

Spring 2015

# Impact Craters

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# **IMPACT CRATERS**

By  
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B.A., Colgate University, 2009

THESIS

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This thesis has been examined and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing by:

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ABSTRACT

IMPACT CRATERS

by

Alyssa Martino

University of New Hampshire, May 2015

IMPACT CRATERS is a collection of linked nonfiction essays framed around two intertwined themes: loss and discovery. At their core, these are coming of age stories. Stories about what we lose and gain as we age—friends, family, intimacy, understanding, and knowledge. Stories about social justice and lost rights. Stories about privilege and gender. Stories about death and drifting and letting go.

## Impact Craters

Dad and I used to sort through adhesive stars and push them onto my bedroom ceiling. I was seven then eight then nine, unable to reach my gangly arms high enough to help. But Dad was hulking, six feet tall with wide hips and hair turning silver, as he balanced on a white desk chair we maneuvered around the room. We coated the sky with celestial bodies. Milky ovals and pointy yellow teeth. Fizzling fall colors, burgundy, orange, and red. Stickers containing phosphor and charged by natural light to glow. We bought our own Venus and Jupiter and poor little Pluto. Dad held a peculiar vigil the day Pluto was demoted, devouring online news articles, occasionally sending Mom and I an email with a link and single, caustic phrase—“What the heck!?!?!?” or “My mind is blown!”

As Dad taught me about the night sky, he also let me—his only daughter, and only child—break the rules, overriding the traditional star patterns and placements. Maybe fathers—or at least my father—have a soft spot for daughters because he always indulged my wishy-washy decision-making. “That star would look prettier over here by Saturn,” I’d say, an indecisive young girl, more concerned with aesthetics than accuracy. Dad once bought me a pack of transparent stickers with purple dots that form each stick figure constellation: Cassiopeia and Orion, Ursa Major and Leo. I asked him to place several yellow stickers together in a big clump, covering one another with their shooting tails because we ran out of normal stars. We laughed and called them the Pleiades, the seven sisters, my favorite cluster because I could always locate it when Dad suddenly looked up at the night sky and said, “What do you see?”

Each night, after we grew weary of decorating, Dad and I turned off the lights and collapsed onto my twin bed. He counted down in a deep tone of voice. *FIVE-FOUR-THREE-*

*TWO-ONE-BLAST OFF!* My twin bed was a rocket, and he was the astronaut pilot. That was around the same time we watched and re-watched the movie, *Apollo 13*. We loved the shots of Jim Lovell staring out the ship's window at the swirling blue and white of Earth; the pensive look of his wife, Marilyn—my mother's name, too—as she stared up at the night sky; the way the whole crew grew silent when they orbited the moon, inspecting its murky, dark craters. Of course, we also loved Tom Hanks. We also loved suspense.

At some point, Dad and I looked up at the strange curl of bodies, which we had neglected to think of as a whole. The stars and planets swirled into an odd shape, a familiar shape: thin at one end, fat at the other. I turned to Dad and said sternly, “Oh no. It's shaped like a chicken wing.” From then on, we called it the chicken wing galaxy.

Dad studied astronomy in college. He owns a beige telescope the size of a bazooka. He keeps it in the shed behind our house next to a red one, shorter but still sturdy and thick like a tree trunk. He attended a physics PhD program at Penn State in his twenties, where he met my mother during a game of human chess. A kind soul with twiggy legs and dirty blonde hair so thin it always slides out of a ponytail, Mom didn't want to play, but Dad nagged and nagged and nagged her until she grudgingly agreed. Recently, I asked Dad about his doctorate and he confessed he did not finish. “This one professor was out to get me!” he said. It wasn't terribly surprising. Even now, my father can be like a firecracker: obsessive, explosive, then suddenly fizzling out. He moves from project to project with such intense enthusiasm and energy, it's hard to believe he's now sixty-two. He paints the foyer three times because the color is not quite right. He investigates our broken sewage system until he knows more than a professional plumber and is, my mother tells me over the phone, “literally dealing with shit.” He decorates the front yard

each year for Halloween with homemade automatons toiled and rigged in the basement year round. Then, he blows a fuse and his best creation yet—a symphony of lightning and thunder wired to scare neighborhood trick-or-treaters—goes down the drain.

At night, Dad taught me about the sky and the universe, but really, he was teaching me about science. About astronomy and physics. About gravitational forces and exploding black holes. Dad tried to infuse me with his love of astronomy, and a deep-seeded curiosity about the world. He showed me books and articles from his physics days, and took me to the planetarium shows at the Boston Science Museum, where we'd lie back in foamy chairs and listen to a deep voice tell us stories of the great astronomers: Galileo and Copernicus and Hubble and Brahe. We'd stretch out in a circular room with other fathers and young daughters and watch the galaxy whiz by, just like a scene from the *Star Wars* opening credits—another movie Dad loved to watch over and over again.

“She’s going to be an astronomer,” Dad would joke to his friends proudly when I was too young to hope to be anything but just like him. I knew he was only half serious, half joking. “Or a physicist. A scientist for the ages!”

There aren't many women in the sciences. My father must have known this while I was growing up. Because astronomy is such a small profession, statistics about gender are often combined with physics. A recent study from Yale found that only one-fifth of Physics PhDs are awarded to women, and only 14 percent of physics professors are women. I did find one startling fact: between 1997-2009 in the United States, only 12.1 percent of the International Astronomical Union (IAU) were cited to be women. Though still pretty disappointing, the number of women in the IAU has still been slowly increasing over time.

I'm not sure if Dad hoped I'd grow into a scientific pioneer, the female version of Stephen Hawking, solving equations that influence our interpretation of the world. Quite possibly, he just wanted me to get a scholarship to a good college—there are hundreds available for women in science. Or maybe he just wanted a topic to bond over, a passion we'd share.

But science, to me, didn't feel at all natural. I struggled with math, calculations written in a seemingly foreign language. I didn't want to be a scientist; I only wanted to gaze at sparkly things in the sky. I listened to Dad's bedtime stories, staring up at the chicken wing galaxy with awe, but it felt more like escape than reality. By middle school, I preferred English and history to algebra and earth science, and I began to sigh each time Dad would drag me into the cold at 2 a.m. in January to crane my neck up and stare at the stars.

Every August of my childhood, Dad took Mom and me to watch the Perseid meteor shower, shooting white lights, fierce and fiery, across the sky. I was not brought up to call them shooting stars. We used the scientific names. Meteor. Meteoroid. Meteorite. Asteroid. Comet. Asteroids are big. Meteors are tiny—as small as a piece of rice and as big as a desk chair. Usually, meteor material comes from asteroids or comets, but they can also result from other debris: particles and pieces spit off during collisions with the Moon or Mars. These foreign objects enter the Earth's atmosphere, whirling and whizzing as if a superhuman pitched them toward home plate. Then, the aerodynamic heating process produces a bright, white trail.

The Perseid meteor shower is one of the most brilliant showers every late summer. It happens because of the comet, Swift-Tuttle, and is named because the meteors all appear to be hurtling away from the constellation Perseus, a hero of Greek mythology. The radiant: that's what astronomers call this point of origin. Maybe we're all just tiny balls of heat and energy,

hurtling away from points in our past. Although from way down here on Earth, it sure looks like meteors are moving toward something, not away. The truth is, we all have radiants, roots, places and people that shaped us into who we are now.

We always watched from the dock on Lake Winnepesaukee in Gilford, New Hampshire, where my maternal grandparents lived in a rosy red condo. We'd lay on lawn chairs and beach towels, bundled up in sweatshirts and sweatpants, hoping the sprinklers would not go off at the precise second you had to sprint up the lawn to the house for a bathroom break. We'd shiver next to one another, ooh-ing and aw-ing when we noticed a dazzling flash above the murky, dark lake—a large blue body where, by day, I swam away with orange blow-up floaties tightly fitted around my biceps.

My family must have seen hundreds of meteors during those summer years in Gilford. But we never saw a fireball, which the IAU defines as a meteor brighter than any planet in the sky. Well, at least we never saw one together. The first time Dad told me about fireballs, I was maybe ten-years-old, eager and optimistic. I quickly added, "See a Fireball," to my mental list of life goals, hoping I could one day imagine a check mark next to its box.

There are more than 500,000 fireballs per year. Sometimes, I think about these odds and the many hours I've spent staring at the sky with Dad, waiting for that brilliant flare. One time, Mom and I thought we saw one—a bright streak, more sizzling than usual—while in New Hampshire. Dad was with us, but missed it. They say fireballs are impossible to miss. A sad indication we were mistaken.

Dad has seen a few fireballs in his lifetime. He saw one in 1977, when he was living in Pittsburgh. He said it was amazing. He said it looked like someone whipped a ball of fire across the blank night sky.

As a preteen and teenager, I used to sit at the kitchen table, filling out worksheets with algebra questions or geometry proofs, physics equations and anatomy vocab. Dad always helped with my math and science homework. He sat next to me at the table whenever I had a question, or on the couch, with a pen behind his ear and his mouth twisted up all funny. He'd make chicken scratches on white pieces of printer paper, crossing out numbers and mathematical signs over and over again until he got the right answer. He'd dig up his old astronomy textbooks from the basement, big and blue hard covers, with fragile papyrus drawings of constellations.

"Dad, this stuff won't even be on the test," I'd whine.

"Isn't it fascinating, though?" he'd reply, flipping the page and veering off course like a wild, uncontrollable flare.

We'd almost always get into a disagreement. He'd be showing me how to complete a math problem, and I'd get impatient, start fidgeting my fingers, eventually yelling, "Just get there already!" I'd stomp up to my bedroom, slamming the door behind me like a child. He was trying to help, and I was being a brat. Homework time was always extremely tumultuous.

By the time I reached high school, I was in several advanced classes—calculus and chemistry—and some of the problems became too difficult, even for Dad. He'd stare at them for a while, scratching his head and making notes on yellow legal pads. He'd double check and triple check and realize he was wrong as soon as he'd been certain he was right.

I'd retaliate with anything but gratitude. With snarky looks and eye rolls.

"Are you sure you're doing this right?"

"That's not the answer in the back of the book."

"Maybe I should just go see Mr. Brown after school."

“Just forget it. I can’t even deal with you right now.”

But the more Dad’s influence molded me as an adolescent, the more our personalities began to clash. I remember throwing tantrums on the itchy gray rug, lying on my back and kicking my legs as a girl because he annoyed me for every reason possible: he chewed too loud, he talked too fast, he drank coffee in the car without a lid and sometimes spilled it on the dash. I’d parent him—my own father, nearly thirty-five years older than me—with such incredible sass. I’d return his gentle kindness with aggravation. Whenever he had a sore throat, I’d say, “Really? C’mon. It can’t be that bad. At least not bad enough to stay home from work.” I was critical, unsympathetic. I could hear myself and wanted to stop—I’m lucky to have him—but once I started to burn, I was uncontrollable.

Dad can be short-fused, too. I first realized this when I was young, and we were driving in the car. Dad grunted at other drivers, then quickly spiked in volume, “What an *ass!* What is he doing? This guy thinks he can cut me off...” Road rage was only the beginning. At home, we were always two meteors about to collide, and even though I was probably the driving force, he was no innocent bystander. After all—with a mother who rarely raises her voice—my temper was mostly inherited from him.

