cleaned up by now. And she was certainly not underground. She was in my shopping cart. She was in my paint cans. She was lost in there, swirling and unrecognizable, out of control, shapeless and impossible to pin down, just as she preferred. But this isn't about her, I thought. This is about me and my art teacher and her mom and the rest of this town. She was in my paint cans but she just needed to be pulled out, propped up, rearranged.

I got on my stupid ladder and I painted for a really long time. I didn't have a plan. I wanted her to be wearing every color. I wanted it to look like she had just gotten back from the paint store. I wanted it to look like she had erupted from a flowerbed.

I heard footsteps behind me. A policewoman stopped at the edge of the curb. Her arms were folded and she was watching me. It looked like she was standing at the edge of a parade waiting for some boy on a bicycle to act out. But it was just me in the dark with my fur hat and my headlamp and my aching arms and my paintbrush. The streetlight was a spotlight on that policewoman, like she was about to bust a move. But we just looked at each other for a while and then she nodded, so I turned back around and kept painting.

I was in the middle of painting Helena's eyes. Of course I made them a little bit yellow. I didn't want to lie. I was almost out of white and I couldn't spare a drop. They were yellow like peonies. They were yellow like butternut squash. I didn't hear the policewoman leave, but when I turned around an hour later, she had turned into a fire hydrant.

I was too scared to see it in the sunrise, so I left before dawn. I wanted it to be anonymous. I was embarrassed everyone would be too scared to tell me it was bad. Because it probably was.

But I had to see it. I didn't sleep at all. I fell asleep for an hour, maybe from ten to twelve, and then I went back. I turned the corner, and on the brick wall on the side of the 7/11, there was Helena. I laughed out loud. It was a bit abstract. Blockish. But it was her, I had done it. She had been there all along, just as I thought. She had just been hiding in the paint store. But now, here she was, in the brightest of attire, smiling a little bit like she knew something.

Helena's mom was there, standing, looking. I wondered how long she had been standing there. I wondered what would happen if I walked up to her and tried to tell her it wasn't my fault

that Helena died. Or hers. If I said, don't cry, mama, it was all the fault of your shithead daughter. We had nothing to do with it, I would say. Some people are just difficult to entertain. Some people just don't think about anybody but themselves. I walked up to her but I didn't say any of those things. I waited for her to say them first.

The hairs escaping her bun were waving in the wind like the grass I could see from the window of the bus that one time. They were so beautiful. A heartbreaking kind of beautiful I only thought was possible to see if you took a bunch of painkillers. But there it was, the softest of hairs floating on a mother's head, trembling, and I wanted to take her head and put it on my shoulder. I wanted to climb inside her parka. It seemed like if I pulled her close to me it would be the right thing to do, but I didn't. Me and Helena's mom just stood there.

Someone had left a red rose under the mural. It was the color of bell peppers. It was the color of pasta sauce. It looked like it had fallen right out of the painting. Me and Helena's mom stood there waiting for anything else to fall out of the painting. Anything would suffice. One of Helena's earrings, maybe. She was wearing her spike ball earrings. They were easy to paint. Electric green, like leaves in the sunlight, flashing and alive. We waited for them to fall, but they didn't. We waited and waited and nothing fell.

My dad came out of the 7/11, butter in his pocket. He didn't notice I was standing there, he just stepped off the curb and walked across the parking lot. I watched him stop. He took a deep breath, and then held up his palm.

The sky glowed white, and I brought my palm up to it as well. Something very small dropped into my hand. The air smelled like a garden, and it was starting to rain.

This Must Be the Place

Some say that the texture between universes flattens in the dream world. To be asleep is to open yourself to the multiverse. And sometimes, in your waking life, another you could be dreaming as well, pulling the strings between worlds tight, causing immeasurable distress as minds and selves combine. This can't be right, you might think. This isn't my life.

1927, Bar Harbor, Maine, U.S.A

They sat at the brown wooden table outside of the diner by the seaport. Max was wearing a suit that made him look quite small, although he was taller than Lydia by a little bit, but at this time she looked much larger, because she was angry and when she felt such things her chest swelled and her arms tensed and she seemed to take up more space than expected for a woman her size. And their child, oblivious to any marital tension, was eating his hamburger peacefully, eyes trained on the pier and the shaded afternoon, the densest of clouds, a thick soiled cotton, occupying the entirety of the sky and weighing down the sea to a dismal rocky shade. The whole family was wearing black that day, like they always did, but it was common in that town to dress conservatively, to have your shirts up to your necks.

Lydia was writing a song in her leather notebook. She had been quite proud of the song, until Max had told her to stop writing in her notebook and pay attention to her son. Lydia wished Max knew this was the most terrible thing he could have said in that moment, because she had stopped her writing practice, her somewhat secret writing practice to attend this luncheon with her family, and she brought her notebook on a whim. Because she had a phrase to finish. She had an idea in her head that she couldn't quite pull out, which seemed to be a feeling she carried with her every day of her life, that there was something off, something she couldn't put her finger on, and if she sat down and deliberated on her life with a shred more semblance of cognizance she would be able to figure it out. If her brain wasn't permanently fogged like the shaded sky then

she would be able to figure it out. And she felt, today, like some days, that she was on the brink of it, that it was on its way and it would finally roll off the tip of her tongue and all would make sense, all the strangeness and unnatural feelings that inhabited her small life, but then Maxwell insisted that they go take their child out for lunch.

Their child, Rainier, was a stillborn baby. He came out bruised and swollen, eyes closed tight, like he was thinking of a solution, like he was on the brink of something too. They buried him in the cemetery and the house was sullen for weeks. Nurse Janet had come, and she had cleaned up all the blood in the house, before Lydia could see it, but Lydia could not walk the floor without noticing the death in every corner of their little farmhouse. The oriental rugs that she sunk her feet into were the deepest of reds, the reds of surgery and bodily cavities and injury. The fieldstone under the fireplace were the parts of her baby boy, they were his tiny fingernails, his toes, the dimples in his purple, bloodied knees, the stones were his eyelids.

And then, he returned. Lydia had never heard of anything like this kind of miracle, so she kept it a secret. It seemed something in the universe had flipped around, a mistake had been made: nobody except Lydia remembered her son dying. It was a peculiar situation for Lydia, because Maxwell insisted that Lydia adhere to her maternal duties, feeding him and clothing him and attending to his needs, even though she knew he was clearly a ghost of some sort, and the origin of his return remained unknown, or why he returned as an older child, perhaps three or four years old. In the beginning she tried to explain to Max what had happened, but he had no memory of anything. He thought she had raised the boy alive. Their memories did not match at all. Max threatened to put her in an institution for hysterical women. Max told her that she was worrying him, and that she should stop saying such outlandish things. Eventually, she gave up trying to get him to understand, and accepted the blessing as it was. Her son had returned.

Strangely, of all things, Lydia was confident that this was not the mystery that harbored her contentment. It was too brash of a mystery, she thought. It is not the thing upsetting my life. That would be much too obvious.

Rainier returned from the dead with certain habits of worship. Upon arriving at the house a couple years after his death, dripping wet as it had been raining all day, he asked if they had any paint. Lydia didn't know who the child was, but she found it odd that he had the same birthmark as the stillborn child she had given birth to some years before. It was a patch on his cheek, the shape of a rabbit. He introduced himself as such, apologized for keeping her waiting, and continued to request paint.

"I am sorry to be a bother, but it is of the utmost importance that I acquire paint," Rainier spoke curiously, in a formal tone, which Lydia thought was quite endearing so she invited him inside and supplied him with paint.

That was the beginning of his religious practice, which didn't develop much after that day. He painted symbols on his face and his arms, prostrated himself on the thick Oriental rug in the idle of the living room and began speaking in tongues. He proceeded to do this every night, a routine unchanging as it was bewildering. Lydia was happy to have a child in the home, so she let him continue with these habits. She only asked him occasional questions, tentatively framed as casual inquiries, to which he would respond with disbelief that she was questioning him and the existence of his god which he called "The Weaver". It was all very peculiar, but she was happy to have a companion as odd as she was. They were both very strange, off-putting people.

As long as he attended church with them, Lydia and Max decided he should be allowed to do whatever he pleased. Sometimes, when Max was at work, Lydia allowed him to wear his paint in public, when she took him out to lunch and to the library to read. He still slept and

moaned and ate like a normal boy, and seemed to be getting older, so she had no reason to doubt his legitimacy. Again, she was just grateful to have him back. The period of mourning after she had thought she had lost him stretched grey and eternal.

Maxwell was a writer, and a very successful one at that. He left the house in the morning in his black suit with his black briefcase in tow, clasps clicking shut like two silver teeth. He had neat black hair and pondering black eyes, a somewhat sensitive man, but very adherent to the values he had been taught by his family. He would become very surprised if anybody suggested any kind of deviance from his Christian values, in a way that was somewhat naive, like he hadn't considered that there were people out there who were raised in any other way. He raised his eyebrows at the town market when he saw little girls rolling across the ground, dresses blooming like roses. He rose his eyebrows at men stumbling out of bars, when their rough voices animated the streets, bouncing off unparticular surfaces, estranged but alive.

And when Max went to work, like every other woman in her town, Lydia stayed home and cared for her child. But, unlike the other woman, her child was secretly a mysterious undead being. She did not want to say he was not real; things that are not real can disappear in any moment, and his corporeality, and lack of urgency, and characteristic absentminded-ness, and many other behaviors so typical of boys his age— it made it seem like there was no chance he would go anywhere. Because, for all intents and purposes, he was just like any other boy, she thought. He kept her company all day, sometimes unnerving her with his devotion, but besides that he was a suitable companion. When he was performing his religious practice, Lydia could work on her writing.

And that is what made Lydia feel normal— to tell the story of another. She had control over it, and she could make it feel whole, sensical, intentional, formed. She slipped into

something of a trance state and allowed stories of people and places to flow through her, and into the gears of the typewriter and onto the white pages in uniform, coded black streaks that she found such comfort in. She sometimes compared her writing practice to the painting practice of her son— it was similar in its abstraction and mystery. In its rapture.

She also read, in that time that she had to herself, while Rainier busied himself with paint and prayer. She read all the giant brown books she had on their shelves, again and again, ensuring one wasn't more dusted than another. Her husband's books were on the shelf, and she read them with terrible envy, consumed with the knowledge that no matter how much she lashed her typewriter and dreamed of intersecting plots, he would be better because he was a man, and he was inherently more suited to intellectual endeavors. Ever since Rainer had returned, he had started writing books about ghost children. Her schizophrenic ramblings had inspired him, she guessed, and made him suddenly quite prolific in the fantasy genre.

