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Flightless

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B.F.A. Creative Writing and Literature, University of Evansville, 2016

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Abstract

The stories in this collection occupy a range of genres: realist literary fiction, slice of life, horror, magical realism/fabulism. While most of the pieces are short fiction, there is one short short, and one flash piece. What unites these disparate styles and forms is a concern with the everyday, with family dramas. *Flightless* is interested in exploring the dynamics of different familial relationships, particularly that of mothers and their children. These relationships, even good ones, can be fraught with expectations, guilt, and feelings of obligation unique to the expected roles of mothers and children, and my stories seek to investigate these places of tension. The magical realist and fabulist tales within this collection take inspiration from writers like Karen Russell and Brenda Peynado, and they attempt to pay homage to their desire not just to tell interesting tales, but to use interesting language to do so. The title of this collection reflects the state many of my characters currently occupy. Something in their life is keeping them tethered to the ground, unable to move onward.

Key words: literary fiction, magical realism, fabulism, motherhood, familial relationships

Flightless

When I was small, my mother was a bird. But only in the morning. The house would still be dark and Dad another hour from waking up, but I could pull back the sheer curtains behind my bed and find her perched in the tree outside my window. Russet feathers puffed around her thin, yellow beak. A robin.

Sometimes Mom complained that she'd rather have been something more exciting. A cardinal or a bluebird. Maybe an oriole or a crane. Grandma never let her get away with saying things like that. She was a pragmatist. She'd lived through the Great Depression and a double mastectomy, and she never let Mom forget that Pappy James had been a Pelican, "dumbest bird" she'd ever seen.

"We don't even live near water," she'd say. "What the hell are you supposed to do with that?" She'd press her denture-less mouth upward, closer to her nose, and suck in her cheeks. "A robin's fine," she'd say. "It's just fine."

Today I'm perched in our sweet gum tree, gangly human limbs dangling obscenely from the branches. It's ridiculous to hope sitting up here will unmake me—siphon the density from my bones or speed the steady metronome in my chest. Though, I guess it's not so much that I'm hoping. I'm pretending. Sarah is 14, nearly three years younger than me, and she started buzzing around the kitchen, glossy throat catching light, over two years ago. I remember watching her erratic jives that first day, rubbing together

damp palms. A sense of elation, resentment. She'd buzzed past my ear and I'd forced a smile.

Dad had gripped my shoulder, grey eyes rolling left, right, up, up, watching her. "It'll be different," he'd said, squeezing tighter. "Don't worry." Sarah had landed on the countertop a foot away from me and I'd reached for her, slowly, aching to cup my palms around her paperclip body. My fingertips had just grazed the silky feathers at the crown of her head, and she was gone, wings beating in soft whirs against the wide panes of the kitchen window.

The bottoms of my shoes scrape against the trunk, dislodging brittle grey strips of bark. When I land, my knees buckle, sensation rushing back in icy pricks along my calves. I've been sitting for too long. I'd told myself a half hour at the most, but I can tell that it's been longer than that. The shadows of nearby trees growing long and dark. I glance up.

At the end of the lowest branch, a plastic hummingbird feeder rocks in slow circles. The tiny black bodies of dead ants bob at the surface of the sugar mix like synchronized swimmers. Left, then right. High kick.

The thought of Sarah drinking out of this bug trap makes my stomach turn, but I've seen her do it before. A persistent yellow jacket circles one of the plastic flowers, beating its body against the congealed sweetness. I swat at it and start pulling at the rope holding the feeder to the tree. It looks like it's disintegrating, sprigs of coarse blue plastic curling along the knot, but after five minutes of bending back my fingernails, I've made

no headway. I grip the bottom of the feeder and twist until the anty mixture slaps to the ground in a sticky sheet. For some reason, this seems better.

There's a second bird feeder, one that looks like a barn—albeit a shit-covered barn—on a branch that's higher up. It's full of sunflower seeds. This state of plenty will last maybe a day at the most. The squirrels like this one. So do the bluejays and the starlings. Sometimes I see Mom, or whom I think is mom, hanging off the side of one of the tiny open windows of the feeder, her spindle legs bent at 45 degrees angles.

“You're going to be late.”

The bottom of the other feeder tumbles out of my hand and lands in the dust.

“Jesus,” I say.

The left side of Sarah's mouth twitches. “Here.” She squats and picks up the feeder between her thumb and middle finger. “I wasn't trying to scare you.”

I shake my head. “You carry it. I'm sticky enough already.”

She loosens her grip and the feeder slips forward, dangles. “Why don't we just buy a new one?”

I slap my palm under its tilted edge. “Fine. Just give it here, then.”

Sarah pulls her hand back and inspects it before wiping it on the side of her t-shirt. She looks at me. “Have you packed yet or not?”

“For the most part,” I say.

“Dad wants us to have the truck loaded by this afternoon.” She points to the feeder. “Before I’m useless.”

“You’re never useless.” The words smack the air with uncomfortable force. I scuff my foot on the ground and send a little wave of dust towards her. “Let’s go,” I say. “This might take a while.”

It doesn’t seem like a room, so piled with boxes, should feel empty, but it does. The nakedness of the walls, the squares of darker blue where posters and calendars once clung, seem to counteract the heap at the center of my room. I want to leave, and I haven’t even made it past the doorway.

“We’ll do your room first,” Sarah says. She bumps my shoulder playfully and pushes past the doorway, her sneakers slapping loudly on the naked wood floor. “What do you want to start with? Books?” she asks, tapping a box. “Or panties?” She smiles, but I feel my eyes pricking in response. “Oh, come on,” she says. “Help me out here.”

“Why don’t we start with your room, instead?”

She digs her nails under the “panties” box and hoists it into her arms. She nods to the other box. “Why don’t you grab that one? We’ll do this real quick. Band-aid style.”

“Fine,” I say. She waits, stationary, until I’ve scooped the other box into my arms before making a move for the door. The book box is so heavy I have to jut my hips forward, rest the edge against my abdomen, and make small, waddling steps forward.

“I think you got the better end of this deal,” I shout at Sarah’s back. She’s already at the end of the hallway, kicking open the screen door.

“I’m young and weak,” she shouts back. “You’re almost there. Look where Dad parked the truck.”

The back end of Dad’s Chevy is actually touching the edge of the front porch. There’s a circle of pale woodgrain peeking through the porch’s green paint where the hitch must’ve jammed into it. I scan the grass, feeling the inexplicable urge to search for that dislodged paint chip. I’m not sure what I’d do with it once I found it. Glue it back on? Throw it away? Maybe I’d tuck it into one my boxes and take it with me. I grunt as I drop my load onto the bed of the truck and clamber inside after it, shoving until it’s flush against the back window. I grab Sarah’s box and scoot it back as well. My arms are shaking now. I pause to wiggle them out and look up as car blips past our driveway, only visible for seconds as it accelerates down the road. The trees on the other side of the highway grow close to one another—knitted together by a dense tangle of bush honeysuckle.

From this angle, it seems like we’re utterly remote, but our new house lies less than a mile up the highway. I glance at Sarah. She’s squinting up at the house, our *old* house, with a puckered mouth.

“He’s not going to get what he wants for it,” she says.

I survey the layer of moss coating the once-white siding. The caulk smeared along the front windows like excess frosting.

“Not even close,” I agree. “But he doesn’t need to.”

The new house is a bargain. The move—financially motivated—if you ask Dad. “We can’t keep living here,” he told us a month ago. “Not without your mother’s income.” Which makes sense. It does. But, then, if that’s the case, we haven’t been able to afford living here for the past three years.

“Hey,” Sarah snaps. A “w” of sweat is beginning to form under her small breasts. “It’s 10:30. Let’s get moving.” She pulls the collar of her shirt above her nose and wipes it down her face. “I’ve got even more than you do.”

I nod and hoist myself out of the truck bed, scraping my shin on the way out. “And Dad is...?”

Sarah shoots me a look. “You know where Dad is.”

I do. Mom will be shifting soon. Limbs elongating in sharp cracks, the translucent base of her feathers stiffening, dropping in rigid clumps. The process starts at 11:00 a.m. Ends at 11:02. Sometimes, if you time it just right, cup her face between your hands in the trembling moments after, something sad—*something human*—happens in her eyes.

But it never builds to anything. Never keeps her from striking out at us in panicked jabs, scrambling away in the time it takes us to throw up elbows, shield our faces from her untrimmed nails.

“He wants to try one more time,” I say.

Sarah shakes her head. “She’s not coming. It’s a waste of fucking time, and you know it.” She reaches for the screen door, but misses. “But you’re just as bad as he is, aren’t you?”

“Language,” I mumble. It’s all I can think to say. Sarah grips the door handle. She takes a deep breath and pulls it open slowly, the line of her jaw softening.

“I’m sorry,” she says. She’s got this look on her face. The one that always makes me feel like maybe I’m the younger sister. Maybe I’m the one that needs protecting.

I elbow her. “You should be. My delicate sensibilities are easily offended.”

She smiles a little. “Oh, I know.”

The last time Mom set foot in the house was over three years ago. I think about this when I knock over one of my final boxes and find the shriveled body of long-dead worm. The worm has been resting all this time in a *Precious Moments* box I’d kept on my windowsill. White porcelain shards now litter the floor at my feet. I reach between the pieces and lift the worm gingerly.

The day Mom had given it to me, it had still been wriggling, little pills of dirt stuck to its body. She’d smiled and gently pressed my hand until my fingers curled around it. Then, stood in my doorway for a moment watching me, head tilting left, to center, to right, in short blips. I don’t remember her saying anything, but she could’ve. That day had seemed so utterly unexceptional at the time. Mom had already been sleeping outside for years, and so her absence from the house, for days or even weeks, felt natural. Expected. By the time that moment had developed any sort of significance for me, it had shrunk to a seconds-long clip in my memory.

There's no sound when I snap the brown remnant. I let one half fall to the floor, mingle with the pretty mess of white. I pocket the other.

Grandma lights a cigarette. Blows a thin stream of smoke out the passenger window. She catches me glancing at her and shrugs. "Every day, honey. We're dying every day."

I check the rearview mirror. All three of Grandma's china hutches are still secure in the back of the truck. Aside from her cast iron skillet, they're the only things Grandma's insisted on taking from her and Pappy's house to our new one. Pappy bought each one for her. I have to imagine he bought her a good deal of things over the course of their marriage, and after the hour it took to load them, the uncharitable part of me wishes she would've decided to keep some jewelry or a nice tea set instead.

Grandma holds the cigarette out to me. I reach for it and try to make it seem like I've never held one before. Add a cough for good measure. Grandma knows me, though. She knows me in a way I sometimes wish Sarah or Dad could know me.

"Are you sad?" I ask her.

"Sad?" she repeats.

I pass the cigarette back to her. "Yeah." I shrug. "Sad."

"Oh, child." Her hands flutter, coral nails rapping against the console. "There's no use being sad about any of it. It is what it is."

"I didn't say there was any use in it," I snap. "I just asked if you were."

“Pull over.” When I don’t immediately respond, she reaches for the wheel. I smack her hand away, but flip on my blinker. An SUV honks at us, gunning past, as we slide to a halt in the gravel at the shoulder. When I throw the truck in park, the hitches pitch forward, banging against the back glass. We both flinch.

“What?” I ask.

Grandma grabs my wrist. “She’s gone, Nora. You hear me?” She squeezes until I look up. “Let her be who she is now.”

I sag against the headrest. Let my hands drop from the wheel.

“Where’s your sister right now?” she asks me.

“At the new house,” I say. “With Dad.”

She nods. “Love her while you’ve got her.”

Mother’s leaving was gradual. First, it was the sleeping outside.

“You don’t want to be in a house after you’ve been in a tree,” she told me one night. She was smiling a little, standing at the bottom of the porch steps, immobile, as I tried to pull her inside.

“But it’s where we sleep,” I said.

“It’s not where mommy sleeps.” She ran her fingers through my bangs. “You’ll try it one day and you’ll understand.”

It was much later that she quit her job at the elementary school. The classroom made her claustrophobic, she said. She'd started keeping the windows open year-round, started teaching lessons from the doorway.

The traveling came next. November would hit and Mom would be gone. Wherever her avian form landed, her human form continued onward, taking buses, renting cars, sometimes simply walking, propelled with the same innate drive to make it the warm soil of South Texas. She called us on her first trip. Checked in every other day "with a thousand hugs and kisses for her baby girls." By the third year, we didn't expect to hear from her for a good two months. When we did, it was a short and confused text from a number we didn't recognize. It was as if she knew we were somehow important, but couldn't pinpoint why. And after each trip, she'd come back a little quieter. A little more restless. Not quite our mom.

Grandma is cussing over our new stove. "To hell with electric," she says. She's holding a blackened green bean casserole between two dish towels. "What're you smiling about?" she asks, elbowing away the oven mitts I hold out to her. "It's stupid." She slaps the glass bowl onto the counter. "How're you supposed to know what you're doing when you can't even see the flame?"

"The burning smell's probably a good indication," Dad says. Grandma pops the back of his head with a towel.

"I'll make sure you get the burnt spot."

Dad fights a grin, the right side of his mouth disappearing into a deep dimple. “There might be a learning curve. All these high falootin appliances. I tell you what.”

Grandma scowls. She’s not impressed with the new house. It’s nicely updated, but the updates can’t disguise the fact that it’s small, just over 900 square feet. With our boxes stacked on every surface, knocking against the ceiling in some corners, (not to mention grandma’s hutches), it feels even smaller.

Dad glances at his watch and turns to me. “You can probably let her out now. She’ll be done soon.”

Sarah asked us to put her in a cage for the move. She picked it out herself at Petco. A sleek wired dome meant for cockatiels. She’s been beating her taut body against the sides for going on two hours now. Even though she agreed that this was the best option, it makes my stomach twist. When her blurred wings hit the cage, it sounds like a miniature weedwhacker choking against a metal fence. She darts to the back of the cage, smacking against her feeder as I get closer.

“Shh,” I whisper. “You’re fine. It’s just sis.” I lift the latch and slide it to the left. Before I open it, I glance behind me. “No windows open, right? No doors?”

Dad shakes his head. “Fort Knox.”

I bend the door back and step aside. Sarah nearly tags my ear on her way out. I try to follow her frantic path, but lose her in the brightness of the kitchen lights.

“Where’s she at?” I ask Dad.

He tilts his head back and cups his palm over his brow. “I can’t see her.”

“Grandma? What about you?”

She pats her mouth with the towel. “I can’t see nothing without my glasses,” she says. “You know that.”

“Shh,” Dad snaps. “Can you hear her?”

I hold in a breath and try to listen past the blood thudding at my temples. The stove clicks to “warming.” Several pieces of ice shift in the refrigerator. Otherwise, it’s silent.

