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Calhoun County

Chloe M. Williamson

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in English

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Dedicated to Jack and Jim Williamson
without whom none of this would have been possible.

Main Street

Sarah winced. “Shit, I have to pee again.”

“Are you serious?”

“Look, the baby wants what it wants.” She ran a finger across her six-months-pregnant stomach absentmindedly.

Dan sighed. “I don’t even know if there’s a place to stop out here.”

They looked out the windows scouting for some signs of life among the flat plains and brittle yellow grass. The drunken colors of their New Orleans neighborhood were a distant memory and Albuquerque – the location of their hotel for the night on this long trip to Las Vegas – seemed impossibly far away, somewhere beyond the horizon.

“I swear, we’re never going to make it to your dad’s party if we keep having to stop every twenty minutes.” They continued on in silence for the next few miles, except for the low hum of the car’s air conditioning system.

“Have you ever seen so many fucking tumbleweeds?” he asked, trying to lighten the mood.

Tumbleweeds gathered in thick knots along the fences that bordered the road. Occasionally one or two skittered across the road, and the rare cars traveling in the opposite direction carried pieces of small broken twigs in their grills, like remnants of roadkill.

“I kind of thought tumbleweeds were an urban legend or something. You know, one of those, like, comic book cowboy things.”

Finally, one of the signs lining the highway promised restaurants and gas stations up ahead. Dan elbowed Sarah, who had started to fall asleep with her head against the glass of the passenger’s side window.

“Babe, ten miles. They’ve got a McDonald’s.”

“Hmm?”

“Ten miles, can you hold it?”

“I’m sure as hell not peeing on the side of the road.”

Dan switched the car out of cruise control and accelerated. The road extended over a ripple of low hills. It wasn’t long before a water tower and the cluster of small buildings appeared on the horizon. As they neared the town, Sarah fell asleep again. When he pulled off the highway and onto the uneven local roads, her head bumped lightly against the window as the whole car jittered. The town looked small and dead to her — a smattering of squat buildings, faded by the sun and eroded by sand.

The first light off the highway was red – the stoplights here were fixed horizontally to poles rather than hanging vertically – and Dan fidgeted with the GPS, searching for the nearest gas station. In a town of this size it couldn’t be too hard to find. Sarah groaned and sat up, rubbing her neck.

“Are we there?”

“Almost. Gas station,” he paused and tapped a knuckle against the screen of the GPS. “...a quarter mile away.”

As they drew closer into the center of town, the traffic thickened as they hit what Dan assumed must be the “main drag,” since it featured a three-story courthouse (the tallest building he had spotted) and a square of dreary tan restaurants and consignment shops.

Sarah gestured to the line of idling vehicles, predominantly weather-beaten trucks. “Where could they all be going? It’s a Thursday.”

Dan grumbled, and cranked the air conditioning in the car higher. As soon as they slowed to a standstill, the sun had begun beating down through the slanted glass of the windshield, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was slowly baking.

They stared out the window in silence, inching forward in little bursts, following the vehicle in front of them – a faded red truck. And then, when they had turned the third corner

around the courthouse, and the gas station sat at the far end of Main Street, Sarah saw the reason for the traffic.

The hearse was deep black and glossy -- clearly less worn than the other nearby vehicles -- it paused and then shifted back into motion at a stop sign. The line of cars followed it jerkily, all pausing at the sign before resuming motion.

The gas station was just past and across the street from the modest red brick Baptist church. By the time they managed to pull into the station the hearse had already disappeared behind the church. The parking lot had begun to teem with families in black.

“Can you believe how many of them are actually wearing cowboy hats? I mean talk about comic book shit.”

Sarah looked up at Dan, and then past him at the church. “I think I want to have her baptized.”

“Who?”

Dan parked the car next to the gas pump. Across the street, mourners greeted each other. Sarah saw a flash of electric blue as a small boy waved a plastic toy airplane.

“Her.” Sarah nodded at her stomach.

“Oh.” He rubbed a hand across his forehead. “You don’t really go to church anymore, though. Unless you’ve been going without me.”

She looked away. “I’m going to see if they have a bathroom inside.”

The convenience store attached to the gas station had three rows of shelves stuffed mostly with a bright and plasticized array of snack foods. Laundry detergent and soap and tampons took residence at the end of one aisle, and in the corner of the back wall a glossy case of liquor bottles featured an open padlock. “*No Alcohol Sale on Sundays,*” the sign on the case read in large, handwritten letters.

She found the small bathroom at the back of the store and slipped in as discreetly as she could manage with her swollen body making every movement slower and more awkward. Afterwards, she thought she should browse through the aisles to find something to buy as payment. The thought of peppermint gum turned her stomach. She saw the fat pickles floating in a jar of their own juice, next to the cash register, but then she imagined the pimply cashier reaching into the jar with the cheap plastic tongs that sat on the counter nearby, and that turned her stomach too.

In the back aisle, next to the tampons, tall candles in glass cases emblazoned with colorful images of saints stood in orderly rows. She looked at them, each one with a small picture of a different saint on the front and prayers printed on the opposite side. She had grown up very loosely Episcopal, and had never seen anything like these in her childhood church. Most were a series of similar, but technically distinguishable, men. She bent over slightly to read their names: Jesus, Saint Michael, Saint Francis, Saint Anthony. The men were all dressed in stark primary colors, or long white robes accented with red or blue. Then, at the end of the row she saw a lone female figure, her entire body surrounded by a halo of golden light.

The bilingual inscription below the picture read *Virgen de Guadalupe — Our Lady of Guadalupe*. The woman, Mary, was beautiful, with light brown skin and thick black hair. Sarah thought her face looked kind. Eyes slightly downturned, she was wrapped in a deep turquoise cloak trimmed with gold and dotted with stars. Under the cloak she wore a red dress. Sarah looked down at her own stomach and then at Mary's broad torso. She ran a fingertip across Mary's stomach, and her finger came away thickly coated in dust.

Mary's head was topped with a gold crown, and beneath her bare feet a young boy — or perhaps a cherub? She wasn't sure — held up the crescent moon she stood on. Sarah picked up the candle and gently sniffed at the white wax, wondering what scent accompanied

the Virgin. The candle was unscented, and the dust threatened to make her sneeze. She hesitated, torn between putting the candle back on the shelf, and the strange sense of safety the candle had given her when she picked it up. She knew what Dan would say — something about superstitious bullshit. She made a move to put the candle back on the shelf, but the thought of leaving Mary all alone, surrounded by men, made her want to cry, so she took it with her to the front of the store instead.

The cashier was a tall boy with short hair and a black teenage mustache. His cheeks were covered in painful-looking acne and a layer of uneven stubble.

“Did you find everything okay?”

She nodded and then gestured across the street to the church, “Do you know what’s happening over there?”

“It’s a funeral,” he answered slowly, like he thought she might be unfamiliar with the concept.

“No, I, what I meant was I guess, did you know the person?”

His eyes widened slightly. “That’ll be four dollars and seventy-two cents.”

“Right.” She dug for her wallet in her purse. By the time she had found it and extracted the necessary cash, she felt sweaty and suddenly anxious.

He gave her the change. “My mom was friends with her mom. She was like eight years ahead of me in school – so I didn’t really...” He shrugged and let the sentence fade off as he scratched at a peeling spot in the countertop.

“I’m sorry.”

“Do you want a bag for that?”

She looked down at the candle on the counter between them, then glanced quickly out at Dan, now sitting in the car checking his phone. “Um, yes actually.”

As she left, the bell on the door sounded sharply, and Sarah had to fight the urge to jump.

When he saw her coming, Dan looked up and smiled. Sarah put the candle, wrapped in a plastic bag, on the floor of the car. “I felt like I had to buy something, so I got us a souvenir.”

“Listen, if you really want to baptize her, that’s fine.”

“I don’t know, I just, we should talk about it, don’t you think? My parents will probably want to know.” It was a small, but plausible, lie – her parents hadn’t attended church in years, now that she had moved away and they no longer felt the need to keep up appearances.

The girl across the street in that casket couldn't have been very old, Sarah thought, maybe twenty-three or twenty-four. She felt her chest and spine go cold with the thought of the girl’s mother.

“I just don’t want to raise her with any fairytales. It seems hypocritical when neither of us does any of that stuff.”

“Right,” Sarah nodded again, “No, yeah, you’re right of course.”

Dan pulled back onto Main Street and they began making their way back towards the highway, this time much faster on almost-deserted roads.

Sarah felt a superstitious need to remember where she had gotten the candle, and so she tried to commit the town to memory, and fix the image of it in her mind like a photograph. She stared hard at the faded blue water tower and the torn American flag that whipped in tatters in front of the low-slung elementary school. She considered jotting down the highway exit number.

Despite Sarah’s efforts, the next evening when they arrived in Las Vegas and her mother and father welcomed them with casserole and intricately-wrapped babywear, the

specifics had faded entirely. Still, after her husband and parents had fallen asleep, she snuck into the kitchen for matches and lit the candle. She copied Mary's prayerful pose for a moment and looked down at it. The flickering of the flame in the dark kitchen turned the appliances and slowly drying plates into frightening shadows, but looking at Mary, lit from above by the glow of the candle, she felt safe.

Nails

The dense patch of nails, like a rash or angry teenage acne, stuck out of the barn wall that tilted away from the other three at the corner.

Without turning to the boys, Jonah spoke. “What’re these nails doing here?”

The boys looked at each other.

Alex spoke first, “Oh – we used to practice on this wall, just so we could know how to nail things right.”

“Is that where my hammer went?”

Alex scuffed at the dusty ground with his boots.

Max broke the silence, “We always put it back after we used it, and nails don’t cost anything anyway, not really.”

“Hold this side up while I nail it back.”

The boys pushed until the wall lined up at the corner again. They had to push hard. The wood flexed back towards them, like an arching spine.

“There’s got to be a hundred nails there.” Jonah tried to number them without exactly counting. The head of each nail stuck out from the wood a slightly different amount — almost none of them driven all the way in. They had rusted in various degrees.

He hammered the new nails in a solid straight line down the joint of the wood. “When did you do it?”

“Night, weekends, whatever. Whenever you told us to go play outside.”

Jonah looked at his boys, his sons, now all-but-men. He had stopped trying to keep track of their comings and goings the year before, when they finally both had driver’s licenses. He watched the sweat stain their shirts and the muscles in their arms strain to hold the wall up.

They were good boys, even if they got up to God-knows-what. They were good boys.

The Ditch Witch

The cow died at the end of January on the side of the road. Its legs bent out from under its large body at odd angles. Besides that, on the first day that they saw it from the bus Joey swore he saw thick foam coming from its mouth. Why no one moved the carcass was unclear — maybe it was too expensive to dig a large enough whole to bury it, maybe the hard freeze made digging a hole impossible, or maybe whoever owned the land simply couldn't be bothered. Coyotes picked at the carcass during the nights, and the cow's teeth had slowly revealed themselves inside the skull, an eerie time-release grin. By March nothing much was left besides thick, sloping bones that the springtime sun had begun to bleach.

They had passed it in the school bus twice a day for months, watching carefully for new signs of decay. Joey had been the first to notice it, but soon it was all they talked about on the journey to and from school. Joey and Mark sat next to each other with Sam in the seat behind them. When they saw the dead cow, they rubbernecked, trying to capture as much of the image as they could in the fleeting moments as the bus whipped past it on the highway. Then they would compare notes ("I swear, there was something green coming out of its stomach." "No way, the intestines have been gone since February. Something ate them, remember?" "Did more of the skin come off near the ribs -- I thought I saw more than before."). At school, they passed notes and gossiped about the girls on the dance team and complained about the way the guys who played basketball thought they were so much better than everyone else (Mark was exempt from these conversations because he had made the JV basketball team that year, and within the month had seen his social prospects open up). But, on the bus, there was nothing worth talking about besides the slowly-disappearing corpse.

It was not until March, when the frozen ground had started to thaw and Sam's stepmother had roped him into helping her plant a flower garden in their narrow front yard, that Joey suggested they make a pilgrimage of sorts to the site they had only seen from the

inside of a moving bus. Joey hadn't turned fifteen yet, but his father had spent the summer teaching him to drive and hair had started to grow in patchily above his lip and in thin scraggly lines along the sides of his cheeks. Both experiences had given him a new sense of confidence.

When Mark got Joey's text, just past midnight, his parents had already been in bed for over an hour. They were as reliable as clocks that way, and if they ever noticed him sneaking past their door in the middle of the night they never brought it up -- he didn't have to climb out his bedroom window the way Sam did. Even if they had known the way he spent his nights and weekends (drinking, smoking, learning to play beer pong in someone's basement) Mark doubted that his parents would mention it to him or even to each other. They understood the importance of keeping up appearances. As it was, he acted enough like the good Christian son that they could brag about him to the pastor after church each week and bring up his latest basketball game and listen to the pastor describe a mission trip the youth group was taking that he would be *just perfect for*. When he had been the first of his friends to get a steady girlfriend, he hadn't even needed to hide her from his parents the way Joey's older brother had tried to hide the girl he was always sneaking around with. Instead, Mark's parents had invited Sarah to come over for dinner. He had prepped her at one of Joey's late-night parties, as they passed a joint back and forth: *They're going to ask you about college, just make something up okay? Do your parents still go to church in town? That's fine, just tell them your grandparents are Baptist*. Still, Mark did try harder in school than Joey, had more fun than Sam, and was better at sports than either one of them.