She noticed that his inspiration tended to be immediate: he had first written about God and the workings of the church, and then family life in a rainy port town, and then, after Lydia snapped awake from her spell of depression and began sharing her supernatural conspiracies, he wrote about ghost children. His newest books were a science fiction fantasy set, unlike anything had created before. They centered around a group of sailors, who searched the seas for the departed ghosts of child soldiers. The captain had an eyeglass that translated light waves into their spiritual form, revealing the hordes of ghost children, weeping in the sea mist. They collected them in nets and brought them back to shore, where they crashed and foamed with the waves, finally dissolving into the ether.

To witness a wreck between two ships, a terrible wreck, is to witness a great love— the masts wrap around each other with a fervor barely known to the most impassioned of human

lovers, their structures and foundations splintering and crashing about one another, terrorized victims of magnetism, momentum, attraction—love— it is what wears us, and it is what one can only hope to survive.

Lydia cursed herself as she read the books. She knew she would never make anything as wonderful as he did. This is why he did it professionally. Also because he went to school and typed all day. He had gotten glasses when he was quite young. His family had celebrated every word he produced. He was not only born to be a writer but he was carried to the fate.

Lydia hadn't been out of the house in quite some time. They communed as a family about once a week, usually on Sunday afternoon after mass. But it was Saturday, and they were at the seaport like it was Sunday, which made Lydia's brain twist, as it was something they hadn't done in years. Maxwell was explaining that they were meeting today to discuss how they were switching churches. St. Mary's was going through some turnover.

"It is an absolute shame, what Father Richard has done. He was the very spine of that place, he was. I don't know what good he's doing, cooped up at home. He's just going to rot in an armchair. He's just going to sermonize to his little family, and of course they're not going to listen. You remember Samantha, how she rolls around on the ground. His career is far from over, I don't know what he's thinking."

His words seemed to be muffled by the cloud cover. It was the kind of day that made it very difficult to listen. Rainier was staring mildly at a flock of seagulls. Lydia became interested as well. She was doing anything but paying attention to her husband speak. She hated everything he did and said. He was the bane of her existence. She wanted to throttle him in every moment. Sometimes, she looked over at him in bed and it was like she was looking at someone she had

never met before. It caused her a deep, welling panic. A disgusting feeling. Sometimes the feeling lasted for days.

“And that new priest, he is a quack. He can’t be any older than the parish boys. He is always fiddling with his vestments. He is always blushing. I don’t know where they found him. Anyways– I have heard great things about St. Catherine’s, which was just recently built on North St., they are of course looking for new patrons, but tomorrow we will attend St. Mary’s for the last time, to say good-bye to William and such, Eleanor....”

Lydia didn’t particularly want to leave St. Mary’s. She didn’t enjoy the mass as much as she used to, but the church’s singing group was the most wonderful group of women. They did concerts on Saturdays, sometimes. She had one tonight. She was excited to put on a satin dress and charm the people of the town with her songs. They clapped and clapped. They loved her. They made more sense than Maxwell, or even Rainier. The stage glowed bright and true, unlike her dismal farmhouse that lidded her eyes and crushed her lungs and weighed her body down to a sogged, miserable state. She was excited to go there. The people in the crowd, they believed every word she uttered.

The sky was the color of heather and tangerines over the church. She didn’t expect a sunset this evening, but there it was. One of the directors greeted her at the door. “It is just you and Eleanor that have arrived, it seems there was some failure to communicate– I am sure the rest will be here soon. Is there anything you have been working on lately, just to stir the crowd until then?”

Lydia loved to sing by herself. She loved to show off. A whole room of people, still, breathing, listening. It was something out of a dream.

“Yes— where is the guitar?” She asked.

The director looked puzzled. He glanced at Eleanor, who also looked puzzled.

“A guitar, you say? Would you like to play a guitar? There are none in the building that I know of, I prepared the piano, like you usually have—”

“Lydia, I didn’t know you played the guitar, that’s nice.” Eleanor said, her attention drifting to the audience.

Lydia’s heart started thudding. Heat rose to her cheeks. Why did she think she played the guitar? What a strange sensation this was. She was again flooded with the feeling that something was not right. That she was just playing along with a charade that had been decided for her, and sometimes she misplaced the details, because it didn’t really seem to mean anything anyway....

“Nevermind! I am so sorry, I misspoke, I will just sing a number I have been arranging.” She said.

“Very well! The floor is yours. Eleanor, if you could come help me with the bells.”

Lydia said farewell and turned to the curtain. Her dress lapped at her ankles as she drifted onto the stage. Fuzzy shapes moved solemnly past her line of sight, contrasted with a dingy yellow spotlight. Chattering and squeaking of chairs echoed off the alabaster walls.

She cupped the microphone and greeted the crowd, urging them to settle and become comfortable. She leaned into the scattered silences that followed. She looked down at her pale hands. She liked how singing made her feel dizzy and strange, like she couldn’t count her fingers, like she could be anyone she wanted. The microphone was a portal. She fell into it when she began to sing.

Home is where I want to be

Pick me up and turn me round

I feel numb, burn with a weak heart

I guess I must be having fun

This tune had been stuck in her head all week, but she hadn't put much thought to it. She had written down the lyrics. They laid upon her desk, scrawled in her leather notebook. When she closed her eyes she could appear before the note, read the words, and sing them aloud. When she closed her eyes she could appear anywhere.

The less we say about it the better

Make it up as we go along

Feet on the ground, head in the sky

It's ok I know nothing's wrong

It was the kind of song that you wrote without knowing what it was about, and then reading aloud to yourself, singing it to the air and looping it into a melody, it became quite obvious. Lydia sang what she remembered. She repeated some verses, in a method that satisfied her, and then alighted to the stage deck, where Eleanor was waiting.

“Everyone just arrived. That was quite lovely! Did you write that one?”

Lydia nodded. The stage light was making Eleanor's face appear waxy and strange. Lydia could not stop staring at the texture of the woman's skin, how it seemed it was to melt any second. She felt dizzy, like she did when she drank too much black tea, like she did when she poured water down her back from the basin and it was too cold, like when she pulled her dress too tight and it wrung her spine of blood and breath. How could she continue to live like this, when despair and sickness haunted the most mundane of moments, when the stage lights painted her friends in wax and it sickened her irrevocably, when her husband seemed a stranger but still lay claim to her body and mind, when her otherworldly child was somehow the most sensical

figure in the web of surreality that soaked her existence. She felt the urge to smell the ocean, so she stepped out the side door. The sky had blackened. She couldn't see a single thing.

2015, Kennebunk, Maine, U.S.A

Sophie woke up with a start. Her big wooden guitar hung from the wall a silent scarecrow, grey in the twilight. She was alone. Her name was Sophie and she belonged in this world. What a strange dream, she thought to herself. For a moment, she thought there might be a stranger named Max next to her, and sighed in relief at her empty sheets. That song she had been playing all week was still stuck in her head. It went, *home, is where I want to be, pick me up and turn me round.*

Go With God, Or Someone Who Has A Car

The highway was flattened by hours of snow, papered white in such a way that absolved all direction and size. An owl, mighty and fat, was soaring over 1-95 North, seeking any kind of branch to rest upon, but all the owl saw and all anyone saw was a featureless expanse, flurried and glowing and indivisible from the white sky. One singular detail was a dark hole in the scene: a black Volkswagen tearing a wet line towards exit 46. And behind the driver's seat, a young man of twenty-three, both sweating and shivering in his Carhart work jacket.

Simon was squinting through his blockish glasses. His windshield wipers were gesturing frantically. A tiny silver angel swung back and forth under his rearview mirror. Simon was terrible at driving, and he had been told this all his life, which had weathered his confidence significantly. He gripped the wheel with white fingers and the radio hummed softly in an attempt to calm him down. A hula girl was waving at him from the dashboard. Simon ignored her. He had always been a quiet boy, but also one frequently gripped by bouts of impulsivity. He was on the way to see his mother.

Earlier that morning, Simon was at home in his New York City apartment with his pretty boyfriend Ralphie, Frank, the lover they had taken the night before, and his wonderful cat. He had woken up slowly in his giant, warm bed, surrounded by sleeping bodies, reaching for curls and sinking into Ralphie's neck, drowsy and intoxicated by the sleepy electricity of skin. And then his phone rang, and the peace was shattered, and he clattered across the table for his glasses only to see the caller was none other but his terrible mother.

Hattie, as her neighbors affectionally called her, lived in the Adirondacks by herself. She was a stern woman, ruddy-cheeked and loud, and hated him when he was a child. It started in his

teen years, when he found he had a distaste for manual labor, a love for erotic literature, and a dwindling desire to live. She caught him in a dress pretending he was a Russian mistress, and she beat him. She caught him using bible pages as rolling papers, and she beat him. And when she caught him with a cucumber up his ass, she had beat him, and beat him, and then gave him twenty dollars, and told him to come back home when he was ready to settle down with a woman. He caught a bus to New York City, where he got a bartending license and found something like true happiness at underground theatres and dingy sex clubs, and put her out of his mind.

But now he was older and things had changed. Ralphie had kept telling him to make amends, because Ralphie also had a shitty mother but somehow roped his way back in and now she sent him money for groceries, so Simon had been back upstate a couple times. But every time he went up, Hattie just made him chop firewood. Which he was bad at.

She had been aging unfavorably, he had noticed. Her eyes had grown dim, like a dog's, and she made the same commands and asked the same questions again and again. Simon had always been pestered by his mother's brash questioning, but he had enjoyed the discussions he had with her in which she told him exactly what he needed to do, because even though he tried to be sassy and self-assured he didn't always know how to proceed, which is something that didn't happen often. Sometimes, when he was in one of those moods, he loved to sit in her reclining chairs under her patchwork quilts and listen to her tell him what to do. But even if he was struck by that kind of mood, he didn't think she would want to tell him what to do. Because even she didn't know what to do. She was growing old, she was softening. Her life was being threatened by six inches of snow.

But alas, here he was, driving Ralphie's mom's Volvo through a blizzard. He had an imperative that he couldn't will himself to ignore. He hated, with a chilling magnitude, the fact that he was a good person.

Hattie hadn't bought any groceries for the snowstorm, and the snow had made the roof of her wood shed cave in, which she had paid a neighborhood boy to build, even though the boy had never built a shed before. The boy's name was Brian and he had a red face and round hands. He had taken a lot breaks from building just to squint at the shed and think.

But it was winter and none of the neighborhood boys weren't around. So she called Simon. She made him leave his cat and his bed and Ralphie, with his soft curls and freckles and tortoise shell glasses, and the marvelous warmth of his apartment, and drive in this frozen hellscape to rescue his deteriorating mother. Because it was the right thing to do.