“What time is it?” I ask Dad.

He barely glances at his wrist. “Close.”

“Are you sure the—”

“I checked the goddamn windows, Nora.”

“There.” Grandma points to an upper cabinet. Sarah grips the white cabinet edge with her tiny talons. She looks almost tired, leaning forward with her thin beak resting on the white pillow of her chest.

I used to ask Mom to tell me about flying. What it felt like. If she was ever scared.

She liked it when I did this. I don’t think she ever got tired of me asking. She’d pull out the books on my bookshelf and open them to pages diagramming the wings of an eagle, a crane, a bat. She’d stretch her arms wide and talk about how harder it was for her to stay afloat than those massive gliders.

She'd talk about the wind whistling between her clenched toes, stinging her eyes. How she felt small and massive all at once. How, yes, it was sometimes scary, but it never made her love it any less.

"Expansive," she said. "That's the word for it. Do you know what that means?"

I didn't, but I'd nod anyway.

"You'll find out," she always assured me.

I wonder how long she believed this. Or whether she really believed it at all. I think about my bookshelf. An ornithologist's dream. *The Backyard Bird Lover's Guide. Hoot. National Geographic's Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern North America.* A mint-condition 1832 *Birds of America* that Pappy James had acquired in the seventies through questionable means.

"Hmmm, what will little Nora be?" Mom would ask. A game she liked to play. She'd be sitting on my bed cross-legged, holding the Audobon guide closed on her lap.

"How about—" She'd open the book to a random page. "A flamingo?"

She'd look back and forth between me and the drawing, tilt my chin from side to side. Grin, as I squealed out protests.

"Okay, okay," she'd say. "Maybe not a flamingo."

She'd close the book and then open to another page. "How about a grouse?" She'd wait. "No? Not a grouse, either? How about a—snow egret?"

And on we'd go.

I used to think she was preparing me for flight. Maybe she was preparing me to watch.

Sarah and I sit cross-legged on her bare mattress. There are sheets in a box somewhere, but both of us are too exhausted to move. I tried sleeping in my room on my equally bare mattress, but I gave up two hours in. Made the short trek across the hall to Sarah's room, where she was staring glass eyed at the ceiling.

I want her to speak. She's been quiet tonight. Uncharacteristically so. I prod her with my foot, until she looks at me.

"I didn't know you today," she finally says. "For a moment after I shifted back, I didn't know you or Dad or Grandma. I didn't know me." She pinches the bridge of her nose with shaking fingers. "I don't want to be this way."

"You aren't," I say. "You were just disoriented." I give her a tight smile. "You spent, what? *Six hours* banging your head off the side of your cage. You probably had a little bird concussion."

"Comforting," she snorts.

"I think it is."

She lies down, back pressing against my knee. "You're right," she says. "It is."

Sarah looks so small, curled under Dad's sweatshirt. Her calves and her socked feet stick out from the edge. I'm worried she's still cold, but she seems to be sleeping deeply. I cover her feet with the pillow I've been using for my head.

Sleeping doesn't seem to be an option for me tonight. I ease myself from the mattress, wincing when the old springs squeak. Sarah kicks at the pillow, sending it sliding off the bed, but she doesn't wake up.

The house is so quiet. I can hear snoring, either Dad or Grandma, down the hallway, but it's a familiar soundtrack. One I find comforting. There's only one light still on. An orange pendant hanging above the kitchen sink. I gravitate towards it. It looks like physical warmth, a heatlamp, and I want to stand under it.

But I don't make it quite that far. There's a faded shoebox on the table labeled with Grandma's careful cursive in black sharpie. The box once rested on Grammy's kitchen counter, nestled in between the cutting boards and the breadbox. If we "behaved ourselves" and made sure our hands were clean, Grammy would let us take the box to the dining room table and pick through the photos and ticket stubs. It was exciting to find photos of Mom when she was a teenager, pictures of long-dead dogs and ponies and other farm animals Grandma always, miraculously, seemed to remember. But it was even more thrilling to find the photos of Grammy and Grampy as young folks. A reminder that wrinkles and white hair were a product of time. A relatively recent development, instead of innate qualities.

I think Sarah and I both wished we had inherited Grammy's looks. In most of the photos, she looks like a true flapper. Dark hair bobbed at the chin. In some of the photos

she's wearing linen day dresses with stiff collars. In others, she's wearing billowing trousers that make her look like Amelia Earhart.

As I'm sifting through the photos tonight, I find myself less interested in how she looks than in where she's looking. In nearly every photo, Grandma is looking away from the picture taker. Her face is always turned to the side.

I pick up one of my favorites. A photo of Grandma and my mother. My mother is wearing a striped yellow and white swimsuit, and she has all the fat rolls of early toddlerdom. She's clutching a handful of Grandma's hair and neither of them are looking at the camera. They're both turned towards something just out of the shot.

Something in my chest aches when I look at it. The Grandma I know is so made of hard edges that it's sometimes hard to remember that she has spent most of her life missing someone. I have to think this does something to person. How can you ever be here, really here, when there's something always pulling you slightly out of frame?

This morning, Dad is plunging a black, metal shepherd's hook into the soft earth. At some point during the night, it must have rained. This has made Dad's job both easier and harder. Easier, in that it takes less force to shove the pointed end into the ground. Harder in that the pole now wants to sag to one side.

I open the sliding glass door and walk out to meet him. My sneakers sink into the mud. Make soft, suctioning sounds with every step.

“Here.” I grab the pole and push it upright.

“Keep it centered,” he says. He puts his massive hands under mine and drives it down deeper, lodging it into firmer soil.

He’s bought a new bird feeder, a carbon copy of the barn-shaped feeder we left behind at the house. I wonder if Sarah would consider this progress or sentimentality. I wonder how he sees it.

He’s purchased a new hummingbird feeder, as well. Only this one isn’t made of plastic. It’s red glass. Even the little white flowers around the base are made of glass. It’s really quite beautiful.

I help him fill both, and by the time we’ve finished, Grammy and Sarah are both leaning against the railing of the deck, watching.

I feel a surge of protectiveness for Dad. I’m bracing for a smart comment from either one of them, but it doesn’t come. Sarah regards the glass feeder.

“Pretty,” is all she says.

We dig out four mugs, rinse out dust and dead bugs, and fill them with coffee. We grab the dining room chairs and lift them over the lip of the sliding door. Place them in a row on the deck.

And we watch the feeders.

The birds here, the ones in our new backyard, act like they've never seen a feeder before. They come in droves. Blackbirds and starlings, chickadees, cardinals. There's a blue jay—a beautiful bird, bright pop against the boggy ground, that Grammy can't stand. "He's a bully," she said yesterday. "There's more than enough to go around."

But she likes to watch him nonetheless.

Sarah seems to enjoy the glass feeder. She spends most of her afternoons chasing away any other hummingbirds that try to approach it. She's small, even for a hummer, but she makes up for it in speed and tenacity. The larger birds, glistening green males that are admittedly, much more beautiful than Sarah, seem scared of her. They take halting sips, plunging their thin pink tongues into the fake flowers. As soon as they see Sarah, they dart up and away. We lose sight of them in the trees.

Dad has added a suet feeder, and this has attracted even more birds. There's a red-headed woodpecker that makes his appearance a few times a day. When he lands on the green wire of the feeder, it sways dangerously.

We have seen nuthatches and wrens. Three yellow finches—one male and two females—and one red finch. We have seen robins. So many robins. *Bob bob bobbing*. At least six or seven of them. None of them are Mom.

The house is starting to look less chaotic, less temporary. Pots and pans have been carefully stored away in our kitchen cabinets, and you can walk through the living room now. We've even found a place for each of Grammy's hutches: one in the living room, one in the dining room, and the final in her bedroom. The one in her bedroom is slowly

becoming populated with artifacts from her life. The shoebox of photos now sits on the top shelf. She keeps moving it from one side of the shelf to the other—like she can't figure out how best to display it. She's put up a thick-framed wedding photo of her and Pappy on the shelf below it. Right next to it, she's laid out a pearl necklace—a gift from her own mother. I've never seen her wear it, not even for special occasions.

Today, she's pulled out a camera, an old Nikon, which she places next to the shoe box. I'm sitting on her sagging mattress, keeping her company as she sorts through one of her last boxes.

"You like it?" she asks me. I guess I've been eyeing it—more out of surprise than desire. I've never seen it before.

I nod. "Was it yours?"

Grammy gives me a sharp look. "Of course it was mine. Whose else would it be?"

"Pappy's?" I suggest.

She turns it in her hands. "Your Pappy used it more than I did, but I bought it." She holds it out to me. "Here," she says. "Take it. There might be some film somewhere—" she gestures to the remaining boxes—"in one of these."

"You don't want—"

"I don't want it," Grammy says. "Take it."

The camera is too slow to capture Sarah, but I try anyway. Make her my first subject. I imagine I'll have some nice pictures of Dad's feeders, of the trees she lands in,

if nothing else. It's probably best I don't get her picture. I'm not sure she would like me taking it in the first place. It's a complicated thing how much I both want and don't want her to look at herself. To understand what she is.

I wonder if she knows she weighs less than three grams. If she knows how fast she's flying when she's chasing away those big males (up to 30 mph). Or that, when she's drinking nectar, her little pronged tongue is darting out 10-15 times per second. Does she know that if she wanted—truly wanted to—she could take to the skies and fly, nonstop, for over 1200 miles? That her body would let her do that?

My elbows sag and I cradle the camera to my chest. I could follow her all day, and I don't think she'd ever pause long enough for me to snap one. I need a different subject. A slower one.

The walk back to the old house takes all of fifteen minutes, a disappointingly short amount of time considering this was meant to be our fresh start. Our clean break. And of course, she's there. Just like I thought she'd be, bobbing on a branch above the barn feeder. When she sees me, she starts singing, little triangle beak opening and closing in irregular bursts, sound vibrating down her dusky chest. Almost as if she knows me. She flits to another branch, and then another, and then another, and I find myself following down below. Trying to keep the darkened smudge of her body in sight. She lands in a redbud tree several yards ahead of me. Flits up and up. When I reach the base of the tree, I don't think, I don't pause. I drop the camera and start climbing, boots scratching noisily against the trunk.

I am palms and forearms and elbows scraping against the knobby growths, the smooth bark, as I struggle for purchase, further and further up. When I push through the first tangle of smaller limbs, I see the nest, cupped between two slim branches. There's a strange pressure building in my chest, tightening down my stomach. I hoist myself up even further, stand on tip-toes until I'm eye level with the straw bowl. Mother clutches the branch above me and warbles nervously, her body twitching side to side. There are three blue eggs, each barely the size of a quarter, clustered together at the center of the nest. Something between a laugh and a sob barks out of me.

I reach for one, and mother cries, diving at my hands. I swat her away, grip one of the tiny blue orbs between my thumb and forefinger.

I could drop each one.

Watch them crack against the hard earth, yolk spilling out in a sticky stream. I could squeeze the one I'm holding just the slightest bit more. Watch the fissures travel across its smooth surface until that hot burst was sliding down my arms.

Mother dives at me again. I let her sharp claws graze the backs of my hands without pushing her away. For a moment, my vision is filled with nothing but the frantic beating of wings. Let her strike and strike and strike.

Posing

The woman next to Lyn really knows how to chaturanga: elbows pulled back like bow strings, her body a straight line hovering just above the floor. This is the only pose, of many, that Lyn has recognized during this class. It is also, unfortunately, the pose she is least equipped to perform. Currently, she is lying on the mat with her right cheek pressed into the generous layer of sweat that's managed to pool below her over the past fifteen minutes. She's tried to shift her arms into an approximation of the other woman's form, jamming her biceps against her ribs, but this is as far as she's managed to get. She remembers attempting this move over 45 years ago in a high school gym class with much the same result.

The other woman, Becky, or maybe Brenda—she can't remember now—has rolled forward in one fluid motion, pressing the tops of her feet flat against the ground, and bowing her back for a pose the instructor calls “baby cobra.” She looks ridiculous.

Lyn lifts her face off the mat and glances at her watch, willing more time to have passed, but there's still 45 minutes to go.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Maybe if she leaves now, she can try to get a refund on her gift card. She'll ask the nice woman at registration if they'll give her cash for it. That way she could honestly

tell her son that she had gone but spend the money on something she'd actually enjoy. Like a bottle of Chianti at the wine bar three doors down.

“Do you need help?” Brenda is looking at Lyn with compassion (which Lyn is okay with) and pity (which Lyn is not). She can admit that Brenda really does seem nice enough. She's wearing an oversized *Life is Good* sweatshirt, and she looks maybe a decade younger than Lyn herself, with severely cropped salt and pepper hair. Like Lyn, she's one of the older women in the class, and this makes Lyn feel a reluctant kinship with her. Plus, Lyn feels certain she's seen Brenda before. She's pretty sure she's seen Brenda, or someone who looks like her, jogging through her neighborhood with an obese golden retriever. And if her health consciousness is enough to make Lyn hate her a little, the golden retriever wins her back some points in Lyn's book.

Brenda scoots closer, abandoning her mat to crouch near Lyn. “Do you need help getting up?”

The other students, now in downward dog, are peering at them between their legs. Lyn rolls onto her right shoulder, away from Brenda, and pushes herself into a seated position. “I'm fine,” she says. She grips the front of her t-shirt and wipes it against her forehead, leaving behind an orangish streak of foundation. Brenda eyes it, then looks away quickly. “It's fine,” she mouths to Lyn.

Lyn's palm flies up to cover the splotch. That's it. She can't do this anymore.

Her embarrassment at being watched is morphing into an animosity towards overly-concerned Brenda and towards Chris, who bought her the five-class gift card, to “enrich her retirement” and “ensure her continued health and well-being” according to

the card that had accompanied it. Lyn had been pretty sure that what he was really trying to say was that she was fat and sat at home too much. But she might be projecting.

Brenda is still watching her, right hand awkwardly stretched out as if to pull her to her feet. Lyn ignores her, pushing herself up by her palms. “I’m fine,” she whispers. “Go on without me.”

She can feel the eyes of the other students boring into her. Stay, they seem to say. Get your ass on the mat, and feel the zen, *goddamit*.

“You were doing so well,” Brenda whispers to her.

Lyn lets out a sharp laugh and the instructor pauses in the middle of her own chaturanga to give her a forced smile. “Remember to listen to your body,” she says to the class. “If you need to take a break, take a break.”

Lyn takes her cue, retreating to the door. She debates turning around and grabbing her mat. She did pay \$30 for it at Target just this morning, but if she takes the mat, it will be clear that she’s leaving, *leaving* which is, of course, what she had originally intended to do. But now that the instructor has provided an excuse for her, she feels obligated to take it.