When Joey sent the text, Mark was already ready to go. There was nothing else to do that night. Sarah would probably have gone to bed already, or else would be up working on homework. He couldn't watch TV without risking waking his parents, and the internet connection wasn't strong enough to do anything worthwhile. So instead he had been sitting

there, refreshing his phone screen and staring out the window opposite his bed, willing something to happen.

When Sam saw Joey's text, he was listening to his father fight with his stepmother Angie about which one of them should go deal with the twins, who had started to cry. All the walls in the house were thin enough, and his father's fights with Angie were regular enough, that he could practically read the script by heart. *You never want to help with them -- you told me when I moved in that you would treat them like your own and you never do. Don't you dare tell me I don't treat those kids like my own -- they're used to you and I'm tired when I get off of work, you know that.* The only thing that was missing from the usual fireworks this night was his sister, Clara, waking up in her bedroom across the hall from his and throwing her complaints into the mix. She had taken the stepmother and stepsisters much harder than he had. Most recently Clara had tried to pierce her own lip with a safety pin and had bled all over the new marble-patterned plastic countertops. She was mad because the twins had decided to fingerpaint her new shirt -- some sequined thing she had gotten at the mall with saved-up birthday money. But even when there was no good reason, Clara was mad about something -- she only ever used the cell phone that Angie had bought her, in an attempt to pacify her pre-teen rage, to text their mother. Their mother, to her discredit, never texted back. She had moved Texas, or maybe Louisiana, with the man she had left their father for and once the divorce papers were signed by all parties, she never got back in touch.

Sam was exhausted from running errands for Angie, and from running interference between Angie and his father, or between Angie and Clara. He didn't particularly like hanging out with Joey and Mark -- both of them were angrier and more rebellious than he ever managed to be -- but if he stayed in the house too long, he started to feel as though he was being boiled alive.

Joey, for all his bragging and bravado, had a way of convincing the rest of them to do things they didn't particularly intend or want to do. Joey's father was drunk more often than he was sober, and his mother spent her evenings chain-smoking in bed, whispering the rosary over and over. They had exerted all their parenting energy forcing his older brother into the Catholic school two towns over after they found his girlfriend's pregnancy test in the bathroom trash can. In the end, Joey's brother and his girl stopped having sex in bedrooms and started doing it in the truck that Josh used to commute to his new school.

Joey texted Mark and Sam when he was about to pass each of their houses so that they could meet him at the highway. This was not the first time he had invited them on a spontaneous midnight adventure. The first time Joey had stolen a six-pack of beer from the fridge (later his father would blame his mother for throwing it out, and Joey would feel sharp pinpricks of guilt), and driven them all out into the middle of a field, miles from any of their houses. They had sat in the back of Joey's father's truck shivering slightly and listening to the crying of coyotes in the distance. None of them had thought to bring a bottle opener so they opened the bottles by slamming them against the wall of the truck bed and prying at the tops with keys. By that time the beer had turned lukewarm from the heat of their hands. They drank it anyway, putting on a dramatic show of drunkenness for one another. Joey had them all home by three.

Now they found themselves again squeezed into the dusty truck. The floor was littered with trash -- discarded fast food wrappers and emptied cans of chewing tobacco.

Mark was the first one to speak when Joey started to accelerate down the road: "So -- what's the plan?"

"You'll see."

"Come on, Joey."

“I thought we should go pay old Bessy a visit.” They had given the dead cow this nickname from the school bus.

Sam jammed his elbow into Joey’s side, “Dude, that’s fucking disgusting.”

Joey continued driving, unperturbed, “You know you want to see it up close.”

Sam shook his head. “I really don’t.”

Mark spoke under his breath, “Dude, chill the fuck out. It’s dead. It’s just bones. Besides, I don’t have anything better to do. Do you?”

Sam sighed.

Joey pressed on the gas pedal, watching the speedometer slowly slide further and further up.

Grudgingly, when the speedometer floated just above eighty, Sam said, “Joey, if you keep going that fast you’re going to miss it.”

“I know where it is.”

“Have you guys heard of La Llorona?”

Sam and Joey both turned to look at Mark.

“La what?” Joey asked.

“La Llorona. It’s Spanish.”

“No shit, dude.”

Mark sighed. “Stop -- Sarah was telling me about it. It’s this ghost story. This lady got mad at her husband for cheating on her, so she murdered her kids in a river and now she goes looking for them every night, crying the whole time — llorona is crying in Spanish, or something like that.”

“It sounds like Sarah really doesn’t want you to cheat on her.”

“Shut up, Sam.”

Joey interrupted again. “That sounds like the ditch witch.”

“The *what?*”

“Do you see any rivers around here? It’s the ditch witch. My brother told me about her.”

“No way, it’s La Llorona. The ditch witch is a tractor or something.”

Before they could start an argument in earnest, Sam interrupted. “It doesn’t matter what it’s called -- that shit is kid stories. They just make it up to keep you from going out late.”

“No man, Sarah’s cousin in Mexico has big scars from it. All up and down her back.”

Sam put his hand on Mark’s thigh and feigned seriousness. “I hate to break it to you but Sarah is fucking with you.”

Joey kept his eyes on the thin patch of highway his headlights illuminated. “It sounds kind of hot doesn’t it?”

“What, Sarah fucking with Mark?” Sam gave a pelvic thrust.

Joey made a noise of disgust. “No -- the ditch witch.”

It was Mark and Sam’s turn to look at Joey. “Are you serious?” Mark asked.

“Sure, I mean, she drowned right so she’s wet and cold and when she finds you she tears your shirt open because she’s scratching your back so hard.”

“Yeah -- because she thinks you’re her *kid*.”

“I don’t care what she thinks I am.”

Sam interrupted again. “She’s probably not pretty anymore.”

“What?”

“I mean sure, maybe she was pretty to start with. But she’s walking through rivers or *ditches* all night looking for her kids. She’s been at it for years. She’s probably old and,” he looked at the road in front of them and then back down at his hands, “saggy.”

Joey looked over at him, “No man, ghosts don’t age. Everyone knows that. I bet she’s still the most beautiful girl you’ve ever seen.”

Mark spoke up. “I mean, what if Sam’s right and she’s started to rot, you know. And like, her skin’s coming loose or her eye’s hanging out or something. Or she smells like meat when you leave it too long in the fridge.”

“Do you think she knows how bad she smells?” Sam asked, almost laughing.

“I mean, her nose is full of water and probably blood and mud and shit, so probably not,” Mark said.

“I bet there’s maggots coming out of her mouth when she tries to talk. And I bet her nails are all long and overgrown, and down there” Sam gestured to his own lap and lowered his voice, “it’s just like one big bloody tar pit.”

Joey gripped the steering wheel and muttered under his breath.

“What was that?” Mark asked.

“You two are fucking disgusting.”

“Okay, well, we’ve definitely passed Bessy now,” Sam said.

“Fuck.”

“It’s fine, just turn around.”

Joey whipped the car into a U-turn and the tires screeched against the pavement. The force of the turn caused the car to tip hard to the left.

“Jesus -- would it have killed you to slow down?” Sam asked.

Joey turned his headlights up to high. They hadn’t seen any other vehicles the entire time they had been out. “Just point it out to me when you see it okay.”

Sam and Mark nodded.

They drove in silence until the familiar form of the corpse appeared on the side of the highway. Joey pulled the car off the road and into the ditch, inches from the cow’s bones and rags of weathered hide. He switched off first the engine, then the headlights.

In the sudden dark, their eyes struggled to make out even the familiar shapes around them. The moonlight made the tan of the cow's skin and the white of its bones glow faintly, and for another moment none of them said anything.

Joey was the first one to step out of the truck into the cold night air. Sam and Mark followed him.

"So what are we supposed to do now?" Sam asked.

Mark shrugged, thinking at least he'd exchanged the noisiness of his house for the silence of the night.

Joey pulled a pocketknife from his jeans and flicked the blade open. "Let's put our initials in it."

"What?" Sam was incredulous.

"In the bones. We can just carve them in."

"Why?" Sam asked.

"Why *not*?"

"Whatever, I'm getting back in the truck," Sam said, checking his phone. Mark followed him and the two of them sat in the closed cab, bouncing their legs up and down and pretending they weren't cold, while Joey stood over the carcass.

In the moonlight the exposed ribcage and the thin stretches of taut, sun-bleached hide looked abstract, removed from their original form and purpose. The heart and eyes and blood had disappeared into the dirt, or into the mouths of scavengers, months ago and there was nothing left that particularly signaled life.

Mark and Joey sat, waiting, checking the time on their phones, watching Joey scrape his initials into one of the animal's hip bones.

Mark spoke first. "This is fucked up."

"You don't have to tell me twice."

When Joey got back into the truck, he turned the truck on, then switched the high beams on as well. He cranked the radio up and as they listened to something loud and grating they flew forward on the highway, back towards their respective houses. It was almost one and all three of them felt as though they had effectively run out of things to do with the rest of the evening.

They were almost halfway back to Sam's house when Mark spotted the strange streams of light further ahead, in the ditch.

"Do you guys see that?"

"See what?"

"Up there in the ditch."

Sam laughed. "Better watch out -- the ditch witch is coming for you, dude."

Joey joined in and wagged the fingers of his right hand at Mark. "She's gonna get you."

"No seriously guys. What do you think that is?"

"It's the ditch witch," Sam and Joey said in unison in singsong voices. Sam had decided to give into the absurdity of the entire situation and Joey was tired -- the kind of sleepy where everything struck him as amusing.

"Shit -- you guys I think that's a car."

"What?"

"No, it's definitely a car. Look, up there on the side of the road."

It took Sam a moment to comprehend the shape. In the dark the headlights projected forward weakly into the ditch. The wheels stuck up in the air, the cab of the car was crumpled against the dirt. "Jesus Christ. Joey pull over up there."

Joey slammed to a stop next to the wreck, and the truck's high beams illuminated the grisly scene. He looked over at the wreck, and then shut them off with a shaking hand.

“Someone call 9-11,” Mark said, pulling at his pockets, suddenly struggling to get his phone.

Joey tried to steady his hands by gripping the steering wheel. “Is there a person in there?”

“Well the car sure as fuck didn’t wreck itself.” Sam had spotted part of a face, like some surreal dream of a face. There was a thick path of crusted blood leading from the upside-down nose, the pale patch of lips and chin left exposed. Sam opened the truck door and climbed out, walking to the edge of the wrecked, overturned car. Trash from the backseat of the car had spilled all over the ditch -- bright McDonald’s and Wendy’s wrappers blowing along the roadside. The smell of spilled beer mixed with the stench of gasoline and burned rubber. Glass sparkled faintly and crunched underneath his shoes as he approached the shattered window it had fallen from.

He could hear her before he could see anything. Her breath came very slowly, rasping. The way cartoon monsters sounded in animated haunted houses. He yelled back at the truck.

“She’s breathing -- Mark call fucking 9-11.”

“I’m trying.” Mark’s hands were shaking so hard that the buttons on his phone seemed to shrink with each movement.

Fear jolted down Joey’s spine. He slapped Mark’s phone out of his hands. “Guys, maybe we should stop and think about this for a minute.”

Mark felt around for his phone on the floor of the truck, “You can’t be fucking serious.”

“I mean it. If the police come we’re going to have to give statements. They’re going to call our parents.”

Sam turned around and looked back at them from where he was crouched, next to the overturned car. “She needs help. We’ve got to be an hour from town. She needs help *now*.”

Joey felt his voice start to crack, “I don’t have a license. You know that. They’re going to ask for it.”

Mark rubbed his hands against his jeans. “There’s got to be a good Samaritan clause. They won’t care about your license.”

“This is my dad’s truck. You think he knows I’m using it? Sam, you really don’t care if they call your dad? You know the step-witch’ll put you on lockdown.”

“Shut up,” Sam shot back, but too quietly for either of his friends in the truck to hear. He rested his hand on the cold metal side of her car. Her hair hung down in a tangled wave, brushing the roof of the car. In a photograph or from far away, this suspended curtain of hair might have looked elegant, but as it was he could see snot spilling out of her nose on top of the thick red-brown streak. He could see the place where her lip had split and, when she opened her mouth gaping fish-like, he could see a metallic filling in one of her molars. Something about her torso looked wrong, something had crunched inward, and he watched her chest jerk with each slow, drawn-out breath.

Joey turned to Mark who had started to dial again. “What about you? Got to keep your reputation, Saint Mark.”

“My parents won’t care -- they’ll find some way to spin it. They basically think me hanging out with you is community service, trying to save the heathen.” The same phrases they threw back and forth as regular jokes in the school cafeteria sounded harsh and flat in the cold dark of the night. When Mark spoke he watched the heat leave his body in a visible cloud and then slowly fade away.