Simon took the exit slowly, and the road thinned. His tires began jumbling him about. Trees stretched over the road, heavy with snow. He cranked down his window just a little bit. He smelled winter and breathed it deep into his lungs. He thought, Enough of that, and rolled it back up.

There was a shape up ahead, on the side of the road. It was a small car, a hatchback, lodged unceremoniously into a snowbank. He was able to make out a girl in a long coat, shoveling it out frantically.

Simon knew something like this would happen. Anytime he tried to do a good thing, the universe gave him a hundred other things he should also be obliged to do while he was at it. The universe was just like his mother.

He slowed down to see what her deal was. He couldn't help but think about the timetable he had crafted in his head on the way over here. Grab Ralphie's mom's car, thank her, tell her

he'd back by the next day (twenty minutes). Stop for gas and get trail mix, a pack of Newports and one of those stupid Starbucks cappuccinos in a glass bottle (ten minutes). Drive without stopping (four hours). Get gas and food (twenty minutes). Arrive before dark.

The girl's hair was tied up in a crazy bun that shook around when she moved. She was covered in a snow, just like the trees. She was moving somewhat erratically. Snow landed and fell off her dark hair like stars. She wasn't shoveling very effectively at all. Her car was really deep in there. He saw she wasn't wearing gloves, and her skinny brown hands were turning raw in the cold. He clenched his own hands in response.

Simon had places to be. I have places to be, he said to himself. He rolled past her. She saw in his rearview mirror that she had stopped shoveling to watch him drive away. She could have waved him down, he said to himself. Maybe she did and he missed it. He shook his head. The angel hanging from the mirror shook its head back. "God damn it!" He said out loud. "God damn it." He made the slowest three-point turn in the history of the world.

Simon pulled over and cranked down his window. She dropped her shovel and ran to his car, not even looking both ways before crossing the road.

"Hey!" She yelled loudly. She shuffled up to his window. Her eyes were a shallow brown, wide and crazy, rimmed with eyeliner all the way around. He resisted the urge to wet his finger and fix it a little bit. She reminded him of his Portuguese neighbor who was always on cocaine. That woman was always bringing him rice in the middle of the night, knocking on her door saying I always make too much rice!, but it usually hit the spot so he never told her to stop. Simon squinted at the girl. She smelled like weed and cigarettes. She was younger than he thought she'd be, maybe even younger than he was.

“Hey,” He said cautiously, peering past her at the wrecked vehicle. “What’d you do to your car?”

She turned around and laughed. “I fucked up, man, I was driving, I couldn’t remember the exit, and then I did one of those things where I remembered the exit right when I was passing it, so I had to do one of those things where you like rip around in a circle, but then that got me all worked up so I was still going fast when I hit the dirt, and then it fucking went over the side. Fuck, look at that shit. I appreciate you stopping, I love your car, man, the little hula girl on the dashboard, she’s cute. Why are you out here?”

Her voice was scratchy and loud. She was definitely younger than he was. He liked her gauges, though. All the girls he trusted the most back in NYC had giant gauges.

“I’m driving up to see my mom. Do you need a phone or something? Are you okay?”

“So, here’s the thing. I’m kind of on a mission.” Her voice got low and she looked him dead in the eye. Simon instinctively pulled back. Anytime someone said the word mission he knew they were crazy. But he let her continue. “I just really need to get to this guy’s house, and his phone has been off, I just need to pay him a visit. I’m not gonna do anything bad, I just have to tell him something...” She pulled away and looked up and down the road. “Could you drive me? It’s just an hour down this road, probably on the way to your mom’s if she lives up here, the road just goes on for like forty miles, it’s right off the side.”

They made eye contact for a weird amount of time. She was definitely strung out, he gleaned. Her eyes were watery and strained and crackling with some kind of energy. She had half a cigarette behind her ear that he thought was a pencil at first. Simon got the impression that she had met her before. Besides his Portuguese neighbor, he was reminded of his art teacher Ms. May, who was always getting too close to him and swinging her glass bead necklaces in his face

off her giant jostling bosom. For some reason, he trusted Ms. May too, even though she was terribly annoying and loud.

“Well?” She said. “I’ll give you gas money.”

He shrugged. “Okay, yeah, come on.”

This girl was a menace, he discovered. She tried to smoke in his car, and he told her to knock it off, and then she tried to do it again like two minutes later, saying she forgot. She tried to put her dirty boots on the dashboard. She talked about her cousin Nico for like thirty minutes, and kept circling back to the fact that he had also named his dog Nico, and because of that she knew Nico deserved to be in jail. She was jacked up on something, and kept offering it to him, but when he asked her what it was she’d say things like, It’s pretty much coke, It’s basically coke, I’m pretty sure it’s like coke, It’s like if coke lasted longer. She kept flicking the angel hanging from the mirror and tapping the hula girl. She kept changing the radio station. She kept asking him questions, and when he refused to answer, she would get all worked up, but it was kind of fun.

“Why won’t you fucking tell me what your name is. Just tell me. I’ll just find your driver’s license. I’ll tear apart your car looking for your driver’s license. What is it? Frankie? David? Chris? Everyone’s fucking name is Chris nowadays. Your name is totally Chris.”

“It’s not Chris and you’re so far off.”

“This is fucking infuriating. Why can’t you be straight up. You’re a criminal, aren’t you. You’re on the run in your little stupid Volkswagen. You robbed a charity. You raped a bunch of people. You’re crazy.”

“Nope.”

“My name is...Lena.” She drew out Lena, sweet and long, and then laughed. She was smiling ear to ear. Her joy was somewhat infectious, and it pulled at his edges, but he didn’t smile. Simon didn’t want her to get any more excited. He eyed the scuff marks she had left on the dashboard.

“It’s *so* nice to meet you, Lena.”

She laughed even louder at that. “TELL ME YOUR NAME!”

“I’ll tell you my name if you tell me the deal with the guy you have to visit. What’s the mission? Boyfriend?” Simon asked. He felt relaxed enough to eat his trailmix. He loved chaos.

Lena sighed dramatically. She collapsed back into her seat.

“His name is Chris.”

“Fucking hell.”

“I know. Okay, so pay attention. This is all important. So, fucking, Chris. Okay. When I met him, I thought he was super hot. He was a total asshole, and I love it when boys are mean to me. God, I just love it. He was my boss at TC Lando’s. When I made a sandwich wrong, he would whack me on the hand with a towel, like we were in a 17th-century schoolhouse or something. When I would get sassy, or talk back, oh my god, he would just yell and yell. And then of course, he would call me into his office and give me stuff, like necklaces and bullshit like that, and tell me I was the prettiest girl in New Hampshire. I *loved* it. And when we started messing around, it just got better. But anyways, he got into a fight with the owner of the place, and he got fired, so he left to go live with his ex-girlfriend up here. And he stopped answering my texts, all that shit. But here’s the thing, a couple weeks after he left—“

Lena paused this story to laugh hysterically for a moment. Her head fell into her hands and she breathlessly laughed.

“After he left, what?” Simon said.

She smiled, and let out a breath. “Oh, god. Okay, so, yeah. The thing is, I am so, so pregnant.” She turned to the window.

Simon’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh.” They flew by a barn. It looked lonely and tired of trying to hold up all the snow on top. It was getting slowly crushed.

He hadn’t noticed, but she definitely had a bump. Her boobs were too big for her skinny frame. He felt his heart sink a little bit. She couldn’t have been older than nineteen.

“You’re telling me you’re going to Chris’s ex-girlfriend’s house to tell Chris that you’re pregnant with his child.”

She nodded, still looking out the window.

“How old is he?”

“Like thirty or something.”

“Jesus. Okay. And you picked now? During a snow storm?”

“I was inspired. What the fuck is there else to do? My coworker got in trouble with his PO and he told me to take his car out of the state. He told me it’s dusted like a bundt cake. He told me those drug dogs would take one lick of the seat and he’d get locked up.”

“Uh, okay. Do you have parents?”

“How old do you think I am?”

“I don’t know, how old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Jesus!”

She laughed. “You sure love Jesus.”

Simon thought about it for a second. He really did. His mom had raised him devoutly Mormon. He loved debauchery, but he really loved Jesus. Jesus and his soft eyes and kindness. Simon wondered what would have happened if this girl was raised in the Mormon church. They would have put her in magic underwear and beat the crazy out of her.

Hattie was always telling him about how the Mormon church had saved her when she was younger. She was addicted to prescription Speed to lose weight, like all the other moms were. She said the Mormon boys had come to her house and wrestled the pills out of her hands. That they had bought her groceries and called her beautiful. Hattie was always moaning about the boys from the Mormon church. If only all boys could be like that, she said.

Simon imagined this Chris character for a moment. “What do you think he’s gonna do when you tell him?”

Lena looked suddenly forlorn. She was still looking out the window. “I don’t know but, you wanna know something? I was staying with my best friend for a while. It was so awesome. We were like sisters. I fucked up a little bit, I kinda did. But I didn’t deserve to get kicked out. Yeah, her dad kicked me out. When I’m old, I will never, ever, ever kick a kid out of my house. No matter how annoying they are. No matter if they break shit by accident, or get too fucked up sometimes, or cry too much. I would just never do that.”

Simon considered this as he pulled into the Cumberland Farms parking lot. He made a list in his head. Soup, beans, green beans, red beans. Dried rice. Maybe an apple.

“Are you gonna go inside?” Lena said.

“Yeah, I have to get food for my mom.” He paused. “Do you want anything?”

She fingered the door handle. She finally made eye contact with him, and her eyes were glistening. “Um, could you get me some hot Cheetos?”

“Yeah, I can get you some, fucking, hot cheetos.”

God, he felt bad. What a mess. He was grateful, because the entire ride over he hadn't thought about his mom for a second, but now he had this whole other weight on his chest.

Ralphie was always telling him he was an empath. Simon was always telling Ralphie to shut up.

There was no one inside, so Simon went back out to pump gas and wait. Lena was doing lines off his dashboard. He ignored her.

The highway was so quiet. Simon lit a cigarette and breathed giant white blossoms into the air. The snow was still falling liberally, softly landing on his hood and arms and eyelashes. The smell of tobacco and snow and gasoline was the best thing in the world.

Lena swung open the door suddenly and made him jump.

“I'm gonna go grab some things! What did you say you needed?”

“There wasn't anyone in there. Do you have money?”

“I'm fucking rollin' in it, baby! Tell me what you need!”