Of course, there were days when we didn’t argue. Although, back then, they were rare. As a teenager, my father and I fought almost daily. Occasionally, I humored him. On those days, I would point at the brightest star in the sky and shout, “It’s Sirius!” or “Vega!” Usually, we were outside the car after dinner, ready to drive the dark, winding roads back to our little suburb, White Pines and Red Maples casting soft shadows onto Dad’s early ‘90s burnt sienna Oldsmobile. He might make a lame joke about it breaking down again—then we’d really have

time to inspect the sky—and Mom might roll her eyes as she often does. Secretly, I bet she was hoping her daughter would learn something—even something small—about this wonderfully fleeting universe from her dear old dad.

When a meteor survives the journey through the Earth's atmosphere, it's called a meteorite and if it hits the planet's surface, it may produce a crater—but only after a high-velocity collision. No impact occurs unless there is a battle of sorts, a butting of heads. The same sort of aggressive fender-benders Dad and I collided into.

My father once stood inside a crater, letting the empty space swallow him whole like a whale's jaw. At age fifteen, he drove across the country with his parents, from Newark, New Jersey to Santa Monica, California, to visit my Aunt Marie. Dad insisted they stop in Arizona at Meteor Crater, also called Barringer Crater, the largest impact crater in the United States. The numbers speak for themselves: 1,432 acres of dent into the golden desert landscape; 1.18 km of impressionable brown dirt. Though I have never seen the crater, I have seen pictures, and it is magnificent, the land sloping down like a giant, organic swimming pool. The impact occurred 49,000 years ago. A piece of debris crashing to Earth. Astronomers say it would have been similar to a nuclear bomb blast, minus the radiation. They say nearby animals—mammoths, bison, horses—would have been displaced by the shock wave. Craters cause damage, lasting consequences, forever changing the terrain.

Dad always held out hope I'd study physics, or astronomy, in college. But as an undergrad, I only took one statistics class. I completed my math/science requirement with the least practical course ever: Core Gems. For our final project, I constructed a Powerpoint project

on a lesser known stone, Agate: its chemical composition and common uses. Mostly, I stared at those pretty swirls of pink and purple and orange at the center of the geodes. Crystals sparkling as brightly as the Milky Way.

Had I let Dad down by distancing myself from the sciences? I couldn't help that I preferred stories to textbooks, or that I preferred to write about the universe instead of investigating it through a telescope lens. What's more, was I letting down all women by not joining the sciences? By not pursuing a physics PhD? I felt a bit guilty, wishing I had the drive—and mind—for studying scientific phenomena and balancing chemistry equations all day. Just the thought of it made me want to pull out all of my hair.

Now, I am 27 and earning a Master of Fine Arts. Ironically, in many ways, I *do* study science. I write about the natural world and the environment, about floods and hurricanes and tide patterns and even, sometimes, medicine. I find my own way into these topics as a writer, an investigator. I am curious about the universe and the way science affects our lives here on Earth.

Dad always trusted my choices. He never pushed me to become a scientist if I didn't want to be one. (Though he definitely hinted at it more than casually.) I never got the sense he'd be angry or disappointed in me if that route didn't work out. His lessons did do one thing: they made me know when something was interesting, strange, or complicated. Dad made me a curious human being. He taught me what it means to be perceptive enough to notice a shooting white meteor in the corner of the sky. Subtle lessons about inertia and impact. I inherited my own father's passion and inquisitiveness. It only took those years of butting heads, like meteors crashing into the surface of a planet, leaving an indent, an impact crater, an everlasting transformation of the land—and, of me.

Recently, I was driving home from the university where I study and also teach freshmen writing classes. I'd had a bad day—students seemingly unengaged as I wrote reminders about topic sentences on the squeaky chalk board—and had to drive an hour and a half back to my apartment before I could eat dinner and collapse into bed.

As I drove home on the long stretch of 1-95, thinking about all of life's tiny frustrations, I saw something bright out of the corner of my left eye. It streaked from left to right just above my windshield, a fluorescent line as thick as a curtain rod. Isn't that odd? I thought to myself. Perhaps a meteor, but I couldn't be sure. I've seen dozens before, but was too absorbed by the yellow lines on the road, my droopy eyelids, and a safe trip home.

Recently, I read that the Earth used to look just like the moon. That silvery surface with thousands and thousands of dips and pockets. Craters with well-defined rims or that have been flooded with lava or those with smooth walls or a central peak. The Earth, our own hazy chaos of green land and blue ocean, used to be as pockmarked and freckled as the moon. But because our planet has two things— an atmosphere and water—erosion has smoothed out most of the craters on Earth. Now there are only 160 known impact craters. The Earth has adapted into what it's supposed to be: a livable place for human beings.

The morning after my groggy drive home, I saw an article online: *Fireball reported in the Northeast*. I wrote an excited e-mail to Dad, explaining what I had seen and linking to the article.

“Do you think it could have been...?” I asked him skeptically.

“I'm so proud,” he wrote back after inspecting the data. “You saw your first fireball!”

The stars are still there in my childhood bedroom, looking stilted and silly. The first time my boyfriend stayed in that room with me, he looked up and saw the odd markings in the sky, which I had neglected to mention. Little purple constellations and pudgy stars. We had dated for

a few years by then, and I'm not sure why I never told him about those stickers on the ceiling; maybe I simply forgot about this universe Dad and I created. It took me twenty-seven years of exploring other galaxies to remember those nights reorganizing our own constellations, all they taught me, all they still are teaching me. But I will admit my ceiling now looks like it has a case of the weird, plum-colored chicken pox.

I finally saw a fireball. I saw it because Dad taught me to always keep my eyes open, searching for something unusual. A rare check on my sacred goals list, this firecracker in the sky.

"Are those glow-in-the-dark stars?" my boyfriend asked as we crawled under the covers. He sounded bewildered. "And planets? How long did it take to put those up?"

"A long time." I smiled. "But don't they look like a chicken wing?"

## Mystery Patrol

I used to stretch onto my stomach outside my parents' bedroom door, willing myself lean and long, an invisible slug against the baseboard. I was six or seven, still wearing my favorite Beauty and the Beast nightgown, Belle's golden dress dulled to urine yellow. The fabric crackled with static electricity against my twiggy kid arms—so much that I wanted to squirm and scream—but I resisted. My bedtime was long gone, and I should not have been there, sneaking in the upstairs hallway that separates my parents' room and mine. It was way too tempting: Mom and Dad always kept their door cracked open at night so our cat, Rocky, wouldn't scratch at the crease and wake them up.

I was always snooping—trying to see and hear and know things I should not see and hear and know. I was obsessed with finding answers, with the feeling that I could suddenly possess some small comprehension of the world on my own. One night, I pressed my chin into the hallway rug as I watched a newscaster interview a woman with straggly light brown hair. The carpet fibers prickled me like grass, but I was unconcerned, eyes glued to the boxy brown television in the far corner of my parents' room. It was the mid-1990s, and the set was old, clunky, glowing like the moon. The TV flashed a photograph of the woman's legs: potholed and purple, bloody and raw, like her skin had been lifted up and thrown aside. Gruesome, but I could not look away.

The lady told the newscaster that a virus crept up all her limbs. Her whole face appeared red and feverish, and I wondered if anyone had taken her temperature. As a kid, I once bit down so hard on a thermometer that the glass broke, setting the red, poisonous mercury free. The lady explained how she woke up and couldn't move her feet, then her whole legs, then her torso, then

her arms and neck. She was paralyzed. She could not move at all. As I digested the 10'o'clock news segment, I, too, felt suddenly frozen and petrified.

Necrotizing Fasciitis, the newscaster said. That's what happened to the woman being interviewed. A flesh-eating virus. Deadly and rare. I didn't yet know what flesh was, but it sounded bad to have it swallowed up like a Thanksgiving turkey. *Ne-cro-ti-zing Fash-ee-eye-tus*. I repeated the words over and over again in my head, imagining a tall red wave overtaking my body, slipping into a darkness so I never see Mom and Dad again. *Ne-cro-tize. Ne-cro-tize. Fash-ee-eye. Fash-ee-eye*. I forced the words to rhyme. I didn't want to forget what I saw: I wanted to remember; I wanted to understand; I wanted to keep the lady and her virus tucked somewhere safe in my memory. I kept chanting silently, these harsh and exciting and unfamiliar words. *Ne-cro-tize-ing Fash-ee-eye-tus. Ne-cro-tize Fash-ee-eye*. I let their syllables meander into a strange, soundless song, a bizarre little ditty. *Ne-cro-tize Fash-ee-eye*. I let the silent beat propel me back to my room, army-crawling low to the ground, curling into a fetal position under my comforter. Then, into my pillow, soft and muffled and breathless, still picturing those haunting pictures of pink flesh and open wounds, I let go and began to cry.

Ali and I had the same shade of squirrely brown hair, but she was short and a know-it-all. I was taller and bossy. It wasn't the best combination for two ten-year-old best friends. Recently, Mom banned us from playing board games. Somewhere around Monopoly's Pennsylvania Railroad or the first big slide of Chutes and Ladders, I'd always get aggravated that Ali was winning and accuse her of cheating. Then, she'd overreact, locking herself in the front hall coat closet, wiping snot on my great grandmother's antique fur coat until Mom peered at me sternly and said, "Apologize. Right now."

It was just the four of us, our little family: Mom, petite with dirty blonde hair, re-microwaving a miniature lilac cup of coffee over and over again on Saturday mornings; Dad, the silver-haired patriarch with a booming voice who baked unusual cakes to look like ski slopes and watermelons; Rocky, our fat, gray cat with dark, mischievous eyes; and, me, a wannabee Harriet the Spy who spent most of second grade carrying around a clipboard at recess.

Mom once hoped to have a baby, a brother or sister for me to play with, but something went horribly wrong. “I’m not pregnant anymore,” she told me when I was only five or six, too young to have ever heard the word miscarriage. “What happened?” I asked, and Mom replied that the baby died in her stomach, stifling a sob as we sat cross-legged on her bed. My heart began to race but I could only imitate her grief. My chest tightened with a sinking sadness, but could not fully understand why. I hadn’t even met this baby; how could I miss her? Mom and I never discussed my brother or sister again—likely because I was too young, only a kid, their *only* kid. But I can recall this single conversation, and one soon thereafter about a surgery halting future pregnancies—later, an image of Mom, weak and tired in a hospital gown.

The board game prohibition made it difficult to find amusement in our small, dull suburban town. Sometimes, Ali and I played kickball or tag in the backyard with the neighbor boys with thick-framed glasses and white-blonde hair. But Ali wasn’t very athletic, and I was klutzy, still growing into my long legs, so our attempts were fraught with tears and injuries. The best days were when Ali and I retreated to the woods behind my house, with tall pine trees and crunchy auburn leaves beneath our sneakers. We built pretend campfires and sat on chunky logs slick with dew. We roasted fake s’mores and frolicked around, spooked by the rustling sounds of chipmunks and chirping blue jays in the tiny wooden birdhouse I once painted pastel purple with my father.