The woman at the registration desk is filling in a desk-sized calendar with precise blue lettering. Hot Yoga on October 7th. BOOTY Camp on October 18th. She holds a finger up to Lyn. “Just one moment.” She finishes the “Y” in “BOOTY” and looks up with a smile. “What can I do for you?”

Lyn can see the yellow stomach of her purse spilling out of the nook behind the reception desk. She points to it. “Can I see my purse, honey?”

The woman nods. “Of course.”

“And my shoes.”

The woman’s smile begins to slip. “Of course.” She reaches into the cubby below Lynn’s purse, hooking her fingers around the back of each loafer. “I hope everything’s alright?” she says.

Lynn rests one palm against the desk for balance and shoves her feet into the shoes one at a time. “Oh, yes. Nothing earthshattering.” She digs in her purse for her phone. “It’s my granddaughter’s birthday today—and silly me—I had forgotten what time the party was supposed to start.” She makes a show of tapping her phone and scrolling through her calendar. “Yep, there it is. 2:30. Looks like I’ll be a bit late.” She leans across the desk and shakes her head. “I swear, if I didn’t have my head attached, I’d lose it.”

The registrar gives her best customer service laugh. “Oh, I understand,” she says. “I’m the same way.”

Lyn pulls the purse across her chest. “I hate to ask this—” she starts.

“Oh, no—” the woman says. “We won’t count this as one of your classes.”

Lyn taps her hand on the counter. “That’s great.” She grips the door handle. “No really,” she says, “that’s very kind of you.”

Lyn is tempted to call Chris and give him a piece of her mind. Didn't she raise him better than this? She was never the sort of mother to gift socks at Christmas or new blue jeans (though he needed them) for birthdays. Gifts, she firmly believed, were for what people wanted. Not what they needed. And especially not what you *assumed* they needed, and particularly not if that need so happened to align with your own current obsession.

The cool air skirts along the back of Lyn's neck, lifting her dampened curls. She's already feeling better. The wine bar, a trendy little joint called "Solstice," beckons just up the hill. Lyn glances down at herself, appraising. Grey sweatpants. Sensible shoes of the very kind she'd always told her own mother she'd never wear. Boxy t-shirt now defiled by various rings of sweat and that glaring makeup smear. She should go home and change first.

But realistically, she knows that if she goes home now, she's very likely to sink into her recliner with her *Home and Gardens* or spend the rest of the afternoon sitting on the back deck, watching the last few swallows who've yet to migrate. This, of course, is what Chris is worried about. What he's trying to prevent. This Lyn is not someone he recognizes. Most of Chris's childhood, Lyn was in constant motion. She'd worked two jobs, trying to provide for the two of them up until his Junior year of high school. Sixth grade social studies teacher by day. Shift manager at the town's last family-owned grocery store by night. Even after the store had gone under, Lyn had spent her newly-found free time volunteering at Glen County's animal shelter during the week and selling hand-knitted scarves at the Farmer's Market most weekends. Run, run, run.

She's not sure how to explain to Chris that her new life doesn't feel small or isolated or hemmed in or any of the other things he's concerned about. It feels still.

The first day of Lyn's retirement, her internal clock woke her at 6:15, as per usual. This wasn't surprising or distressing to Lyn, because she knew she could enjoy her favorite part of the day, the morning, without having to rush through the whole rigmarole of getting dressed, putting on mascara, eating her banana nut oatmeal.

Instead, she took her time making coffee. Selected the "rich brew" button as opposed to her usual "standard brew." Picked up an issue of *National Geographic* and settled into a chair at her dining room table. From this vantage point she could look out the sliding glass door onto her deck and see the woods behind her house slowly being illuminated by the sunrise. It was delightful.

Lyn could feel the day unfurling in front of her. So many options. She kept thinking about what she would be doing at this particular moment were she still working. I'd be putting on my shoes right now, she thought. Then: I'd be going out to start the car. I'd be halfway through my commute. I'd be pulling into my parking spot.

And instead, here she was. Free to do whatever the hell she wanted to.

The difficult part was figuring out what to do first. She could start a new book. She had a stack of unread romance novels in the corner of her bedroom.

Or maybe, since the forecast was calling for good weather today, she'd take a short hike. Get herself aligned with nature before she did anything else.

She started sorting through her closet, searching for her Merrell's and a pair of mucked-up jeans she'd kept over the years specifically for hiking. The jeans were at the bottom of a drawer under a stack of beige and black slacks.

Funny how this could be a part of her daily uniform—slacks and blouse, slacks and blouse—and she would never question it. But now that she was looking at them, really contemplating them, she couldn't think of a single occasion that would ever make her to want to wear them again. They weren't particularly flattering. Nor were they particularly comfortable. Lyn grabbed the stack of them out and tossed them on her floor.

That's what she'd do today. She'd clean out her closet. Out with the old, in with the new. Maybe she'd go shopping afterwards. Buy herself a retirement friendly wardrobe.

She wasn't sure what that would look like, but it certainly wouldn't be business casual. She started pulling out blouses, as well. Most of them were colorful, cheerful-looking things. Reds and bright blues and purples and about seven black and white polka dot shirts. She had no idea she'd acquired so many. They were blouses appropriate for an elementary school teacher, but she couldn't really imagine choosing them over her t-shirts and sweaters if she no longer had to. *Gone*. She grabbed four by the hangers and tossed them onto the pile of slacks.

She was reaching for another handful of them, when she remembered why she'd originally walked in there.

Was this really how she was going to spend her first day of retirement?

Organizing her closet?

No. This wasn't right.

But where had her jeans gone? She scanned the floor and nudged the pile with her foot. The hangers clanked noisily and slid to the left, but she couldn't see her jeans.

Maybe this was a sign. Maybe hiking wasn't the thing either. It required the right gear. Plus, the path might be muddy. It had rained the night before. And hiking wasn't really relaxing, either, was it?

Reading it was, then. And, well, it had been awhile since she'd *been* with herself. If she was really feeling the book, maybe she'd lock the doors, find a good playlist, light that lavender candle in her bedroom.

But. Then again, she'd told nearly everyone she came into contact with that she was retiring today. She was pretty sure the teller at the bank, the cashier at Quick trip—maybe even the kid at Subway—knew today was the official start of retirement.

What if someone decided to stop by to visit her? To celebrate? To check-in on her?

No, she couldn't choose that option, either.

By three o'clock, Lyn had come up with a turned down at least twelve other plans for her day. She'd managed to make a bologna sandwich for lunch (because the question of *where* to go to lunch had been equally daunting). And she'd managed to split her attention between some pretty terrible day-time television, a crossword puzzle, a week-old newspaper, some mindless scrolling through Facebook, and composing an unnecessarily long grocery list.

By five o'clock, Lyn was researching different organizations or clubs she could join. Maybe the Metropolitan Village Greening Club or she could take classes to become a certified Master Gardener.

By seven, Lyn was starting to look into part-time positions. It wouldn't hurt to pick up a little extra income, would it? And a little part-time position, just a few hours a week, wouldn't be nearly as stressful as working full time. The library was looking for extra help. So was the county clerk's office.

By nine, she was ready for bed. For some reason, she felt more tired than if she'd worked a full day. She lay there for a while, listening to the muffled sound of the television in the other room. She knew that tomorrow would feel much the same.

But after a week, a month, she felt something began to shift inside. The gears inside her mind starting to slow, to ease.

Lyn's phone buzzes. A text from Anne. She feels herself smiling. Where Chris is diligently trying to right her path, "enrich her retirement" as it were, his daughter is content to meet Lyn where she's at. She ignores Anne's question. Something about a new scarf for Lisa. She's not sure who Lisa is or why she should be compelled to knit a scarf for her. She types out "WINE BAR ?" and it's two, maybe three seconds before she

receives a “omw.” That settles it, then. She adjusts her purse strap so that it semi-covers the makeup stain. It’ll have to do.

Being around Anne makes Lynn feel awake. Present. Anne’s what she’s pretty sure the kids call a “hot mess.” Which is funny, because her life seems like an updated version of Lyn’s youth—one with things like Tinder and Instagram and Uber—and Lyn never thought of herself as particularly “fucked up,” or whatever Anne likes to refer to herself as. Was she mildly alcoholic in college? Sure. Was she high more often than not? Well, yeah. Did she have a lot of meaningless sex sprinkled in with a few once-in-a-lifetime love connections? Absolutely.

Pretty standard fare, as far as Lyn is concerned. Which is why Lyn loves being updated on Anne’s current drama: *Ben broke up with Angie, because Angie and I made out last Friday night, but it wasn’t like it was anything serious, and now Ben won’t talk to me and Angie won’t leave me alone.*

Lyn gets all of the juicy details without having to feel any of the angst she knows accompanied all of her own youthful reveries. It’s all the entertainment she could want.

Lyn is already a half bottle in by the time she sees Ann weaving through customers towards her table. She’s still wearing the mandatory non-slip shoes and pink dress shirt required by Cracker Barrel, but she’s yanked out her usual bun. This makes the top of her head look slick and round in contrast to the curling mass that humps at the base of her neck.

“Grandma,” Anne says in greeting. “Are you drunk already?”

Lyn looks at the half bottle in front of her. “Just a little.” She pats the bench next to her. “Shh. Take a seat. Get drunk with me.”

“Jesus, Grandma.” Anne sits down and pulls the bottle closer to her, examining the label. “How are you this fucked already?”

She wraps an arm around Anne’s shoulders. “Honey,” she laughs. “I haven’t been fucked in a while.”

Anne mimes gagging. On some level, Lyn knows she should stop talking. On another level—probably the drunken one—she can’t bring herself to care.

“It’s my birthday,” she announces. “I’m celebrating.” She nods to her empty glass. “Properly now.”

“Your birthday was two weeks ago,” Anne reminds her. “Remember, we had chocolate cake. At your house.”

Lyn rubs her eyes. “Not my birthday. I made the cake.”

Anne sighs. “You’ve bitched about literally every cake we’ve ever made or bought for you. You said you wanted to make it.”

“I did?”

“You did.”

“Well, damn.”

Anne slides Lyn’s glass away from her and pours in small splash. Takes a sip. She blinks a couple times and pats Lyn’s hands. “Yikes. Okay, no wonder you’re like this.” She

pushes the glass away from the both of them. “I think I’ll pass. Maybe you should, too, huh?”

Lyn frowns. This was not how things were meant to go. “We can order another kind,” she suggests. “It doesn’t have to be this.”

Anne is looking at the door. “Hey, Grandma, do you know that woman?”

Brenda is attempting to wave around Lyn’s mat, which she’s awkwardly clutching, along with her own.

“Oh, shit.”

Brenda stops in front of their table. It might be the lighting or the wine, but Lyn is convinced Brenda looks like an Olympic athlete. She has the body of a gymnast or a swimmer with those chaturanga arms. The muscles flex as she extends the mat to Lyn. “I think you forgot this,” she says. She’s smiling brightly. Uncomfortably.

Lyn shake her head. “Didn’t forget it,” she says. She realizes she’s slurring.

“Oh.” The mat sags in the space between them. “Are you sure it’s not yours? I thought it was the one you were using today.”

“Tell you what,” Lyn says. She digs into her purse. “Why don’t you keep it?” She slides the gift card across the table. It’s a bright pink with a yellow lotus flower. It says “Happy Birthday” in blocky script along the top of it. “Take this, too.”

Brenda picks up the card. “You don’t want it?” She’s exchanging looks with Anne, trying to gauge whether or not Lyn’s serious.

Lyn leans back in the booth, trying to create distance, make it harder for Brenda to hand it back. “Take it.”

“Okay,” Brenda finally says. She unzips a thin pocket on her leggings and slides the card in. Lyn thinks that’s the end of it, but Brenda is pulling out the chair closest to Lyn, settling her light frame into it. “What do you want, then?”

Lyn waves her way. “Nothing. It’s free. You’ll be doing me a favor.”

“No, I mean it was for your birthday, right? What do you want to do, then?”

“What do you mean?”

“For your birthday.”

“Yeah, I’d like to know, too,” Anne interjects. There’s a surprising bite to Anne’s tone.

Lyn points to the empty wine bottle. “I’m already doing it.”

“Alright, but what else?” Brenda asks. “What would you like to do to celebrate?”

“I’ve already celebrated,” Lyn says. “We had cake.” She’s not too drunk to be unaware that she’s on the opposite end of the conversation she and Anne just had minutes ago.

Anne take another swig of wine and rolls her eyes. “Come on, Grandma. Can’t you cut the shit already, and tell us what you want?”

Lyn is surprised by how quickly Anne’s united with this other woman. Five minutes in and it’s “tell *us* what you want.”

“Would you like another bottle of wine?” Brenda asks. Anne shoots Brenda a look, but if Brenda registers it, she doesn’t seem phased.

Lynn is shaking her head. She’s plenty wined up by now.

“Dad and I could get you a gift card to some other classes,” Anne tries. “It doesn’t have to be yoga. Dad just thought you might like it.”

Lyn closes her eyes.

“Or it doesn’t have to be classes at all. We could get you a card to your favorite store. Buy you some yarn for knitting? A puppy? What? Stop shaking your head.”

“I want,” Lyn starts. “I want...” She’s not sure how to finish. She wants to be left alone. Or, no, maybe that’s not quite right. She likes seeing Anne, and Chris, even though he exhausts her. She likes her Wednesday lunch dates with her ex-husband at the Hardee’s downtown where all of the old people—she’s aware she technically belongs to this crowd now—eat. She even likes going to the grocery store every Tuesday, talking to the cashiers and the deli man, the teenaged baggers.

But she also likes being home. She likes puttering around the yard, planting bulbs and filling bird feeders. She likes wearing sweatpants all day, and sometimes not even brushing her hair, because who the hell is going to see her, anyway? Sometimes she likes sitting her ass in a chair and not doing a goddamned thing.

Lyn knows about momentum. That an object in motion, as every retirement book she’s ever read assures her, stays in motion. And she can understand what they mean. She

can feel her life slowing down, edging in around her in a way that is both frightening and comforting.

Anne is still throwing out suggestions. *A bike. A bigger tv. A new birdfeeder.* But Brenda is watching her in silence. Lyn doesn't like the way she's scrutinizing her. Doesn't like feeling so seen.

"Do you want to go home?" Brenda asks. Is she messing with Lyn? Judging her? She tries to read into her furrowed brow. Her tight lips. She seems sincere. Maybe even determined. "Come on," she says. "You live near Meadowcourt, don't you?" She waits for a nod from Lyn. "So do I. I'll take you home."

Lyn turns to Anne. Shoots her a questioning look. A part of her feels like she's asking for permission. Anne shrugs.

"Let's go," Brenda says. "I'll drive."