Simon had never understood his relationship to risk-taking. He had always been so careful. He thought things through with a militant attention to detail. But there was nothing he loved more than a good calculated risk. He couldn't live his life without intense, fucked up, seriously calculated risk-taking. He sourced his drugs carefully, tested them with strips, weighed them on his little scale, and then railed them with reckless abandon. He meticulously prepared for him and Ralphie's sex parties, and then let strangers beat him with leather switches and choke him into half-consciousness. What the hell was up with that? He had a guardian angel sitting close to his shoulder, auditing the details of his life, considering the outcomes of every scenario, but that guardian angel had such an appetite for the most depraved shit. That angel always had an

agenda. Simon knew Lena was about to do something fucked up. But the most predictable thing he could do was refrain from trying to stop it.

“Beans and soup and rice.” He said plainly, and got into his car to wait. She ran across the parking lot.

Simon drummed his fingers on the dashboard. His guardian angel hummed excitedly. He felt a little bit like when he had first moved to New York, and he didn’t know anyone, and he felt like he could get away with anything. He realized he had missed that feeling.

He heard yelling coming from the store. Through the window, he saw Lena engaged in verbal combat. Her arms were full of soup cans. The clerk was holding a shotgun and shouting at her. She was laughing and screaming wildly. With a sick mix of panic and excitement, Simon watched her knock over a fruit stand and sprint out the door. His angel jumped at the clanging of bells. Simon gunned the pedal as soon as she slid into the passenger seat, knocking her to the side.

“Goooo, man, we gotta go, c’mon, I got you your soup...” She was red in the face, sweating like a bull, smiling like crazy. Simon peeled out of the parking lot and down the road.

He knew he was supposed to be mad. He wanted to be mad. But Lena had reminded him suddenly of how bored he had been for the past year, after he got promoted to manager and didn’t spend as much time on the floor, and always ended up going home before 11. But any normal person would have kicked this crackhead out of his car by now. It wasn’t even his car. But either way, she was being downright rude, and if he put up with it she would just do it again and get herself in more trouble. And he would be confirmed as a pushover. He would be confirmed as one of those people that let narcissists fuck with them and string them along because without them he felt lost.

“So, Lena, what the fuck was that.”

“It’s fine, no cameras, man, it’s gonna be fine. You’re gonna pull over soon, I think, can you find 34? It’s 34...”

Simon was still going almost 60 mph, and he passed 34 Main at just that speed. He watched it fly by, and then screeched to a stop.

“This is you.”

“It’s all the way back there! Turn around!”

Simon felt his knuckles grip tighter. He always let crazy bitches walk all over him, just because he loved being around people who didn’t notice he was repressed. “Just, get out of my car. You know what, this isn’t even my car. I’ve driven you far enough. You got shit all over the dashboard. Just walk. It’s like half a mile. You’ll make it.”

Lena’s eyes flared. She put her hand over her belly and threw the door open. She pulled out one, two, three soup cans from her pockets. “Fuck you, Chris.”

“Simon.”

“FUCK YOU Simon.”

Lena took off down the road. He watched her go. He imagined she must have been on the track team, with her long legs. She still looked somewhat powerful, boyish, even when it was evident she hadn’t been eating. Simon closed the door and sat there, watching her march down the highway.

He started thinking about Ralphie. Ralphie had been talking about babies lately. It had been driving Simon insane. Everytime they went out in public, Ralphie made a point to stop and crouch by every stroller, giggling and crooning and chatting up the glowing parents. Ralphie’s mom had him when she was like nineteen, and he had said that he thought that was definitely too

young, but it only made him think that as long as you were older than nineteen, it was the perfect time.

And Ralphie had got to him. Simon started seeing babies everywhere. They seemed to appear in the strangest of places, doing things that he didn't think babies did, or had never noticed them do before. He remembered he saw a baby on the subway, looking seriously at an advertisement. He saw a baby at Central Park, gripping tightly to its wool hat, possibly concerned about the degree to which it was fastened to its bald head. He was at the grocery store, shopping for rice, and suddenly there was a baby crying softly in his shopping cart, before he realized it wasn't his shopping cart.

And each time he saw one of these babies, with startling consistency, it was always looking straight back at him. All of those babies saw right through him, he was always thinking. How oddly his addictive personality mixed with his stifling inhibition. All those babies knew he would be a terrible father. How he would be confusing, and distant, and sensitive, and cruel.

Lena had disappeared around the bend. Simon started to stack the cans in the passenger seat. The car seemed quiet, like after snow had fallen. The cans looked like dejected little boys waiting on the curb to be picked up after school. He picked up a bag of Hot Cheetos off the floor. It was the first shock of color he'd seen since he left the city. It was like the flower had fallen off the hula girl's ear.

When he pulled into 34 Main St., Simon didn't see or hear anything. He saw Lena's footprints drifting across the blanketed yard. The house was single story, flat and boxy, pale yellow. He heard a dog bark once and it made him jump. He grabbed pepper spray from his dashboard and got out of the car.

Nobody answered the doorbell. Simon shuffled through the snow to peer through the windows. Too dark to see much, the power could be out, he thought, also glancing up to the darkening sky. He could make out the muffled sounds of talking from somewhere in the house, and strained to hear it, but could barely make out the words.

Then, for the second time that day, his phone rang and scared the living shit out of him. He jumped a foot in the air. He heard someone say, “What was that?”, so clearly, before he ducked down to answer it.

God, he was the worst son in the world. “Hey, mom, I’m so sorry I’ll be there soon, the roads are bad...” He whispered.

“Simon, what the hell is your problem, what are you whispering for, it’s getting dark, Mary just called me and said there’s a tree down, you’ll have to take the road around, the one off Maple, where the hell are you, boy, I’m waiting on you, boy, I need help with the generator, it’s getting right cold, get your ass down here.”

“I’m almost there, I’m coming. Hold on. I’ll be there soon.” Simon hung up the phone before she could protest. He popped back up to the window only to see a menacing face flaring back at him. How many fucking jump scares could this heart take in one day, he thought to himself, as he gasped loudly.

“Now who the fuck are you? You here with Lena?” The man yelled through the window, leaning against the frame. Lena was right, Simon thought. This man looked fucking mean. But undeniably sexy. A five o clock shadow dusted his chiseled jaw. “Get this crazy bitch out of my fucking house.” He was still yelling, and Simon suddenly noticed that he had Lena behind her, by the collar of her coat, and her nose was bleeding. She hadn’t noticed him yet.

She was babbling: “Fucking hell, Chris, I hate you so fucking much, I hope you rot in hell. I hope you and your ugly ass girlfriend rot in hell. I’m going to kill you both. And you’re going to deserve it. You went and knocked up a seventeen year old, you are so fucked. I’m gonna be on your ass for child support for the rest of your fucking life. Me and this baby are going to haunt you until you die.”

He whacked her across the face, but she kept going.

“I’m gonna tell him so much mean shit about you, me and this kid, we’re just gonna hang out and talk shit about you. I’m gonna tell this kid you beat me and all your other girlfriends and your mom. That you cheated on me. That you sold Jason bad molly and it gave him brain damage. That you’re the reason Jason is blue-green colorblind. I’m gonna tell this kid you stole from the register every day and shorted us on tips. That you are a shitbag, Chris, and you’re never gonna be anything but a shitbag. Me and this baby are gonna make your life a living hell.”

She starting swinging at Chris’s face and got a good whack in. Then she looked out the window and somehow just then realized Simon was watching her with a disapproving stare. “Oh my god, it’s that kid with the Volvo, he came back for me. He came back for me.” Lena started crying hysterically, and then they disappeared for a second, and then Chris threw her out the door. She landed in the snow on her knees, and then fell to the ground weeping.

She was shoving her hands in the snow, grasping it desperately. Simon remembered when he used to do that when he was a kid, when the overwhelming urge to die was too much for his skinny pale body to handle and he would run out into the yard and shove his hands into the snowbanks til they were raw and stiff.

Lena was moaning in pain. “He didn’t want my baby. Nobody wants this baby. I thought he would want my baby. Can you drive me to the bus station? God, I fucked up. I think I really fucked up this time.”

Simon stood there and watched her. Five years working at a bar in New York City and this is the most fun he’d had since moving there. Why did he love this shit so much? He shook his head, thinking, God, I’m such a freak. He brushed Lena’s hair away from her face, helped her up, and put her in his car.

She said to him, “You know, I thought this might be one of the worst days of my life, but it hasn’t been that bad.”

“Who the hell is this?” Hattie was standing in the dark doorway.

“She’s my friend.”

“Your girlfriend? You are so beautiful, honey, what a beautiful girl. Welcome.”

“No, she’s my friend.”

“Does your friend know how to start a generator?”

Lena had been railing that white shit off the dashboard the whole way there. If anybody could get a generator going, it was her. Her eyes were wild with excitement. “Yeah, yeah, my dad was an electrician! Let me see.”

She clanked around in the basement for a while. She was making thinking noises too, humming and exclaiming nonsense. Simon heard her laugh out loud once. She sounded like she was a mad scientist assembling some kind of sentient android. She sounded like she was creating something revolutionary.

Simon and his mother were sitting in tense silence, staring at the dark TV. Usually, when they were together, they would sit in silence and watch TV, but now that the power was out, they weren't sure what to do.

They were somewhat equally surprised when the lights flickered on. Lena trundled up the stairs.

"All fixed madam." She collapsed on the couch.

"Now, where are you from, girl? What are you doing up North?"

It was then that Hattie and Lena began to talk. Hattie barraged her with questions and Lena barraged her with answers. Lena wasn't shy to launch into a tale, and Hattie wasn't shy to interrupt. Simon wasn't truly listening but he was still jerked along by their conversation as he drifted off, twitching awake when they would start yelling in excitement, eyes blinking open when Hattie slapped her broad leg in laughter. By the late evening, Hattie was mooning over her. She was begging her to stay and fix her generator every day. Hattie told her that she was the daughter she had been missing from her life, and that she would have such a beautiful baby, and it was a girl, she just knew it. Hattie said that was the kind of thing she just knew.

It was dark in the living room when Lena nudged Simon awake.

"Hey, kid, can I sleep here?"

"Kid?" Simon said.

"I'm so sorry, I forgot your name. What is it?"

"It's Simon."

"That's what I'm gonna name my baby."

"Bullshit."

“Yeah, I’m gonna. Even if it’s a girl.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Okay, okay. Can I take this blanket.”

Lena started whispering something that Simon couldn’t hear, so he turned away to indicate he was going back to sleep. He didn’t know why he trusted her. She was just so young, especially when she was tired, and curling up under a blanket under one of the patchwork quilts. He used to do that when he was young, fall asleep on the couch after watching TV and talking to Hattie. He opened his eyes one more time, and saw her feet were sticking out. The holes in the bottom of her wool socks struck him. He fell asleep thinking about how Hattie might darn them in the morning. That was something Hattie loved to do.