When the New England weather grew snowy and bitter, Ali and I mostly watched Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen movies. Our favorite was *The Adventures of Mary-Kate and Ashley*, in which the twins sing and dance like musical performers while solving a series of mysteries. Week after week in my living room, Ali and I executed high-kicks and belted out lyrics into hairbrush microphones with the stereo spiked. We pretended to be the Olsen twins: I was always Ashley, and Ali was Mary-Kate. We wanted their cute cheek dimples, their kid-sized beige trench coats, their basset hound named Clue. We wanted to be anyone but ourselves.

By springtime, one of us suggested Mystery Patrol: our own crime-solving, detective group. I wanted what I'd always wanted: to solve mysteries, to stumble upon answers previously unknown. We made t-shirts, squirting bubble paint into jagged letters on A.C. Moore black fabric. We were always better at math than art. We printed pamphlets out at my house and placed them carefully in mailboxes, skipping and hopscotching all the way up and down Meadowbrook Circle. *Got a Mystery? Call Mystery Patrol*, the fliers read.

Ali and I wandered and crept into the backyards of strangers, hoping they would not notice us picking out four-leaf clovers as we created wild stories about how our neighbors had disappeared without a trace. I was always the ringleader, egging on Ali to follow me onto illicit patios; she was the worrywart who feared getting caught. One time, I suggested we climb the trees in my front yard to get a better look at the neighborhood; Ali made it two feet off the ground before she started sobbing, shouting "GET ME DOWN!" and, I—luckily, a head taller than her and able to do so—cradled my arms beneath her backside, which was a whopping ten inches above. She parachuted like a helpless puppy into my grip. The incident didn't stop our charades: we snuck onto swing sets that were not ours; we played with pets we did not know; we

may have even peered into a few translucent windowpanes. Really, we were bored children in the suburbs.

Then, my goldfish, Goldie, died in the most peculiar of ways. The tank's water spilled all down the side of my desk, plastic toppling over like a domino block. It wasn't a big tank, a foot tall, quarter-foot in diameter, cylindrical with an orange top. I won Goldie the goldfish at an elementary school carnival and kept him in my bedroom, opening the top flap each morning to sprinkle in a single rancid flake of fish food.

I wanted to know what happened to Goldie. I was ten and I missed him. Death was still foreign to me; I did not understand how humans, or animals, could suddenly stop breathing and never come back to life. Ali came over and the two of us squatted down to study the area below my white desk. No footprints or handprints or paw prints. Then, we saw it: a strand of silky gray hair. We galloped down the stairs.

"Rocky is being charged with first-degree murder," I announced to my parents, smiling and giddy, no longer distraught over Goldie's passing because we had solved this crime and now—however false it was—we felt like any answer was within reach. Mom and Dad just looked at each other and shrugged. Then, Ali ran back to her house across the street just in time for family dinner.

Two years after watching the newscast, I was still having nightmares about the mysterious flesh-eating virus. I woke up in the middle of the night, sweaty and panicked, a dark stain on my pillow near my brow. I was sure the deadly disease was coming for me, hunting me down, hiding under my box spring. I couldn't tell Mom and Dad: I didn't want them to know that I still sometimes watched the news from the hallway outside their room.

I had other nightmares, too. Mom's father, my Papa, was very sick. So was my friend, Gill, pronounced just like Jill. Both had cancer. I didn't know what kind Papa had, but Gill had brain cancer. They just found it, and I was scared, even though they shaved her head and performed surgery. No one ever told me whether or not she was going to be okay, and I felt like my parents were hiding an important but daunting secret: that hardly anyone recovers from tumors that bleed into your brain. This made me angry—the hunch that Mom and Dad never told me anything, that they secluded me, not wanting to upset me the way it had when the not-yet-born baby brother or sister died in Mom's belly. They were only trying to keep me safe.

After each night terror, I quietly positioned myself on the floor of my room. I shouted so my parents would hear and come running into my room, asking, panicked: What's wrong?

“I rolled out of bed!” I wailed.

They always saw right through this charade. Go back to sleep, Dad said. You look fine. I huffed and puffed my way back under the covers, into the darkness, unable to shake images of bright green viruses, the tickle of bugs creeping up my own legs and arms so I twitched restlessly beneath the sheets. I learned very quickly what it was like to be afraid and unable to tell anyone the real reason why.

Ali and I had a third best friend: Erica. She lived on the opposite end of our street. Erica had reddish hair and freckles. Lots of them. She was good-spirited, but almost always walked around like she had to pee. Erica's backyard contained an aquamarine pool where we spent many summer days, racing on royal blue mats and practicing dolphin dives. One day, her parents asked for Mystery Patrol's expertise. Ali and I slipped on our t-shirts, grabbed my father's old black,

leather briefcase, now full of crime-solving tools—pens, a tape measure, a pink Talkboy voice recorder—and headed down the street.

When we arrived, Erica’s mom gave us the scoop: all their yellow tennis balls were disappearing. They couldn’t find them anywhere. Not in the shed, or the backyard, or by the pool. Not even in the woods that run along the backside of their house, a place full of poison oak and prickly thorns where we aren’t allowed.

Ali and Erica and I collectively scratched our heads. We searched the yard, poking around near the badminton net, pushing away some of their black lab, BooBoo’s, toys. BooBoo! Could it be that easy? We found her, wide-eyed and chewing up a tiny stuffed animal in the living room, and coerced her outside. Erica rolled a ball towards BooBoo, through the browning grass. Each of us, nerves tightly wound like a phone cord, waited to see what she’d do. Then, we watched as she batted the ball underneath the screened-in porch.

All three of us belly-flopped onto our stomachs. It was too dark. Erica got up and ran to get a flashlight. She shone the rays under the planks of the porch and we saw them: a half-dozen yellow balls. We hooted and cheered.

Erica’s dad dragged the tennis balls out, one by one, with the pool net. The three of us retreated to the basketball hoop in Erica’s driveway, cradling the yellow fuzzy spheres. We looked at each other, proud and beaming in this liminal state where answers seemed rare and parents sheltered us from the biggest, most frightening truths. We were detectives, and we suddenly felt like we could tackle anything. And soon, we’d have to do just that: facing loved one’s deaths and other forms of less tangible loss. Friends drifting apart, or moving away. For now, a world of knowledge burst from those yellow orbs in our palms. Life was as simple and easy as solving a mystery with your two best friends, when the culprit was almost always a

family pet. Ali and Erica and took turns bouncing the balls as hard as possible on the dark asphalt and watching them hurtle vertically, swooshing right through that faded red rim, nothing but net, like purposeful shooting stars.

### **The Girls Who Grieved in Bunk Beds**

When I was ten, Mom sat me down in a kitchen chair and said solemnly, “There is a tumor in your friend Gill’s brain.” Muted bells rang in my ears. I didn’t fully understand. Would Gill be okay? Was she in pain? My stomach felt kind of funny, a knotted mess. The kitchen seemed to be spiraling into a surreal, hazy blur.

I nodded my head, and wiped a few fingers against my moist cheeks. I was a quiet and reserved girl, often scared to ask the questions to which I most needed answers. I took deep breaths, exhaling slowly. Then, my parents dropped me off at my best friend Erica’s house and went to the hospital to wait with Gill’s parents.

That night, Erica and I sat for hours on a window seat bench, staring out a large picture window at a pair of dancing porcelain frogs in her green front yard. It was spring. They looked so cheerful and peppy with their long wire legs lifted into high kicks, their Kermit faces twisted into wide smiles. Would I ever feel that sort of happiness again? We sat quietly together. Around Erica, I didn’t have to say a word. She was my closest friend from elementary school. At recess, we conquered the monkey bars, developing tiny raised blood blisters on the palms of our once soft hands. We hunted for crystals in the miniature gravel that dotted the playground. At soccer practice, we slid orange slices over our front teeth and plotted against evil coaches who made us run wind sprints. At home, we built robots out of cardboard boxes. We jumped between blocks of furniture in my living room to escape the vacuum, which we imagined into a dreaded monster. We played pretend basketball games against a fake opponent, the “quackers.” We had wild imaginations. Through our games, I transformed from a shy, often overlooked girl to one with much to offer. I became the best version of myself, comfortable and confident.

Gill did not go to my elementary school. But she went to my camp. For three summers, Mom had sent me to a Jewish sleep-away camp with the daughters of her two childhood best friends. We had grown up together: Steph, who once told me that she liked the smell of gasoline; who taught us to do flips on her parents' mattress; who had the fierce laugh of a hyena; and, Gill—whose name was pronounced like Jill; who was the star of her soccer team with flowing brown locks; who often said, “Come join us, Lyss”—especially at camp where I was shy and intimidated by girls who pretty and popular and athletic. The type of girls I wanted to be, and wanted to be friends with—girls I admired for their tenacity and resented for their effortless extroversion. I could never quite fit in with them. Too quiet and shy and prude, I had little to offer their vivacious personalities. Still, I was wrangled like a horse by Steph and Gill, who always called me over and tried to include me. The other girls humored them—letting me tag along, never teasing me about my awkwardly long khaki shorts, and even in rare moments, looking out for me. We teetered somewhere on a phantom border between sisters and complete strangers.

“We’ve been friends since we were in our moms’ bellies,” Steph and Gill and I always told others. We said we crawled through tunnels to reach each other before we were born. As kids, we made up games at an outdoor pool, Steph and Gill stronger swimmers but sticking by the white lane dividers near the shallow end, never making fun of me for only jumping off the low diving board. We went to the Nickelodeon *All That* Music and More Festival with our moms, who shouted, “Raise the Roof!” and pushed their palms upwards, trying to be cool. We just laughed and plopped into their laps for the rest of the show. We loved our moms and they loved us—the six of us an unusually cheerful little gang.

As I waited with Erica for my parents to return home, Gill's hair was shaved into a new boyish cut. Her head was split open with a surgical knife. The tumor was bleeding into her brain. It needed to be removed immediately. As the surgeons worked, they bumped or shook something in a way that would leave one of Gill's arms shriveled and paralyzed. For the next two years, I'd offer to help her cut up her food in the camp dining hall. Fiercely strong and stubborn, she'd refuse my help. On the softball field, Gill had to change her mitt from one hand to the other to throw back the ball. Her brown locks no longer flowed behind her back but rather were a few inches long, prickly to the touch. A few times, Gill sat in her wooden bunk—a bottom bed because she could no longer climb up to the top ones—and cried to us. "I'm ugly now," she wailed. "What will the boys think?" Before her surgery, Gill had a camp boyfriend named Jason, a boy with dark hair and a goofy smile that radiated from his face. They held hands and she might have even pecked her mouth against his once or twice. Gill had chemotherapy and radiation. She swallowed huge horse pills, shaking her head from side to side to get them to slide down her throat—a habit I picked up from watching her because I had never swallowed a pill before and thought that must just be the only way to do it. Gill's way.

Three years later, during the summer when we were thirteen, things went downhill for Gill. Mom took me to visit, to say goodbye. Gill looked up at me from her bed—a portable twin placed into the downstairs office of her house. It had plastic fitted sheets that squeaked each time she sat up to vomit into one of those small bean-shaped trays. The office was right next to the kitchen, where 10-year-old Gill once sat, eating a turkey dinner, right before her parents rushed her to the emergency room. She never ate turkey again; and, for a while, pretending I didn't like the taste, neither did I.