Joey’s hands had started to shake. They weren’t listening to him and they didn’t understand. At least they hadn’t been drinking or smoking this time. Still, the truck wasn’t his and the last thing he needed was his dad screaming at him about it with his thick whisky-

breath. The last thing his mother needed was another reason to sob quietly, when she thought neither of her children would hear her, into her rose-patterned sheets.

“Hi, I’m calling to report an accident on highway 49--”

“Get the fuck out of my truck.”

“What?”

“You heard me, get out.”

“No, sorry, Yes I can hear you, hold on.” Mark got out of the truck, looking incredulously back at Joey. He held the phone away from his face. “How are we supposed to explain how we got here?”

“I don’t know. Make something up.” And then Joey was speeding away as fast as the truck could go. He could no longer hear Mark speaking slowly into the phone. It took a bit longer to clear Sam and the overturned car from his rearview mirror but soon enough he had managed that and by then it seemed he was already more than halfway home.

Sam didn’t turn around when Joey drove away. The girl in the truck had opened her eyes and looked at him. Her long eyelashes were clumped with crusted blood. She blinked a few times. She started to clear her throat, winced in pain, and let her head fall back. Then he watched as she tried to move her left arm, before she looked at it and saw that it had been crushed between the side of the seat and the car door.

Sam put a hand on the edge of the car window, feeling the jagged edges of broken glass. He was afraid to touch her and equally afraid that she would die if he looked away. Goosebumps had formed along her trapped arm, and he didn’t know whether she was shaking from cold or pain or shock.

“It’s okay, shh, everything’s going to be okay,” he whispered to her as they waited in the otherwise silent night for the ambulance to arrive.

Cattle Guard

He wasn't sure how long the cow had been stuck in the cattle guard before he noticed it. She was still alive when he went over to her, but the angle of her leg under the solid black mass of her body was sharp and unnatural. She struggled, trying to pull herself out of the grate her foot had fallen into, but it was no use. Maybe she had been startled, or had been running for some reason. Either way she had caught a hoof in between the pipes and her body had lurched forward over it.

Usually the cows didn't try to step on the thick, spaced bars because they could see through them and cows were careful enough that they rarely stepped onto something they could see straight through. As soon as he saw the intersection of leg and narrow metal bar, though, he knew there would be no saving her. It was a thick and stirring feeling at the bottom of his stomach, like when a rabbit darted under the wheels of the truck too fast for you to swerve, but you knew for a split second before impact that you were going to hit it.

He always felt compelled to look — a need to kill the thin hope that the tires had simply rolled over caliche or a solid stick. Every time he regretted it when he saw the shocking splash of red and pink against the dirt road.

He didn't recognize the cow and his first thought was gratitude — it wasn't one of the heifers he knew by sight, or the one he had bottle fed for the first month. When he looked into the large black eyes — past the impossibly long, batting eyelashes — they were calmer than he expected, resigned. He could see his own reflection in them. Flies gathered near the corners of her eyes and she twitched her ears to scare them away. He knew he would have to get the gun, but he didn't want to leave her alone, so he waited, gently stroking the rough fur of her forehead, wishing he could lull her to sleep like an infant.

Roadside Crosses

That boy never came to confession, just to mass to sit with his mother and his older brother, and even this he did sparingly. This was why Father Mateo almost didn't recognize him at first, and it struck him that he had never heard that boy's voice before, just heard his name — Joey — in his mother's confessions, her voice cracking in worry when she spoke about him.

As Father Mateo stood waiting to greet parishioners after mass he could hear what Joey told another boy about the accident as their parents talked. Joey, tall and thin, with a thin new mustache and beard, leaned close to his friend, but spoke in a stage whisper that was not difficult to hear.

“There was so much fucking blood — all down her face and in her hair — the car was upside down, you know, and she was stuck in the seat — her nose must have hit something too because it was bleeding down into her eyes.”

The boy Joey told this to was a regular at mass and confession who looked equal parts eager and queasy.

The story made Father Mateo think for a moment of Christ's blood, and then of the crucifix in his childhood church, and then of the first time he had realized that Jesus had actually been a man, and had felt things the way humans did, had suffered and bled and *hurt* the same way he could have.

The crucifix had hung above the altar and he had seen it every Sunday since before he could remember, but that Sunday, he actually looked at it. Jesus was starving-thin on the cross, the hollow under his ribs painful-looking and concave. His head was downturned, resting on his chest. His face looked tired — resigned lips, large, sad eyes. Painted blood ran down from the thorn crown nestled in his hair in thick rivulets, forming a red curtain all the way around the circumference of his skull. In each palm a thick nail, the size and shape of a

railroad spike, had been driven through, and the blood flowed here too. The gash in his side spread almost the length of a rib and had its own red flow. His feet had been pushed together and a single nail driven through both of them.

Mateo imagined how the rough wood of the cross must have felt against Jesus' back. How could anyone stay conscious in that much pain, the whole weight of your body hanging only by your own bleeding hands? No wonder he had cried out in pain and asked God why. How could he not? Mateo looked down at his own soft palms while the priest introduced the reading for the day. He had a thin scar on his left pointer finger from the time he had stolen his older brother's pocket knife and tried to cut a branch off of a tree with it. It had bled a terrifying amount, a soft red dripping onto the ground. When he had realized fully what was happening he had held it tightly with his other hand and the bleeding had stopped, but for a moment he had stood, stunned, knife in one hand, staring down at the blood welling up from inside. If his small finger had bled so much, how much more blood would Jesus have lost on the cross.

To the side of the altar, Our Lady of Guadalupe had appeared in an alcove, demurely looking down at her own hands, clasped in prayer. He had often imagined her looking across the space between them at her crucified son. He had imagined his own mother looking at him, nailed up and suffering like that. In the Bible, Mary cried at the foot of the cross, but Our Lady always looked so calm.

And now this young woman, Lexi, had died, not with the serenity of Mary on her deathbed, but with the bloody suffering of Christ. Father Mateo had read in the papers last week about the girl's death. This morning, the women who came to set up flowers before mass had continued to whisper about Lexi Campbell. The four women came every Sunday to set up. In their tan and black dresses and tousled highlighted hair he sometimes thought they resembled chickens in a yard. They moved busily about the sanctuary, gently repositioning

blossoms and quietly chatting with one another. The light shone in through the stained glass windows, falling on the wooden pews (replaced last year after a donation drive). Thin beams of sunlight reached out towards the base of the crucifix which hung behind the altar. This Jesus looked tight-lipped and grim, but his wounds were thin and symbolic. His face was lifted to the sky, calm and resigned. A painting of Jesus, dressed in white robes, with a thick beam of light shining from his chest hung next to the crucifix. The Stations of the Cross, on the back wall, were abstract art — a project done by one of the girls who had gone through confirmation classes three years ago now. Jesus and the men who had tortured and killed him had all been transformed into dark jagged shapes (the shape which was meant to symbolize Jesus cast a faint yellow glow while the others had only gray shadows). A geometric tangle in each painting surrounded a stark white cross. There was no blood here, not even the suffering face of Christ. Mateo couldn't help but compare them to Easter parades in Mexico City, where he had watched men sweat under the enormous weight of massive wooden crosses as they carried them through the streets. The wood rubbed their bare shoulders raw.

As the women had moved through the sanctuary that morning, in the early light, their talk about Lexi's death had risen above a whisper.

She had been young, and only a few years into her marriage. No one in Lexi's family (nor her husband's) was a Catholic, but it was the nature of this town that everyone in the pews would have known Lexi and her husband anyway.

The day before, when Joey's mother had come in for confession, wringing her hands, she had brought up the accident.

“Did you hear about the girl?”

He nodded. He had been shocked by the sheer number of car accidents when he first arrived in the town, almost ten years ago now, but it happened every year or two on the roads,

cars slipping on black ice or hit head on by drunk drivers. The dead in these cases were almost always young. “God permits things we can’t understand sometimes.”

Cynthia looked up from her lap. “Joey found her. He was out doing God knows what” she paused, realizing she had used God’s name in vain in the middle of confession, “out with those friends of his and they found her and he left. He just drove away. All his friends stayed. Those good-for-nothing friends he’s always out with on the weekends, but all the rest of them stayed.”

He rested a hand on hers and repeated himself. “It wasn’t your son’s fault that the car crashed. It wasn’t Joey’s fault that she died — it doesn’t sound like there was anything anyone could have done. God does things we can’t understand.” He didn’t know that there was nothing anyone could have done to help Lexi, not really, but he thought that hearing it might help her, and he knew it would make no difference to Lexi now either way.

“He should have tried to help her. He could have *tried*. He could have done *something*.”

“We do the best we can in times of crisis.”

“Well, he should have done better. I should have raised him to do better. What did I do wrong that he acts like this? He’s only fourteen, he runs around drunk with his friends — just like his father and his brother — when I heard someone wrecked their car out there, you know what I thought?”

He shook his head, but he knew already. This was a new manifestation of an old worry. Cynthia came in every week to talk about Joey, to wring her hands, to grip her wooden rosary beads with shaking, white knuckles. She was worried about him, but not enough to try to confront him. It sounded like it wouldn’t have done much good if she tried. Joey didn’t listen to his mother, just like his older brother and father hadn’t before him. So Cynthia came every week to Father Mateo for confession and worried and talked and wrung her hands at the one man in her life who was obligated to listen and respond. She had come to confession every

week the entire time he had been in this town, and he had watched the gray in her hair spread over the years. In the last two years, she almost always wore the same dress to mass, and he wondered if it was the only nice thing she had to wear. It was a long black dress, usually with the same black cardigan over it — she wore it to funerals and weddings in the church as well, sometimes with different scarves in the winter.

“I thought it could have been him dead on the side of the road. He could drive into that ditch any time he takes the truck. He could drive into someone else. I know he drives drunk sometimes. I don’t know where those kids get the beer but they do. I see it in the truck sometimes, on the floor, all the empty cans.” She stopped again, her voice thick in her throat, “I mean what did that girl ever do wrong in her life?”

“Even children of the best parents make mistakes. We’re God’s children and we make mistakes all the time, but he forgives anyway. You have to forgive him.”

She looked up at him, her eyes glassy, holding back tears. “What would you have done?”

“What do you mean?”

“What would you have done if you found her?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know that — I *can’t* know that.”

“What did I do to make him like this?”

He made his voice firmer this time. “You have to forgive yourself. God will forgive you if you just ask him, and his forgiveness is perfect.” Every week he told her this, in some variation. That she had to forgive herself for the sins of her husband and her children. That she had tried, was trying, and that God was the only one who was capable of being a perfect parent. Each week, after he said it he thought she might finally understand, and that this might be the week that she stopped blaming herself so harshly. But she always came back the next week, carrying her worry and her guilt like a security blanket.

“What good does it do if God forgives me and my son drives off the road and kills himself and his friends? Or hits some poor girl?”

They sat in silence for a moment. He looked at her thin hands and the tarnished wedding ring she had acquired long before he met her. He wondered what it must be like to love an imperfect child so imperfectly. His advice must sound hollow to her. He wasn't a father. He couldn't know how she felt, not really.

“You have to trust that God will guide you through this if you let him.”

She nodded. “I'm sorry, Father.”

“There's no need to apologize to me.”

She interlaced her fingers and looked down at them, instead of at Father Mateo.

“Father, God, I'm sorry. I'm trying to learn to love like you do, I promise. But it's hard. It's so hard. I love him and I just want him to be okay. I want him to be a good boy and stay out of trouble. Every night when I wake up and he's not in his bed I pray but I'm worried it's not enough.”

Father Mateo had seen a lot of death in the nine years he had been in this small dusty town. It was a different kind of death than he had grown up with. Here everything was sanitized and cordoned off. The first two years had been difficult — he wished the bishop had explained to him how different American churches were, how different the American Catholics could be. Because it wasn't just death, it was the whole way they knew and practiced their faith. They were quieter here, less colorful, as though the endless dust and wind had somehow penetrated the church and coated everything in a sedative layer of beige.

After he finished seminary, after a year working at a small parish outside of the city, but close enough that he could drive back and visit his parents once a week, the bishop had come and talked to him about transferring to a church in the US. The bishop had told him that the

churches in the states needed an infusion of life. He had laughed off the idea at first, but when he mentioned it to his mother, her face lit up and he knew that he would take it to make her proud.

During the first year, he had seen some of them laugh at his accent during English mass on Sundays. During Spanish mass, there was no mocking of his accent, but that congregation was no different, really. Even though they spoke the same language, he felt as though he was translating something for them, as though perhaps, they had grown ashamed of the physicality of religion in Mexico, the same way some of them switched to English mass and struggled through confession with him in English, refusing to speak in their shared tongue.

Eventually, he had decided that he would at least have to begin by meeting them where they were, with a kind of religion that felt familiar. When he had started, the office chair behind the desk had struck him as too comfortable and soft, but now he was used to it, its worn leather and thick cushioning.

Now, at least once a week, he drove two hours on desolate highways to the nearest major hospital to visit the sick and wounded and dying. He had been called to perform last rites in hospital beds and in sagging ranch homes at the far end of long dirt roads. There was a desperation to some of the dying that was the scariest part. Their eyes went wide and wild. One old woman, thin hair still up in a bleached perm, had asked him if she could still go to Hell, even though she had confessed. She started to list a series of sins to him, rambling before he could cut her off and assure her that God knew she had asked for repentance.