But Lena was gone the next day. When Simon looked out the window, the yard was still and white. It was undisturbed except for a set of footprints. They went down, down, and back up again, and then paced back and forth, and stopped. Maybe she had looked through the window another time. But she didn’t come back inside. The footprints turned around once more, trailing down the driveway, and away.

“She wanted to know where the bus stop was,” Hattie said, from behind him. She was cooking the beans that Lena had stolen. “I gave her the house phone number. She is a very nice girl, nice personality. I told her she is welcome anytime.”

Simon noticed his wallet was missing. It had no cash in it anyway. Now she would never forget his name, he thought. Hattie was making noises at the stove, and told him to sit down, he was making her nervous. He did so, and watched her cook. She was stirring aggressively,

spraying tomato juice across her apron. He watched the steam curl from the pot like tiny, soft fingers, grabbing at the air.

Next Time We Will Look

The little girl's name was Mary Bearcomesout, and she had been hit by a truck on the state route in the middle of the night. The reason she was out on the state route in the middle of the night was a great mystery in her small coal-mining town, a real hot topic of discussion.

Everyone in town took it upon themselves to parse out why she was out there on the road. Girls just didn't get up in the middle of the night and walk to the state route for no reason, they were thinking. So everyone began their passive investigations. Mary became a name that lived wildly under the awnings of liquor stores, whispered grimly behind market stalls, traded for cigarettes and dip.

Some people thought she had gotten kidnapped and then became too much of a hassle, so the kidnappers changed their minds and dropped her on the side of the road where she was promptly flattened. Some people thought she had an older lover that she went out there to meet, in a rainstorm, in the middle of the night— but others would shake their heads at this. She was trying to run away, they countered. They didn't know where to, but it seemed like something that a twelve-year-old might try to do.

The night she died was one drenched by a rainstorm. All day it poured, heavy on the earth like thousands of footsteps, making the leaves weep and shake. The storm left by nightfall, but the ground was still soft and inconsolable, grabbing your bare feet as you tried to walk across it. The night she died, Mary had felt sorry for the ground as she stood on the side of the road, letting its wet, desperate grip pull her deeper and deeper into the earth.

It was this kind of weather that brought out the salamanders. The pungent perfume of honeysuckle would stick to the blanket of mist and lure the wet animals from their hiding places.

Anyone wandering the trails might spot them staggering about, drunk off the dew that dripped from the heavens like falling stars.

And like all great dramas, these nights would end in tragedy. The salamanders would pour onto the state route and meet their fate under the wheels of passing cars.

So, Mary pulled on her rainboots on nights like those and plucked the salamanders, one by one, off the road. She brought a blue plastic sand bucket shaped like a castle and with it she walked down the state route, piling the salamanders inside like little princes caught after curfew. When the bucket was full, she poured them back into the woods. Beautiful jewels, wiggling into the muddy trenches.

Mary liked to imagine that the salamanders knew what she was doing. The salamander mothers staying up all night fretting over their salamander children, presuming their dangerous and fatal whereabouts, only to have them return in one piece because of Mary's valiant efforts. She thought the mothers might weep at her sainthood.

But Mary, didn't survive that evening. She was kneeling over, chasing a salamander onto the road side, when she was slain by a 16-wheeler. Her body, mangled and bruised, was cast to the side and rolled into the wet trenches under a lattice of leaves. Perhaps the salamanders may come out of their hiding places the next morning and prayed beside her body. Perhaps she was the catalyst of a new salamander religion. But all that was certain was that her body was pulled from the ditch and returned to the reservation where she lived. Her parents laid her in a traditional open grave in the mountains to the West of the town. She got visitors every day, for a while. They surrounded her with flowers, with daisies and harebells and prairie clovers. After a couple days, her body was gutted by a pack of coyotes. Her chest yawned open to the sun, her

fingers melting into the ground. The daisies and harebells and prairie clovers began to rot, still placed carefully in her outline.

Mary didn't know what to make of being dead. She didn't have arms or legs anymore, but if she willed it with her mind, it was like she had arms and legs, even more so than people who had real arms and legs, whatever that meant now. She couldn't really move about as she pleased, she was much more often summoned. She appeared all over town, with no control over her destination or how long she would stay. Her surprise seemed to be contagious: if there were people around her they would suddenly look up, confused as well, and then shake their heads and go back to whatever they were doing.

She knew what she was doing when she died, but couldn't exactly recall the moment of impact. She couldn't piece the memory together, so it quickly became something she stopped concerning herself with. One of the first things she did was try to find her body. She wanted to see it for herself. She had a feeling it would bring her some comfort, or some resolution. But when she visited her grave, the sight of her mangled corpse roused nothing in her. She observed the jagged curve of her open ribs, the loops of her blackened entrails. Mary was uninterested. She was unsure how to proceed. She couldn't think of a single reason she might still be hanging around on earth. Nonetheless, she was rarely bored: she was consistently distracted by her corporeal limitations.

And limitations they were: she continued to be sporadically conjured into spaces that she had no intention of visiting. She found herself appearing at the market stalls, under the awnings of liquor stores when talking people would spill her name into the air and pull her from wherever

she was to attend to it. She would feel the urge to stick around and listen, despite her growing anxieties, until they were done talking about her.

She would be pulled into classrooms as the teachers faltered to explain her death and warn against the dangers of the nighttime, and of highways, and of going off by yourself, as curious little girls often did. Nobody seemed to be able to see her, but the moment appeared, they would all fall silent. The little kids would drop their heads and avoid eye contact. They would start playing with their erasers. Some began to cry.

She would fall into the houses of people she didn't know. She would end up sitting at their dinner tables as they discussed her fate in excited tones. She would appear at the bedsides of mothers, as they prayed to God, thanking him for sparing their children and taking Mary instead.

Her least favorite place to appear was a small apartment in the strip off the interstate: a shotgun house on a road called Halfmoon Boulevard, next to a trailer park. She would almost always be called to the bathroom. She would appear before a man she didn't know, and she would wait patiently while he threw up. Into the toilet, into the sink, onto the smooth alabaster of the square shower. She would take a seat on the ground, or on top of the toilet, or in the window if it was open, knowing she would be there for a while. It was always a disagreeable scene. The man was always sickly pale with watery blue eyes, his nose and eyes and mouth running all over his neck and chin. He would utter her name in pathetic whispers, in growling whines, in whimpers and prayers and sobs. He would sit on the ground next to her and drink and cry and say her name a thousand times, so she could never leave.

She spent a lot of time following him, pulled helplessly along the moment he uttered her name. Lots of time, he wouldn't even have to say it out loud, he would think it so hard that she

would appear beside him. He always pulled her into his truck, where she would sit in his passenger seat and watch him sip vodka out of a thermos. He had all kinds of jerky movements going on. Eyes locked onto the road, he shook his head for long periods of time, while hot tears dropped into his beard. He hit the steering wheel randomly and spooked her. She could never relax when she was around this guy.

When the highway was empty, he always took the opportunity to start screaming. He would scream and scream and scream, and beat himself on the head, on the chest, while he drove. This would cause Mary considerable amounts of distress. She was always grateful to be pulled away into a quiet grocery store, where she could be calmed by someone whispering her name to a newspaper. The difference between the depraved reality of this man and the rest of the town always creeped her out. She would be forced to decide which one felt more real.

But she liked best when she went to the playground at schools, when all the kids would talk about her. They would gather in circles and say ridiculous things. She loved it when some of the little girls would lie and pretend they knew her, or say that they were friends. Being friends with a dead girl gets you lots of attention.

“We used to call every night on the phone.” A girl said once. All her friends flocked around her and listened intently. Mary pressed in just as close.

“She always gave the best advice. She was the one who convinced me to kiss Ronny. And now look at us. I can’t believe she’s gone.” Mary imagined being on the phone with the girl, coiling the cord around her finger, covering the receiver and yelling to her parents, I’ll be done soon! Just one more minute! She thought about the kinds of things they would have talked about, but couldn’t come up with much. Mary hadn’t had many friends when she was alive.

“We were in love.” Another boy said, across the same playground, and she jetted over there right away. His friends all patted him on the shoulder. He looked at the ground forlornly. Mary imagined giving him a foxy glance over her shoulder in math class, driving him wild. Mary imagined what it would be like to kiss him by the swings. Of course, she had never met that boy either.

She knew that if they had really known her, they would have thought she was strange. She did better with adults. When she was alive, she had listened to kids like those say terrible things about the girls who did their own thing, the quiet girls, and she knew they would be saying those things about her, if they had known her.

When Mary was in school, there was a girl that got picked on a lot like that. Her name was Beth. She was tall and wide, with a broad forehead and two thin braids that went down to her elbows. Beth wore the same pair of flip-flops year round and you could always hear her coming by the way she would slap down the hallway. Beth got picked on because she couldn't make eye contact and never said a single word. Not even to the teachers.

Mary always thought there was something going on behind Beth's careful blue eyes, because they never missed anything that really mattered. Whenever Mary looked over at her, she was always watching something: it seemed she noticed everything that happened in classrooms that most people overlooked. Anytime Beth was looking at something, Mary always checked it out too, because it was usually something interesting. A fly trapped in the window beating itself against the glass. A spot of sun on the wall shaped like a rabbit. A boy bouncing his knees at an incomprehensible speed. And one time, a small mouse, still as a stone, tucked into the corner, watching her right back with button black eyes. Mary always wondered how Beth had noticed that mouse.

So, Mary was pleasantly surprised when she was pulled to a clearing in the woods and Beth was standing there staring right at her with nobody was around. Spring air ran through the trees and brushed past Beth's purple dress, which stirred softly around her still, boxy frame. A circle was drawn around Mary's feet in the dirt. Beth looked her up and down thoughtfully, like she wasn't exactly sure what she was beholding. Beth didn't seem like she was looking at a specific thing when she looked at Mary. She didn't look like she was investigating the details of a frog's back, or peering at the stomach contents of a rotting bird, as Mary had often done on her time on earth, when she was deep in the woods and she was sure none of the kids at school could see her doing so. That's what Mary expected in this moment, given that Beth seemed to have brought her here, deep in the woods, where nobody could see what she was doing. But no, Beth looked at her with a vague consideration, as if she was gazing upon a distant cloud, or the smallest of sunsets. Mary wondered what she was seeing.