That summer, Gill's face was pale, hair messy and short, as she whispered, "I love you" to me. I stood close to her side, cold and frightened. Every summer since, I've wished I could remember what I said back, if I even said anything at all.

That summer, we went to the cemetery to bury Gill, where a girl from camp I barely knew sobbed so hard the graves seemed to shake and shiver. She was the same girl who would, ten years later, write Gill's mom a letter about how Gill had made her live more fully and generously. That evening, we gathered for *shiva*—the first phase of Jewish mourning—with Gill's family and all the other camp girls: Steph and Jessie and Julie and Mel. Our parents, too. Everyone was there. We laughed and reminisced about the time Gill broke her nose doing flips on Steph's parents' bed, colliding right into their wooden dresser, staining the carpet a dark cherry red.

Two weeks later, our parents dropped us off at camp.

We were thirteen that summer, bold but still afraid, smudging eyeliner onto our lids and flirting with boys behind the dusty group showers at Camp Young Judaea—the ones with cobwebs in the ceiling corners, the constant fear a daddy long legs might suddenly skydive onto our soapy bare skin. We had mastered the butterfly stroke and could swoosh a lay-up like a pro. It was a thrill—this spending the summer away from home, from our parents—even though we were homesick as hell. That summer, we fell in and out of love and hate and everything in between, the way only thirteen-year-old girls can with each other.

On the first night of camp, the counselors called a bunk meeting and we gathered on the floor in a large circle with the Girls Bunk 6 counselors: Carly and Jamie and two more whose names I forget. Carly was skinny with long straight brown hair and dark arm hair she shaved off

with a razor. When someone asked about it, she snapped, “Don’t bring that up again.” Jamie was plump with soft eyes, a soothing voice; she wore a metal whistle on a string around her neck. Both counselors owned the same red and blue shorts as us campers. Both were juniors in high school.

Steph set a square box of tissues on the floor within our reach for the meeting. The counselors explained how a girl had died. Her name was Gill and she was a camper the past three summers. She had a tumor that one day bled into her brain. She had surgery and chemotherapy for two years. She had every treatment and medicine imaginable until nothing else would work. She lived until her Bat Mitzvah, where she wore a shiny navy blue dress and shawl and held a Torah and said Hebrew prayers and became a Jewish woman—an act many of us were supposed to do that year. The counselors explained how we could talk to them about all this. Then Carly turned to Steph. “Do you have anything you want to add?” she asked. Crinkling a tissue between her fingers, Steph gave a brief speech about how much she missed her best friend.

Next, Carly turned to Jessie and Julie, two girls who knew Gill from school, who played on her soccer team, who were outgoing and popular and made my palms sweat out of nervousness. Jessie was lean and athletic with wavy brown hair, sticking her tongue out to the side like Michael Jordan while pushing a basketball into the hoop. Julie had this soft, tan skin with invisible pores and owned many pairs of cute frilly bras and matching underwear and would, a few years later, be one of the first girls I knew to lose her virginity.

I don’t remember if Jessie or Julie said anything during that bunk meeting. What I do remember is sitting on the fringes of the circle, silent and cross-legged, my body small and hunched over like a rag doll.

That summer, I lounged in my bed and wrote postcards on my personalized rainbow initial stationary or made gimp bracelets and key chains in the afternoons. I shaved my legs on a beach towel on the floor until they were smooth, dipping my razor in a pink shaving cream bottle cap filled with sink water. I made human pyramids in the middle of Girls Area and giggled at male counselors dressed up like women for the camp's twisted version of the Miss America pageant. I sat at the same table for three meals a day and said the Ha-Motzi blessing of the bread, mouthing made-up words because I have a Catholic father and never went to Hebrew School but I didn't want another reason to feel like an outsider. At camp, there were different trays for milk and meat meals to keep kosher. My eyes lit up at the beige ones topped with small cartons of blue skim and red whole milk, which were often a sign of grilled cheese for lunch.

That summer, I learned to kayak and attempted to canoe. Betsy couldn't steer and we wound around the dock and back to the sandy shore yards away from where we launched ourselves into Lake Baboosic. One day, a leech suctioned itself to my right shin and a waterfront counselor had to pour salt on it until it shriveled up and fell into the sand as I shrieked and everyone else on the beach danced around on their tiptoes, antsy from the commotion. That summer, I went on runs up the hill to the director's cabin and down the winding woodsy path near the infirmary, heaving the air from my lungs as if it were a poisonous gas. That summer, I wrote a letter to Mom saying I was having a terrible time at camp and wanted to come home.

That summer, we grew sad only when the sun slowly set behind the lake and no one could see the red puffy half-moons under our eyes. After dark, we retreated to the counselor's alcove—Steph and Jessie and Julie and Mel and me. Mel had short black hair, a deep voice, and was kind to me. We'd sit, three or four or five girls in Carly's bed, talking about Gill. Mel would crack jokes about her ferocious animal laugh, and Julie would chuckle at them with her soft

round face. Jessie and Steph would take turns stroking each other's backs, or occasionally mine, their palms smooth and fingernails prickly against my t-shirt. A moment of remembering, and of the rare but perhaps false bond we all shared—because of Gill.

One night, I heard the counselors come home and “ooh” and “ahh” at us, saying “Look how cute they are!” before poking our shoulders to wake us up. We swayed like delirious zombies back to our beds. Once I dreamt the counselors brought us back a whole pizza in the middle of the night, sneaking it into Girls Area because campers aren't allowed to have food in the bunks. I think it may have been real—not a dream—because that was the summer we became accustomed to special treatment, to people breaking the rules just for us. Plus, in the morning, I could smell the saucy dough, that gooey mozzarella, so hot it might sear the skin off our cheeks.

That summer, other girls and boys whispered about Steph and Jessie and Julie and Mel. Sometimes, they even whispered about me. “Weren't they friends with that girl who died?” they all asked each other. We were near-celebrities, the lucky and unlucky ones. *Gill's friends. Friends of a dead girl. The girls who grieved in bunk beds.*

On Shabbat, the whole camp said prayers for Gill, and for us. We wore khakis and white t-shirts or blouses and black skirts and uncomfortable clog shoes. We got angry at the boys in our age group who didn't stand up beneath the shady trees while a shaggy brown-bearded counselor named Dan played guitar and sang, “lie-lie-lie,” over and over as we held hands in a big circle, right arm crossed over the left. Standing was optional and the boys said they hardly knew Gill. We didn't care. We wanted solidarity with our boys, with Boys Bunk 6. We felt like an ice pick stabbed a cold block and fractured us—the 13-year-old girls and boys—apart.

At the end of each weekly Shabbat service, we twisted our right arms over our heads, spinning 180 degrees until our backs faced the middle of the circle. Then, we released our intertwined fingers and walked away from the grove.

That summer, all the older girls visited Steph in our bunk. They recognized her curly hair and hiccup-like laugh and wanted to make sure she was okay. One night, I heard one of them ask, while pointing to a photo of me, Gill, and Steph on the wall, “Who is that third girl?”

In the photo, the three of us are standing in front of our first summer camp ever. We are tiny frames, three or four years old, wearing thin, patterned cloth, and biting down on one end of yarn used for an art project—probably a kite string. We are each smiling coyly. Steph is in the middle, with her short chubby arms around our necks. Both girls’ curly hair is the same shade of dirty brown, but mine is wispy and straight with streaks of blonde. Still, I sometimes think if you swapped the faces below our messy mops, the photo would hardly change.

“That’s Lyss,” I heard Steph answer the older girl as I eavesdropped from my adjacent bunk, pretending to read. “She’s our *other* best friend.” Steph’s tone was confident and firm, as if our friendship was a given, a simple fact. She said it the same way she had begun to say, “Come join us,” to me on the volleyball court or at Shabbat service—just like Gill had always done.

That summer, Mel and I went into the alcove, where Jessie was crying. “Do you want them to stay?” Steph asked her. Jessie’s face was contorted and wrinkly like an old man’s forehead as she nodded her head no from side to side.

We climbed, arm after arm, leg after leg, into Mel’s top bunk, our eyes puffy and full of confusion. Another girl came over and said, “Why are you guys so upset?” Without much

thought, I shouted back, “Because Gill was our friend, too!” Then, I released an unintentional wail. A raw, aching sound. The noise set off Mel, and the two of us cried for what felt like hours. Until our mouths were dry and our throats tingled like we had just eaten Pop Rocks candy. Because we had finally opened up some sort of grief vent inside our vocal cords and now the sadness would not stop flowing.

Then, we just lay there frozen but breathing, awkwardly twisted in Mel’s bed because our limbs were rapidly outgrowing the frame. We were suddenly tall, suddenly lanky, suddenly too full of too many things we could not understand or explain. Together, Mel and I fell asleep in that top bunk, perpendicular to the pillows, two cold guardrails on either side of us. One rail jabbed into the backs of our necks. But on the other side, just beyond the metal bar, our feet dangled free.

## Inroads

My hometown is shaped like a slanted rectangle, flat bottom and top with frizzy side burns. Look at a map of Sudbury, Massachusetts for several seconds, and the outline of Bart Simpson's head appears. As teenagers, my friends and I drove all over that yellow-skinned, bug-eyed menace, looking for excitement. The roads became our labyrinth. Our cars were always covered in leaves or snow, until sweat stains became normal in the humid summer air.

Driving to Sam's house, where we watched movies in her basement amidst her little brother's action figures, was a piece of cake: Meadowbrook to Peakham to Concord to Pantry to Haynes to Julian's Way. Ali was horrible with directions and would always call us lost in some remote part of town, insisting she'd driven halfway to Boston. To get to Adam's, just backtrack to Haynes then take Marlborough to Mossman to Farm. Or, if feeling ambitious, we could always walk through the woods behind Sam's house, connecting to Adam's backyard, the matted pine needle ground where we'd later smoke things that made us happy and untroubled and high.

We drove until we were tired of driving, then we started walking or biking. A few times, we may have strapped on roller blades that barely fit our feet; mine were black with neon green and purple laces. One summer we biked everywhere, to David's and Nina's and Ali's. I hadn't ridden since I was ten, needed to regain my balance, but David and Erica were there, power walking behind me, keeping my wheels in check, the most loyal of friends.

Sometimes we met at Haskall Soccer Field—right in the center of town, near Atkinson pool—with a ball to kick around. Other times, we sat in a circle or laid our heads in the grass, bugs crawling all up into our hair and onto the napes of our necks even though we didn't know it then, too concerned with high school's philosophical questions: *Was Sam getting back together*

*with her boyfriend? Why were Nina's parents so strict? Would Adam ever keep a girlfriend for more than a month?*

The bravest ones used to steal the street signs with nothing but a wrench, twisting counter-clockwise until the panels came loose. "They stole it for me last night," Julie once bragged, opening her bedroom door to show off the big bold letters now plastered to her wall: *Julie Rd.* This, I thought, was the greatest compliment of all.