Lyn snugs her robe around her shoulders. It's getting chilly now that the sun is setting. Anne has wrapped herself in a throw Lyn normally keeps on the living room sofa. Brenda has one of Lyn's light jackets on over her sweater. It's weird to see her, an almost stranger, sitting in one of her oldest rocking chairs. She was embarrassed of Brenda seeing the dishes in the sink, the baskets of clean laundry stacked next to the couch—but she seems nonplussed. Lyn hadn't actually meant to invite her to stay, but when Brenda had pulled in Lyn's driveway, she'd started asking her about the clematis growing on her light post, and Lyn had ended up telling her about the deep purple one that was growing on the shed out back. "It's gorgeous," Lyn said. "It won't stop growing."

And then before long both women were trekking around the side of the house with Anne in tow, and Brenda kept stopping every now and then to ask her “where’d you get this one?” or “what’s this called?”, and then, next thing she knew, Lyn was grabbing a trowel and a plastic bag out of her shed to dig up starts for her. And then Anne had insisted on having a few starts of her own, and now here they were, sitting on Lyn’s deck, their shoes and jeans caked in mud, watching the sun go down.

“Look at that one,” Brenda says. She’s pointing at a fat robin that’s just landed on the railing of the deck.

Lyn laughs. “That’s not a swallow, Brenda.”

“Oh,” she says. “Well, I’m not a Brenda.”

“You aren’t?” Lyn asks.

“My name’s Becca.”

“Hmm.” Lyn shifts in her chair, and grins sheepishly. “I like that better.”

Becca zips the jacket up tighter. “So do I.”

Anne is singing under her breath. It’s quiet, but Lyn can still make out the tune to “happy birthday.”

Saves

Elise reaches out to still her mother's hand. For the past five minutes, her mother has repeatedly scrubbed her fingers under her nose. Every time she does this, she manages to dislodge her oxygen tubes, sending off a titter of anxious beeps through the machines.

As soon as Elise releases her thin fingers, they slide under the plastic once more and scrape against the pink, flaking skin beneath her nostrils.

"It itches," her mother says.

Elise frowns. "I'm sure it does, but you're rubbing your nose raw."

"The tube is rubbing my nose raw."

"I'll ask the nurse if they can do anything to help it," Elise offers.

Her mother laughs. "Save your breath. They've got more to worry about than that." She reaches for a plastic cup of ice water sitting on her bedside table. "Little Bobbi," her mother begins, "my roommate." She waits for a nod of recognition from Elise.

"Yes?"

"She took a bad turn the other night. She has a brain tumor, you know." She shakes the cup. "Or rather, had a brain tumor. A male nurse used one of his saves on her. She was able to walk out of here the next day. Full remission."

Elise stares at her hands, but she can feel her mother's eyes on the side of her face. "Must've been a new nurse."

Her mother holds the cup to her lips, takes a ginger mouthful and swallows. Her lips are so cracked that she stains the rim with a tiny smear of blood.

"He was young," she says. "I don't think he'd been here a week before it happened."

Elise digs in her purse until she finds an unopened chapstick. "Here." She hands it to her mother.

Her mother dabs at the drop of blood still seeping from her cracked lip and then seals the divide with a thick layer of waxy balm. It takes her two tries to get the cap back on. She stares at Elise as she hands the tube back. "I'm dying," she says. "You know that, right?"

"The doctor says—"

"The doctor," her mother snaps, "didn't save Bobbi. The nurse did."

Elise unzips her purse and drops the chapstick inside. She thinks better of it and takes it out again, setting it next to her mother's ice water.

"Okay," Elise says. "You're right." Her mother nods and pulls the sheet up to her chin, presses her mouth against it.

It takes Elise 45 minutes longer than usual to make it home from work, and on the drive, she finds herself thinking about Bobbi. The few times she'd seen her, she'd been

struck by just how young she looked. Sixteen. Seventeen max. What really baffles Elise is not the fact that the nurse would use his save on her (she imagines it was likely a romantic gesture), but rather that he'd have to. Where were Bobbi's parents? Her family? Her friends? Elise tries to sort through her recent visits, recall whether or not there was ever anyone there to see Bobbi. She remembers seeing a thin, blonde woman holding balloons a few visits back. Elise had held the door open for her, and they'd exchanged strained smiles. The woman had good skin, a nicely fitted pink blazer. It was hard to guess her age, but if she were pushed, Elise would guess early forties. Perhaps this was Bobbi's mother?

Balloons. She'd brought balloons. Elise tries to loosen her grip on the steering wheel. Lower her shoulders. Unclench her jaw. She has to remind herself that she doesn't know the particulars. Doesn't know the slightest thing about this woman's life, or even, frankly, if this woman is Bobbi's mother in the first place, but here she is, making the kind of assumptions she doesn't want others to make about her.

Elise can smell food cooking—something Italian—before she reaches the door. Thomas works 12 hour days and wants food as soon as he's home. If Elise isn't home in time for them to cook together, he always starts the meal. He likes to tell her that he makes a better housewife than she ever could, but she knows he relishes this fact rather than begrudges it. When Elise walks into the kitchen, she finds him standing over a pot of bubbling Bolognese sauce, dabbing at the front of his shirt with a damp paper towel. He starts to smile when he sees her, but it snags on one side of his mouth and hangs there without ever making it to the other side.

“You’re late,” he says. “Traffic?”

Elise slides her purse onto the counter. “Yeah, it was pretty slow.”

The smile levels out across his lips, easy again. “Bummer,” he says. “How is she?”

Elise pulls up a stool. “Alright. Or not well. I don’t really know.” She hovers her pinky over the sauce, feeling a thin layer of condensation pooling on her skin from the steam. It’s hot enough to burn a little. She jabs her finger quickly into the pot, submerging it to its base and bringing it to her mouth. Thomas watches her, waiting for a reaction. It’s good. Really good. The best he’s ever made before—not too sweet, not too salty. But her mouth dries as soon as she’s swallowed, and she finds herself mumbling an apology, seeking out the couch in the living room.

Sammy is stretched across two couch cushions, his front paws extended in front of his body and the pink pads of his back paws facing the ceiling. He thumps his tail listlessly and yawns. There’s a darkened spot where his drool has soaked into the cushion. Elise wrinkles her nose and shoos him off the couch. He jumps onto the coffee table, and the pile of mail and old magazines shifts beneath him, threatening to spill off the edges. Between a yellow electric bill and an old copy of *O Magazine*, Elise can see the face of a cherubic infant laughing toothlessly from a prenatal pamphlet. She knows Thomas must have picked it up the last time they were at the hospital visiting her mom. Elise pushes the pamphlet under Sammy’s paw until most of the infant’s face is obscured by white fur. She thinks about going back into the kitchen, telling Thomas that leaving these goddamn things all over the house isn’t going to make her want to try any sooner.

It's the thought of emptying her lungs, of shouting and shouting until the tension in her shoulders snaps and the rawness of her throat gives her the option of silence—that propels her back towards the kitchen. At the doorway, she pauses. Thomas is standing with his back to the door, carefully ladling sauce onto two plates of steaming white noodles. The plate on the right holds a small ramekin full of sauce so Elise can control her noodle to sauce ratio. It's something he loves to tease her about, but never fails to accommodate. Her anger shrivels, curling into guilt. She presses the palm of her hand flat against the small of his back and reaches for her plate. She can make herself eat two bites. He'll be happy even with that.

On her drive into work the next morning Elise allows herself to get lost in running numbers, creating budgets, finding solid, numerical solutions to the problems her firm throws at her. It always feels like she's solving one of those word problems from a standardized test. The ones that nearly everyone in her class had always hated so much, but that Elise had always loved. To get Lawyer A to Baltimore it will take a plane ticket of x , a rental car of y , (plus gas, g), and food for three days at z per meal and three meals per day.

Elise tries to think of her life as a word problem: Elise has one save. She once had three. Save One she used on her father and that was the right choice. Save Two she used on her mother when she was first diagnosed with lung cancer. This was also the right choice. Though, now the cancer is back. This time in her left lung. Thomas has zero saves. Elise plus Thomas equals one save. If Elise has one sick mother, one young

husband, and one (potential) family, how should she use her final save? Please show your work.

Seven years ago, when Elise was in her last year of college, her mother used her third and final save on Elise's father. He'd been driving home from the bar on a Friday night when the neighbor's dog, an elderly black lab named Cookie, dashed across the highway in pursuit of what was most likely a rabbit. Elise's dad had swerved to avoid it and rolled their old jeep end over end into a ditch. The accident had occurred only a few miles from the house. When the police called Elise's mother, it wasn't ten minutes before the two of them were sliding into the gravel behind the red and blue swirls of emergency vehicles. Her mother, flinging open the car door, had stepped into the cutting air in nothing but an oversized Winnie the Pooh nightshirt and a pair of her Dad's work boots, shaking and shaking, but seemingly unconscious of the cold.

Broken ribs, a punctured lung, a ruptured spleen—maybe he could have made it on his own. Maybe he could have pulled through. But the moment Elise's mother saw her husband's limp body being heaved through a shattered car window, she decided to give up her last save if it meant she could drive him home that night, tuck him into bed, and know for certain that she'd wake up to his easy laugh and lined face the next morning.

Elise's father did come home that night; Elise remembered leaning against the console from the backseat of the pickup truck and clutching his hand tightly, while her other hand squeezed the thin shoulder of her mother, who drove them silent and white-lipped back to the house. Almost more terrifying than the near death of her father, was

the idea that her mother had nothing left. Not a single save for herself. One for Elise. Two for Elise's father.

Three months later, Elise's father would be dead: killed instantly in a work-related accident and Elise's mother would be left wondering if the three months had been worth her last save. If maybe she shouldn't have held on to it for the future. But no. Time is precious. Surely she would have made the same choice even if she could have done it over.

Tonight, halfway through sex, Elise looks down at Thomas and finds herself wondering what it would be like if the intent behind her lovemaking were different. For a moment, she allows herself to imagine coming together with the intent of creating something new, something good, instead of with a desire take away everything she doesn't want to think or feel or be. She wonders if maybe she is ready, has been ready. If maybe waiting, out of guilt, out of fear, out of the crushing weight of "what if" isn't really saving anyone. Not her mother. Not her unborn baby. She presses her face into Thomas's slick neck and lets even this thought wash away.

The first save Elise ever used was on her father. She remembers the ripping, breathless feeling that accompanied it—as if something were being wrenched from an essence inside of her that she had no name for. She didn't begrudge him. There were risks associated with a job like her father's, and while accidents didn't happen often, the idea of welding under the weight of meters and meters of water never became something Elise

could make herself comfortable with. One weekend when Elise’s mother was out of town helping Aunt Rhonda through a divorce—it could have been husband number two or husband number three—Elise’s father came home after work complaining of lower back pain. He’d taken some ibuprofen and settled into his recliner to watch reruns of *Ren and Stimpy*. An hour later, Elise would walk into the living room after getting no response to her repeated question of “chocolate or vanilla?” and find him slumped in his chair. An hour later, and he would be checked into the ICU for severe decompression illness, and then, three hours after his initial complaint of “man, my back aches like a sonuvabitch today,” Elise would give up her first save freely and almost unthinkingly, terrified by her first glimpse of mortality.

Even though it was several months before she stopped feeling like some phantom limb of her psyche, her soul, her—she didn’t really know what—was operating inside her, Elise didn’t regret what she’d done. It had bought her more time with him. And for a man who had used all of his saves before the age of 16, time was everything. Elise’s save bought them another six years with him. Another six years until the crash.

“Your Mom is going to be fine,” Thomas says. It has been a silent morning as he and Elise have orbited around one another, two planets just barely grazing as they swap places showering, brushing teeth, getting dressed. They’ve finally collided, hovering around the coffee maker as it drips slowly, forcing them to wait. “Dr. Kal thinks there’s a good chance of recovery,” he adds. “I really think she’s going to be fine.”

Elise grunts in response. She wants to ask him where that confidence was when he used his saves on his sister, his first wife, himself. He steps closer to Elise, bowing his head, trying to force eye contact

“She can’t ask you to do this,” he says. “This isn’t your responsibility.”

Elise watches black drop after black drop plunk into little over an inch of coffee that’s pooling at the bottom of the carafe. Maybe Thomas is right. This probably isn’t something a mother should ask of her daughter. But Thomas wasn’t there when Elise got sick in seventh grade. He didn’t see her mother, eyes swallowed by grey bags, stealing silently into her room, anxiously slipping a thermometer into her ear every two hours. He didn’t see her methodically running a cool rag over Elise’s feverish forehead, her stiff and swollen neck—curled in the twin bed next to her for three days before she couldn’t take it anymore, couldn’t think of ever wanting anything more than to feel Elise’s forehead cool beneath her fingers again.

Thomas touches her elbows, gently, reassuringly. “It makes sense to wait,” he says.

Elise leans into him for a second, gives him a small smile, and pulls away.

“Not when it’s cancer.”

Elise wasn’t there when her mother was first diagnosed. This is something her mother likes to bring up almost as much as her own thoughts do. Elise doesn’t point out that she was the one who’d been urging her to go to the doctor for months before she

finally made an appointment. She doesn't remind her that neither of them had thought her cough was much more than an annoyance; something worth looking into, worth treating, but nothing a round of antibiotics couldn't fix.

She doesn't remind her of this, because she knows, really, should have been there. When her mom had called her about it, Elise had been supportive. She'd praised her for making the appointment, but she'd ignored her mother's hints about wanting company. Her mother had mentioned the length of the drive, the construction on I-25. She'd said, "I haven't been to Northridge in years." She'd brought up not knowing where to park or what wing of the building her physician was now located in. And then, she'd shifted gears. "But enough about me," she'd said. "How have you been? What's your day look like tomorrow?"

And this is where Elise should have said: No, Mom, this is important. Why don't I drive you up?

But this is, instead, where Elise started talking about how she was good, but busy. How tomorrow was looking pretty crazy. A meeting first thing in the morning, and then a conference call with another firm in the afternoon.

And while this was factually true--there was a meeting and there was a conference call--neither of them were pressing. Neither of them actually even directly concerned her. In fact, the meeting was a surprise birthday party for Stephanie, a co-worker she barely knew.

If she were being honest, Elise really just hadn't wanted to be trapped in the car for two hours with her Mom. She didn't feel like trying to make small talk, trying to

conjure up something, anything to talk about with someone she'd once been so close to. But that was what it was like now. Now that Elise was an adult, living on her own, building her own life—every interaction with her mother was a reminder that neither of them really knew who each other was anymore. What they had were memories and a set of facts. For example, Elise knew that her mother had gotten really into cycling over the past few months—the kind with music and a fitness instructor. She knew that she'd been reading Stephen King novels in her spare time. That she'd started been cleaning out her garage so she could paint. What she didn't know was *why*. Or rather what kind of person she'd become to suddenly like these things. She never knew her mother liked horror. She'd never participated in any sort of organized exercise routine, and she'd certainly never been a neat freak.