But I did it in high school — I knew we were never going to get married but I did it anyway. When I had the miscarriage I was grateful, I felt so relieved. She had been in tears by this point, her narrow wrinkled fingers shaking as she reached for a tissue. He had handed her one from the table next to her hospital bed. He should have told her what prayers to say, or how many times she could loop around the rosary as penance, but she was so old and small

in the bed and her hands were shaking so much he laid a hand on hers and said gently *God forgives all.*

Confessions like these surprised him at first. In the churches he had grown up in, down in Mexico, confession happened in a booth, a little screen separating priest and parishioner. Here they happened in a small room off of the main sanctuary, he sitting behind a desk and the often-nervous confessor sitting on a couch nearby. When he had started, the office chair behind the desk had struck him as too comfortable and soft, but now he was used to it, its worn leather and thick cushioning. The walls were lined with religious artwork that pre-dated him. Another replication of Jesus with the rays of light bursting from his heart, a few poems, the famous picture of footprints along a beach. They had seemed overly saccharine to him at first, but now he was used to their soft colors and the cloying floral background of the poems. They brightened the windowless room, and they gave parishioners something to look at. They almost never looked him directly in the eye, but when they did there was something about it that made him want to be more lenient.

He had only served for a year in one of the Mexico City parishes near his seminary before he was sent here, to this dusty town, and so he didn't know how different it would be elsewhere, but the first time he had gone to a dying person's bedside by himself he had been shocked by how long they had held onto guilt. Some of them listed off sins at length — ones that had never come up at their weekly confessions. They were eager suddenly to tell someone about the dark and heavy things they had been hiding all these years, and in the telling alone there was a kind of release. It had been almost ten years since seminary now and he felt every day the need to stress God's forgiveness, his gentleness, that any sin could be pardoned given enough earnest desire to repent. The difficult part was pushing any of them to understand this perfect forgiveness, that they could be forgiven for something that they themselves would not forgive.

The was the thing he had struggled to convince Wayne of when he came to confession after accidentally shooting his own granddaughter. He had sat opposite this tall, broad man who had shot his own granddaughter in the sand-hills and watched his weathered hands shake fiercely.

Forgive me father, for I have sinned — he had stopped there, a sob catching in his throat. He wore pressed Levi jeans and dusty cowboy boots which threatened to peel apart at the sole, his sun-bleached cowboy hat resting in his lap. He picked his hat up and ran his hands nervously around the brim, trying to gather himself together enough to speak again.

I made a terrible mistake. I... he looked down at the hat... I killed her. My granddaughter. I shot her. We were hunting and she... he looked down at his shoes, shuffled first one of them then the other forward and then back... we were hunting and she ran out in front of me and I don't know I should have stopped. I should have seen, don't you think? I don't know how I didn't see. I don't know how I didn't notice. Why didn't I stop? Why couldn't I stop?

He looked pleadingly at Father Mateo, tears slipping slowly down his weathered skin. The entire time he had known this man he had been the perfect stoic cowboy. He rested his cowboy hat on the pew next to himself during mass, and kept his spine rigid and straight. He frowned gravely at the bouncing granddaughters when they giggled. He was a tall man but now, leaned over resting his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, it was possible for the first time to imagine what he might have looked like as a child.

There were other people waiting for confession at the time surely, but he had hoped they would all understand that it was this one who needed him the most. He could already imagine what they might say when they came in. There would be the teenagers (Jackie, Ashley, Allison, Ben, Daniel) that came in to ask forgiveness for drinking and sex, and then came back the next week saying the exact same thing. There would be the mothers (Jennifer,

Shaylene, Amanda) worrying about jealousy and whether they were being un-Christian towards the other members of the PTA at the high school, and telling him why they had signed their children up for cheerleader or football camp instead of Vacation Bible School. Sometimes, though this was a habit that he was not proud of, when people came in he would try to guess what they might confess. Ashley had gotten a purity ring for Christmas that year, a beautiful gold ring that her father had bought for her, and she always looked at her hands and twisted it around her finger and told him that she had sinned with Ben again *I promise I try not to, but Father, it's so hard*. Shaylene would always say something about her pride — it was her way of bragging while expressing remorse. After a while, one could get good at predicting these kinds of things.

But for now, all of them would have to wait. He turned his attention back to Wayne.

“This wasn’t a sin — it was an accident.”

“I don’t think God cares if it was an accident or not.” Wayne ground the heel of one of his worn boots against the light blue carpet.

“You didn’t murder her.”

“She’s still dead.” Wayne’s voice cracked and he looked down at his lap. When he spoke again his words were softer and more hesitant. “I pulled the trigger. The words don’t make any difference.”

“God forgives all.”

“Even if he could forgive me — how could my son forgive me? Or Julia? How could she forgive me for killing her little girl? What about Sarah? She watched her sister die because of me.” His voice had risen until he was almost shouting. Father Mateo wondered absently if the people waiting outside could hear.

He looked the man in the eye. “You didn’t do this on purpose. God’s love and forgiveness is perfect and all you need to do is ask.”

There was a long silence. “I don’t think you understand. How am I supposed to ask them to forgive me? I wouldn’t forgive me if it was the other way around.”

At the funeral, they had all seemed to grieve equally, though Wayne had sat stiff in the front row, not touching his son or daughter-in-law. His son was almost as tall as Wayne was, but less weather-beaten. He worked as an accountant in town instead of out on the family ranch. They had always been a striking family at mass. His wife with the long blonde hair, always in perfect curls, and the two little girls sandwiched between their parents, dressed up in colorful dresses, with ribbons tied into their thin blonde hair. The picture was not complete now without the second granddaughter, but Wayne’s son and daughter-in-law had simply moved closer together, both of them almost sitting on top of their remaining daughter, as though they could make the absence disappear. Sarah, the little girl’s sister, sat between her sobbing parents, dressed in the same pink dress she had worn to Easter services, and which she had now started to outgrow. She looked equal parts confused and distressed.

He believed what he had told Wayne about forgiveness, but he knew that Wayne didn’t believe it. He wasn’t sure that Wayne *could* believe it.

The parents of the little girl stopped attending confession and then mass gradually, but the old man stayed devout in his weekly appearances.

After the confession, Father Mateo dreamt for weeks afterwards of a little girl wandering the sand-hills, a deep bleeding wound in her chest, calling out for her grandfather. He had gone out to the sand-hills once, when a family invited him to a picnic they were hosting, and he had been immediately underwhelmed. A long row of low hills, dotted with scraggly grasses and weeds, spread out for miles on end. The children who had accompanied them on this trip took turns rolling down the hills, or sliding down the sand on sleds originally intended for snow. The wind had picked up halfway into their meal, and the sand had stung as it whipped against his face, each grain hitting his skin like a small bite. In his dreams, the

bloody girl wandered slowly among the sand, slipping up to her ankles in it, struggling to gain enough traction to climb the shallow hills. She reminded him of the images of Christ he had seen in church growing up, that starving bloody Christ on the cross, a look of anguish on his bony face.

The next Wednesday, he got a call from far out in the countryside to perform last rights for an aging rancher who had caught pneumonia and was proving unable to get rid of it. Driving there, he passed the spot where Lexi had driven into the ditch and died. Her car was long gone, of course, but in the dim light of the sunset the broken glass glittered. Someone had erected a slim white cross.

In the town he had grown up in these kinds of crosses bristled up next to the roads, thickly, some vying for attention in front of one another in more or less the same spot. Each one was wrapped in fake flowers and bright ribbons. The ones for children were distinguishable by the pile of stuffed animals surrounding their bases. This cross was plain and white, and with the colors of the setting sun it seemed to glow.

They had always reminded him of miniature Día de los muertos altars — a place the dead might stop as they wandered. He had been prone to such superstitions as a child — he had left out a piece of cake for his grandmother the year after she died when he was six years old and in the morning a bite had been missing. He was certain she had come in the night to visit him and had enjoyed the cake. Later, he realized his father had probably taken a bite in the middle of the night, or the mice he could sometimes hear scratching in the walls had found it. Still, there was something comforting about making space in your home for the dead to rest. He felt fairly certain that whoever had put the cross up for her didn't believe that Lexi would visit the cross, but as he drove past it he wondered what she might look like kneeling next to it.

He didn't stop, he kept himself even from slowing down, and he continued on his way to the rancher. The sunset looked like an egg yolk that had broken open and was spreading across the flat land in the distance. Deep yellow, and thin streaks of orange shone brilliantly against the shrubby plains, which were interrupted only by occasional outbreaks of sagebrush or mesquite.

The last rites themselves were strikingly ordinary, as much as these things could be. The old man didn't want to vary from the tradition as it had been established so they were done rather quickly. He had been confined to his bed for a few days, and he had the look about him of someone who was dying. Still, his voice had been strong and thick — a bit startling coming from the withered shape on the bed.

The man's daughter had graciously welcomed Father Mateo — she was the one who had called him to schedule the visit — offering him cookies and coffee or tea. She was a stern-looking woman with close-cropped hair and dark blue scrubs (the solid color embellished with a pattern of "W.W.J.D" in white script font). Father Mateo thought that she looked familiar from his visits to the hospital in town. After the last rites were done, he had tried to start a conversation with her. She cut him off before he could finish his sentence. "No disrespect meant, but I'm a Baptist and I'm not planning on changing any time soon. Do you need any more tea for the road?"

The drive back seemed shorter than the one there — which always seemed to be the way with these roads and this time he let himself stop at the roadside cross. He pulled over on the side of the road and parked, but left his car running so the headlights illuminated it. As he walked towards the cross, broken glass crunched under his feet, already mixing down into the sandy dirt. The cross was plain, with just her name written on it in thick black letters. Someone had taped a photo inside of a plastic bag to the base — Lexi and her husband on

their wedding day. She was beautiful, though she looked young and slightly scared in the picture underneath the thick layers of makeup.

He looked up because he heard a noise, a rustling in the brush, and for a moment he thought he saw two figures in the pasture — a thin young woman, hair and face obscured with something dark, carrying a little girl. His first instinct was to brush the sight aside, to rub his eyes until the figures disappeared, but instead he stayed focused on them, watching as the shadowy shapes walked slowly farther and farther away. Then he glanced back at the car and when he looked back at the pasture the light of the headlights had sapped his night vision.

He was surprised by how willing he was to believe in what he had seen, to quickly and gently quiet the skepticism that rose to mind. It had been an oddly comforting sight — one that made him think of home, and that made him miss his mother. He wished that he could have captured the moment somehow for Wayne, to show him that the little girl wasn't alone after all, that these lost two had found each other, that she had someone to take care of her now. But he knew even before the thought had fully formed, that it would be no use. None of the parishioners here would believe him if he described this kind of sight, least of all Wayne, so he got back into his car and drove the rest of the way back into town. He did not dream of the girl again.

Homestead

You moved to this ranch in a covered wagon when you were three years old and you used to tell your children you could remember sitting in the wagon all the way from Louisiana, but that was a lie. But the truth is: you moved here when you were three years old with your brother and with your mother and your father, and with all of you in the wagon it must have taken a very long time.

You know this story, and your children know this story, and your grandchild knows this story but now they sit you down at the dinner table and tell you they have decided that you need to move to Golden Acres, which is just another name for another kind of hospital. And you tell them that you'd rather die right here, out in the pasture even, but they tell you to stop being so melodramatic and they pull out brochures that you can't read even with your glasses, so you sit quietly at the table while they talk at you but really to each other.

You moved here when you were three years old and when you turned fourteen your father gave you an acre of land and told you to grow whatever you wanted and you planted the whole thing yourself by hand that summer – cotton and corn and in the corner a sad, thirsty strawberry plant that never did bear any fruit that you could get to before the birds did. You planted that acre yourself in the sun but none of this changes the fact that last week you slipped in the shower after taking Ambien and the blood thinners made the thin grazed patch on your knee bleed for hours — a pool of red all over the bathroom tiles.

You moved to this ranch in a covered wagon when you were three years old and, though you know there is no use saying it now, you will not let them move you off of it until you are too weak to stop them and they push you into whatever new kind of wagon — an ambulance or a hearse — they have to call.

Double Lines

When the blue lines appeared, parallel like the twin lines on the Do Not Pass stretches of highway, she shook the stick, to check that those lines wouldn't dissolve. She took two more tests in a row — finishing out the three pack she had been able to afford with the cash in the bottom of her purse. She had gone through the self-checkout lane, self-consciously curled around her cart, the tests covered with a box of sanitary pads and a tabloid magazine. She didn't need this making it back to her mother's quilting circle just yet.

All three tests, which she took after chugging three bottles of Lipton iced tea from the fridge, showed the same result. Jess held her breath, looking at the plastic sticks arranged in a neat line on the bathroom counter. She counted backwards, trying to do the math in her head. She hadn't let herself even imagine this as a possibility when her period was late, or when it stayed that way. Even when she had locked the bathroom door (even though she was all alone in the apartment) and torn open the inoffensive floral packaging, she had let herself think the whole thing was like a bad joke. What a relief it would be to see the tests come back negative.