It took nine minutes to get from my house to school if I made all the green lights. We were the in-betweeners, not too cool or uncool, simply alive, growing out of our shoes and pants and senses of self. It took fourteen minutes to get to North Sudbury, where most of my friends lived. Luckily, I could be at Erica's house in twenty-five seconds, down in the circle of our road. We lived slightly south of town center, where the biggest news was when a new neighbor painted her house a piercing shade of urine yellow and planted a deer-shaped topiary by the driveway, small beady eyes always watching us from behind driveway potholes.

Once when Erica was upset with her parents, and they rushed off to a family party without her, I walked down to her house and found her sitting outside, face damp as she sat by the aquamarine pool. Her eyes widened to see me, surprised or relieved or just plain confused because I'd showed up uninvited to comfort her. We sat there, on a lawn chair with her, talking for hours, even though it was a family matter and I shouldn't have gotten involved. After all, her parents were like my second mother and father. Erica's mom once stroked my head until I fell asleep in their guest room, feverish during a sleepover. Another time, I sat in their living room, staring out a big picture window at dancing porcelain frogs in the front island of their yard, mourning the loss of my 13-year-old friend. After a few minutes, Erica's dad, a tall man with a round balding head, wrapped me up in his huge bear hug. Most days, Erica felt like my sister,

even though we did not share the same unbreakable bond of blood. I feared what might happen if we ever fought the same way we did with our parents, with the people who we couldn't shake away: our parents, her sisters.

Sometimes, when it rained, Erica and I would call each other and say, "Should we?" We'd both hang up and walk the quarter of a mile, meeting between our houses, hopping from puddle to puddle until the bottoms of our jeans soaked through. We called it puddle jumping, and were probably too old for it, but that didn't matter. Not to us. As the rain made our hair look greasy and dark, we danced there, in the middle of our street, not caring if the cars driving by thought we were nuts.

Sometimes, we drank too much in friend's basements: vodka and orange juice or rum and coke or Keystone Light and Bud Light and Miller Lite—beers followed by a word that implied they had fewer calories, though that's not why we chose them. We didn't drink to fit in; we wanted to feel something, anything, running through us, circulating, circumventing. Sometimes, the girls fell asleep in Sam's bed, huddled for warmth, waking up in a frenzy of craving water and Advil and greasy egg sandwiches with home fries. Mostly we watched movies: *Empire Records* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and *Almost Famous* and *The Ring*. Actually, Julie, Ali, and I hid upstairs during that last one, gossiping because we were too frightened to watch in Sam's dark basement. We quoted those movies until we all knew them by heart, until their jokes became our own, until we became stonemasons of the witty, cinematic one-liner.

On a hot summer day, Erica and I walked to Nina's because we were bored. She lived near the soccer field, about two miles from Meadowbrook. We picked her up, and all three of us walked to Adam's house across town—our sandals flopping against the sidewalk for over an hour, the crackling of pine cones our organic soundtrack. Four miles total, we calculated

afterward, feeling victorious. We'd conquered this town, left our footprints all over it. Irrelevant was the fact that Adam's older sister drove us home, our feet now red and wrecked by blisters because we weren't wearing sneakers to support our flat feet.

Another afternoon, Erica and I walked along the broad curve of Peakham to Ali's because we knew she'd been in a bad fight with her Mom over something trivial. We wanted to be the kind of friends who sided with each other always, even when knew we were wrong.

"What are you girls doing here?" Ali's mother shouted through the car window when she saw us walking down the sidewalk near her house.

"We wanted to see our friend," Erica replied somewhat stubbornly, in a way that made me proud to know her. In a way that made us all seem more like family than teenage friends.

We banded against them: parents, drama queens, bullies, Mr. McCraith and Mr. Brown—teachers who made snide remarks ("Did you even study for this test?") or told you to move down a math level. But then there were the teachers who cared: Mr. Hosford and Mr. Mayer and Ms. Notaro. Sometimes, we met them early at school to talk about Russian Literature and college apps. I never minded going in early. I despised the halls of our high school—their cliques and dirty looks. But those classrooms, smelling of books and chalk and old wood, I adored. It was the same adoration I felt for my friends, a ferocious desire to hold on, hold on, even though we were only fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, and letting go of the rope that bound our little crew would one day be inevitable.

"Here," I yell, as we nearly pass our turn, the road framed by pines and oaks made of something sturdy, something unbreakable, a wood from another world.

Brenton veers radically, twisting the steering wheel until it fights back. The car swings around, nearly jolting us out of our seats. We tighten our leg muscles to hold our ground.

“Take this right and then your first left,” I say.

Directing and guiding is my job when we are here, in my boyfriend’s car, or really anywhere, but he doesn’t know that yet. For now, I am simply the co-pilot of his Acura TL, master of the back road and shortcut, commander of the suburban roads. The problem is this: I’m starting to forget my hometown’s street names.

“A little warning would be nice,” Brenton mumbles.

We drive by another emerald sign. Ahead, the roads coil like harmless garden snakes.

“Uh,” I reply, “you grew up here, too. Why don’t you direct us?”

He is terrible with directions, even worse with names. He didn’t know mine until college, though we grew up three miles apart and attended the same high school; somehow our paths never crossed much until we were twenty-two.

I like that this is our story. I like that now we drive here together, down roads where a Driver’s Ed instructor first said to hold the steering wheel at ten and two. I like that this world is mine, his, ours. Separate, but slowly melding.

Brenton turns to me from the driver’s seat and rolls his eyes, though he quickly transitions into a smile. I place a hand on his leg and let out a chuckle. We are pathetic, meandering the roads like foreigners.

“Let’s just use the GPS next time,” I say, leaning back on the headrest.

Giving directions has never been my forte. Not like Erica, who we called, “The Human GPS.” Her mother used to get in the car, look to her two daughters and say, “Now, get us to the

grocery store ... the elementary school ... the mall ... Sudbury Pizza.” She’d inform them, “I’m not moving until you tell me where to go,” smirking from the front seat. The lesson stuck.

I am no Human GPS. Still, I am frustrated to forget those white block letters on flat green signs, ones I’ve seen so many times, previously memorized. They have names like Meadowbrook and Saddle Ridge and Greystone and Marlboro and Farm and Ruddock and Ford. These names—ones that guide us to my childhood house, or to Brenton’s—tickle my tongue like latte foam. Now I can only recall them with a laptop or map spread out before me, some crumpled mess. Unintentionally, I always ruin maps; I never pay enough attention to my steps to retrace them. I ignore the perpendicular folds, indicators of what once was neat, now made chaotic and crinkled by my own impatience.

I call Mom when I need directions, a hint at the road names.

“You know where it is,” I say to her. “The street Sam lives off ... The one near Julie’s old house ... On the other side of the high school ... Almost in Lincoln ... You know where I mean, right?”

I am helpless, useless, a lost bird flying through unfamiliar territory.

Mom says uh-huh a few times, flipping through her vivid internal atlas. The streets are slick on her lips like the names of close family members.

“Mossman Road? Wayside Inn Road? Hudson Road? Babe Ruth Drive?” she asks.

“That one!” I reply, both relieved and frustrated. I am only twenty-five, my mind still sharp and young. I didn’t plan to forget this place for many years. I lived here through preschool, elementary school, middle school, high school; through rotating friend groups and field hockey tryouts; through piano recitals and birthday parties; through track team hill sprints and late night 7-11 runs; through instant messages and sledding on snow days. One day, when I’m a public

affairs assistant in Washington, D.C., or a copyeditor in Virginia, or, most recently, a graduate student in New Hampshire, I'll wonder if all that was even real.

Though I am forgetting their names, I still know Sudbury's roads. The geography of a hometown is intimate, even when it grows faint, a tiny, toy truck in the rear view mirror. I recall the road's twists and turns as well as the curve of Brenton's back when he's lounging on the couch, sipping a Bud Light (not everything changes ... ). "I think you're my best friend now," I once told him, a little bit surprised, a little bit sad, though not sure why—maybe nostalgic, wondering why friendships change and relationships change us.

I remember the shortcuts to Sam's and David's and Julie's, but I never drive or bike there like I once did. I wouldn't find friends but rather the surprised faces of adults. "Oh. Alyssa?" they'd ask, straining their necks to the side. "What are you doing here?" Behind them the house would be quiet and empty, except, perhaps, for the snarl of a pet dog.

Now if I need a friend I have to calculate airfares, or look up train times, or guess how much gas will cost to drive to New York or Virginia or North Carolina. I have to rely on cell phone towers and text message limits to tell Erica how I tripped and skinned my knee in a grocery store parking lot, and, almost immediately, a young housewife asked if I was okay, her face hardened by a look of pity. "I'm fine," I quickly answered, hobbling to my feet, even though I wasn't. Why was I here, in this small strange town? Where rain made roads the cruelest kind of slippery? Where the streets were strangers, not friends?

Some of us haven't spoken in years. Like David and Julie and Nina. Others haven't spoken in days, maybe hours. Like Erica and Ali and Sam. And still, a few oscillate between those groups, unsure whether to go forward or back. Like Adam, who recently told me ours is an

“adult friendship” because of how little we keep in touch. *Bullshit*, I thought, wishing I could take back those moments at his house: philosophizing around the fire pit, rubbing his golden retriever’s belly until her legs flailed joyfully like octopus tentacles.

One Saturday night in high school we gathered in Ali’s basement. Someone—likely David, our group’s outdoorsman—suggested we go for a walk. It was dark outside and we’d be able to see the sky: navy-blue-to-black backdrop, muted milky band. We were all there, ten or eleven or twelve or thirteen of us. One by one, we crept through the back door and into the yard, wandering around the side of the house and onto the pavement. We ambled down Ali’s street to whatever was out there, whatever was waiting for us. Talking and laughing and shrieking while some of us hushed the others like children, fracturing our larger group into two smaller groups, as had begun to happen sometimes. These ruptures were becoming more common, and they were beginning to worry me. Me, the girl stuck in the past. Me, the girl who never questioned whether our friendships would last until our hair faded to silver and our bodies grew frail. After a short while, a black and white car pulled up beside us with red flashing lights, and its driver slowly rolled down the window and poked out his head. We were teenagers blocking the street, disturbing the peace. A neighbor ratted us out.

“I swear, officer. We just wanted to see the stars,” David pleaded.

“Alright,” the cop replied, though I’m sure he thought we were troublemakers, stoned or drunk and up to no good. Or maybe he saw it in our eyes: we were only teenagers, aching to understand the universe.

“Go on home,” he said gently, turning off his lights.

And we did. Back to Ali's, and then soon, back to our separate houses—our parent's houses—gassing and braking as the pines and maples cast shadowy figures upon our cars, enormous branches suspended overhead as if they were broad arms waiting to reach down, scoop us up, and carry us away.

### Humanized

“We’re all just human beings,” Holly tells me. She’s kneeling on the rug in my sophomore college dorm room, hair blonde like the meat of a ripe white peach. Her pink cheeks seem to pop off her fair, smooth pores. Next to Holly is a forest green hiking pack that’s been crammed full of clothing. She meticulously opens the top flap and takes out a few tank tops, a pair of pants, several bras, and a sweatshirt. She places them one-by-one on my wooden desk chair. The stack looks ready to topple over like a Jenga tower.