And the prospect of learning this new person felt less like a new opportunity and more like a responsibility. A burden. One she maybe wasn't ready for right now.

So, she ignored her mother's hints. She stood in the conference room and ate icecream cake—oreo with chocolate icing—while her mother drove up to Northridge. She doodled flowers on the corner of an expense report while Bennett and John, the two partners of the firm, argued about the best time of day to go catfishing—Bennet was convinced it was any time after nine pm. John thought you needed to get out early in the morning. Five at the latest. Her mother calls while she's listening to their banter.

This is when Elise uses her second save.

Thomas doesn't talk much about the saves he's used. Elise knows his sister hit a deer coming home one night when she was seventeen. Once, when he was really drunk, he told Elise about his first wife Lily attempting suicide. This had been a shock to Elise, because Lily always seemed in good spirits. Quick to laugh. Hard to unsettle. She was now remarried, and expecting her second child. Sometimes Elise runs into her at Costco, and the two exchange pleasantries. It always feels like they're a step away from casual friendship. Elise thinks they probably would have been close had they met under different circumstances.

Thomas doesn't talk about his final save. She knows he used it on himself. Which is a common enough thing to do. Most of the people Elise knows—aside from her immediate family—have used at least one on themselves. But she can tell Thomas is ashamed by it. Every attempt she's made at digging deeper, has resulted in a stilted conversation. "I overdosed," is the most she's been able to get out of him. She's not even sure what he overdosed on. If it was hard drugs—something like heroine or meth. Or prescription. She doesn't know if it was intentional or accidental. She's knows it happened sometime after college and before he met Lily. While he was living in Chicago. That's it.

Tonight, Elise tries bringing it up again. They're sitting in the living room with a bowl of popcorn resting on the cushion between them.

It's been more of the same. Her asking—trying to be gentle, trying not to let her frustration, her hurt at being kept on the outside leak into her voice. Him providing monosyllabic answers.

“Do your parents know about it?” she tries.

Thomas brings a piece of popcorn to his mouth, and chews slowly. “They do,” he finally says, nodding. “They were there.”

“They were there?”

“They were,” he says. He watches Elise. “Why do you ask?”

“Were they there before you used your save or after?”

“After,” he says. Elise doesn’t realize she’d been clenching her shoulders, until he says this, and everything sags forward.

“Elise,” Thomas says. “What’re you getting at? Why does it matter?”

Elise shrugs. It probably shouldn’t matter. But she knows that had Thomas said “before,” she would have had a hard time viewing his parents the same way. The thought that they either wouldn’t or couldn’t save him makes her uneasy.

Elise pats Thomas’s thigh. “I was just curious.”

He reaches for her hand and squeezes it. A truce. He won’t press her any further, though she knows he wants to. She has no definitive thoughts. No clarity. Just a series of “maybes” vying for her attention.

Maybe her Mom will recover. Maybe she and Tom can’t get pregnant. Maybe she won’t ever want to. Maybe her child will be perfectly healthy all its life.

Or maybe it won’t be. Elise has already read enough articles about SIDS, about congenital birth defects. Sometimes, when she’s really gotten herself going, she

remembers that novel she read years ago, where the infant was smothered in its crib by the family cat.

So many ways to die. She doesn't like the idea of bringing a life into the world without a safety net. In fact, it seems reckless.

So maybe they shouldn't.

Thomas gives her a tight smile. Almost as if he's heard her.

For a year and a half, Elise's mother came in for x-rays and CT scans that turned up clear. Her lungs looked good. She'd stopped smoking, or rather switched to an e-cig, which Elise figured was better than nothing. She drove her mother to every appointment. They stopped for lunch on the way back—started making little detours to the big shopping mall up there before they'd return home.

They started to get comfortable hearing good news. Both of their lives falling back into familiar shapes. But then the cough returned. Her mother had been coughing for about three weeks when they went in for the next check-up. Though they didn't broach the possibility of recurrence on the drive up, neither of them were terribly surprised by the results. The cancer was back. Same type. Different lung.

Her mother took the news calmly. Quietly. She nodded along to Dr. Kal's explanations. Elise couldn't bring herself to listen. Her mother saw the look on her face and gripped her hard by the arm.

“Don’t use it,” she said. Her lips were pressed in a thin line. “Not yet. Let’s try some other options.”

They operated first. Used a thoracoscopic camera to locate and remove the abscess on her lung. This was followed by several weeks of radiation therapy. The subsequent CT scan revealed that the cancer was still present: searing spots of white on the black backdrop of her lung. But it hadn’t spread. So, this is where they were.

Elise is in the middle of a meeting when her phone shakes the conference table. She’s about to shove the phone in her purse, thinking it’s a text from Thomas, when she sees “Mom” flash across her screen. “Excuse me,” she murmurs. She grabs her phone and gets up, sneaking out the door. She hesitates for a moment, finger poised above the screen, before she swipes to the right. “Can you bring me my fleece blanket? thx”

Elise lets out a breath. Good. She’s alright. She squints, looks at the message again. Hadn’t she brought her that blanket a week ago? Elise feels her stomach contract. She walks back to the conference room and sticks her head through the door. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I have to go. My mom wants me.” John looks at her in concern. He’s always been the kinder partner. He gives her a thumbs up. “That’s fine,” he mouths. Bennett doesn’t look at her at all.

Elise swings by Target on the way to the hospital to buy a blanket. She has a sinking feeling that this isn’t really what her mother’s asking for, but it makes her feel better to buy it anyway, almost like the act of buying it will prevent this visit from being anything other than a quick drop-off. She picks a blue one. It’s soft and similar to the one

she's already brought her mother. She drives with the bag sitting on her lap, the fingers of her right hand swaddled within the plush folds.

Elise tries to decide to rerun the numbers.

Eighteen. This is the five-year survival rate percentage for those diagnosed with lung cancer.

Forty-two point five. This is the mean percentage of people who die of lung cancer recurrence.

One. This is the stage her mother's cancer is currently in. According to Dr. Kal, it doesn't appear to have spread past her lungs. It is also, in case she'd forgotten, the number of saves Elise has left.

Thirty-five. This is the age you officially qualify for the term "geriatric pregnancy."

Thirty-six. This is how old Elise is.

Elise pulls into the parking lot. She can see her mother's room, fourth floor, all the way to the left, lit up, waiting for her. She presses her face into the steering wheel and takes a shuddering breath.

Her mother is sleeping when she walks in. She looks thin, dwarfed by the size of her bed, but she also looks peaceful. The blanket Elise brought her last week is tucked around her feet. Elise notices that the skin under her mother's nose is still raw, but that her lip seems to have healed. She walks closer, lets her fingers nearly, just nearly brush the surface of her mother's face and graze the thin fuzz covering the top of her head. Her

mother opens her eyes, flinching in surprise at Elise's nearness. It takes her a moment to fully orient herself, and then she stares at the bag on Elise's arm. Something seems to pass over her face—something hard and yet unsurprised. Elise attempts to remove the blanket from the bag, but her hands are shaking so much she nearly drops it. A second attempt. She manages to drape it over the bed's handrail.

Her mother looks at her. "You've decided."

Elise wills her to say "I understand." To tell her "I'd do the same" or "I love you" or even "You're a disappointment and I never want to see you again." Instead she just nods, pulling the sheet up to her mouth. The scab on her lip has started to split again, but she doesn't seem to notice it. "I thought so," she says.

A Lovely Little Seascape

Ernesta likes to start working on her paintings well before any of the old folks wake up. She gets out of bed, slides on her slippers, and grasps the smooth handle of her cane, trying to make sure it doesn't thud too loudly as she pads into the sunroom. At 6:30 the white-washed walls are covered in the most splendid pinkish-orange. There's not a time of day Ernesta loves more. It helps that the only person she has to deal with this early is Susanne, and for the most part, Susanne lets her do what she wants. Some mornings, Ernesta even finds a cup of coffee sitting next to her easel. She's not really supposed to drink coffee, it's not good for her heart, but Susanne knows how much she misses it. Ernesta misses a lot of things about living at home. Most of all, though, she misses her husband, Bob Ross.

This morning, there's a slight nip in the air, and Ernesta's fingers have trouble clamping down on the caps of her paint tubes. She remembers how nimbly her fingers used to move, even in the cold, when she and Bob were still living together. That was a long time ago, though. Now the only way Ernesta can see her husband is by pushing a VHS into the portable television Susanne always leaves out for her. Ernesta is thankful for the videos, but she's a little disappointed that they never thought to tape anything other than her husband painting. It seems a little short-sighted. Still, it's better than nothing, and she likes to see him so happy.

Today, Ernesta is feeling daring, so she digs through her wicker basket of black tapes until she sees "Beauty is Everywhere Pt. 1" in her daughter's precise handwriting. She skips forward until—there—she stops on one of her favorites, a soft seascape. She's tried this one before, many times, but it never turns out exactly how she's hoping. The

colors always end up a little too saturated, almost violent. Ernesta carefully peels back the plastic wrap from her wooden pallet, and hits play while covering her canvas with thick strokes of liquid white.

“Hi, welcome back,” her husband says. “Certainly glad you could join us today.”

“Of course,” Ernesta says. She knows her husband can’t hear her, but sometimes she likes to pretend that he can. This is mainly why she gets up so early. She enjoys her pretend conversations with her husband so much that she can’t stand having some grumpy old farts ruin it for her. A couple weeks ago she accidentally woke up an hour later than normal and Bernard Hammond had spoiled her entire session by constantly reminding her that her husband couldn’t hear her. Ernesta, in turn, had tried to pretend that she couldn’t hear him.

“The goddam hippy is dead, you hear me? Dead!” he’d shouted. Ernesta had continued to smear liquid white in thick streaks across her canvas. “You hear me?” Bernard had said again.

Ernesta had wiped her forehead. “Oh, Mr. Hammond,” she’d said, “I’m trying not to. You don’t know the first thing about my life.” She’d run her fingers along the wet white on the tip of her brush, watching as tiny splatters of paint fanned across Bernard’s too close sleeve. “I’d appreciate if you let me get back to it.”

Ernesta tries to shake the memory. “Let’s just have some fun,” her husband suggests.

The first touch of paint is always the most nerve-wracking, but her husband has such a way of putting her at ease. He brushes the canvas with light strokes of cadmium

yellow and yellow ochre. Ernesta hurriedly pulls from both yellows, pressing the paint into her bristles.

“Hold on, hold on,” she laughs. “I’m not so fast anymore.”

The first mark is made, and Ernesta feels like she can breathe. She dips her brush into just the tiniest bit of Indian yellow and gently strokes the darker shade onto her canvas. “Oh,” she breathes. Yes, this is right. This is how it’s meant to go. She looks up. The video has cut to a clip of her husband holding a spotted fawn. She frowns for a moment. They raised many animals together when the kids were growing up—cows, sheep, turkeys—but she can’t recall ever raising deer.

Her husband’s voice breaks through her concentration. He swirls a fan brush coated in white, explaining that these little puffs will form clouds. “You can put it *wherever*,” he says. “Because this is your world here and you can do anything you want.”

Ernesta jabs her brush into some phthalo blue. Her painting is going to be a bit darker than her husband’s, but she thinks that’s probably just fine. In fact, she knows it is. Less than thirty minutes later, Ernesta looks up in surprise as she hears her husband’s typical sign-off of “and God bless.” She’s not sure how he can be done already. She scrutinizes her canvas. No, that will not do. Not at all. There’s barely the indication of a shoreline, and her waves look sharp and bulky. Not at all like the gently curving splashes, the soft puffs of foam, in her husband’s painting. Ernesta blinks rapidly, trying to trap the tears of frustration pooling in her eyes. This one was going to be special. This one was going to be for Jane. Something to put in her bedroom. No, not bedroom. Apartment. Jane didn’t live at home anymore, because Ernesta didn’t live at home anymore. Ernesta

grabs a large brush, and gently strokes it back and forth against the canvas to soften her lines. Jane should have stayed with her father. That man never could cook. What was he surviving on? Probably just eggs and toast. She shakes her head. If Ernesta were home, she'd make sure he had meatloaf every other week. Some oatmeal for breakfast to help with his cholesterol. He was the one they needed to worry about. Not her. She wasn't sick. Doctors nowadays always thought you were sick. Even if you were feeling fine. And they were good at convincing everyone else you were sick too.

Down the hallway, Ernesta can hear doors opening and dishes clattering as the staff begins setting the seven long tables in the dining room for breakfast. It's only a hair past seven, but she'll be at the end of the line this morning if she doesn't pack up soon. Eat, eat, eat. That's all those old folks did. It was a good thing Susanne watched out for her, always making sure she got a heaping plate. Otherwise, she was liable to starve to death. Ernesta gives her painting another long look. It's not right. There's something off about it, but she can't quite place it. Maybe she'll try again later. The paint will still be plenty wet after breakfast. She gathers her brushes in one hand and picks up her paint thinner in the other. For the first few months she was here they wouldn't let her use any sort of solvent, and she was never really able to get her brushes clean. It seemed like she was throwing out at least two a week. Ernesta was pretty sure Jane had made some sort of agreement with the head honcho so she could use it—signed some sort of document stating Brook Meadows would not be held responsible if Ernesta suddenly decided to guzzle down a whole tin of mineral spirits.

“You ready for breakfast, Miss Cooper?” Susanne asks from the doorway. She's holding a black tray piled high with toast and a precariously placed pitcher of orange

juice. Ernesta is about to answer, but Susanne breaks into a smile and cuts her off. “You didn’t tell me your baby was coming to visit. I’ve got her set up next the window where you normally sit. I told her I’d come get you.”

Ernesta blinks. “Jane’s here?”

“Sure is,” Susanne says. Ernesta scans her face, notices her smile slip a little.

“Were you not expecting her?”

Ernesta presses the engorged ends of her brushes into a damp paper towel. “I wasn’t. Tell her I’ll be there soon as I wash up.”

Jane is the only person Ernesta has ever seen that gets prettier and prettier with age. Maybe it’s because she’s her baby. Maybe her gangly daughter is one of those rare types who takes four decades to finally come into themselves. She’s sitting with her tanned fingers wrapped around a white coffee mug next to the big bay window. Mr. Hammond is trying to talk to her, and she looks about as happy as Ernesta feels any time that grumpy curmudgeon opens his mouth. He winks and squeezes Jane’s shoulder as Ernesta gets closer. Ernesta glares at him as she pulls out the chair across from Jane.

“You leave my girl, alone. You hear?” Ernesta says, folding her napkin primly.

“She’s here for me, not you.”

Jane smiles at her and slides her half drunk coffee across the table. “Shhh,” she says. “I won’t tell.”