She looked all the tests, each with its own pair of blue lines, and at her phone right next to them on the bathroom counter. She really should call Luke. They had talked about marriage after all, sort of, in the way he had of talking about something without saying any of the words straight out. If she called him, she knew he would go out and get a ring. He would try to make it a surprise, but there was only one thing for a Good Christian Couple to do when something like this happened. As soon as she told Luke about the tests her future would become their future, snapped into place. She still cringed at the thought of herself as a Good Christian Girl — after all, hadn't she outgrown that fantasy in high school? — but that was how everyone else in the town saw her now that she had started going back to church with Luke. Her father had called her a few weeks ago and after he had interrogated her thoroughly

about the relationship (his first concern had been their age gap — she had just turned twenty, and Luke was almost twenty-six) but when she told him that Luke had her going back to church, he stopped asking questions and told her how proud he was, how happy he was that she was back in the church, how sorry he was that he couldn't visit to go with her. He had rarely come back to town after the divorce, and she had gotten used to seeing him only on holidays or over the summer.

Before she started going back to church, she had tried to explain to Luke how she felt about it, four months into their relationship, as they lay in her bed, breathing quietly and in sync.

He responded bluntly to her hesitant probing: *Any child of mine will be raised Baptist and that's all there is to it.*

You know I was raised Baptist.

He had nodded.

You know I don't go anymore.

He shook his head.

Church was so harsh, Luke. I don't want anyone else being that afraid. I used to cry thinking about going to Hell. Every night. I can't have been older than ten. Kids aren't supposed to feel like that.

As soon as she had realized what sin was, she had found it lurking everywhere. On the playground in fourth grade she fell and scraped her knee and when the blood came welling up she said *God Damn It*, and then felt the hot flash of guilt in her stomach.

As though church wasn't enough, her father insisted on sending her to a youth bible camp, hours away from home.

The boy, who wasn't any older than she was, had leaned towards her, his face distorted by the flickering of the campfire. *Do you know what happens to sinners?*

Jess nodded, even though she knew it wasn't really a question.

Sure enough, he answered anyway. *They burn in hell.* He picked up a stick from the ground and threw it onto the fire, then he looked back at her. *They burn like that. Do you want to burn like that?*

She watched as the stick burst into flame, then transformed into a glowing ember. She shook her head.

His voice was taunting. *I can't hear you.*

No. I don't want to go to hell.

Do you know they have lakes of fire there? And birds peck off your skin and peck out your eyes, and it never ends, it just gets worse and worse.

Jess nodded again, leaning away from him to get another marshmallow to toast. She looked across the fire at the youth camp counselor, busy talking to one of the female counselors, whispering something in her ear -- she slapped gently at his thigh and laughed.

The boy moved closer to her. *Do you ever sin?*

I think we probably all sin, sometimes.

I don't.

She shrugged. *Okay.*

Aren't you afraid of going to Hell?

She shrugged and made an excuse to move to another spot where her friends were singing a song about Jesus, but that night she dreamed an endless wave of fire swept over her. In the dream she couldn't move as it came towards her, roaring. Inside the flame the faces of people she loved melted as they screamed in pain. She woke up sweaty and she had to put her hand on the rough wood of the bunk ladder to remember that it wasn't real.

The best part of growing out of the whole thing was, when her parents split up and her mother didn't insist on her going to church each week, getting to do whatever she wanted,

laugh at the guilt and fear when it came, push it off and get on with her life. She still sometimes went on youth group retreats because all of her friends were going, and she found herself awake at night, desperately wanting to whisper to her friends in their adjacent sleeping bags, and ask if any of them *really* believed in all of it.

Luke turned his head to stare at her.

You'd rather they end up in Hell? A little fear never hurt a kid.

She got up from where she had been lying with her cheek on his chest and began looking for her shirt on the floor.

As she put her bra back on, she looked straight at him. *If I'd known you were so concerned about Hell, I could have saved you some trouble.*

Jess, stop. I can't control myself around you — you know that.

Don't you dare blame this on me.

Jess, stop, let's pray about it. God forgives. We have to get better at staying away from temptation like this.

Her shoes were in the other room next to his couch, so she stood barefooted by the bed staring at him in disbelief. *You're the one who started it.*

He had sat up, and looked down at his hands, began cracking his knuckles, one by one. He knew this drove her crazy, or at least he should have known after the number of times she had asked him to stop. She wanted to grab his hands and hold them still. He looked up at her, sadly. *I just keep thinking about you with him.*

Jesus, Luke. You have to get over that. It happened once. We were in high school, I was bored and he had a car, we never even dated.

After she had told him about the first one, after he had admitted to being a virgin, she had known that she couldn't tell him about the other two. The out of town student at the community college who she had met at a friend's party, the rodeo boy she had run into at the

county fair. Luke was so unnerved by the thought of her pimply high school fling that she could barely imagine how he might compare himself to either of these men.

You had a condom with you. You knew we were going to do it.

She shook her head. *You should have had a condom too.* The first time, when she had been fifteen and she had done it in the back of a car there had been no condom. She had panicked afterwards, shoplifted pregnancy tests, even contemplated going back to church to pray. When her period came again, she drove two towns over and bought a box of condoms. She always kept at least one in her purse now.

When Luke invited her over to his apartment that night to watch a movie and eat dinner together she had assumed that they had both known what was going to happen. It had happened before. He always started the evening sitting across from her at the table, smiling at her in that shy way of his, telling her (as though somehow embarrassed or frightened by it) how beautiful he thought she was. The first time they had kissed, deeply, and his hands had begun to skim the bottom edges of her worn t-shirt, he had pulled back and told her that he had to stop himself, that they really shouldn't go any further. But half an hour later he had been the one to tentatively lift away first her shirt, then her bra. The first time she had opened her purse and produced a condom, he had protested awkwardly, saying that God didn't approve of birth control. But they both knew what pregnancy would mean, and when push came to shove, he always gave in to the momentum of their evenings.

She had left in a huff that night, after he blamed her for bringing a condom, before he could get dressed so that he couldn't follow her out to her car, and though she had tried to pretend that none of it bothered her, by the time she hit the highway she had been in tears. Luke had a way of making her feel wasted and dirty, sinful, in a way that she hadn't since childhood.

The next day, though, he came over with flowers and his hat in his hand. He shifted nervously from one cowboy-booted foot to another, and apologized for what he had said. He apologized for acting like he knew what it would be like to have children. That was a bridge the could cross when they came to it. She noticed that he said when, not if, and he looked so sad scuffing his boots against her front step that she told him to come inside for iced tea.

When he came in, he kissed her softly and the new stubble of his beard scratched lightly against her chin. They never drank her iced tea. She never even went to the fridge. They moved rapidly to the bedroom, and this time she did not bring up the box of condoms she had in the dresser drawer because she knew it would upset him.

So here they were, a month after the fight. Jess had started going to church with him on Sundays. She had even let him sign her up to help with the monthly potluck. They had invited his Godmother over for dinner and after they ate Luke washed dishes in the kitchen while the small, stern, gray-haired woman stayed at the table with her and asked question after question about her relationship with Christ. Jess was surprised, and slightly frightened, by how easy it was to lie.

Jess looked back at the pregnancy tests and instead of calling Luke she called her friend Lexi. But when Lexi answered, she froze. The knowledge that she had made a mistake flooded her mind before she could get any words out. Poor Lexi had been trying for a year now to get pregnant, and she was starting to get discouraged by the process of trying again and again. Lexi had started texting her after each negative pregnancy test — sad, curt messages (*negative again, not this month, we'll try again next time I guess*). Besides that, it was late now, just past eleven. Lexi's voice was tinny on the other side of the phone and Jess wondered if she had woken her up.

“Jess? What's up?” Lexi didn't sound sleepy, just tired.

“I,” she looked down at the tests again, “I think Luke wants to get married.”

“Well that’s good news, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. What if we do it and then we can’t agree on anything?” She smoothed her blouse with her hand.

“You said you’ve been fighting less.”

“Yeah.” She listened to the slight blur of static on the line as both of them waited for the other to break the silence.

“And he must be glad he’s finally got you going to church with him.”

“He is.”

“So what’s there to fight about?”

“Well you remember the time we almost broke up — what if we have kids?”

“You’re not having kids right *now* are you?” She heard Lexi’s footsteps — the click of heeled shoes on wood floors. She could almost make out the faint speech and music of a television ad.

“Right, but,” she wasn’t sure how to end the sentence.

“I mean he’s nice, your parents like him. You’ve been going out for what, almost a year now? It’s probably time you figured out how you feel about each other.”

“How did you know, with Jack, that you were going to say yes when he asked?”

There was a long silence and Jess looked to see if the call had dropped. Lexi sighed before she began speaking again.

“Sometimes you just have to decide who can give you the best future, you know. This isn’t some fairy tale, Jess, this is real life. Jack is a good man, our families have known each other forever. We want the same things.”

“Well that sounds really romantic.”

“Jess, sometimes it can’t all be about romance.” Lexi sounded annoyed now.

She nodded, forgetting for a moment that Lexi was miles away in her own house.

Jess heard the rattling of keys on the other end of the phone before Lexi spoke again.

“Is there a reason why you’re calling me about this right now?”

“No, sorry, I just,” Jess crossed her fingers — an old superstition that made it feel less like lying, “I just don’t know what to do, and I can’t sleep.”

“Luke didn’t spend the night tonight?”

“No, we went to church this morning. I just needed some space to breathe tonight, you know.”

“Listen, I’ve got to run. I remembered I have to get something from the store and I won’t have time to get it get it tomorrow morning. I’ll see you at work?”

“Yeah, I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

She got up and left the bathroom, which had started to feel increasingly claustrophobic, and walked to the kitchen. She surveyed the dingy apartment from the fridge — the living room carpet which still smelled of tobacco smoke from the last resident, the low leather couch her mother had bought her on discount at the local furniture store, the windows that looked out on a dirty parking lot and some dumpsters. She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. It wasn’t as though she had managed to build much of a life here. The apartment felt so empty lately, quiet and lonely. She thought about Lexi’s house, which was always warm, something always in the oven or a scented candle burning somewhere. Lexi’s house had a kind of permanence that this apartment never could.

Jess had met Lexi at the peanut plant a year earlier when Jess got a job working in the store at the front. There was only so much she could do to keep from getting bored and Lexi would sneak out from her office behind the store to graze the sample peanut brittle and snack mixes that they always had out. Jess had found her annoying at first, after all the samples were for customers, not employees, and besides she was a few years younger than Lexi and her mother was always hounding her about what a wonderful wedding Lexi had had, and

when Jess would settle down like that, and that she would need some advance warning because *these things don't pay for themselves you know, but of course I want to help you out, and we can probably get your father to chip in as well.*

Of course her mother hadn't actually been to Lexi's wedding, but more than half of the women she quilted with had, and they had all passed around pictures with a combination of jealousy and pride. They had gotten married in the local Baptist church, the sanctuary dressed up inside with thick swaths of white and pink flowers and ribbons. Lexi's dress had been made for her by her mother and grandmother, and it fit her perfectly because of this. Jess's mother had showed her the wedding pictures online, had pointed out how perfect Lexi's long hair had looked curled under the veil and secured with rhinestone-studded pins. In all the photos she smiled demurely, her makeup glossy and perfect. All of the men in the wedding party had worn blue dress shirts and pressed Levis.

Still, the more she got to actually know Lexi, the more Jess was struck by what a relief it was to have a friend again, and a little enchanted by the contrast between what her mother saw of Lexi and what she came to know. She hadn't realized how lonely she was until Lexi started inviting her over. Jess' friends had left after high school for colleges in Texas, or had decided they had more important things to do than make time for her. Jess had been in a mad rush for independence at the end of high school, focused entirely on moving out, finding some way to finance herself. The rest, she had told herself, could come later. Instead, she had found herself left behind, flicking through internet videos in her studio apartment while her friends went to school or got married or joined the military. She had felt herself stagnating for months, trying to decide on a direction to move her life forward in. Lexi's attention made her forget how stuck she felt. There was something novel about having not just a friend, but a friend who had been one of the pretty and popular girls in school, a girl who her mother thought she ought to emulate.

Jess could still remember the first time she had ever seen past her mother's version of Lexi. One day, at work in the front shop of the peanut plant, as Lexi picked absentmindedly at wasabi-coated peanuts with her chipped-polish fingernails she had turned to Jess with tears in her eyes. Jess had assumed at first that the wasabi had just gotten to her, and offered to get a glass of water.

No, I'm sorry, I'm just really tired, Lexi had responded. Jess had turned her attention back to the cash register, and when she looked up Lexi had started to sob quietly. *Do you like me?*

She had lied through her teeth. *Sure. You're a nice person.*

Lexi had nodded, wiping her nose and eyes on the sleeve of her shirt. *Do you think I'm pretty?*

Jess sighed. She had seen enough pretty girls do this act before. *Of course you're pretty. You know that.*

You wouldn't know it from the way my husband treats me.