She immediately was overcome with appreciation for this strange girl and the circle she had drawn for her. She didn't realize how much she had missed having a bed, or a home, and here was a place in the world carved out exactly for her. The relief was euphoric. Mary wanted to cry out in joy, weep in satisfaction. She wanted to spin like a dog and fall to the earth in slumber. Her ghostly state had gotten her thinking in a hopeless way. She was untethered, floating, pulled to and fro by frivolous conversations and wayside comments, homeless. The circle around her feet made her feel like anything was possible now. And for the first time, someone was kind of looking at her. Oh, how she wished to say thank you.

"Mary." Beth said again.

The truck driver was at the liquor store. He was arguing with the woman behind the counter about the Raspberry Rubinoff discount. Nobody else in the world wanted anything to do with the handles of Raspberry Rubinoff on the bottom rack, so they were 40% off. He was saying, If I buy all of them, can I get them 60% off, and she was saying, No, read the damn label. Mary sat on the counter and listened. The man had a point, it was unlikely that anyone was gonna develop an interest in that Raspberry Rubinoff, and she saw even more cases in the back that would also sit there collecting dust.

The woman was getting agitated. She seemed to know the guy, and wasn't too threatened by him. She was looking at him blankly. "Chris, I'm getting tired of this. Go find someone else to hassle."

Then they were suddenly in the truck. Whenever Mary was pulled through time like this, it confused her considerably. She was getting tired of being confused. It felt like she woke up from a nap. She wanted to go back to Beth's circle. Chris was drinking Raspberry Rubinoff out of the bottle. She wondered if he had gotten the discount. He had a distant look in his eye, like he was looking beyond the road past his windshield, beyond the mountains. They were driving down the state route Mary had died on.

Mary saw Beth on the side of the road. She was bent over in her purple dress drawing a circle with a stick. Much to her delight, Mary was sucked right into it.

Her and Beth watched as Chris whipped his truck over to the side of the road. He stumbled out of it and approached them, eyes red and bugging and angry.

"Beth, what the hell. That girl died doing exactly what you were doing. What the fuck is up with kids, running around on the road, don't you know it's hard to see, what the hell, girl, you're gonna get killed. What the hell are you doing." His words came out wet and blurry.

Mary and Beth watched him approach. She saw their eyes meeting each other with the same intensity, blue like the hand soap Mary used to have at her house. She loved that blue. Beth was his daughter.

“What are you doing.” He said, but he didn’t seem to expect a response. He sat in the mud next to her. It was raining a little bit. The clouds were swollen. Beth wasn’t looking at her dad. She was looking at Mary. They were all sitting in a circle. It felt nice.

“Beth, come on, we gotta get off the road. You can’t be here.”

There was silence. He was getting agitated

“Mary.” She said again, still looking at the circle in front of her.

The man’s eyes bugged out of his skull. He grabbed Beth by the shoulder and she didn’t respond. Mary watched every human emotion flash across his face over the course of second. He looked at the circle. He shook his head and started to cry.

“God almighty,” The man said. “What the hell is wrong with you. Please, get in the truck.” He grabbed Beth’s arm and led her away. She didn’t resist.

Mary stood in her circle and watched the truck pull back onto the road and drive away. The clouds bloomed grey and spilled their shadow onto the treetops. The sky was filling up with dark, gloomy sink water, it looked like. It was going to drain any minute. Mary didn’t have any place to go except her circle, and she was somewhat satisfied with that. She was even more satisfied when it started to pour, just like it had the night she died, drenching the highway and the tree roots and the lattice of dark, waxy leaves that covered the ground. She closed her eyes and imagined what it might feel like to have one, just one, raindrop land on her hairline, slide down her forehead, trickle down her neck. How she would shiver if it were to crawl down her sternum,

how it would eventually be dissolved by the heat of her heart beating. How it would become a part of her.

She was surprised she hadn't been pulled anywhere else. She opened her eyes.

Beth had dug the circle deep. Rain was pooling in the tiny trench like a moat. A salamander scuttled out of the underbrush. It was bright orange, slick as an eel, and it wiggled up to her circle and dipped its nose into her small circle of rain. Its head broke the surface tension with the most delicate of gestures. It began to drink.

More salamanders came. They circled her in a bright orange braided ring, spiked with wiggling, leggy tangents. They stepped across each other in familial ways. They wagged their small heads in all directions. While they sipped their rainwater, they bowed to her.

They love me, Mary thought. They really love me.

Next Time We Will Listen

That morning, the ground had shaken a little bit. The disturbance was so small that it could have been produced by imagination, and if you weren't paying attention when it occurred, you would assume it to be as such. A fisherman in his fishing canoe thought he saw the water move in circles around him, but he attributed it to the movements of an unknown creature deep below. Another man operating a crane thought he had fallen asleep for a second— and maybe he had, because he was certainly about to.

It is often before disasters that everything lies calm, and this day was no exception; the small Alaskan fishing town was more peaceful than usual, which was noted by the truck drivers hauling oil supplies without disruption, by the people under the docks tying rope to various things, swiftly and securely, by the single mothers at the pharmacy looking out the window at the sky, quiet and resolute. The frost had begun to break. Spring was sucking the grey piles of snow back into the earth. The drains in the street produced a low melody that whisked the air from the total silence it may have preferred, making a cool, soft day. Nobody was the wiser that a disruption was to come, nobody at all. But they should have been.

I was the first to see something coming. My dad and I became famous for this day because our story was so unbelievable that nobody could stop talking about it. I didn't even believe it as it was happening. That day, the biggest tsunami in the world hit the bay we were fishing from, the bay that lapped at the edges of our town. Thirty-three people died. The reason we survived is still a mystery to me. We were out far— nobody ever went out like we did in a boat our size. My dad always told me I was the only one who would do it with him because I was the only one brave enough to risk the giant waves our bay was known for. I wasn't sure that was

why, but I went with him anyway. I would sit in a nervous silence that he interpreted as a certain stoicism.

What happened was: we were picked up by the wave and put back down. It was absolutely terrific, something that has never happened in the history of the world, and may never happen again. The tsunami made no sense: a tiny earthquake triggered a crack in a cliff face, which fell into the sea and created a wave thousands of feet high, magnified by the shape of our bay. It must have been some mistake God made, some kind of foresight of physics. But it occurred. Marvelous, they say in the papers, miraculous, incredible. If only we could have given a little bit of our miracle to the thirty-three people that were sucked into the sea. In all the interviews I have done, I have neglected to mention a part of the story that needs to be told. More miraculous things were happening in our town, that everyone pretended not to know about, and everyone in the paper failed to discuss. We could have had an even bigger miracle, I would say. One that would have also gone down in history, but for different reasons. I want to explain how we could have saved everyone in town if we had only listened to the girl who worked at the bait and tackle shop and her eccentric guardian.

Olivia was quite unassuming. Everyone knew who she was, because she was quite mysterious, and also only had eight fingers, which made her distinguishable. She was a strange girl, but also quite funny, and a lot of the fisherman would visit her at the counter and tell her stories of their days. I know Olivia because I was in love with her.

We met when we were young, maybe eight years old. I often went trapping in the woods near her backyard. Whoever lived with her, her family I supposed at the time, had always kept to themselves. I was overwhelmed with curiosity. I always saw her working in the garden in the summer, carrying big bales of hay. I saw her tiny undershirts hanging from the line, her long

underwear, distressed and stained. I was grossly intrigued by their state. I wanted to know what rabid activities she indulged in that caused her garments to be so distressed.

I learned that she lived with a medicine woman named Bee. I had heard a lot of things about Bee. She had a history of causing trouble in town. When she was younger, she was always getting rounded up by the cops for running around at night, getting into fights, being crazy. My dad had told me she was a violent schizophrenic. So when I first came into their yard to talk to Olivia, I was pretty spooked when Bee came out and sized me up. She asked me all these questions, her eyes hard and mean, an iron grip on the broom in her hand. But once she ascertained that I was a somewhat nervous boy, prone to inhibition, she softened like leather, smiling and waving herself away. For some reason, I trusted her immediately. After all, she had raised Olivia.

Olivia had a habit of telling me everything that was on her mind— it was not difficult to set her off, I was always reminding her of things, stories she had been waiting to tell. Her soliloquies became my sole source of entertainment, one that I sought out regularly.

Bee and Olivia weren't related: the reason Bee got Olivia in the first place is hard to explain, but one of the first things Olivia did was try to explain it to me. She said it started with a dream, a dream that woke Bee up in the middle of the very night Olivia was born, the kind of dream that could drench a nightdress with sweat. She recited this several times to me:

“So, it started off like a normal dream, right? Bee was standing on a cliff, looking out at the bay. She felt there was a rock in her boot. She struck the cliffside with her foot, trying to free it. Her boot suddenly descended with a force that surprised her. The ground began to rumble and shake, like they were on the back of a giant that had been woken up by her movements. The shifting of the earth was tremendous enough to split the cliff in two and send it into the sea.”

“Bee got really scared– she watched the cliff face began to slide downwards. It was thousands of times the size of her. She wondered how she could have possibly caused it to break, with the strike of her heel, and decided it was impossible. How could it be? The cliff face was thousands of times larger than she was. She was sure that it was a coincidence, that there was no way she could be at fault– in the dream, she was confused, trying to figure it out.”

“But the rock was as large as a continent. She was too small to even behold it. The ocean was far below, and the rock caught it by surprise. The ocean looked betrayed by the intrusion. She had never seen the ocean submit to anything, but here it was, rapidly and anxiously folding into itself to swallow this falling giant. The bay became enormously upset. A wave appeared, of vast and tragic proportions.

The ground split beneath her, and she lost her footing. She fell.”

So, Bee woke up. And looked around. She wanted to make sure she had been returned from her death in one piece. She woke up still afraid that some of her had fallen into the sea. She checked her hands. They were grey and soft in the dim light. They had not, after all, fallen into the sea. When Olivia explained this to me, I wanted to talk to Bee about it. She still made me nervous. I knew exactly what this felt like; I was always having terrible dreams about the sea, about going too far out in my boat with my father, who seems to row towards death with glee.

Apparently, Bee told Olivia this story all the time. Bee would always remember that night, because it was when she realized that something terrible was coming. I didn't really think it would occur. I was vastly entertained by their magical escapades. I didn't think they meant anything. I thought it was just Bee being crazy, and Olivia being naive and whimsical. To reflect on the accuracy of her vision is painful to me now. And it was painful to Bee as well, before she even knew how terrible it would be: everything about the night Bee dreamt was burned into her

mind. Especially the moon, Olivia said. It was swollen. It looked like it had been gorging itself on wine and bread and other appetizers all night long. Bee said the moon was big and wild for Olivia's birthday: it forced its way into her house, through her windows, and into her bed. She remembered the shadow on her floor of the rabbit bones hanging from the porch rafters, swaying and tapping each other in the wind.