Ernesta wants to take it, but she shakes her head. Smiles guiltily. “I’ve already had some today.”

Jane raises an eyebrow and pulls the cup back. Ernesta waits for her daughter to say something, but she doesn’t. Jane was never the lecturing type. She’d been an easy child. Ernesta flags down Susanne and her orange juice.

“You’re here a little early,” Ernesta says. “Everything okay? Is your Dad alright?”

Jane’s mouth flattens. “Mom,” she says slowly, “Dad has been—” She fiddles with her bracelet and doesn’t finish.

Ernesta leans forward. “He’s been?”

“Busy,” Jane says. She reaches across the table and pats Ernesta’s hand. “Really busy lately, but I know he misses you. He’s not one for words, you know, but he misses you.”

Ernesta laughs. “Not one for words? Alright.” She takes a sip of orange juice. “That’s a first.” Jane gives her a tight smile, and now Ernesta feels the urge to pat *her* hand. “It’s okay,” she says. “I’m happy he’s busy.” She inclines her head to the sunroom. “I made something for you. Your father’s are better, but mines not too bad.”

Jane’s index finger and thumb rest on either side of her mouth. She runs both down to the center of her lower lip and pulls. When she takes her fingers away she’s smiling again. “Another painting?”

Jane shifts in her chair and Ernesta notices the plastic bag looped over the back of her seat. A Blick’s bag.

“More supplies?”

Jane nods, pushing the bag across the table. “What did you paint me?”

Ernesta ignores her question. “Do you think he’s going to come visit soon?” she blurts.

“Maybe so.”

“Will you tell him I miss him?” Ernesta asks. “That I’d like to see him.”

Jane smiles. “Of, course I will.” She pushes back her chair, clasps her hand in front of her. “Now, why don’t you show me that lovely little seascape?”

Bean Nighe

1672

The night before they found Tyler Boyd's body pinned beneath his plow, his mother Ailith had been washing clothes by the stream. She'd sat her basket at the bank, tied her dress around her calves, and crouched in the cold water. In went a tunic. In went a pair socks. As she washed, she hummed, breath steaming between her clenched teeth. She moved quickly. On evenings like this, it only took a few minutes for her fingers to stiffen and prune, making it difficult to scrub.

She was wringing out her husband's trousers, when she noticed another woman, standing waist deep in the water about thirty meters downstream. She was sure the woman had not been there when she'd first stepped in, and she'd not seen her approach.

"Isla?" she called. Ailith's eyes weren't good at far distances, but she could make out the rounded face, the rope of long, dark hair typical of her cousin. Ailith finished wringing out the trousers and waited for a response, some sign of recognition, but Isla didn't move. "You'll catch yer death standing in that," she tried again. "Isla?"

Isla's shoulders were bobbing—sudden jerking movements that made it look as if she was shivering. Ailith watched her spread something out in the water in front of her—something white, a piece of washing—and release it. The cloth tumbled downstream, slowing against rocks, splaying out in swift eddies, until it snagged against Ailith's legs, pressing against her skirt.

She reached for it slowly, hesitantly. It was a shirt. Her son's shirt, she was sure of it. She could tell by the pretty bit of stitching at the collar. A dark blue. She'd soaked

the yarn in elderberry for a week to get it that color. She tossed the shirt onto the bank and started climbing up the edges, grasping thick tufts of grass.

Hodgson leans forward and runs his fingers along the barely visible grooves. 1543? 1678? This is the old part of the cemetery, where Hodgson swears you can smell the age—a musky, earthy scent that reminds him of the cellar after a heavy rain or the bottom of a compost pile, where the leaves stick together, slick and black. Here, water has buffed the headstones to anonymity. A layer of soft green lichen crawls up the sides of each stone, coats the top. Each time Hodgson visits this plot, he feels thankful for the duration of modern stones like granite, marble. Eleven years later and Mary’s still has a sheen to it. Almost like it’s new.

Hodgson pulls a folded piece of paper from his coat pocket and presses it against the gravestone in front of him. A few strokes of red crayon reveal a date. 1548. The letters above it are faint, but the name “Tyler Boyd” is still visible. Hodgson steps back, committing name and date to memory. Three people were buried at East Morrow in 1548. A young woman. An infant. And an old man. Mr. Boyd is the third person to have died that year. Hodgson surveys the other gravestones. They look like rotting teeth jutting crookedly from the patchy earth.

“Late night, Mr. Carr?”

Hodgson starts, his bad knee quivering as he turns to the sound. The voice registers before he sees the face. On Tuesdays, Officer Laney’s normal rounds take him

through the cemetery, but Hodgson is almost always shuffling out the little iron gate by the time Laney gets there.

Hodgson checks his watch. 6:15. Ten minutes past his usual visit. “I guess it’s a wee late, isn’t it?”

“Need a hand?” Laney asks. He reaches for Hodgson’s elbow and gently pulls him back onto the muddy walkway.

“Thank you,” Hodgson says. He pats his trousers. “Damn leg.”

Officer Laney stares at the paper in Hodgson’s hands. “Still cataloguing?”

Hodgson resists the urge to shove the paper in his pocket. “Aye,” he says, “Bit tedious, but someone should do it. Be finished any day now.” Laney opens his mouth, but pauses when Hodgson clears his throat. “Best be heading back. I’m keeping the girls for Tom tonight.”

Laney smiles, “Alright then, Mr. Carr. Be well.”

Normally, it takes Hodgson twenty minutes to get home. At one point in his life, he could’ve done it in ten or twelve. Now everything seems to take longer. Even thoughts. Especially thoughts. Hodgson’s breath comes in rapid huffs. He places his palm on the stone wall to his right, leaning, and recognizes the bright purple aubrieta rooted in the silt along the top.

He's stopped in front of the Darrow house again. The sand-colored two-story is old, very old. The copper framing the roof is a streaky green that looks delicate, predisposed to crumbling. Just to the right of the garden wall, Gamsey stream burbles softly, its dark water smoothing over small stones. It's the last rural home before you reach East Darrow Village. A large, peeling yellow sign advertising "Darrow Mystics: Palm readings, Tarot cards & more" sways like a flag above the entryway. Hodgson listens to the sign creak on its rusted hinges. It needs oil. *A man would've oiled it by now*, he thinks. Ms. Emily's husband had passed away two years ago; the kindly gentleman taking place among Hodgson's catalogue at the surprising age of 52.

Ms. Emily cuts a dark outline in the glow of her kitchen window, watching Hodgson. Her right shoulder moves like maybe she's chopping some vegetables. Scrubbing a dirty plate. But it begins to slow until she's not moving at all anymore. Hodgson sees her left hand inching out of his field of vision, reaching towards what he knows is the landline.

"Shite," he whispers, and hurries around the corner. *Don't call. Please don't call.* Last time she called words like "restraining order" had been tossed around. When asked what he was doing there Hodgson had mumbled out an excuse about admiring her flowers, but his attempt had been half-hearted. He was fooling no one. The last time he'd spoken with Emily Boyd had been at Mary's funeral.

"You killed my wife, you bitch," he'd screamed at her. "You killed my wife."

When Hodgson gets home, he immediately goes to his study and slips Tyler Boyd's paper into a folder titled "1500s." The folder is thick already, and he hasn't even finished that part of the cemetery. About ten or so graves remain unrecorded, plus a handful more that Hodgson knows are completely indecipherable. He adds "Boyd," "Lefroy," and "Hamsworth" to the death list taped to the front of the folder. So many Boyds died in East Darrow during the 16th century. They make up over half the folder. Hodgson sifts through the other folders: 1600s, 1700s, 1800s, 1900s—all the way up to present day.

Hodgson picks up a tattered file, the thickest one, and begins to leaf through the photographs. Some of the pictures have turned white in the corners where his fingers have repeatedly grasped them. The front door groans, and Hodgson flips the folder closed and slides it into a drawer.

Tom is standing next to the stove when Hodgson walks into the kitchen.

"Dad, did you mean to leave this on?" he asks.

"Grandpa!" Grace and Cate fling their arms around Hodgson. It feels like tiny bird wings brushing against his jacket.

"Dad," Tom repeats. "Were you making tea or—"

"Yes, yes, I was making tea," Hodgson says. Tom squints. Creases fold into his forehead and down the sides of his mouth. Hodgson is struck by how old he looks. He pats Grace's head. "Would you like some tea?" he asks her.

Her nose is red from the cold, a small dribble of snot pooling at the base of it. She nods, and snuffles, wiping her nose against the sleeve of her fuzzy blue sweater. Tom shakes his head and hands her a Kleenex.

Hodgson turns to Cate. She's grown since the last time she came over. Her limbs seem longer and more refined. She's grown now. Eighteen since October. The girls haven't needed someone to watch them in years. This, Hodgson knows. Tom sends them because he worries about his old father being alone too much.

The kettle begins a breathy squeal and Tom switches it off, grabbing a mug from Cate. "We ran into Officer Laney on the way here," he says turning away from Hodgson. "He said he'd seen you at the cemetery." Steam curls from the mugs, rising up to fog his glasses. He slides the mug towards Hodgson and waits for a response, but Hodgson only grunts. "I thought you'd stopped going," Tom says.

"When did I say that?" Hodgson grumbles. "I've never missed a day. Your mother expects me."

Tom wipes his glasses on his shirt. "He says you're cataloguing again."

Hodgson shrugs. "I'm so close. Might as well finish it."

Tom stares into his tea and doesn't respond, but Cate nods. She's old enough to remember Mary. She still wears her grandmother's necklace—a single pearl on a thin silver chord that Hodgson had bought Mary on their second anniversary. Hodgson can see the silver glinting around Cate's neck, the pearl tucked below the collar of her sweater. She locks eyes with him.

“You should,” she says.

The official cause of death was ruled a stroke. They were eating supper, talking about gardening plans and grandkids when Mary suddenly paused mid bite.

“Sweetheart?” Hodgson asked.

Mary looked at him for a second before blanching and shoving out of her chair violently. Stew sloshed across the table, and spilled down her legs in steaming lines, but she didn't seem to notice. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing beyond strange, incoherent mutterings would come.

“What's wrong? Mary, what's wrong?” Hodgson asked, running his hands up her arms, grabbing her face.

The right side of her face looked like it was seeping downward, her mouth sagging like excess fishing line. Hodgson cradled her head and fumbled for the landline, stabbing out 999 with shaking fingers.

By the time someone picked up, Mary's body had gone completely slack. He pressed his fingers against her wrist, her throat. His ear against her breast. Silence. He shook her, pressed the heel of his palm against her chest and pumped. Again and again and again and again and a pause. Nothing. Hodgson caught sight of the kitchen clock. A cheerful, ticking thing with birds and flowers painted across the face. It was 5:17 pm.

“Sir, what's your emergency? Sir, can you hear me?”

Hodgson picked up the phone and gently sat it back on its hook.

It takes Tom a while to leave. Hodgson loves his son, but Tom's prone to lengthy blethers about his marriage, even Cate and Grace—often cause Hodgson's brain to gel and ooze from his mouth in meaningless globs of “oh, yes,” “quite right,” and “you don't say.”

Tom finally glances at the kitchen clock, and then down at the watch on his wrist. “Well, it's been great talking to you Paps, but you've kept me too long.” When Hodgson closes the door behind Tom, the tension he hadn't realized was building, releases from his shoulders. He walks back into the kitchen, but the kitchen is empty. “Grace? Cate?” he calls.

“In here, Pappy,” Grace answers. She's curled on the couch with a thick blanket; multicolored lights from the television play across her face.

“Where's Cate?” Hodgson asks.

Grace shrugs. “Maybe the toilet?”

Hodgson grunts, ready to settle into his armchair. There's a slight creaking sound and he pauses, looking down the hall towards his study. The door is cracked, faint blue light filtering into the hallway where it's open.

“Cate?”

His sock feet tap the wooden floor gently, causing the boards to sigh. When Hodgson pushes open the door, Cate shoves a paper back into the “1900s” file.

“What’re you doing?” he asks. His voice is a little sharper than he’d intended.

She flinches. “Just seeing your progress.”

“I’ve been done with that century for a long time,” Hodgson says. “What are you looking for?”

“Nothing,” Cate says, inching towards the door. “Just curious.” She reaches for her necklace, rolling the pearl left to right against the chain. “We’ve had a lot of family deaths since Grammy,” she says. “Aunt Hill, cousin Bobby, Uncle Sampson.” She pauses. “Others I never really met.”

Hodgson nods. “You’re quite right.”

“Why do you think that is?” she asks.

Hodgson swallows and clears his throat. “I honestly don’t know.”

The oldest graves in East Darrow were located in a small, fenced plot several yards behind Mary’s grave. Here, sheltered by a few twisted elms, some of the stones had weathered more gently. You could catch a number, make out a word or two from an inscription. This is where Hodgson had started.

At first, his visits were purely for Mary. He'd gotten into the habit of going every evening between five and six, because dinner was when he found himself missing Mary the most. For the first couple of weeks, he'd tried eating at their kitchen table. Family and neighbors kept him well-stocked, dropping off roasts and haggis, puddings and shortbread, but Hodgson ended up tossing much of it onto the compost.

The only solution was to start taking dinner with Mary again. And so he did. He'd wrap a chunk of bread in cheesecloth, stuff it into his jacket pocket, and make the trek out to her grave. He knew that Mary—the real Mary--wasn't there. Just her body. But being in the cemetery by himself was a different kind of lonely than being in the house by himself.

There was a bench beneath the elm trees in that old plot of cemetery that he started sitting on. He'd have his chat with Mary, and try to settle in, to rest for a moment. But he could feel the blank faces of those stones, grim and lichen-covered, watching him. He started talking to them, as well. Imagining that the smaller stone belonged to little girl named Stella. The large, split one belonging to a man named Matthew. And so on.

But he started to feel foolish and a little guilty. Here he was, a grown man, sitting out here making up stories over the graves of real people. Imposing his whimsy on their lives.

He began making rubbings with notebook paper and a nub of charcoal. And once he'd gotten a date and a name, that too somehow seemed like it wasn't quite enough. What could a name and a date really reveal about a person? They were symbols. Nothing

more. Even Mary's epitaph, a carefully chosen Burns quote, "But to see her, was to love her," felt like a pat summation of who she'd been.

The research felt like a balm; it was something that could occupy his time, keep his mind busy in a way gardening or housekeeping could not. He'd been cataloguing the graves, researching occupations, deeds of sale, birth and death certificates, for less than a month when a pattern started revealing itself to him.