And from there the veneer of perfection that had always scared her away from Lexi was removed, and they were free to share their secrets, however uncomfortable. The more she got to know Lexi the less intimidated she was by her. Lexi was beautiful, there was no denying that. Lexi's life was on track in a way that hers wasn't, but Lexi was so anxious about all of it that you could forget how other people saw her. She was worried about whether or not Jack's parents liked her, she was worried about whether or not Jack liked her — she said he almost never touched her outside of the scheduled sex their doctor had recommended for getting pregnant. Lexi clung to Jess, asking her opinion about Jack, about what to wear to dinner with Jack's family, about whether or not she should ask for a raise.

There were times she thought she saw Lexi more clearly than Lexi saw herself. She could talk endlessly about how Jack was good and decent, and a better husband than she

deserved, but when they went out Jess watched Lexi lean away from his touch. She didn't want to embarrass Lexi by pointing it out, but she wondered if perhaps Jack had stopped reaching out because Lexi doled out these small rejections so often. Jack was a decent man — he bought Lexi nice jewelry, he was always nice to waitresses when they went out, but Jess didn't always understand why Lexi thought *so* highly of him or why she talked about feeling unworthy of him.

When Jess complained that her mother wouldn't let up on the fact that she was single, Lexi was the one who introduced her to Luke — a friend of Jack, and though Luke was religious in a way neither she nor her mother had been in years he won both of them over the same way he won over all other women, with his wide smile and the way he tipped his hat and said Sir and Ma'am.

Jess wasn't yet 21, though the other three were older, all in their mid twenties at least, but when she went to bars or restaurants on double dates with the three of them no one ever asked her for her ID. They spent weekend after weekend crowded into restaurant booths, or driving out into the country to stargaze, each couple pretending that the other couldn't see or hear what they did in the dark. When Luke and Jack went on a hunting trip in the summer Lexi had stayed over at Jess's apartment, curled small on the other side of her bed, insisting that she would get too lonely otherwise. She thought about Lexi's soft snoring that night, how small and vulnerable she had seemed, curled up in the far corner of the bed.

Jess rearranged the pregnancy tests on the bathroom counter, putting them into a perfect line, and rested a hand against her own stomach, allowing herself to imagine that she could feel a heartbeat, or a kick, or the shape of some limb, or the curve of a spine. Instead, she felt only her own pulse, fast and light against her fingertips. She spent the rest of the night searching on the internet, talking carefully around the word itself: "pregnancy options", "chances of miscarriage", "pregnancy at four weeks". By the time she drifted off to sleep she

had settled on an answer. This, she thought, meant that she really couldn't tell Lexi. How callous it would be to shove something like that in her friend's face. But the whole thing could be over with quickly, no one besides her would need to know. She could probably scrape together enough money between what she had saved and picking up a few extra shifts, or, worst come to worst, taking out a loan downtown.

The next morning she woke up feeling relieved. When she went to the bathroom, the tests were still lined up on the counter, their opened packaging scattered on the floor below. She would need to dispose of the evidence now, so that if Luke came over that night there wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary. She gathered first the packaging, and then the tests themselves, and wrapped them in a plastic grocery bag. She tied the bag's hands in a double knot and then placed it in the kitchen trashcan.

When that was done, she brushed her teeth and forced her unruly hair into a bun. She let herself wonder for a moment what a baby would look like with the same frizzy mop, and just as quickly she pushed the thought away. Besides, she thought, she wouldn't wish hair like this on anyone. When she heard her phone ringing in the bedroom, she didn't think anything of it. Maybe Lexi wanted her to get coffee for both of them on the way in, or maybe Luke wanted to wish her a good morning. He did that sometimes, though usually it was after they had had sex. It was one of the habits of his that she found simultaneously a little juvenile and quite charming. When she answered the phone it was Luke. His voice was flat and faster than usual. He asked her if she was sitting down and without waiting for an answer told her he had something terrible to tell her (had he cheated, she thought? Or perhaps he was going to confess an addiction to porn or online gambling?).

She was so busy imagining what awful secret he could have to confess, that she didn't understand what he was saying at first. *What? Is she okay?* But she wasn't okay. Lexi had been found on the highway last night and the ambulance had been too late. It seemed

impossible to believe. The realization reached her body first, and she started shaking too hard to hold the phone to her ear. Luke told her to take a deep breath, and said that he was already on his way over.

Later, she would feel guilty for thinking of herself instead of Lexi in the moments that followed the phone call. Shock wrapped around her, insulating her from the raw grief that would come later. She told herself that it was what Lexi would have wanted, what Lexi would have told her to do, but of course she had no real way of knowing that. She pulled the carefully-tied bag out of the trash can, and lined the tests back up on the counter. She spread the packaging out as well, preparing a scene that she could show Luke when he arrived.

When he arrived and she opened the door, before he could step across the threshold, she took a deep breath and tried to make her voice sound as steady as possible.

“I have something I need to tell you.”

Sopapillas

She could never quite get used to the way the words sounded in their mouths, thick and cumbersome. Maybe, she thought, Spanish solidified when it hit their tongues, when for her it had always been so quick and soft and easy.

She had been at Cocina Jalisco now for ten years, had slowly worked her way up until she was in charge of shifts, and the cooks started to say please and thank you when they spoke to her. Friday nights were the worst. Crowds of teenagers stumbled in, some of them already drunk, trying to order margaritas and Coronas. They pouted or glared when she asked for ID.

When her husband first talked about moving to the US she had hoped that they would go somewhere glamorous like Los Angeles, or even chilly Chicago. She would have settled for Albuquerque, or even El Paso, but they had landed here instead, where he had been gotten a job at the peanut plant and she had picked up waitressing to make ends meet.

Once she became a manger, the cooks started leaving leftovers for her in Styrofoam containers before they closed for the night. By the time she got home on the weekends, her husband would have already put the children to bed. She ate the food after doing her best to reheat it in the microwave and it was always close enough to her mother's food that she could feel how far away she really was now, in this stucco three-bedroom ranch home, in this little town.

Some nights she ate the leftovers cold. She sat at the kitchen table, listening to her children argue in the other room, or gossip in low tones. In the master bedroom, her husband would have the radio turned to a Spanish talk-radio channel – a year after they moved he confessed that he had stopped dreaming in Spanish.

She kept telling the cooks to stop giving her sopapillas to take home, but they never listened. She ate them sometimes, even though the fluffy pockets of fried dough had gone

cold and clammy, and the honey had thickened against their outsides. She ate them even though they never tasted as good as they would have fresh.

I-25 South

Alongside cruise-control roads, deserted one-lane highways sliced through flat planes of tall yellow grass, the sagebrush rippled in the wind like water. Mirages appeared and disappeared on the asphalt in front of the car and Courtney was struck with the feeling of elementary school swimming lessons, the way she had paddled frantically towards her mother who took slow steps backwards, drawing constantly a little further away.

On roads like these it was easy to forget you were driving at all. For the last hour of the drive, as much as she turned the radio dials, she could not seem to escape an endless series of evangelical radio talk shows. As preachers droned something about hating the sin and loving the sinner, Courtney felt as though she was driving straight into her past. Perhaps she would arrive and find herself fourteen again, long-limbed and awkward. At fourteen the only thing she could think about in church was Lexi's hands as she had passed Courtney the communion tray. Courtney had thought at the time that the Honest to Goodness Holy Spirit flowed through that girl's hands. It was the kind of thing she and her college friends had laughed about as they passed handles of liquor between them – *That was so fucking gay, you guys I was so gay*.

Heat built up in the car as the sun beat through the window. She started to sweat and the smell of her shampoo spread — a lightly floral scent. The drive down here from Denver had been a steady progression from mountains to flat plains. The horizon had become a very distant line, distinguishable only by the transition from blue sky to yellow grass. Patches of population along the drive provided momentary lapses in the desert — a clump of houses, a post office, a gas station, and a dusty convenience store. She had never driven down from Denver before, had never driven home period since she had left for college five years earlier. Now that she was getting close the houses and highway markers became familiar and she could feel her chest tightening.

At the town limits the same sign greeted her – “Population ~10,000” – and she had to fight the sudden momentum of memory. These places had a way of filling up with moments so heavy and thick that she could hardly wade through them. Still, she drove down the familiar roads, masked only a little by darkness. Since she had left home, most of the buildings had stayed the same, some of them didn’t even seem to have been painted. Some business must have rolled through town selling pixelated backlit signs because all of the restaurants and the lone hair salon had them now, proudly declaring the time and temperature, accompanied by slow, jumpy technicolor animation.

It started to feel more like a dream than even a memory, as soon as she hit the town square, with the familiar three-story courthouse, the ring of restaurants, consignment shops, and the low-slung post office. The traffic lights guarded empty intersections. And then as quickly as she had arrived in town she left it again, driving down the highway to her childhood home outside of town. The road was deserted and with the limited scope of her headlights she might be only moments away from driving into absolute nothingness.

When she arrived it was almost nine at night. Courtney took one more deep breath, shut off the car, and got out. The stars had arrived dazzlingly. She walked up the brick pathway to the front door. In the moonlight, the front yard was barely recognizable. The gaudy flowers her mother had planted to attract butterflies had been replaced by stones of varying sizes and shades of gray. The drought must have forced a trendy xeriscaping of her childhood home.

Her mother answered the door in a worn turquoise robe. Her hair was up in curlers, her makeup still on -- a thick layer of eyeliner and mascara and a thick swath of bright pink lipstick.

“Finally! You know I was really starting to worry. Do you want a cup of tea? Or Oreos? I went to the store today and they had the new double-stuffed ones. I know I shouldn’t but, they were two for the price of one.”

“I think I’m okay, thanks.” Courtney pulled her bag across the threshold and stepped inside.

“Are you sure? They’re good.”

“Yeah, no, I’m fine. You should still have some if you want though.”

Her mother sighed and looked towards the kitchen. “No, that’s okay, no point in opening up a new box. Was the drive okay?”

Courtney cleared her throat, lifted her duffel bag across the threshold, and closed the door behind herself. “It was fine.” She cleared her throat. “The lawn looks good.”

“Oh, I had that done last year. Everyone was getting rock gardens.”

Courtney nodded.

“You know it’s too bad you haven’t been able to visit before now.”

Courtney’s throat felt tight and dry.

“So much has been changing around here -- did you see the new signs?”

Courtney nodded.

“They’re tacky if you ask me, but you know how people get about these things. Once one place has them they’ve all got to get them. I think they’re a hazard on the roads -- someone’s going to get distracted one of these days and drive straight into a building.”

The silence pooled between them. Courtney thought about Lexi far away from any of the new neon signs, alone in the dark of the highway, car wrapped around a telephone pole or crumpled in a ditch. “What time do we have to leave for the service tomorrow?”

“I think if we plan to get in the car around nine that should give us plenty of time.”

Courtney nodded. The reality of the situation began to assert itself. She sat on the couch. Her mother straightened a pile of mail on the coffee table.

“I just can’t believe she’s really gone, you know,” Courtney said.

“You two were practically glued at the hip in high school,” her mother drew slow circles in her coffee mug with a teaspoon.

Courtney swallowed hard and spun the ring on her thumb in circles.

“I always thought it was so nice that you had such a close friend.”

“Yeah.”

“How is um, oh you know, what’s her name, Carol?”

“Who?”

“You know, the girl you stayed with at Thanksgiving.”

“Caroline,” Courtney corrected. “We broke up.”

“That’s too bad. She sounded nice. She was a paralegal, wasn’t she?”

Courtney nodded. She could see her mother trying to avoid a look of relief.

“That’s a good job you know, health insurance, benefits, the money’s not ideal maybe but it’s not awful.”

“It wasn’t about money.”

“That’s too bad.”

Caroline had left two weeks ago with boxes of her stuff and the cat they had adopted together. Courtney still found herself stepping around phantom furniture, trying to avoid obstacles that had disappeared. Their arguments, which had taken on a reassuring sort of regularity, had finally crossed some line that only Caroline seemed to see. One of their final fights had erupted over a lesbian wedding in Texas featured on the news, the grinning brides surrounded by a wall of friends, blocking a scattered perimeter of protestors.

This kind of shit is exactly why I had to get the fuck out, Courtney had mumbled, her head resting in Caroline's lap.

Without looking away from the TV screen, Caroline responded: *See this is your problem, you're never going to let go of it, you have to give people a chance to prove you wrong. Who knows what would have happened if you had said something in high school. You don't know how people would have been about it.*

She had wanted to scream "I do know, believe me I know and you don't", but instead she bit her tongue and forced herself to take a deep breath. *Look it's not the same, okay, your middle school had a GSA for Christ's sake.*

A GSA I was the president of, Caroline said, finally looking down at Courtney, unable to resist a smile.

Courtney hesitated before breaking the silence, *Seriously though, I don't think people in cities understand, really.*

Caroline's voice hardened, *Oakland wasn't always a cake walk you know.*

Courtney sat up and rested a hand against Caroline's, which lay limp over the remote control, *I know I know, it's just,* she cut herself off, *let's not fight about this, okay?*

From there the fight escalated, spinning out until they were both standing in the kitchen leaning against counters on opposite sides of the room, crying.

In the very end, Caroline cited Courtney's apparent inability to trust other people or assume good intentions. Courtney let her leave because she was tired of Caroline's pushing, and because she suspected that they had stayed together so long more out of habit and a mutual fear of having to find someone new than anything else.

Courtney looked up from the floor at her mother "Did she seem happy to you?"