“I’ve been reading a book by the Dalai Lama,” Holly says, straightening the pile, “and trying to remember that.” Holly is confident and clever, an enthusiast of Biology, Buddhism, and Literature. This weekend, Holly took a flight from Flagstaff, Arizona, where she attends a big university, to visit me at a tiny liberal arts college in Upstate New York. “I just need a break,” she said on the phone. “To get away for a while.” Since meeting three years ago in Portland, Oregon, we’d visited each other often: I’d gone to her hometown, Salt Lake City, and she’d come to mine, Boston.

She says again, “We’re all just human beings.”

My legs dangle over the bed as I bite my cheeks in toward my molars. I’ve spent the past thirty minutes complaining about my suitemate, Laurie, who is upset because no one wants to live with her next year. I was the messenger who broke the news. For weeks, Laurie and I have brushed our teeth in silence before class.

“It’s not my fault,” I tell Holly. “*No one* wanted to live with her again. She’s crazy. And totally selfish.”

I look to Holly, who is now sprawled out on the floor, and hope for reassurance.

“And there was that time Laurie yelled at me because Shannon was showering when she got back from the gym and *obviously* it was my fault she would be late because I didn’t tell Shannon to let Laurie shower first . . . ”

I spout the words rapidly.

Holly looks up at me from the floor, the lamp radiating off her hair, bouncing off the walls in my tiny room.

“Human,” she says again. “That’s all we can be expected to be.”

Holly and I met four years ago at a creative writing workshop for high school students held at Lewis and Clark University in Portland, Oregon. “Nerd camp,” we lovingly called it. For two weeks we made fun of the hippie girl with tangles of hair to her shins and the shaggy blonde boy from Hawaii who liked to say “gnarly.” We gawked at my snobby, brown-haired roommate with her gold bangles and tight ripped jeans (*Didn’t she realize this was creative writing camp, not a night club?*). We befriended the counselor with ginger hair all down his back who played a “Gaelic Storm” CD during once-a-week field trips to the local Kmart. We weren’t hippies or pretentious artists or free spirits. We were just teenage girls, wanting to get away from home for a few weeks. We deemed ourselves the only normal people at this place—however meaningless that statement was.

At lunch, we joked about the cyber camp kids across the quad. “Want to rearrange my hard drive?” we said seductively to each other, flipping our hair. “Can I play with your floppy disc?” We dared each other to talk to them in the dining hall, knowing the stakes were low; this was a camp for middle schoolers, IT geeks four or five years our junior. *Maybe, I thought, we weren’t so normal after all.*

Holly seemed exotic even though she was blonde, bright-eyed, with creamy white skin. Still, she didn't think about the world the same way as people I knew—at least people back on the East Coast. My hometown friends panicked about getting good grades, worried about getting asked on dates, and bickered with their parents over how late they could stay out. To Holly, the world was trial and error. She'd try anything and mess anything up too; it was all part of the experience. Holly doodled in her notebook all day long, took walks alone, talked back to bullies, and flirted with every boy.

She made out with one on our last day in Portland. He was chubby but endearing with a rose-flushed face. They exchanged phone numbers the next morning and I remember feeling embarrassed and distraught when he was waiting at the same airport gate as me. As we made awkward conversation over bagels, Holly text messaged him feverishly, even though she was *my* closest friend and hadn't spoken a word to this stranger before last night. Plus, Holly was seeing someone back in Salt Lake; his name was Dal; it was pretty serious. I sighed and sipped my latte.

Holly had sex with her boyfriend back home. "When we do it, it's special," she told me. "He always takes me to dinner first." I didn't have a boyfriend. Back then I feared that one would ever want my gangly body, so awkwardly proportioned, too tall and too skinny, without any curves. I was afraid of sex hurting, of how my body would open up to let someone else inside.

Holly's beauty was natural. Her eyes were a big, bold blue. She had just enough curves that the guys liked it, so they could hold onto her as if she was their own. Her hair had silky waves, perfectly separated like fruit wedges. One day, Holly brought a small bottle of curling gel to my room. "This might make your hair less frizzy," she told me. I hoped my cheeks would not

turn red. “Oh, awesome, thanks,” I said, hiding my eyes while I flipped my head over, weaving my locks into a tight bun.

After workshop, we took walks through the campus rose garden, surrounded by buds and blossoms, thorns and leaves. We sat and wrote in our favorite spot on campus. *The grassy knoll* we called it. *Our grassy knoll*.

We laughed our asses off when Holly’s workshop teacher shared a poem she wrote that began, “My vagina is like a red rose.” *My vagina*, we chanted, *is like a wilting flower, a saddened insect, an angry animal*. Back then, the word felt raw on my tongue; it was not one I ever said aloud. But in this foreign land, fifty states away from home, Holly made me brave; Holly made me into someone I was not.

In my college dorm room, Holly stands up and lays a tank top on her torso, gripping the collar beneath her chin and letting the fabric hang down.

“This one?” she asks me.

“Sure,” I say. “Looks great.”

“I just want to get drunk and make out with someone,” Holly says as she wrestles her t-shirt off and maneuvers into the tank. She walks over to my dresser with a tube of eyeliner, positioning herself close to the full-length mirror so her nose nearly touches the glass. She holds very still except for her right hand, drawing dark lines above her lids.

“I don’t know, though,” she adds. “I’m kind of still hung up on Danny.”

I can never keep track of Holly’s boyfriends.

“What happened?” I ask.

“He moved to California to play music.”

Holly sighs loudly and pulls out a container of eye shadow.

“Like, what am I supposed to do?” she continues. “Drop out of college and live with him in his van?”

“Um, please don’t do that,” I reply, twisting my face into a look of disgust.

Suddenly, Holly whips around from the mirror, her face glowing.

“But he amazes me!” she squeals like a child.

In my friend’s dorm room, I watch Holly take double shots until her eyes glaze over as I slowly sip a mixed drink through a plastic straw. My eyes follow her with intention. She poses for photographs with my friends, flashes a peace sign or squeezes her lips tight as if she is kissing someone. When Holly finally looks my way, there is nothing behind her eyes but the buzz of cheap vodka.

At the party, Holly quickly disappears. Minutes later, a friend points to the dance floor where Holly is kissing a tall blonde boy named O’Boyle. Or, as I know him, *the semi-sketchy drug dealer from freshman year*. Someone to avoid.

“It’s fine,” I quickly tell her, though my heart is beating fast. If Holly were anyone else, any other friend or acquaintance, I’d be worried.

“She can fend for herself,” I say aloud, if only to justify it.

A few minutes later, I see Laurie through a crowd of people and avoid eye contact. Suddenly, a friend appears and taps me on the arm.

“Holly’s puking on the stairs,” she says.

In my dorm bathroom, Holly vomits up a big brown liquid that bounces into her hair and sticks to the skin around her lips until they are stained like a *Got Milk?*-ad-gone-wrong. I hold her hair in a ponytail and, with the other hand, rub her back in big round circles.

Laurie's door clicks open from the other side of the bathroom. She peeks her head through to where the stall is and sees me.

"Oh!" Laurie says, startled. "Sorry. Is she okay?"

"Yeah I think so," I reply. "She'll probably be done soon if you need to pee."

I tell Holly it's time for bed, gathering myself up from the stall floor.

"I'll just sleep here," she mumbles, resting her right cheek on the cold, white porcelain.

"There's no reason to sleep on the toilet," I say. "Plus, someone might want to use it."

"Fine, let me just make myself throw up first ..."

"But I think you're done. Let's just go to sleep."

"NO," she yells, suddenly aggressive. "I need to stick my finger down my throat."

"Why would you do that?"

"IT'S FINE," she shouts indignantly. "I DO IT ALL THE TIME."

I wander back to my room, feeling defeated. *Does she mean she does this after every meal?* My eyes start to water until Laurie, who has just heard Holly hollering at me about throw-up, creaks the door open a sliver and asks if she can come in. She gives me a long, tight hug as I snuffle snot back into my throat.

"Thank you," I say.

I take a deep breath and return to the stall.

"Okay, Holly. Now it's really time for bed."

I lift her up and she leans all her weight on me. I bring her to my room and sit her down on the blow-up bed where I hope she will sleep it off.

Holly stands up and takes my towel from the hook on the wall.

“I want to clean up,” she says, stumbling toward the door.

“Now? Let’s do it later. Together.”

I’m tipsy and tired and annoyed.

“No, I want to do it now.”

Without even thinking, I grab the other end of the towel from Holly. Suddenly, we are players in the strangest sort of tug of war. I grip the blue cotton fibers, blood rushing from my fingers and palms and wrists. Finally, I realize the absurdity—*what are we doing?*—and let go. The release in force sends Holly flying back into the leg of my bed. BAM! The sound of her back against the wood makes a large thump.

“Oh my god,” I say. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to ...”

Holly scowls at me from the ground. She says nothing. My face burns. She gets up and goes to the bathroom for a few minutes. When she returns, she flicks the light switch hard and collapses onto the blow up bed. I don’t know what to say either, so I roll over to face the wall and close my eyes.

I wake up to Holly standing over me.

“Please don’t hate me,” she says.

I stretch my arms and legs out into an X, as far as they will take me, and let out a loud groan. I scoot back onto my pillow and sit up to face Holly.

“I could never hate you,” I say. “I’m just worried about you.”

“I know,” she says. “I need to learn my limits. I don’t usually drink that much.”

Holly’s comment about sticking her finger down her throat reverberates through me. I am unsure if I should bring it up. I know she’s had body issues before. But maybe she was just drunk and rambling? Even if I ask what she meant, if she’d been throwing up food, throwing up after meals, I can anticipate her response: “I was just drunk. Don’t read so much into every little thing. I’m *fine*.”

But I can still imagine Holly’s cheeks, pale and icy from their fast-made friendship with the toilet seat. I remember the look in her eyes as she shot back vodka, the glow in them as she spoke about Danny. Holly was always putting on a show, seeking my attention. Releasing the towel, ending our foolish tug of war, was the right thing to do.

*What would the Dalai Lama say?* I want to ask her. But I don’t say anything. Instead, I reach my arms toward Holly, digging my fingers into her back, pulling her in like she’s mine: my pretty porcelain china doll, my Buddhist life coach, my seductress of underage nerds, my brutally honest hair dresser, my instiller of courage. I hold on for several seconds, wondering what will happen when I let go.

### Matrilineage

I am a preteen, dying for a pet rat. A white one with a pink nose. At the pet shop, I meet a Goth girl. Her hair is black, punctuated by one thick magenta streak. She is older, maybe seventeen. She ushers me into the musty store. Her voice is a booming baritone. Her ears are lined with metal spikes and miniature pink balls. I am twelve and afraid of needles. I am painfully shy, but still somehow precocious. Goth girl leads me toward the cages, opens the wire door, and cups a chubby white rat. He is small, and while holding him, Goth girl seems larger, stronger, edgier. The little guy's whole body shakes as I pet his silky fur.

“See,” Goth girl adds, raising her dark penciled-in brows. “They’re great.”

I’m sold. When I ask for one, Mom’s eyes nearly bulge out of their sockets, but she humors me, arranging weekly trips to *Pet World* in Natick, *Especially for Pets* in Sudbury, and *PetSource* in Marlborough. Later, she will argue that she was simply trying to avoid confrontation, to wait it out until my rat lust waned. She was right. One day, I woke up and no longer wanted a rat. I wanted a bunny. Then a guinea pig. Then a hamster.