Five families consistently top the death list each century: Boyds, Lefroys, Darrows, Laneys, and Carrs. Every half century or so the casualties spike and rotate to another family. From 1543 to 1606 Lefroys were dropping like flies, then there were a few years of Lefroys and Carrs both dying in unprecedented numbers, 1689 to 1724 the Carrs make a substantial leap, 1730 to 1785 the Laneys are almost entirely obliterated, and by 1815 the Lefroys are creeping into first place again as the Laney's misfortune comes to a temporary end. Newspaper clippings, death records, photographs, birth certificates, genealogical studies—Hodgson has researched them all, hungry for some sort of reason. Is it just the size of the families? A violent nature? Stupidity? But the deaths have come from diseases and drownings and farming accidents and starvation and feuding. There's a part of Hodgson that wonders if maybe it's just poor luck. But his collection of files, his fastidious notes, and his careful cataloguing are evidence of the other part of him, the part that can't truly believe it's that simple.

Darrow Mystics opened a week before Mary passed. It was the first shop of its kind that East Morrow had ever seen. Hodgson had noticed the ad for it in the Sunday paper.

“Did you see this?” he’d asked Mary, rolling his eyes.

“I did.” She smiled, glanced at him sheepishly. “I actually think we should go. Wouldn’t it be fun?”

Hodgson had grunted and pushed away from the table.

“I don’t believe in all that nonsense,” he said, setting his plate in the sink.

“I don’t believe any of it, either,” Mary said. “But they’re a good family and they need some support.” She grinned. “I’d rather keep my mystics local.”

Hodgson had smiled at her. “Go, if you must. I’ll be here.”

He had spent the afternoon knee deep in weeds and the boggy mess of their garden, making space for the tiny sprouts trying to push up from the soil. Later that evening, when Mary returned, Hodgson took her coat at the doorway and asked her, “What does Ms. Emily say tomorrow will bring us, my dear? Fame? Fortune? More rain?”

Mary had patted his hand. “Bad news.”

A scream tangles in Hodgson’s dream. For a moment, he’s stuck between the cusp of waking and sleeping, but when he finally breaks that border, he realizes that the sound hasn’t stopped. It’s difficult for him to swing his bad leg over the side of the bed,

but he manages to get both feet on the ground, and then he is limping down the hallway, heading towards the guest room. *One of the girls*, he thinks. He hobbles faster. *It's one of the girls*. He pauses as he passes the kitchen window and realizes that the scream is coming from outside. He doesn't even take the time to shove on a pair of boots. Hodgson is out the front door, wet, moonlit grass pressing against his pale feet. The scream quiets, turns to sobbing. It's hard to see in the dark, but Hodgson can make out a hunched figure in the ditch in front of his house.

“Grace?” he asks. “Cate?”

The girl is dressed in a white shift. She rocks slowly, her back hunched. Loud sobs wrack her small frame.

“Cate?” Hodgson tries again. “What's wrong? Are you hurt?” His fingers graze her shoulder, but she jerks away. Something hits the water with a slap. Cate's thin fingers are clenched around a saturated cloth. Hodgson squints. No, not a cloth, but a piece of clothing. A blue sweater.

“Cate, where did you get that?” Hodgson asks. Cate doesn't respond. She plunges the sweater into the water and continues to rock. When Hodgson reaches for her again, she starts screaming once more and takes off running, her bare feet slapping against the boggy earth.

Hodgson shakes, his bad leg trembling. Does he chase after her? Does he try to find Grace? He turns and runs back to the house as quickly as he can. His feet are so wet that he nearly slips and falls when he steps onto the wood floor of the kitchen. He stumbles down the hallway, flinging open the door to the guest bedroom. Both girls

blink sleepily at him, and Cate sits up in bed. Her nightgown is unsoiled; her feet, sticking out of the un-tucked sheet, look clean and dry. Hodgson pants. Something between a sigh and gasp.

“Pappy, what’s wrong?” Cate asks. Her eyes are wide. Hodgson can’t seem to find words. He walks further into the room and reaches out to touch Cate’s face. To make sure she’s really there. Wetness. Her face is damp.

“Are you crying?” Hodgson asks, studying her.

She touches her cheeks, rubs her fingers beneath her eyes. “I guess I am,” she says. “It must’ve been a bad dream.”

Hodgson stares at her for a moment, and nods. “Of course.”

Hodgson hears the girls up early the next morning, much earlier than he would normally get up. It can’t be much past six. His body feels weighted, stiff from his run the night before. The tea kettle lets out a soft wheeze, then cuts off abruptly. They’re trying not to wake him.

“Do you feel okay?” he hears Cate whisper. A dish clinks in the sink.

Grace’s voice rises a little. “I already told you.”

“Shh.”

“I feel fine,” Grace says, softer this time.

Hodgson shifts into a sitting position. He can't hear Cate's response.

Grace giggles. "Just my nose."

"Okay," Cate says. "That's good."

When Hodgson shuffles in, Cate nearly drops her cup. "Did I scare you?" he asks.

She smiles. A little shakily. "No."

"You're up early," Hodgson says. Cate slides a mug across the counter towards him. Hodgson takes a sip and tries to hide his disappointment. No cream. Grace crawls onto one of the dining room chairs and pulls her nightshirt over her knees. "We got up early for cartoons," she says. "Sissy said the good ones are on early."

Hodgson takes another sip and glances at Cate. "I've heard that, too."

"I'll turn some on for you," Cate says. "Let's set you up where it's warm."

Hodgson presses his hand to Grace's forehead. She's been sleeping peacefully for the past two hours, but her cheeks are flushed. Cate sits on the couch next to her, drumming her fingers on the plush arm. Sunlight hits her hair, making it seem lighter. For a moment, she almost looks like Mary.

She stands up. "I think we should take her to a clinic."

Hodgson waits for her to say more. She opens her mouth, and then seems to think better of it.

“Why don’t I call Dad? He can come pick us up.”

“Your Dad’s not going to take her to the clinic unless she’s bleeding out,” Hodgson says. “You know that.” He clears his throat. “Put on your trainers. We’ll take her in.”

The drive to the clinic is short, but the time in the waiting room is not. The longer they sit, the more Grace wilts, her under-eyes becoming bruised and heavy. Hodgson rubs her back while Cate prattles away on the phone with Tom. He’s coming, he says. Soon. Tied up in traffic.

She rolls her eyes at one point. “No, we both think she needs to be here,” she says. Hodgson massages his knee. It had started to rain on their drive; now every few minutes a rumble of thunder punctuates the otherwise muted waiting room. After an hour and half a nurse finally ushers them into a waiting room and begins asking Grace questions while she takes her temperature and blood pressure. “We’re going to draw a bit of blood,” the nurse says to Grace. “Can you be a brave girl, for us? It’ll be over quickly, I promise.”

Grace nods. The nurse is just finishing when Tom gets in a few minutes later. Hodgson feels perversely validated by his surprise at Grace’s appearance. Tom strokes the top of her head. “How you feeling, Gracie Girl?”

Grace leans into Cate and doesn’t respond. Her eyes look watery.

There’s a rap on the door and a woman with close-cropped grey hair slides inside the room. “Big crowd,” she says, taking them all in. “We’re going to admit her. We’re still waiting on the lab results, but we think it’s meningitis.” She explains that Grace’s

infection, which could've have easily been contracted from a shared drink, a kiss, a misplaced sneeze—is now throbbing in her brain and spinal chord.

“She’s going to be okay,” the woman says. “We’ll get her on some IV medication, and she’ll be fine. No lasting neurological damage.” She pats Hodgson’s hand. “But it’s good you came when you did.”

A nurse knocks on the doorframe, taps her clipboard, and the doctor asks to be excused, clicking out the door on low-slung heels. Hodgson watches her leave and walks further into the room. Tom sits next to Grace and strokes her hair as the nurses come in to start her on IVs. The machines she’s hooked to beep and bop and thrum rhythmically. Hodgson stares at his eldest granddaughter, trying to gather his thoughts enough to speak.

Hodgson grips her arm and pulls her aside, out of Tom’ earshot. “Did you know about Grandma Mary?” he whispers.

Cate nods but doesn’t speak. For a second, all Hodgson can picture is Cate hunched over Grace’s blue sweater. He shudders, runs a hand over his face.

“Why is she alive?” he asks Cate. “She should be dead.”

“We caught it in time,” she says simply.

Hodgson checks his watch. It’s 5:10. Tom and Cate had urged him to go home after Grace had gotten settled in at the hospital. “Grammy’s expecting you,” Cate had said.

Tom had shot her a glance but refrained from saying anything. Hodgson is only about five minutes out from the cemetery. His pace is brisk, and he knows he'll make it in time. He's only about two minutes from the Darrow House. He can see the top of the chimney. A thin swirl of smoke trails out and is immediately lost in the grey of the sky. Hodgson is trying not to think about Cate and Grace, Ms. Emily and Mary—but his mind circles and prods around them. And then another thought. Perhaps an almost-thought. About a story. An old wives' tale, something meant to scare small girls and boys from wandering out on the moors. Something he could just barely remember his own mother, many years ago, telling him as a young child.

Hodgson stops in front of the Darrow house, but this time it's not for breath. He can see Ms. Emily watching him from the kitchen as he lifts the latch to her gate and brushes past her overgrown garden, slowly making his way to the door. He wonders if she'll call Officer Laney.

But the door opens as Hodgson makes it up the last step. Wisps of grey hair droop from her low bun. She's wearing reading glasses and an apron streaked with soil. She doesn't look very mystic at all.

"What'll it be?" she asks him. "Cards or palms?" She attempts a smile, but her eyes are subdued. Maybe even a little sad.

Hodgson rubs a shaking hand over his mouth. "I suppose you're going to tell me you knew I was coming."

This time her smile seems genuine. "I did know you were coming. I watched you cross the street." She opens the door a little bit wider.

Hodgson stares at his feet for a moment. “Your husband. Did you know before?”

Emily brushes at the dirt on her apron. “How’s your granddaughter?”

Hodgson rubs the face of his watch. 5:17. He takes a deep breath and steps inside.

“There’s no wrong choice.” Hodgson regards the cards splayed in front of him.

The two are seated at Emily’s kitchen table, a pot of tea steaming between them.

Hodgson feels almost a little disappointed. He’d imagined beads and incense. A crystal ball.

Hodgson pauses above a card to the far left and then pulls it towards him. Emily flips it over. “Eight of Swords,” she says. A smile skirts her mouth.

“Well, what’s it mean?”

“Your beliefs are limited. Constricting you. You’re going to need to open your mind.”

Hodgson leans back in his chair. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

Emily pats the table. “Good. I’d hoped you say that. You have questions, then?”

Hodgson fingers the card. “I’ve been cataloguing.”

“And you’ve noticed something. Patterns, maybe?”

Hodgson’s heart thumps. “I have.” He gestures to the cards. “Do I pick another?”

Emily shrugs, and leans forward. “You can if you’d like, but I’d rather pick one for you.”

Hodgson feels his chest tighten, but he nods in agreement. Emily picks a card from the middle and slides it towards Hodgson. “Go on then.”

He hesitates and grips a corner, flipping it over. A skeleton knight riding a white horse. Hodgson swallows. “Is this what Mary drew?” he asks.

“Death is a common enough card for people to draw. It’s meaning isn’t always as morbid as you’d think.”

Hodgson glances between Emily and the card. “But it is when you draw it.”

Emily takes a sip from her tea. “Now you’ve got it.” She reaches for Hodgson’s hand. “I don’t enjoy it. Neither does your Cate, I’ll wager. But there’s nothing we can do about it. We predict it and we attract it.”

“How long do I have?”

Emily’s face softens. “Is that the question you really want to ask?”

Hodgson flushes, feeling chided. “No, I suppose not.”

Emily leans forward and puts up a finger. “One a generation.” She holds up a palm. “Five families.” She smiles. “Yes, I’d guess you know the ones.”

Breakage

The first time I broke, it was clean in two. The left half of my body cracking against the wooden floor with a sound that was softer than expected—a thud more than a clatter. But the pain was exquisite. A line of agony from crown to pelvis.

Father was the one who found me. Scooped both halves of my body into his warm hands, and brought me to the kitchen where mother, hearing the fall, had already started stoking the fire. “I know,” Father said. “I know.”

They don’t tell you what to expect. At least mother and father never did. From my left eye, I could take in the full scope of my split. See the smooth, open cavity of my stomach. Shadows gathering around the opening to my right leg. Everything inside me white and velvet- soft and hallowed out.

Mother pressed at the seam between my eyes. Ran her fingers down the fissure in my nose. I’d like to think there wasn’t jealousy in her touch.

When the pot was ready, lacquer hot and glistening, they lay me out on the kitchen table.

“Be still,” Father said.

“Be strong,” Mother said.

I was neither. There was heat and more heat, and I was burning. When I twisted away, the metal slid down my face, and I could feel it searing down my lips, hardening.

Father moved to wipe it away, but Mother stopped him.

“If she wants to speak, she’ll learn how.”

It is slow going, this I will tell you.

The next morning, I stepped out with my friends. They pressed eager hands to my cracked places. “So pretty,” they whispered. They wondered when they’d get their own.

“Maybe I’ll trip down the stairs,” said one.

“Maybe my brother will push me,” said the other.

The metal on my mouth warmed in the sun, turned hot. I sucked in my cheeks, tried to pry open my lips, but they wouldn’t budge. Funny, how they didn’t notice my silence. How they stretched out their arms, drew lines along their collarbones, saying “I want to break here and here.”

I go to school. Try to fold my body into a desk, but I am too rigid now to do so. I stand in the back of the classroom next to another girl. She is wearing a skirt that shows off the golden veining on her knee-caps. When she walks, the metal on the inside of her knees touch and clink. The teacher watches us with hooded eyes, but she makes sure to never call on us.

That night, Mother finds me in my bedroom with a dull blade lodged between my lips. I have managed to break through the pretty gold. I prod the tip of the blade with my tongue; taste metal. I grip the handle and wrench it free. A scream whistles through the newly formed hole.

Mother crouches in front of me, eyes flashing with pride. “Good girl,” she says.
“Good girl.”

Bowser

It took them a week to find Bowser, and when they finally did he looked more like a Halloween decoration than a cat: the space between his bony cheek and his jaw buckling in on itself. Grey tongue thrust between sharp, little incisors. He was lying beneath the peach tree. A spot they'd neglected to look the half dozen times they'd passed it walking to and from the barn, carrying tins of Fancy Feast, calling *here kitty kitty, here Bowsy, time for din-din.*

In retrospect, Steven understood how they'd missed him. His shriveled grey body had sunken into a layer of bruised peaches, the pungent animal smell of his decay fusing with the honeyed scent of rotting fruit. Addie had been the one to find him, and to Steven's horror, she'd scooped his stiff body from the ground with her small, bare hands as soon as she'd spotted him. "He's dead, Daddy," she'd told Steven matter-of-factly. "He needs a funeral."

"Oh, god. Baby, don't touch that," Steven had said. "Set him down."