"I don't think I'm the one to ask about your," her mother paused, "Caroline."

"Not Caroline. Lexi. Did she seem happy?"

“Oh, I don’t know. I would see her at church sometimes, or when I went shopping. They just moved to a new place, her and Jack. She was doing a lot of decorating, I guess.”

Courtney nodded, trying to picture this imaginary storybook housewife.

Her mother lowered her voice. “Everyone says they were trying to get pregnant. For the last few years now.”

“Who told you that?”

“These things get around. I’m in a quilting group with her aunt and Janice couldn’t keep a secret if her life depended on it.”

Courtney swallowed hard and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. Her mother rambled on about town gossip for the next hour and she nodded, tried to listen. Instead the words slipped over her like a foreign language, intelligible only when she heard a name she recognized.

That night she fell asleep in her childhood bed, staring up at the scattered glow-in-the-dark stars she had installed on the ceiling in middle school. Where she and Lexi had laid next to each other in bed during sleepovers. They had looked up at the glowing clusters of plastic on the ceiling and Lexi pretended to recognize made-up constellations. In the middle of the night, when she woke up for no reason, Courtney could hold her hand just above Lexi’s skin and feel the heat coming off of it, smell the way her perfume wafted into the air when she rolled over. The scent lingered in her pillowcases for days. Now her pillowcases smelled thickly floral, Lexi’s ghost replaced by the sterile magic of detergent and fabric softener. Every time she closed her eyes she saw Lexi, sixteen-year-old Lexi with her cigarettes and her shaking hands, jerking the wheel of her father’s truck — the one they had driven almost every weekend — and slamming off of the road into a deep ditch. In the dream, she was a paralyzed passenger, watching the way Lexi’s black hair spun when the truck rolled upside down.

When she woke up, sweaty and with a pounding heart, Courtney still couldn't escape the memories. Lexi at seventeen, sitting in the back of her father's truck stargazing, and the way her mouth had tasted sweet and tarry, like cherry and tobacco.

"I'm not, like, a lesbian or anything."

Courtney had nodded. "No yeah, no, me neither" she had mumbled, sliding a hand around Lexi's back.

"I'm serious. My parents would lose their shit."

How many nights had they sat in the distant stretches of some pasture or at the end of some long dirt road smoking and crying and kissing in turns, right up until the week Courtney left for college and Lexi realized that she was actually going to be left behind.

It started at a party. Or it started the night five months later when they drove back from another party together. Or it started when Lexi handed Courtney something for the millionth time and she had noticed for the first time how soft Lexi's hands were.

The party was the kind no one else would remember after it had ended. Someone's parents were off to a farm auction for the weekend and the event took place in their basement, which doubled as a tornado shelter. The room itself was a glorified concrete box, but someone's older brother had brought dozens of six packs and in the dim light you could almost pretend everyone was more beautiful than they were at school between the fluorescent lighting and the linoleum floors of the hallways.

Jimmy started it, during a game of truth or dare. Jimmy who had been following Courtney around the school hallways with his patchy beard and mustache, teasing her that he could see her bra straps. *Lexi I dare you to kiss*, he looked around the circle, *Courtney*. The girls made the expected noises of disgust, the boys who had been looking at their phones looked up suddenly.

The kiss itself was short and Lexi laughed. *Whatever, you pervert* she shot back at Jimmy. And then the moment was over and someone else was being asked about how many people they had had sex with or being dared to call the pastor of their church on his home phone number.

Courtney had never thought before about what Lexi's hair might smell like or how soft her lips might be, but now it was all she could think about as they sat across from each other in the circle. She spent the rest of the night nervous and distracted and when Jimmy approached her to ask for a goodnight kiss before she went home, his stubble felt harsh and raspy against her face but she let him kiss her anyway, in case his kiss could be some kind of antidote, in case she could force the world back to the way it had been before, the way you forced a bone that had been dislocated back into place.

The next time it happened was summer. They were driving back to Courtney's house from a bonfire -- Lexi spent the night with her whenever they were staying out late because Courtney's mom didn't ask as many questions about where they were going or when they would be back. Their parents weren't friends so there wasn't much risk of Lexi's parents finding out that she wasn't actually just going over to her friend's house to watch a movie and work on math homework.

Lexi offered to drive because Courtney had taken three or four tequila shots towards the end of the party.

Lexi eyed Courtney from the driver's seat as they pulled onto the highway *Do you think you're going to throw up? If you do just tell me so I can pull over.*

Stop, I'm fine.

Jesus, Court, your breath fucking reeks.

The fear sobered Courtney up momentarily. Her relationship with her mother operated on a strict principle of plausible deniability. *Pull over for a minute.*

Lexi slammed on the brakes and the car skidded to a stop on the side of the road.

No I just need a mint, or some gum or something.

Lexi breathed a sigh of relief and fished around in her purse. When she found a piece of gum and held it up in its thin silver wrapper she looked up and found Courtney's face inches from hers.

Courtney kissed her, both of their mouths hot and dry and fuzzy with alcohol, on the side of the road in the dark, at least a mile in every direction from anyone else.

After some time Courtney pulled away. *Sorry.*

Lexi ran her tongue over her teeth. *It's okay.*

They sat in the car, listening to the soft white noise of the engine running, and to their own breathing. Eventually Lexi put the car into drive and they resumed their trip.

That night they both brushed their teeth and washed their faces and got into bed quietly as they had countless times before. Lexi sat on the far corner of the bed looking at her hands.

Courtney sat up from where she had settled against the mattress and watched the room start to spin from alcohol-induced dizziness. *I'm sorry about earlier.*

Lexi, not looking up, shook her head.

And then, in a moment Courtney would almost convince herself had happened only in her dream, Lexi turned around and leaned over to kiss her. It was short and this time her mouth was cold and tasted like toothpaste and the harsh antiseptic of mouthwash.

That whole summer Courtney had to remind herself she wasn't dreaming. At parties, around bonfires, or over beers Lexi got so drunk her speech came slowly, as though with each word she had to untie something with her tongue. She kissed boys and looked over her shoulder at Courtney while it happened. They would go to parties together, smoke and drink and on the way back they would find some abandoned part of road, or some patch of pasture

far enough away from whoever owned it, some place to park the truck and drink and smoke and kiss.

Courtney kept kissing Jimmy, but only at parties, only where anyone else could see them. He asked her out -- to dinner, to the two-screen movie theater, to come over to his house to “study”, to go hunting, but she always declined as politely as she could manage. His lips were always chapped and his face was pocked with acne, a spread of angry red bumps and fading scars. And though he and Lexi drank the same beer at the parties and smoked the same kind of cigarettes, his mouth never tasted half as good as hers.

Their nights fell into an easy rhythm -- they would go to a party together, kiss other people, and then sneak back into Courtney’s house after her mother had fallen asleep and lie next to each other in her bed, taking turns listening to each other’s heartbeats, looking for all the places on a body one could find a pulse. Words for any of it seemed redundant really, when you could replace them with kisses, and running your hand through Lexi’s tangled hair. They always froze like spooked rabbits when they heard Courtney’s mother get up in the middle of the night, but they could never manage to stay frozen for very long.

When she tried to remember the summer from her dorm room two or three years later, all Courtney could really remember was Lexi’s body, shaking out in the open of the cold, dry night air or sweating between her sheets. The way her lips felt or her hands or the slamming of her pulse in her throat. But the fall semester of her senior year started, and with it Courtney’s mother, who had never really put her foot down before, told Courtney it was time to have a curfew because senior year was the year of college applications.

The first time Courtney mentioned college to Lexi, she honestly believed she might be able to get her to apply. She imagined the two of them lying on lush grass in an academic quad somewhere, holding hands where anyone might see.

She wrapped her arms around Lexi, letting her palms rest against her stomach, the space where her breathing was slowing, and she whispered the words in a kiss against Lexi's neck: *You know you could come with me.*

What?

You could come with me. There's still time to apply to college. There are so many colleges in Colorado. We could visit each other on the weekends.

Lexi extricated herself from Courtney's arms and turned to face her. Her eyes had turned angry. *You know I can't. We don't have money like you.* College had never been a question in Courtney's house. It was one of the things her mother insisted on, and one of the only times her father was mentioned *You've got to go get an education, you know your dad was always so smart and that's why I married him.*

Courtney reached a hand across the space dividing them and rested it on Lexi's leg. Lexi had missed a strip of hair with her razor -- a thin line bristling up her calf. *Some of these places have amazing scholarships you know.*

Lexi looked at the bed of the truck and picked at a piece of lint on the flannel blanket they had spread out. *It doesn't matter.*

Oh. But -- Courtney stopped because she wasn't sure what else there was to say. The November cold started to sink into her bones.

When Courtney spoke again it was a whisper again, so quiet she wasn't sure whether or not Lexi would hear it. *I want you to come with me.*

Lexi reached for Courtney's hand. Lexi's nail polish had chipped since they had painted each other's nails the week before, pretending to be the kind of friends who did normal things at slumber parties. Only when she looked up to meet Lexi's gaze did Courtney realize Lexi had started to cry. *I wish I could.*

I don't understand. If you can get a scholarship or loans to pay for it, why can't you?

Lexi shook her head. *You don't know my parents. My aunt has a job lined up for me at the peanut plant. Their secretary wants to retire this year. It's good money. And you know my grandma is sick and my mom is trying to do everything and it would break their hearts.*

Courtney did know Lexi's parents. They stood in church every Sunday with their rigid posture. Her grandmother's hands shook when she held the hymn book to sing and some wispy piece of her graying hair was always escaping whatever up-do she had tried to put it in. Courtney also knew that only four other people in their class had started to draft college applications. A few more of them might apply to the community college in town, or to the small university a few towns over, but the chances that anyone besides her would escape the state were slim. The rest of them would stay, working some job with their parents, or in town, and saving up for engagement rings or baby cribs or a house down the road from their parents.

Courtney looked back at Lexi and felt her eyes grow teary with the dawning impossibility of it all. When Courtney leaned in to kiss her, Lexi whispered *I'm sorry*. Her breath was warm and soft against Courtney's face, and all Courtney wanted to do was apologize instead or tell Lexi it would all be okay or somehow find some way to make the impossible possible. The rest of the night they spent very little time talking.

Lexi did finally mention college to her parents a week or two later, still early enough in the fall that she and Lexi could sometimes venture outside at night without coats, Courtney felt guilty about how badly it went, about how she should have known from the beginning that it wasn't going to be an option, not really, not in the way it was an assumption for her.

Lexi, nose running, biting her lip to keep from crying in earnest had described the tense dinner to her, and Courtney had to dig her fingernails into her own thigh to keep some sensation rising above the guilt she felt for pushing the whole thing. Sometimes when Lexi talked about her parents she made up funny voices for them (Courtney had been the first to

do this for her own mother, but Lexi adopted it willingly at times). This time was different, and what she quoted from them came through in a flat, sad voice.

Lexi hadn't let her parents start talking because she was afraid if she did she would lose her nerve. Instead she had plowed ahead as soon as her father finished saying grace. The mashed potatoes her mother had made from scratch that afternoon slowly went cold on the table while they spoke.

Her father had responded first: *I don't understand. You know how hard your mother worked to find you that job at the plant.* Lexi and Courtney both knew this was something of a lie -- very little had been involved in finding the job besides asking Lexi's aunt whether she thought they could find room for another employee at the front desk.

Her mother was the next to break the silence: *I don't understand why you would want to leave us? Haven't we been good to you?*

And then the questions had begun, from her father, one after the other while she stuttered, realized she had not spent enough time preparing the kind of answers he wanted to hear.

What would you study?

I don't know.

So what is it you want us to pay for, if you don't even know what you want?

But the scholarships--

Her father had cut her off, *are not going to pay for everything. And to be honest, I don't like the idea of you leaving your mother right now. If you want to do dental tech or something like that later you can take classes right here.*

Telling the story had sapped whatever energy Lexi had had when she began, and they sat in silence for a long time, Courtney tracing careful circles on the fabric of Lexi's shirt.

Courtney didn't bring up college again until the spring when she had made her decision and the deadlines had passed. She hadn't told her mother that she wasn't applying anywhere in state until after it was too late and there was nothing either of them could do. She knew she had to get out, and she knew that if this was the only way she could go to college, her mother would let her go. She paid her own deposit to hold her place in Colorado with tips from working long weekend shifts at The Pasta Bowl.

By the end of May, Courtney had formed an alternate plan, another way to bring Lexi with her. They had woken up accidentally with the sunrise and Lexi rested her head on Courtney's chest. The two of them floated just above sleep and Courtney said what she did because the moment had the quality of a dream.

You don't have to go to college.

Lexi shook her head sleepily: *I know.*

No, I mean, you could just leave.

Lexi cleared her throat. *What?*

Just come with me. In August. Courtney ran a hand across the smooth skin of Lexi's back, feeling the sharp angles of her shoulder blades. *I'll have a dorm and you can just stay with me until you can find a job. Denver has lots of jobs.*

Lexi shook her head again and it was only by the soft pooling of tears on her shirt that Courtney realized Lexi had begun to cry.

You know I can't leave my mom.

She has your dad, and your grandma keeps her busy. She'll have plenty to do.