As the story goes, Bee put on her boots and strapped on her snowshoes. She went into a trance-like state. Olivia explained that Bee was a witch, and worked with dream magic. The trance-like state was something that she went into often, in order to solve problems and allow spirits to guide her around. I nodded, suppressing my laughter. What a strange, wonderful world they lived in.

But apparently, eyes rolling to the back of her head from religious rapture, Bee burst out of the wool curtain and marched through town. Those who were awake at the time naturally all remember too. I know the kind of people that are up at that time, I imagine their curiosity— the teenagers crying under wool blankets by their windows, husbands sipping whiskey and watching the snow, sweating lovers in the black morning hours, all peeking, blinking, glancing into the street from the dark windows, following the sound of Bee's crunching boots, watching the wind whip her long, white hair into circles. She dutifully followed the dream to the midwife's house, from which a wan yellow glow spilled from the windows and onto the snow. She knocked on the side of the wall.

It was for these reasons that only certain people listen to Bee. Those that do, benefit greatly: she is an accomplished healer, she has a wisdom unparalleled by many other professionals in the town. But even her clients who listened still thought she was crazy. They let

her wrap poultices their fractures, rub salves on their aching backs, and then they got out the door quick.

The next part of the story, Bee only told Olivia one time, after she asked and asked and asked, because even though she didn't want to know, she wanted to know.

Bee knocked and knocked on the midwife's house, and then the curtain parted to a biblical scene. A dead woman was illuminated in the center of the room by an overhead lamp. Upon further inspection, she was better described as a dead girl. The hanging lamp pulled long shadows from her hips and collarbones, darkening pallid, bare skin, still beaded with cold sweat. Three people sat silent on a bench to her side, holding blankets and bundles. The midwife clutched a newborn baby, slick and red, in her trembling arms. Bee approached her. When the midwife saw her, she melted with relief. As if her presence permitted the tragedy. She thought: Bee must have had a dream. The midwife was thinking that even if the mother's death was her fault, it was all okay, because it was meant to be. If it wasn't, Bee wouldn't be here for no reason in the middle of the night. People didn't believe any of Bee's strange philosophies until something incomprehensible happened. Bee sat next to her. They exchanged no words. The midwife laid the baby on the mother's chest, the color of snow.

The dream had led Bee to this child. She chose compassion, thinking it to be the correct choice in any circumstance, fated or otherwise. She adopted the baby and named her Olivia, after Bee's own mother.

There were whispers about the baby from the moment she was born, from the stir Bee caused, stomping through the snow at eerie hours of the night.

But, immediately, Bee was overwhelmed for the love she had for the child. Olivia took a long time to learn how to speak, and when she did, it was in short, pointed phrases. She had hair

the color of chamomile tea. Her eyes were dark as stones. They flashed when she was interrupted, which was odd in a child so small. Bee was, uniquely, amused. Others, at the farmer's market, at the pier, the corner store, were put off. I thought it was quite interesting.

Bee planned to dedicate their life to preparing for the coming disaster, spreading the news, preparing the town. She had a feeling that Olivia might be able to do something about it; the dream had led her to the midwife's house, after all. But she didn't say a thing, in Olivia's earlier years: she ruminated on it, wondering if Olivia had some kind of magic, wondering when she could broach the topic. In the end, Bee didn't have to. Olivia started having dreams about the wave when she was seven years old.

The dream, as Bee feared, had a life of its own.

The first time it happened, little Olivia woke up out of her bed and started running. There was about a minute or so where she didn't know if she was still dreaming or not. She was running up the hallway, and she was also running up the beach, tripping in the sand, heart clattering violently under the shadow of the wave.

For the first time then, and finally, Bee knew exactly what needed to happen. She had once again found the dream, and was ready to follow it.

This is the part that I loved to hear about it. I asked Olivia about it all the time. Those two were the most magical people this town had ever seen. Every night, they prepared for the disaster. Discussed the catastrophe that they saw in their dreams. All I wanted to hear about was their practices, and how one goes about possibly preparing to interfere with a coming tsunami, but Olivia would always interrupt herself to tell me about other things her and Bee did together that were marvelous and fun. I would ask about what magic they did in the night, and Olivia

would start going on about the house repairs they had been working on, all the firewood they had cut, the drying herbs and fruit that smelled otherworldly, the clay oven they were building. And then, she would tell me one or two things, something about tin cups or scrying.

Scrying, she told me, is something they use to figure things out, and when I asked her for more details, she somehow started talking about the peppers and tomatoes they pulled from their garden, and how they were so red and alive. I wished I lived in their house with them, existing so deliciously in every moment, living vibrantly by day and performing mysterious rituals in the evening hours. I was at their house every moment I could be, especially in the winter because I was always trapping by their land. I was drawn to their warm bricks, the smoking chimney. Olivia and Bee spent their winters knitting blankets and such, making rabbit soup, fragrant with herbs; we often set traps together in the tall, barren wood, feet strapped into creaking snowshoes. Eventually, they let me in to their scheming.

They had devised a plan. Bee saw Olivia's coldness, her affinity to the dry earth, and understood there was much room for elemental magic. They collectively decided that if they could learn to speak the language of the wave, they could convince it to leave them be. Bee had tried to warn everyone for years— they brushed her off, because our bay got “tsunamis” all the time— every time there was a big storm or mini earthquake, the unusual shape of the bay would push a giant wave up the beach and lap at someone's house. So they resorted to witchcraft. Sometimes I wouldn't go to school because I was so excited to see what they were doing.

For example, one afternoon in the winter, when it was pitch black at four in the afternoon, Bee turned off the lights and surrounded them with tin bowls of water. They let me sit in on this one. It was a beautiful evening, the moon was large and wild, as I had imagined it on the night of Olivia's birthday. When we looked out the window, it imprinted on our eyelids and bounced

around in the room like giant white balloons. It even bounced across the quivering pools in the tin cups. It made us all excited. Every time we shifted their weight on the wooden floor, the tiny dimes would shake nervously.

Bee told Olivia to close her eyes.

Listen to the wind over the snow.

Bee's voice was very similar to the wind over the snow.

Feel the water in your blood, in your skin.

Olivia felt herself sinking into the floor. She imagined she was melting through the slats.

Tell it to pool in your knees, in your feet, in your heart, in your ears.

I saw Bee couldn't help listening to her own advice. She felt her breath grow deep and long.

Remember, the water inside of you doesn't belong to you at all, not any more than the other water in the world, in the tin cups on the floor.

I was listening, of course. I swallowed, something, nothing, that never belonged to me in the first place. I wondered where it came from.

It was in this way, she told me, that she learned to move water with her mind.

And that's about when I fell in love with her. She was the only thing I thought about. We spent the summers like most Alaskan teenagers spent their summers. I showed her how to build the traps my dad made, which were extra strong. She showed me how to make kites.

I noticed her big dark eyes made her look like an owl. There was something about her that was so wonderful that I didn't understand. She said things that I had never thought anyone would say.

Olivia told me she only felt happy in the snow. That there was something about being very cold that made her feel warm. When the snow fell heavily, we would climb the trees to heights that made us nervous, and then close our eyes and let ourselves fall. The snow would reliably catch us everytime. We would lie for what felt like hours and pretend to be dead. When we got up, the outline of our bodies would continue pretending.

I wanted to want to tell everyone, truck drivers, the shopkeepers, the fisherman, that the wave was coming. But Olivia told me that people wouldn't believe me, and they would think we're crazy. She said it would make Bee look bad. She said that they had been trying to tell everyone for years and they didn't care. So I didn't say a word.

My dad didn't talk often, but we prayed a lot at the dinner table. We always had to pray for so long before we ate, so much that the food got cold. And it got cold quickly, at our table by the window, especially in the winter. Every night my dad would talk about how the fish had been dwindling. Then he would ask me about Olivia, and warn me about hanging out with girls so young, even though we were the same age, she was just small.

He had known her mom, Tallulah. He always told me that she looked just like her, all angles. He said Olivia's collarbones and hipbones pointed accusingly like her mothers had. She even had the same stringy hair, wore long. It seemed to get darker every day, the color of olive oil now.

But my dad still gave Olivia a bag of my mom's old clothes. We went through them together, slowly. They were all the same colors as the town. The browns of soaked wood, depressed by sea water. The greys of gulls' wings, of wet streets, of fogged windows, of old snow. At the bottom of the bag, there was a shock of color, a flower. Olivia dug out a pair of

tye-dye leggings. They were pink and green and blue and black. They fit almost perfectly, except they sagged at the knees.

She put on a big hunting jacket. She put on a pair of gloves. The clothes smelled like a person I had never met before.

The thing about Olivia is that you never know how she is going to react to something. Years later I was thinking about her on the boat, even before I saw the wave, because it was kind of my fault, everything that happened to her, and why she didn't talk to me anymore. A couple years back, when we were eleven or twelve, I brought her a dead rabbit from one of my traps. I knew her hands always got cold chopping firewood, and I thought we could make mittens. The rabbit was huge and soft. I wanted to teach her how to skin it. I knocked on her window as I was coming around the house, which is just as tall as I can reach, and then when I knocked on the front door, she was standing right there. Her face lit up when she saw the rabbit. We went to the shed, where Bee had a large steel table. Everybody in the town had a steel table just like this one.

I was being very careful, I didn't want to mess up. I showed her how to pull off the rabbit's feet and put them aside, and how easily the fur came off. The rabbit was completely bloodless. It had been out in the snow, hanging from his trap, for a long time. I put her hand on the fur on its belly, and when she looked at me, she was the prettiest thing I had ever seen. I just had to touch her. I had to kiss her. We had been best friends for so long, she should've seen it coming.

She was the warmest thing I'd felt in a while, and for a minute, she was mine. She was like the bowl of hot oats I had in the morning. She was the single touch I remembered from my mother, only a year or so after I was born. She was the sun of the river rocks, that seemed so far

away at the time, in the white death of an Alaskan winter. But then I opened my eyes I realized she was frozen in place, dark eyes full of something I couldn't understand. She had never liked being touched, I realized. Maybe she never knew I loved her, I realized. Slowly, Olivia turned from me and walked out of the shed. When I followed after her, there was only a track of small footprints in the snow. The wind was whistling softly.

And this part of the story, I don't know whose fault this is, but it happened. After I left, she went out into the woods. She laid down in the snow and didn't get up until morning. My dad warned me about women like this, that aren't simple, that don't say what they mean. I have no idea why she did what she did, and I never asked. She ended up in the hospital with frostbite, and Bee got in big trouble for not being able to find her, or something. Social services found out Olivia wasn't in school, so she got taken away. She moved in with Tallulah's grandparents, who never wanted her in the first place. Everyone in that family looks the same, said my dad. Like skinny ragdolls. I saw them all at the market together looking around with their big dark eyes. He was right, I thought. Maybe Olivia was better off— maybe Bee was putting too many weird ideas in her head. Maybe that's why she was so odd. It was three years of my life, that I spent with them. I did everything I could to forget it. I did everything I could to find a meanness inside of me, so I could convince myself they were crazy, that none of it was real.