But Addie had not wanted to set him down, and now, here she was staring at Steven in confusion, lifting the cat away from her body. One hand under his throat and the other cupping what used to be the soft paunch between his belly and his hind legs. "You want me to put him back?"

Steven pressed the back of his fist to his mouth. This close, every breath Steven took made him feel like he was tasting Bowser. "Daddy?" Addie stepped closer. She was holding the cat out to him like some sort of offering, the first traces of distress pinching at the corners of her eyes. "But it's Bowser."

Steven swallowed hard, took a tentative breath, and then immediately gagged, a line of hot drool slipping down his chin. Addie moved closer, gripping his pantleg. He resisted the impulse to swat her hand away. A damp, slightly tacky palm print was now outlined on his blue jeans. He'd need to wash them in a load by themselves. Add a capful of Clorox. "Let's lay him in the grass," he managed to say. "He'd like that, wouldn't he?"

Addie gently deposited him on a thick patch of zoysia just beyond the tree's shade. When she stood back up, Steven noticed the slick, white body of a maggot clinging to the front of her t-shirt. She saw it as soon as he did and flicked it off silently.

"Daddy, are you crying?"

Steven wasn't sure what he was doing. He wasn't sure if he was sad for Bowser—sad he'd never hear that grating meow again, never find him tiptoeing across the windshield of his truck, or trotting across the field with a vole swinging from his mouth—or if he was sad for Addie, or—and this was most likely—sad for himself.

Bowser had been Addie's gift for being such a good girl during the divorce. He'd let her pick him out from the Humane Society just over two years ago. Bowser had been what his ex-wife Cheryl had dubbed "ugly cute"—little balloon of a belly filled with worms, eyes crusty with what looked like yellow snot. What had really thrown Steven was his gaunt face, all angles and sharp edges—almost as if it had been stretched tight by a plastic surgeon. But he'd made Addie excited about coming over, and that was really what mattered. When Steven had moved into the new house, he hadn't really known how to make the space something Addie would like. He bought the same DVDs he knew she

had at her mother's house. The same purple and pink lunar bedset. The same assortment of stuffed animals—plus, a horrifyingly realistic possum she'd fallen in love with at a Cracker Barrel. But Bowser was something special. Something that tipped the scales.

She loved that cat. She'd carry him around the house, cradling him like an infant or clutching him under one arm like a furry football. She tried tucking him into bed with her at night, holding him against the pillow while she brought the blanket under his chin. And though this normally in some annoyed growling, Bowser never did offer to bite her. Not hard anyway.

Addie started asking Cheryl to swing by to visit Bowser during weeks when she wasn't scheduled to come over, and for all their differences, Steven had to admit that never begrudged him these impromptu stops. She'd drop Addie off for an hour or two in the evenings, go and run some errands, and Steven and Addie would sit on the floor in the kitchen and throw jangling purple balls, catnip laced mice back and forth, laughing as Bowser skid across the linoleum.

Addie was looking at Steven expectantly. He'd missed whatever she'd been saying. She squatted over Bowser, leaning onto the tips of her white tennis shoes. "How'd he die?"

Steven brushed his fingers against the top of her head. "Honey, let's give Bowser some space. He's starting to smell pretty bad, isn't he?"

She rocked backwards onto her heels, and a few wayward slips of sandy hair brushed against the damp spot on his jeans. "But how'd he die?"

Steven slid his hands under her armpits and lifted her to her feet. “He must’ve used up his nine lives.”

Addie bent her head back to look at him. “That’s not real,” she said, squinting into the sun. The back of her head was now touching the belly of his t-shirt. Everything would need to be washed. He’d have her scrub up to her elbows with some Dawn soap when they got inside. Then send her off for a shower. Looking at Bowser, Steven had the intense urge to wash him, too. Plop him in the sink for a flea bath like when he was a kitten. This was crazy, of course, but the image of bubbles, rainbowed like an oil slick, and soaking through his crusted fur, called to him.

Steven had never been a cat person. Or rather, he’d never had the opportunity to become one. He’d grown up in a pet-free home. His mother was allergic to both dogs and cats, and his father had no real fondness for either. He’d pat the neighbor’s chocolate lab if he came sauntering into the yard, but Steven never thought this looked quite natural. His father held his arms stiffly and kept his face turned to the side, away from the dog. Once the dog was satisfied with his pets, he would make his way on to the next house, and his father would go inside and stand in front of the sink for a good two or three minutes, scrubbing at the oily black residue the dog’s fur had left on his fingers.

Steven always got the distinct impression that his Dad petted the dog out of a sense of forced generosity. Probably because all of the other neighbors cooed and exclaimed over him, and his owner, a sweet woman who lived in the house across the street, liked to monitor the dog’s progress from her front porch.

And so Steven had never asked for a dog while growing up. He'd never asked for a cat, either. He thought about asking for a fish, but he suspected his parents wouldn't like the idea of having to clean the tank. Cheryl, on the other hand, had grown up on a veritable farm. She'd grown up with a pack of dogs, always at least six or seven strays named things like Buddy, Buddy 2, Little Man, Big Momma, Little Momma—that her parents provided kibble and kitchen scraps for. She'd had two pet lambs, a pony named Baby, and she'd helped her mother collect eggs from their hens, and (Steven found it hard to imagine this) helped slaughter and pluck them for dinner when they got tired of “store chicken.”

Getting a kitten for Addie had been Cheryl's idea. “She'd love it,” Cheryl assured him. “Cats are easy. Little food. Little water. You won't even notice he's there.”

Steven very much doubted that he wouldn't notice a living, breathing creature sharing the same space with him. It had been many months since he'd experienced that phenomenon. His new house, a two-story foreclosure marooned in a bean field, tended to amplify just how alone he now was. He'd chosen the house because it fit his tight teacher's salary and aligned with the admittedly romanticized view he'd developed of Cheryl's rural childhood.

He regretted buying it almost immediately. It was way too big for one person. Even with him claiming a room and an office, and reserving a bedroom and playroom for Addie, there were still three rooms he had absolutely no idea what to do with. Plus, the house had needed an enormous amount of work. Every sink—kitchen, bathroom, half-bath—leaked and there were large tea-colored water stains on the ceiling in the living room and in his bedroom as well—which he'd started to use as a sort of Rorschach test

for his mental health. When the blob to the left of his ceiling fan resembled a lopsided clover, he took it as a good sign. When it looked like an obese llama, he began to worry.

He was in over his head, and he was sure Cheryl knew this.

“What’s a cat going to hurt?” she asked him. “He’ll help with the mice. Give Addie something to play with when she comes over.”

“You’re right,” Steven said. “I’ll take her to pick one out tomorrow.”

Steven let Addie curate the funeral. There was a lot of discussion about where Bowser’s final resting place should be and which flowers would need to be picked for him (cat mint was a must) and whether or not a mouse needed to be sacrificed to accompany him into the afterlife. Steven had finally managed to convince her that they’d probably had enough death for one day. But Addie insisted they place a frozen filet of tilapia in the grave with him. “Like the Egyptians.” Steven doubted the Egyptians ever buried their cats with frozen food, but it was a nice gesture, and he was sure Bowser would have appreciated it.

Even Cheryl ended up attending the funeral. She pulled in for Addie’s regular pick-up time just as Addie and Steven were traipsing across the yard with Bowser balanced on the end of a garden shovel. Part of Steven wished the funeral would have been contained to just the two of them. A special Daddy-daughter moment, where it would have been okay for both of them to get a little choked up about Bowser and say a few words over him. Now, with an audience, this kind of emotional poignancy seemed untenable. Embarrassing, even.

As Addie was tossing her limp collection of flowers into Bowser's grave, Cheryl kept trying to catch Steven's eye. She was smiling a little, like *gee, how cute is this?* He imagined her telling the other hygienists at her work about it tomorrow. *And they held a funeral for him. Yes, flowers and everything.*

Addie was holding Cheryl's hand. She'd barely looked at Steven since Cheryl had shown up. Steven leaned against the shovel, watching the two of them, wondering if he'd know they were mother and daughter if he met them on the street. It was hard to say. Addie reflected back at Steven his own light hair and thin lips—his detached earlobes. Her face was still child-round, padded along her cheekbones and jaw in a way he didn't imagine would persist into adulthood. When that melted, the shape might more closely resemble his own: not broad or balanced enough to be chiseled. That's certainly not a word Cheryl would have ever used to describe him, even early in their marriage. *Delicate?* Was that it? That didn't seem quite right, either. Cheryl had delicate features. A small nose, a mouth that, even full smile, seemed to know where it was appropriate to stop.

Addie was swaying from one foot to the other, stretching out the hem of her shirt by pulling on it with both hands. The movement was distinctly Cheryl. Come to think of it, the way her right hand fluttered when she was talking about something important was also Cheryl. And the way she'd scrub her finger under her nose, right-left-right, a nervous habit, was something he was certain Cheryl would do tonight during the awkward two-minute exchange that now constituted their every goodbye.

Steven cleared his throat. "How do you guys feel about some ice cream?" He looked at Addie. "We could go to Dairy Barn. Get your favorite."

Addie glanced between him and Cheryl. “With Mommy?”

Steven was already nodding. “Of course. If she wants to.”

Steven had hoped they would all ride together. He’d bought the truck when they were all still living in the same house, and he’d picked it because it fit all three of them comfortably. Better than Cheryl’s Jeep. It was also cleaner than the Jeep, mainly because of his strict no-eating-in-the-car policy. Cheryl’s floorboards were always filled with empty Wendy’s frosty cups, and Subway sandwich bags.

But as they walked towards the driveway, Cheryl bypassed his truck, yanking open the back passenger door of the jeep before Steven could even think to make the suggestion. Cheryl patted Addie on the butt. “Up we go.” She smiled at Steven. “Meet you there?”

Steven watched Addie scramble into the Jeep, sending out a cascade of trash, with as little hesitation as she’d picked up Bowser this afternoon. He picked up a napkin off the ground. It was puckered in the middle, a wad of what felt like chewing gum, hard at the center. Cheryl’s mouth seemed to shrink. “Sorry.” She held out her hand.

Steven curled his fist around it. Now that he couldn’t feel the outline of the gum, he felt better. “Don’t worry, I’ve got it.” He patted the rubber seal to Addie’s door. “You know if you wanted, I could drive. If,” he nods towards the trash, “it would easier, that is.”

Cheryl smiled. One of those smiles he suspected she used with particularly difficult patients.

“What do you think, kiddo?” she said, turning to Addie. “Wanna ride in the tank with Papa instead?”

Addie pursed her lips and glanced guiltily at Steven. “I wanna ride with Mommy,” she mumbled.

Cheryl forced a laugh and ruffled Addie’s hair. “It’s almost like you missed me or something, Little Bit.”

Steven laughed as well. “Hey,” he said. “I get it. I’d need a break from me, too. See you guys up there.”

Dairy Barn was only a fifteen-minute drive up the highway, and this meant that Steven went probably way more than he should. He enjoyed the ride. It was long enough for him to feel like the trip had some sort of meaning, but short enough that he never felt guilty that he’d taken up too much of his day by going. Tonight, Steven tried to convince himself that the car ride alone, while perhaps not anticipated, was exactly what he’d needed. It was going to take him time to incorporate Bowser’s absence into his schema, and he needed to start now. The cat had been his shadow for the past two years, following him around when he was outside. He liked to pounce on Steven’s hands as he yanked up weeds in the vegetable garden or chew on the wire ends of the rake when Steven was piling leaves during the fall. At night, he’d meow at the back door until Steven let him in. When Steven would wake up in the morning, Bowser would be sitting on his dresser, vibrating his mouth at the birds outside the window, the loose skin on his stomach billowing out around him, making him look larger than he really was.

Jesus Christ. Steven rubbed the bridge of his nose. It was just a goddam cat. He could go to the shelter tomorrow and pick out another one. That's probably what Cheryl would suggest.

Steven felt his phone buzz in his jean pocket a few seconds before Cheryl's name popped up on the Bluetooth in his truck. He stabbed at the "Accept" button, but her voice cut in and out, choppy notes that hadn't even managed to coalesce into a full word yet. They were crossing the Missouri River, where cell coverage was notoriously bad. Steven had been trailing the orange blip of her Jeep for the past ten minutes, but he was just now noticing that Cheryl had merged into the left lane. Steven sucked in his cheeks. At the next stop light, maybe a half a mile up the road, she'd need to be in the right turn lane to head towards Dairy Barn.

Cheryl's voice started to break through. He heard a "sorry" and a "catch up" and a "maybe we can" before she started in with the "can you hear mes."

"She doesn't want ice cream?" He didn't like how loud his voice sounded.

"No." Cheryl's voice seemed even louder. "I think it's just been a big day for her. She's ready to get home."

"Big day?" Steven said. "That's really what you're going to call this?" Steven took a shuddering breath. "A 'big day' is when you go to the zoo. Not when you bury you're fucking pet, Cheryl."

There was a brief garbling sound and Steven realized she'd had him on speaker phone. Now her voice sounded crisp, but quieter. Like she was trying to whisper.

"Really? She's crying now."

“I wasn’t trying to make her cry. You just—” Steven paused, slapping his hand on the steering wheel—“you just come and you want to fucking sugar coat the whole ordeal.” They’d hit the stop light at a red. Cheryl was the first person in the left turn lane, her blinker throbbing angrily. “And home? Really?” Steven continued. “Like where she’s been for the past week, isn’t home?” The Kia in front of Steven had just made a right on red. There was another car coming up behind him, urging him forward. Steven glanced to his left as he made the turn. Even through the tinted windows, he could see Addie in the backseat, and she was, in fact, crying.

“That’s not what I was saying at all,” Cheryl hissed. The truck’s Bluetooth gave a *beep beep beep*, indicating that the call had ended. Steven thought about dialing her back. He thought about turning the car around and following her home, insisting that Addie come back with him, but that sounded like something crazy divorcees did, and he was pretty sure Addie wouldn’t actually want to come with him, anyway. The truth was, she might never want come over now. Why would she? Without Bowser, what did he have to offer her? The same books and movies and toys she had at her mom’s house.

Steven pulls into Dairy Barns parking lot and throws the truck in park. The stand looks closed; no lights and a white paper taped to the inside of a window. More than likely a note about the closure. That was just as well. Steven hadn’t even been hungry when he’d made the suggestion. Bowser’s scent had been haunting him all afternoon, turning his stomach.

As Steven pulled out of the parking lot, he considered that though Bowser could never be replaced, not really, Addie might appreciate a new companion. Something to keep her mind off him. Maybe he could stop by the shelter just to look. Not today, of

course. Not tomorrow. That'd be too soon. But maybe sometime later this month. After they'd had a chance to mourn. Maybe once Bowser's grave had started to patch in with a soft down of green.