This is me at twelve: finicky and stubborn. The opposite of my mother, a decisive, gentle woman who continues to reheat a short, delicate teacup of coffee over and over all morning. Mom is petite with dirty brown locks, which look silly if you put them up in a ponytail—like a few loose strands of baby hair. She is kind and quiet to the point of passivity. I have only seen her yell a dozen or so times—mostly at me during a tantrum, and occasionally at Dad for sipping an uncovered hot mug of coffee while driving. My parents are the type of couple who have the same three trivial arguments over and over, arguments that end with one of them laughing hysterically or coyly reaching for the other’s hand.

Around other kids my age, I am quiet like Mom. But around my parents, I am hot-tempered and sharp-tongued. Yelling at them is a rush—one always followed by a post-sugar-high crash, a gushing sea of guilt. But I am still young and naïve and believe my strength is in the volume of my voice. Mom, with all her passive benevolence, is an easy target. We ride together to the pet shop. I sit in the passenger's seat, smirking, giving her a hard time about the softness of her voice. "Ma-om," I say. "I can *not* hear you. Puhh-*lease* talk louder."

I am an only child, and more than a little bit spoiled. I want what I want when I want it. Like a tree house—the kind set into the shoulders of large oaks and pines. I am too stubborn to accept that our backyard does not contain the correct kinds of trees to support our weight, refusing my father's offer to build a backyard playhouse on stilts.

Mom and I arrive at a small pet store in Framingham. I am back to wanting a bunny, or maybe a ferret. My face is pressed against the glass of a large fish tank with neons wiggling around. Puppies yap behind a glass wall. Hamster feet tap in plastic balls, spinning nowhere. The whole store smells rancid of fish and rodent poop. I walk toward Mom who is peering down into a cage filled with gerbils. Their pink noses look wet with dew. My head is still hunched over the cage when I have the sudden feeling that something has happened—something bad. My stomach tightens. The gerbils stop nibbling.

When I look up at Mom, a large bird is perched on her left shoulder. A green parakeet. A Senegal parrot. Or, maybe, an Australian cockatiel. The truth is I am unsure of this unwelcome bird's species. I know only that it is large and bright feathered and has found a new home. Mom's face is completely white, spooked the color of an elephant tusk. Her neck cranes forward.

"Ummm," she says, slowly twisting around toward an employee. "A little help here?"

"Oh! Well, look at that," the lady says, smiling. "Isn't that funny!"

Now, Mom's lips stretch into a frown.

"Don't worry," the lady says calmly. "He'll move in a minute."

"A minute?" Mom chirps back.

A pair of talons digs deep into her shoulder. I stand, helpless and frozen, next to my mother, not saying a word.

One particularly stormy winter, Mom tells her mother, my Nana, she can no longer live alone in her condo, which sits on a large icy lake in mountainous New Hampshire. Mom tells Nana she has to live with us. And so she does. For four months when I am a sophomore in high school, Nana sits on the couch in our family room devouring trashy paperback romance novels. She loves to read and finishes each story in a day or two. Her husband, my Papa, died six years ago, when I was ten. Papa was a loud and gregarious man with many friends. When I picture visiting the lake as a child, it's my grandfather I see: taking me for a swim in my plastic blow-up floaties; walking with me down to a large pointy rock; mixing gin and tonics for my parents; laughing from a deep place in his chest. It wasn't until he was gone that I got to know Nana—not simply because I was older and cared more, but because with him in the room, she sometimes fell into the background, silent and unnoticeable like a brass candlestick. He loved her unconditionally, but his presence was overpowering. What I remember most of Nana was her quietness: bringing a tray of cocktail shrimp over and setting it down on the coffee table; playing card games against Papa and smiling politely when she won. Nana was quiet, but undeniably smart, the family member no one could ever beat at cribbage.

I once asked Mom about her relationship with Nana growing up, and watched curiously as all color abandoned her face. She looked if she were about to divulge a deep, dark family

secret. Instead, she told me that they never fought or bickered or raged at one another. “My relationship with Nana was very different from ours,” she said, ashamed or disappointed that our relationship as I grew up was often fraught with arguments and tears. I blamed myself. And, because of this comment, I always pictured Mom to be the perfect child: her light blonde hair falling onto her preppy cheerleading uniform as she skipped home from school, bright-eyed and merry. At times I’ve resented this girl, thinking her life more perfect than mine, more simple and easy and neatly packaged because she could keep her mouth shut and follow the rules whereas I, as a child, was always throwing fits: crying and kicking on the floor when I was six and seven and eight until my face was so hot and feverish I could barely slam the door behind me. Mom tried to ignore me, but occasionally had to resort to yelling; it was not her first choice parenting method.

Mom is one of four siblings, and from childhood stories they sound like the most beloved kids in town. Her family lived two blocks from Newton South High School, and every day around noon, a crew of motley teenagers walked to Nana and Papa’s for lunch. Nana ushered the kids in like any good wife and mother, making them snacks and sandwiches, a real *Leave it to Beaver’s* June Cleaver. Nana was a soft-spoken woman with sultry strawberry curls and soft tanned skin that, as a girl, I liked to trace, pulling my fingers along her creased cheeks, forehead, and chin. I imagine after dishing out leftovers Nana stood on the kitchen’s perimeter, surrounding her many extended children, watching and smiling with her hands clasped behind her back.

For a whole winter, I arrive home from high school to Nana engrossed in books. I bend down and hug her and then invite her to do activities with me. For a whole winter, Nana becomes my own personal playmate. We run errands at CVS. We go out to late lunches. We play cribbage after dinner. She always wins. I have always longed for a sibling and, in an odd way, my

grandmother is my stand-in much-older sister. Sadly, I don't think she feels the same about me. In our kitchen, Nana stands with her hands on the counter, flashes me a beseeching smile, and begs me to conspire with her, to help her find a way home. "Tell your mother to let me leave," she says. "When can I go home?" "Drive me back now." "Why is she making me stay here?" I am offended as I stand quietly across from her, twisting my lips together in confusion. *Why doesn't Nana want to be with me?* But I do not reply.

Now, at sixteen, I am as quiet as my mother: standing in corners at parties and pretending to look amused by my cell phone; lurking near Mom because I get along better with adults than most other teenagers. I often hate myself because of this. The past summer in our camp yearbook, my quietness became an ironic joke: *Alyssa "Shut Up!" Martino*. At sixteen, I have grown more levelheaded around my parents, more appreciative of the ease I feel around them, and, far more cautious not to scream and throw a fit.

A few years after her stint as our houseguest, Nana checks into an assisted living home. She doesn't want to burden any of her children—all of whom offer their extra rooms. Suddenly, my quiet, passive Nana becomes the star of the home—a bright bulb attracting new companions with her willful glow. One resident, John, falls so in love with her that he begins what can best be described as stalking. He waits for her after meals. He follows her around the home. He constantly calls her name, seeking her attention and approval. One day, Nana has had enough of this shadow. "Please leave me alone!" Nana shouts at John, rushing off to her room. Later that week, he accosts her in the elevator, ramming into her with his walker over and over again. Afterward, she looks so fragile with purple bruises all over her body, and I couldn't help but wonder if her heart now sped up every time she left her room. Nana's skin is thin like paper. Anything remotely sharp can nick right through it. Once, an aunt found blood spilling from

Nana's head; she bumped it and didn't want to tell anyone. She hates being fussed over. She hates for anyone to think she's weak. Maybe when Papa was still around, Nana could afford sitting back and being taken care, but now she is on her own. Stubborn and forceful and strong.

A thick, rectangular magnet with nine cartoon cats is stuck front and center on Mom and Dad's fridge. The background is white. The cats are gold. Under each one is a different adjective: *Happy, Hungry, Angry, Sad, Tired*. Each kitty's facial expression is the same: thin beady eyes; white whiskers; straight and stoic mouth; pink button nose.

I am twenty-two. It's been several years since Nana moved to assisted living. I lift the magnet with my right thumb and index finger and push it up a few centimeters. Under it is a piece of lined paper from one of those cute notepads my mother cannot resist. They have hand-drawn martinis or bright yellow polka dots and phrases like, "Girls' Night Out!" We are not having a girls' night out. Usually, they are scribbled with to-do and grocery lists. Today, this small lined paper contains a list of times and medications: *5:05 AM One Percocet / 8:20 AM Four Ibuprofen / 10:15 AM One Percocet*. The handwriting is my father's, tiny block letters written with a ballpoint pen. This week, he is playing nurse to Mom. Her breast was sliced off and put back together, bad and good cells scooped out and replaced by superior, non-cancerous ones from her stomach.

Mom lies on the couch all day, watching television and nodding in and out of sleep. The cushion behind her is permanently stained. Not from ketchup or mustard or barbecue sauce. This is an ice stain. A blue rectangular ice pack has been slid up against Mom's stomach for so many hours since her mastectomy, melting like summer ice cream, that it has permanently darkened the green microfiber material my parents once picked out in a furniture store.

I am home in Massachusetts to keep Mom company. Last spring, I graduated from college and got a job working on progressive issue campaigns in Washington, D.C. Every day, I take the Metro to a spunky office with a Martin Luther King Jr. mural on the wall—a building I will forever associate with seven excruciating hours staring at a blank computer screen, waiting for medical updates, but also with the call when Dad joyfully shouted, “Her lymph nodes are clear!” I didn’t go home for Mom’s surgery. I was too scared to ask my new boss, a towering man with gray hair and a raspy voice, for a few days off. I was too scared to tell him why I needed to go home, too worried I’d cry in his office, huge tears onto my suit blazer, gobs of snot sliding down my throat. I knew I’d never get the words out. Anyways, my actual fear was of the waiting room. It would make this way too real.

But I am here now. Two weeks after the surgery. Two weeks is not too late. I am guilty for having missed it, but I am here now, and it’s better than never coming home at all. Plus, she is going to be fine. The cancer didn’t spread. That one rotten breast is gone. I go into the living room and curl up on the love seat a few feet away from Mom’s couch. She’s snoring and looks awful, not at all restful or calm. She looks fragile and tired. Her hair is slick like dark oil. She hasn’t washed it in days. Her skin is matted with grease. She’s been wearing the same ratty nightgown for a week. Beneath the fabric, her breasts sag sloppily without an underwire bra.

When she wakes up and groans, “How long did I sleep?” or, “Did I fall asleep again?” her voice is softer than usual. Strained and groggy. Her vocal chords barely squeak. I can barely hear her. She looks so weak.

I bring her juice. I bring her movies. I bring her dinner. Dad brings her a Percocet. She closes her eyes and fades into another deep sleep cycle.

Six months after Mom's mastectomy, Nana is dying in a nursing home bed with lavender-scented lotion rubbed onto her feet. I fly back from D.C. to say goodbye. Nana has developed emphysema from seventy years of smoking cigarettes, but is not terribly ill. She has decided to go off her medications simply because she is lonely and tired of living. At least that is how it seems to me. She is eighty-five. She has lived a good life. We are sad. But no one fights her on this choice. They'd never win.