You don't get it. She's not the same as your mom.

I know -- my mom doesn't have anyone.

Lexi pulled away and curled up with her back facing Courtney. She had started to sob. *Please stop asking. You know I can't.*

But you could, if you really wanted to. Not everything has to be about your family.

You have to live your life.

You don't get it. Mom would never be the same if I left. She needs me.

I need you.

Please stop.

I love you.

Lexi turned to face her. *I love you too.*

Then come with me. Just leave.

For a moment the silence hung between them, and she let herself imagine it, the two of them in her car not looking for a hiding spot, but driving far enough away that there would be no need to hide anymore.

When Lexi spoke again, she could barely get the words out. *Please stop asking. I'm not going to leave them. Your mom is different. She doesn't need money and her mom isn't here and sick and she won't hate you forever if you leave. You don't get it and I don't want to keep telling you no, I can't.*

And then it didn't matter how much she wanted to bring Lexi with her, how much she wanted both of them to escape, how much she wanted to be able to hold her hand somewhere that wasn't dark. The only thing that mattered was how hard Lexi was crying and how small she looked crying there on the other side of the bed.

Maybe at Thanksgiving I'll come home. I'll come visit you and tell you all about it.

Maybe your grandma will be better by then.

Lexi nodded. *Maybe.*

At the time, Courtney couldn't understand why Lexi couldn't do what she had done, why she seemed so hell-bent on making her mother happy, on bending to her father's will, on staying and taking care of her grandmother. It had seemed like weakness to her at the time,

letting her parents win and keep her trapped. Now she could almost imagine how much quiet strength it must have taken to say no over and over again, to stay loyal to family no matter what.

The second week of college, when Courtney had to leave a documentary screening to cry in the bathroom, some well-meaning sophomore had followed her to ask if she was okay. The answer was no, of course, but when she asked what was wrong all Courtney could seem to do was shake her head and repeat: *It's just a girl, just a girl, it's silly*. How much more would those words have hurt Lexi than anything said in the back of a truck, more than when Courtney had to break the news that she had chosen an out of state university (*But you'll come back for breaks won't you?*). Just a girl — Lexi had not been *just* anything. Lexi, who for all of her self-hatred and confusion had enough of a backbone to storm out of their US history class when the professor skimmed over a textbook page about the AIDs crisis with a joke about “those fags”. Courtney had stayed rooted in her seat, hoping she was not turning as red as she felt, wondering if she now understood how it felt to be burned at the stake.

All Courtney wanted to do now was kiss the space just beneath Lexi's jawbone and feel Lexi's pulse jitter against her lips. In the three years they had known each other, Courtney had never even really tried to explain Lexi to Caroline. What good would it have done? Still, she wondered what Caroline would have said about Lexi, her teary not-a-lesbian kisses, her habit of getting drunk and flirting recklessly with boys at parties, all while glancing across the flickering light of the bonfires, looking for Courtney. Something about *internalized misogyny* probably, some five-dollar word they would have tossed back and forth with stumbling imprecision in the university LGBT lounge. How much could Caroline have possibly understood about what the two of them had lived through? The way that the homophobic rhetoric seeped into church sermons and school classrooms and locker rooms and parties, the way she had never heard someone say *gay* out loud until college unless it was

immediately followed by *fag*. The way that after standing up to their homophobic teacher Lexi had to crack a joke and assure the rest of the class that she wasn't a dyke, and then had to meet one of the basketball players behind the gym during lunch to prove it. The way Lexi's mother had changed the channel when a gay couple kissed on some TV show, and scoffed (*That just seems like a little much, don't you think? This is family television*). The fear that had stabbed at them whenever another car passed them when they had found some place to park. The way they learned to spring apart at the distant approach of headlights or the crunching noise of tires on gravel.

Caroline had never had to keep a secret in her life, let alone one this important or this big. Caroline who hadn't understood at all that by having, at least, the conversation that she had insisted Courtney have over and over, Courtney had implicated her mother in the grand act of secret keeping. On the phone, the first and only time they had had a conversation with the word *lesbian*, she and her mother both agreed it was for the best that her grandparents not know. Courtney had wondered, if she did marry Caroline, what her mother would say to the rest of her family. Would she say anything? Would she make up some excuse for the weekend trip to Colorado? Some routine medical procedure maybe, or a work conference. She had no idea if her mother had, or would, tell her friends but she suspected she wouldn't. She had simply shifted the burden of excuses to someone else -- it was her mother now who had to sidestep her friends' well-meaning questions about her permanently-single daughter. And she couldn't blame her really, not when her mother was the one who would suffer the consequences. It was her mother now who felt a sense of relief that there was no more Caroline, that maybe some boy would come tripping into her life, that for however long this lasted there was no need to erase an entire living part of her daughter's life.

She had thought at first when Caroline dialed her mother's phone number and thrust the phone into her hand that it would do no good. That her mother would hang up, pretend

not to have heard whatever she had said and that they might never speak again. Try as she might Caroline could not understand why Courtney's hands were shaking so badly she could barely hold the phone to her ear, why she had only agreed to make the phone call after weeks of Caroline's wheedling (*I promise you'll feel better after -- it's so freeing*). Part of the truth that Caroline didn't know was that she couldn't call her mother without feeling as though she was stepping back in time to the November afternoon she called Lexi from her dorm room. She had sat cross-legged on her bed, a pile of glossy rainbow stickers and pamphlets spread out in front of her, new conversations and words buzzing in the back of her mind. She had felt giddy when she dialed the phone. She had just agreed to spend Thanksgiving break with a group of her newfound friends, all of whom understood without explanation why she never talked about home.

When Lexi picked up the phone everything that Courtney had been gathering and storing up came pouring out. She started talking about the new friends she had made and the rainbow flag they had bought her (before proudly declaring her an initiated baby gay) and the Thanksgiving trip.

When Courtney finally paused, Lexi's voice was slow and very quiet.

So, you're not coming home?

Well no, I mean it's like Tasha says, it's all about forward motion--

Lexi hung up.

They hadn't talked again. Courtney hadn't known what to say. Their lives had seemed to grow further and further apart and before long the idea of bridging them over the phone seemed thoroughly impossible. She had told herself it was better to stay away, that if she returned she might fall into bed with Lexi again and never get back up, that she might be drawn back into the sleepless cycle of long secretive nights. Instead, she stayed away. She had never made good on her promise to return until now, when it was too late, and that sat

uneasily in her stomach as she watched morning light filter in through the windows. Though her mother had begged her to come home, even for a weekend, Courtney had refused. This was the line she had chosen to draw in the sand and refused to step back over. Instead her mother visited her hesitatingly, awkward and unable to fit quite right into the new life she had built. Eventually Courtney had to acknowledge that the night was over, and that it was time to get out of bed and put on the black blazer she had bought for job interviews.

They drove to the church in her mother's ancient station wagon. Courtney tugged at stray pieces of her hair and tried to smooth over the nervousness, strangely like first-date anxiety, that had started to brew in her stomach and in the painfully tight muscle surrounding her heart.

At the funeral, Lexi's husband sat in the front row. An older couple, presumably his parents, sat straight-backed on either side of him. Courtney couldn't hear him crying but he sat there, hunched over his own lap, shaking.

The church was the same one they had both gone to as children. The building was low to the ground and fairly plain from the outside except for the narrow spire which protruded from the roof. The pews hadn't changed, and the wood still bore the slight dips made by generations of churchgoers sitting in them weekly. She couldn't remember which pew Lexi and her family used to sit in and the realization made her panic momentarily. There had been months, years probably, when she could have found that pew crawling on her hands and knees in total darkness. Now she raked her eyes over the rapidly-filling pews and felt as though she were searching for her car in a particularly large and winding parking lot.

She stared at the blown-up picture of Lexi at the front of the room – her face had grown wider and her hair was styled into a tousled pixie cut. Her smile was the same as it had always been, however, and for all that Courtney could tell she looked happy. Her heart dropped when she saw the coffin which lay beneath the picture, a glossy marbled red-brown,

with thin gold handles lining the sides. How many pallbearers could such a small body possibly require? A frothy wreath of pink and white flowers sat on top of the closed box.

If the casket was closed Lexi must look awful. It was not too much of a stretch to imagine her bloody, her limbs at odd angles like twigs stacked at the base of a campfire. But how broken must she be that the mortuary couldn't cover it up for a day or two. Had her bones broken through the skin in places, thin ridges of white along her cheekbones or forehead or shin? Or was she bruised complete purple and blue? How many pieces had she been in when they cut her out of the smoking wreck. Courtney could easily imagine the kaleidoscopic possibilities of her suffering.

The body in the box, whatever it looked like, of course, was not really hers to grieve over. She looked around trying to find some familiar face her eyes could rest on. The scattered high school classmates looked like optical illusions, all changed just short of the point of irrecognizability. Lexi's parents sat next to her husband's family, folded in on each other like a book half-shut and she couldn't see either of their faces from her spot towards the back of the church. How odd she and Lexi had been, the two only children in their grade at elementary school, both girls, both the end of their family's last name.

The pastor talked for a long time, about Angels and Good Christians, and how Heaven was warm and soft and bright (Courtney thought about all the cold dark nights she had spent with Lexi, nights when the only light had come from matches or Lexi's lighter or the soft glow of her skin under the moon). Her husband walked carefully to the altar and immediately lost control of his tears. He was tall and broad, and the skin on his hands and face was deeply tanned. He looked uncomfortable and fidgety in the suit that was slightly too tight across his shoulders and too loose on his legs. She had to wonder if both she and this man had dressed in clothing that they never wore except for funerals and interviews. He looked embarrassed to be standing in front of so many people, and his hands trembled,

shaking the paper he read from. His voice was deep and he stopped to clear his throat, all blocked up with the process of quiet crying. Courtney promised herself she would listen to what he was saying, but instead all she could think about was the low gravel of his voice and how ridiculous the two of them must have looked sharing a bed.

What must it be like to have sex with such a big man? Did Lexi ever worry that he might forget she was there and crush her? How small and fragile her ribs must have seemed under his big, weathered hands. But they must have done a lot of practicing in all the time they had been trying to have children. They must have fallen into some kind of rhythm. She tried to imagine Lexi as a mother, or even pregnant with swollen ankles and wrists, but all she could see was Lexi skinny and shivering in her bra and underwear, beckoning her closer -
- Promise you'll miss me. Of course I'll miss you.

It was then, watching Lexi's husband shake and weep in front of all of his friends and family, that she let herself have the thought that had been scratching just outside consciousness all week, ever since she received the email from her mother, with the brief obituary attached. Suddenly afraid that something about the way she was sitting would give everything away, she let herself wonder whether there was a chance that the car wreck had not, after all, been entirely an accident.

It was frightening how much the thought that Lexi had done this on purpose appealed to her. The thought that there was a reason this had happened, that it had something to do with her and her leaving, or with some way Lexi had never stopped loving her was seductive. And now there was no way to know. Courtney had become the sole keeper of their shared memories when Lexi slipped out of life in a hospital bed, surrounded by family and the harried beeping of clustered, anxious machines. In all the time she had spent away she had never forgotten the way Lexi's lips had felt on hers the first time, cracked and beer-coated at that party, so it seemed possible that the same magic had held true for Lexi, that she had

become so stuck in the past that she tried to drive back into it in her car instead of going home to her husband.

There was something comforting about letting herself believe this was some final and overzealous gesture of love on Lexi's part, but there was no evidence for it, at least according to her mother. Lexi had seemed happy, Lexi had been married, Lexi loved this man enough to want to have children with him. Despite this, Courtney wanted to believe that she had been the only one capable of making Lexi smile, not that she was part of the problem, part of some illness that needed to be cured or prayed for or exorcised out of Lexi's pounding heart.

When all the talking was over, everything was still for a moment and Courtney was seized with an urge to run to the front of the church. She wanted to lay her palm flat against the smooth side of the coffin and feel the heat of her hand warm it. Instead, before she could form a plan, the pallbearers carried it outside to the graveyard that wrapped around the back of the building.

The tears came all at once when they started to pile the dirt back into the grave. She wanted to scream. She had a vision of Lexi trapped alive in the coffin, scratching at the inside desperately, screaming for help, screaming for her now that she had finally come home.

Her mother tapped her shoulder. "Hey, almost ready to head out?"

She wanted to wait until it was done so she could lie on the dirt and pretend that she was resting her head on Lexi's chest. She wanted to press her ear so hard against the ground that she could imagine hearing a heartbeat that was not her own, frantic and lonely as it was. But she knew that she couldn't. She knew that she had to maintain an image of acceptable grief, just a friend's grief, to the rest of the funeral party. She also knew that laying down and hearing nothing would be worse than imagining that there might be some response she hadn't listened for. Briefly, she allowed herself to imagine the kind of heaven the pastor had waxed on about. She wondered what Lexi might look like in heaven, healed of all her mortal

wounds — did that include the way she kissed, frantic and hungry? Did it include the fragmented love letters she had written on post-it-notes and slipped into Courtney's locker as they passed in the hallway without seeing each other? In heaven surely she wouldn't smoke or shake or cry, but would she still love Courtney? If they met again, both made whole and perfect, would either of them even recognize the other?

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