And then, a couple weeks ago, before the tsunami happened, I had to go into the tackle shop she worked in. It was the only one open and my dad needed gloves. I was on the pier outside the shop, thinking about going in, too nervous. Men in the fishing boats looked at me flatly from the rolling tide. They looked like fish themselves, with greyed skin and sliding eyes, leaned all over the deck with their sloped backs and fattened hands.

There was a crew that liked to talk to her. They all knew Bee because she always came around for fish. The men had all watched her grow up. I saw them walking toward the shop, so I slipped in behind them and entered the warm little room. It smelled like deerskin.

She noticed me immediately. But the men started speaking, so she turned away. I went to look for gloves and listened. They said that it was cold out there, that she was lucky to be inside. Their down jackets whispered to each other. The ocean crashed softly outside. They were always talking about the fish problem.

“The fish are disappearing,” said a fisherman. “Olivia, you know about this? Remember? There was barely any fish today.”

“There’s someone out there taking all our fish,” One said.

“Or some-thing!” Another said.

“Olivia, you know how to clean a fish? We can show you how to clean a fish good, if you want. I bet you’d be fast, with those little hands.”

Olivia took off her glove and wiggled one of her pinky stubs at them. They exclaimed in surprise. The fishermen loved surprises because they didn’t get many out on the water. That was the first time I saw her pinkies. I knew she had lost fingers when she went out in the woods, but I had tried not to think about it. I didn’t look up, because I knew she was looking at me.

“I already know how to clean a fish,” she said. “I just can’t anymore, I don’t think. I had ten fingers the last time I tried.”

They said more things, and the men filtered out one by one. I bought the gloves. She didn’t say anything to me, and I didn’t say anything to her.

That was one of the last times I saw her. The day before the tsunami, it was raining outside, and we were sitting under a canopy on the pier. One of the fisherman came to talk to my dad. He clapped his hand on my dad's coat and they talked for a while, the kind of speak that is impossible to pay attention to, until the man got bored. He turned to me in the way that adults turn to children to indicate they're about to say something interesting.

"Do you wanna see something?" The man said. He started rummaging around in his jacket. "I thought I lost this. My granddad was Russian. He was on one of the ships that discovered the bay. He wrote a bunch of poems about it."

He finally produced a small spiral notebook. He told me to hold onto it while he worked, that didn't want to lose it again, that it might be interesting to me. The pages were noisy and rough, scratched by rapid ink.

"Something is under the deck

We are on the back of something wild

It holds us for now,

Because it doesn't know we're here"

I had never read a poem like this before. I wondered if whoever wrote this poem had ever read a poem at all. I wasn't sure if I was interested.

Then I saw Bee out of the corner of my eye, walking up and down the beach. Olivia had told me she sometimes walked up and down it to collect things she thought had magical potency, so I had seen her here and there, but never this close.

Bee was wearing a long brown coat that went past her knees. Her head was hung in concentration, looking for something, arms folded tightly. I knew what her arms felt like. They had shown me the right way to chop wood, they had zipped up my coat in the morning, they had

biffed me across the head, they had grabbed wooden spoons from my hands. Through the window, over the wind, under her jacket, I could feel her arms. I looked away, to read another poem.

*“The water is hating
It spits on my feet
It showed me something this morning,
The body of an animal
It wants me to be scared.”*

Bee got smaller and smaller down the shoreline. A sudden draft made her coat wrap around her tightly and whipped her white hair into a long tail. Bee straightened her coat and tucked her hair into her hood. I looked through the window of Olivia’s tackle shop, and I could see her watching too, through her big dark eyes. I wish I had known that was the last I would be close to them.

The fisherman had forgotten to get the book back from me that night. I went home and read the rest of the poems.

*“I think we are too cold
I think we’re going to die soon
I think the sun isn’t the right color
I think this bay is alive”*

I bookmarked this page, because until now, I thought no one else saw the bay this way. When I was out on the boat with my dad, I never felt like I could breathe. I felt like the bay was waiting for me to blink, to look away, to let my guard down. I turned the page.

*“I think the water can read my mind
 I hold my head over the side and watch it turn
 Into braids, into limbs, into wings
 It is too loud now
 I think it is inside my head”*

Olivia would have thought this poetry was terrible. She was a wonderful writer, always making up poems and songs that I remembered years later. But I would never show her this kind of thing: she was very sensitive, and everything always gave her bad dreams. Bee had always told her she could stop something from giving her bad dreams if she locked it in a box and buried it. When Olivia had bad dreams about the rats in the ceiling, Bee put their tiny droppings in a tiny cardboard box and buried it under the snow. When Olivia had bad dreams about the painting on the wall that Bee had found at the dump, Bee wrapped it in newspaper, saying it was just as good as any box, and expedited its fate to that of the rat droppings.

Olivia had always wondered what she could bury to get rid of her bad dreams about the wave. The darkest part of her mind told her she would have to bury Bee. When she told me this, I had no idea what to say.

The last poem in the book was about love.

*“I hope I remember what it feels like
 To ache for another
 after all of this ends”*

The next morning, I walked down the main road. A dog had been following me for about a half a mile. The dog was nonchalant, and very certain that we should be walking together in

that moment. Out of all the days, that was the day I decided to go to Bee's house and ask for Olivia. I just wanted to talk to her again.

The rabbit bones were hanging from her porch rafters. The wool curtain hung still in the darkened doorway. The garden was sleeping, snowed over. I saw footprints to the shed and back, to the shed and back, to the shed and back. I saw three drops of brown blood. Bee had caught something, maybe. But it didn't look like anyone was in the house. There were footprints leading to the woods, to the beach. I didn't have enough time to search the woods, so I just went back home. The dog was nowhere in sight.

Me and my dad went out on the water that day like we always did. There was a pit in my stomach like there always was. We felt the smallest of rumbles from the water. The surface wavered back and forth. My dad didn't look alarmed at all. I didn't know if he noticed.

And then, because I was looking, because I was always looking, I was the first to see the mountain appear. Tall and vast, a giant rolling in from the grey horizon. I wished I had just been on the water for the first time so that there could have been a moment I could have thought it was really just a mountain. But I had been on the boat far out on the bay almost every day of my life, even back when I was younger, when memories were heathered at the frames. So I knew that it was not a mountain.

We watched the tide recede like someone had yanked it from below. Like it was a tablecloth and God showing everyone how he could pull it so fast that nothing would be disturbed. But it wasn't fast enough, so everything got disturbed. I was suddenly terrified. My heart suddenly understood what was to happen. It became an angry beast inside me. It crashed upon my ribcage, against my lungs. It hammered on my stomach. There was nowhere to go, only the cold ocean. There was nothing to hold on to, only the sides of the rocking boat, which

wavered now, wildly and without compassion, tossing equipment across the floor. My dad and I looked at each other with enormous eyes. He was yelling but I didn't hear him. I couldn't hear anything. I could just hold on to the sides of the boat. I could just feel the water on my face. And, somehow, I could only think of Olivia. And Bee. My life flashing before my eyes and that is what I saw, warm bricks around their fireplace, a wooden spoon swirling in soup, boots in snow, wielded axes in small, strong hands, Olivia laughing, Bee laughing, Olivia. Olivia.

We were suddenly thousands of feet in the air, and I could see everything. This is the part that nobody believes. This is the part that I can't believe, because it doesn't make sense, how my Dad and I, a mile or two out into the bay, were some of the only survivors. We were right at the heart of thing. But the giant lifted us all the way up. I could see the whole town, but I could only look at the shore, far across the bay, and see two people, two I knew well. Bee and Olivia, sitting side by side, holding hands.

When we were little, Bee always told us to stay out of the trees. We loved to climb them when the snow was tall. Bee said the branches would be weakened, and we wouldn't know until it was too late. But Olivia was the kind of child that needed to feel something to know it was real. She often went out without me, sometimes in the dark, to climb the trees, to fall into the snow. She didn't believe anything could be dangerous. One time, the crack of a branch pulled her feet from under her, and she fell.

She hit the ground hard and was instantly stunned by the betrayal. The wind was knocked out of her. Strangely, she lost control of her body. She got up rapidly and started running. She gasped for air as she went, and before she understood what had happened, she was back at home. She dove in front of the wood fire and hugged her knees to her chest. Her clothes were wet from

the snow. The water dripped, dripped, dripped onto the warm wooden floor. She told me this as if it were funny. As if she wanted to do it again.

Bee used to tell us so many things. Don't climb trees when it's snowing, she said, but Olivia had done it anyway, without much thought. And then, never turn your back on the ocean, she also said. Sometimes, there is nothing you can do to stop yourself from running away. This is what occurred: I saw Olivia get up. And I saw her run.

But Bee sat. I was looking at her white hair was whipped in circles by the wind. I was looking at her brown coat. I was imagining what Olivia's screams could have sounded like if I could hear them.

The last thing I saw was Olivia, turned in a panic, trying to get Bee to follow her, Bee sitting calmly. A mile away and I knew what her face looked like, I could feel her arms.

And then the wave, as quickly as it picked us up, put us down.

I didn't see it, but I can imagine it. The wave racing up the beach. Right on her heels. Ripping the ground from the earth. Tearing up rocks and throwing them around like it was looking for something, urgent and wild, and then finding her.

It had come upon us so suddenly, hadn't it. Every day, when I close my eyes, I see images of my own production, that I did not witness but I know occurred. The water yanking her from the ground and sucking her into tide. I imagine her, smaller than she has ever been, the salt and cold beating her body. The last of her air being pulled from her lungs and cast out to sea. Olivia. The tsunami was a great thing of nature, treacherous, anomalous. You may be surprised that it is not something I think of often. Even though I watched boats thrown high into the air, flipping like coins. Trees breaking loudly at their bases. The corner shop disappearing into the ocean. The

parking lot disappearing too. The wind was heavy and wild, but our boat spun lazily in the wake of the wave, pulling at our stomachs.

I didn't have a thought in my mind. I was covered in sick, cold, wasted. I had never seen the bay so alive.

What was it like, to experience such a miracle? People ask me often. I tell them it was life changing, unforgettable, awe-striking, nothing I could have ever expected to occur to me. That I was so lucky. So, so lucky.

What I don't say: and, for a minute, she was mine.