Mom takes me to lunch before the nursing home. She looks me in the eye from across the table. She tells me about the names Nana has been calling out in bed: her childhood friends, long lost sisters, a random aunt and uncle. The hospice aide tells Mom that in Nana's last few days, she will relive her entire life on a reel: watching old stories play over and over again, a surreal and ultimate cinematic experience. In its first few scenes, the film appears a tragedy. Nana shouts disturbing phrases that leave Mom and her siblings with pits in their stomachs: "Don't go into the light," "Don't make me go," "Help me," "Save me." Nana's death, it seemed, would be anything but peaceful.

We arrive at the nursing home and walk the long white hallway to her room. Nana is laying on her back in a bed, unconscious. I kiss her on the forehead. My hands shake. A few others are here: my father, aunts, uncles, mom's first cousin and her daughter. The room smells of rubbing alcohol and baby powder. Nana always smells of baby powder.

An hour later, we are waiting around impatiently, everyone sullen and silent, when Nana begins to choke as she exhales, her eyelids shimmering and shut. I feel an epiphany slither into my bones: *I am going to see Nana die.* I am terrified. Heart racing. Air is trying to force its way out of her lungs. It's trapped. She is trapped inside her own body. I want to shake her awake. I want to yell, "Don't you want to be with me?" But it's too late. One last gurgle is released from

Nana's thin peach lips and then her body stops this paced rise and fall. Mom collapses to the floor and I flee to Dad's chest. A cousin looks in disbelief. An aunt lets her face fall into her palm. An uncle begins to sob. I turn away from Dad and go to Mom. I wrap my arms around her as she cries.

After Nana's body has been cleared away, we all sit in the room sorting through her belongings and crying sporadically. An uncle says, "People always thought she was so submissive and passive in comparison to Papa. But she was one tough old broad." I think about the fact that Nana is dead. Dead on her own terms. Dead because she wanted to die. One final act of toughness. The opposite of what I once believed Nana to be: another quiet and passive female whose genes were passed to me.

At Thanksgiving, an aunt pulls me aside and asks, "How's your Mom doing?" It's been three years since her mastectomy. All her mammograms and blood tests are clean. And yet, she means Mom's stomach: the place where a surgeon stole healthy cells to rebuild her breast. Her torso never healed correctly. Every night, Dad microwaves a long heating pad for her, and she lies in bed with it against her belly, bouncing molecules beating warm against her scar.

"She's fine," I say. "Tired sometimes. Still sore. But fine."

I think about the email her best friend sent right before the surgery—the one I snooped and found: *You may be quiet and thoughtful but you are not weak and you are definitely more than tough enough to take this on.* I know Mom wonders why she hasn't healed, why her body is failing her. Sometimes, I question if perhaps the doctors messed up, implanting the cancerous cells from her breast into her stomach, instead of the other way around. Could the doctors be *that* dumb? No. But my mind creates these wild scenarios, imagined explanations, because I am

desperate for answers, desperate to blame this condition on something other than genetics. I cannot accuse her body, bones, or cells: that DNA is also mine.

After dinner we gather in the family room on the green couch and love seat. A cousin looks at Mom and says, “Auntie, why do you always wear those yoga pants?” Mom rotates between two pair of black yoga pants. Even on workdays. They look silly. Very unprofessional. Way too tight. If her shirts aren’t long enough—they usually aren’t—her butt is left exposed. It is a bit too droopy to look good in tight black pants. “You always wear those same ones, Auntie,” my teenage cousin repeats. “How come?” My face muscles tighten. Mom is skilled at keeping her pain private, tactful at staying quiet and bottled up. “Oh, I don’t know,” Mom answers. “They’re really comfortable.” I can see her face burn pink with embarrassment. The next week, I take her to the store to try and buy some loose, flowing dresses with no seams near the waist. We pick out several. She returns them a week later without telling me.

Sometimes after a long day of walking—a farmer’s market in the South End of Boston or D.C.’s National Mall—Mom clutches her stomach in a way so painfully reminiscent of those long days on the ice-pack-stained couch that I can only wince and worry and look away. She is sixty. She never complains about her stomach; she just silently holds that spot from a distance, hoping we won’t notice; hoping not to make a big scene; hoping if she’s very quiet, no one will see her. But I do. I always do.

I am twenty-five and living in New England again: back in the land of four distinct seasons, orange leaves and frigid nor’easters; back in my childhood home with the green love seat and polka dotted notepads; back with my quiet mother and the bedroom door I used to slam in her face after throwing a senseless fit. One day, I stop at the drycleaner to get a pair of pants

hemmed. The place is small and kind of dumpy, but Mom takes all her dry-cleaning there. More and more these days, I follow her lead.

A short and rambunctious Asian lady positions me up on a platform in front of a mirror. She holds a flimsy tape measure up against my long legs. She inserts needles into the bottom of the pants and folds the materials up underneath. “How’s the length?” she asks. “Perfect,” I say. She hands me a tiny slip of paper from behind the cash register. “Please write down your first and last name.” I jot it down and slide the note back to her. “Martino?” she says. “Oh! I know your mother. She is a very nice lady. Very, very nice.”

This is what I’ve come to know: quietness is not synonymous with weakness. We are not only soft and submissive, or only loud and strong. We take on different roles during the many acts of our lives. Mom and Nana and I are each many traits braided together in the intricate quilt of our lineage. *The bratty kid, the quiet teen, the perfect cheerleader, the submissive housewife, the stubborn grandmother.* We are trapped only by each other’s expectations. Confined by simplistic perceptions that no longer fit the shapes of our complex, evolving selves. And as we grow, we also become more comfortable with who we are. We also become better at being us.

I smile at the Asian lady who has my pinned pants draped over her arm. Yes. Mom is nice. Nice and kind and thoughtful and quiet and complex and strong. Very strong. She is cancer-free. She runs a foundation that gives grants to the community. She goes on long walks, knowing it will require an extra hour with the heating pad against her abdomen. Occasionally, she even bucks up and wears a pair of high-waist slacks to a board meeting at work.

“Thanks for your help,” I call to the Asian lady as the door swings shut behind me.

Mom may be quiet, but her words beat for me like a soft and steady drum. A heart’s gentle pulse. Never tiring. Never slowing. Her voice is all around me. But her voice is also in

me. Some days, it *is* me. Because it doesn't matter how strong Mom thinks she is: I am the one who will pass her true spirit down to my children. I am the one who will clear my throat and say, *Your grandmother was strong and quiet, just like your great-grandmother. Two tough old broads.* If I have a daughter and she happens to be quiet like us, I will add, over and over and over again, *This is your legacy; you are tough, too.*

## Tunis Eclipsed

The room whistles like an old steam radiator. *Shuuuush!* we whisper to each other. *Shhhhhhh!* we say defiantly, pressing our index fingers against our chapped pink lips. We scoot our chairs to face the podium and a dark-skinned woman in a black blazer and matching suit slacks. She leans toward the microphone and says good afternoon, enunciating slowly in near perfect English: *Welcome to Tunis, the capital of Tunisia.*

The year is 2008. Today's lecture site, once an 18th Century Tunisian ruler's residence and now a restaurant, feels far too majestic for a large group of twenty-year-olds' spring break trip. But this is not your typical ten-day-long party. We are college students on an educational tour organized through our study-abroad program in Rome.

The residence sprouts from the middle of the medina, a huge winding maze where vendors sell spices and scarves. Next door, a tower's spine reaches at least ten stories high, showcasing a simple white arabesque. Outside the market's entrance, large billboards of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali ambush the sky. He is always set against the red Tunisian flag, fixing his cufflinks or waving his right hand, staged with a mischievous smirk.

Gender equality is the topic of the afternoon lecture. The speaker emphasizes progress. As in Tunisia has *progressed* when it comes to women's rights. She might cite women's voting rights, gained in 1959, or that 21 percent of judges and 31 percent of lawyers are female, according to a UNICEF report. Tunisia is, after all, far less strict on women's issues than most neighboring Arab countries.

Around the room, Tunisian men sit, legs crossed, hands in their laps, at separate round tables covered by dark crimson tablecloths. They lean back in their chairs and raise their bushy brows. They whisper across the room in Arabic. They snicker. *How rude*, I think, turning toward

Akram, a Tunisian law student seated across from me. He does not laugh or whisper with the others, never once nods or claps or indicates his feelings on the topic at hand. He simply remains still, frozen and focused on the speech.

When the woman finishes talking, I applaud long and hard, pursing my lips in disapproval, glaring at those interrupting men.

After the lecture, my friends and I wander the medina with Akram, who has—without being asked—taken it upon himself to act as our unofficial guide. He is tall with dark curls of thick hair. A hint of beard buds on his chin. He dresses casually in jeans and a blue collared shirt. His shoulders are broad and his eyes are eager and I sense his desire to befriend us is genuine.

We follow Akram closely like an out-of-place line of marching ants, weaving through stacks of wooden shelves, rows of tables curtained off by patterned textiles. Every crevice brims with clutter. Silver teakettles. Pointy-toed slippers. Yellow and maroon spices. Woven bowls. Leather purses. Marionette dolls. Pashmina scarves. Beaded jewelry. This is sensory overload: a coup of my nostrils, staged by a dozen different spices; vivid oranges and reds, received and sent to the brain; silver and silk, wool and wood, beckoning to be prodded and stroked. Yet I am cautious not to pick up anything I do not want. A girl from our trip was smacked in the head by a vendor when she refused to buy a piece of jewelry she'd been eyeing. The owner cornered her in the back of his shop, swung his hand back and released it with force.

We buy souvenirs or gifts for our family and friends back home. Akram barter for us in Arabic, overriding our attempts to converse in English, or even the broken Italian we have learned this semester. When we reach the end of the medina, Akram suggests we meet him that night for hookah. “The blue mosaic bar,” he says. “You can’t miss it.”

That evening, we arrive on a dimly lit hill: Kyle, Kevin, Bridget, and I. Our cab driver motions for us to hop out, the bar nowhere in sight.

By daylight, I am not afraid of this country. I know that “no” means “yes” if you smile too wide. I never leave my shoulders uncovered. I swim in Tunisia’s cold sea and lay on her bright beaches. I eat blood oranges, never tiring of their juicy sweetness; I consume dates by the handful, spitting seeds into the trash like an old man spews chewing tobacco. I pull my head under the covers of my sleeping bag to shield myself from Saharan insects after we get drunk and sing songs by a wild magenta campfire. I am kind to every Tunisian taxi driver, and they are kind to me in return, saying *grazie*, *shukran*, thank you. Most of them want to talk about Senator Barack Obama: Could he be the next American President? *We like him very much*, each driver says, peering in the rear-view mirror. *We hope he wins*.

My friends and I stop at a small structure, sides covered by blue tiles. Akram is standing on the stairs. “You made it,” he greets. “Come in.”

We follow him inside where the floors are masked by Berber rugs, muted colors in geometric designs that require years to stitch. Woven benches line the walls. The door swings shut. Men stop, turn, and look our way. I scan the room. My friends and I are the only four white people here; Bridget and I are the only two women.

Akram leads us further inside. He sits on a rug, calls over a waiter, and orders in Arabic. The four of us follow his lead, collapsing onto the floor.

“I wanted you to meet my sister,” Akram explains, looking at Bridget and me. “But in Tunisia, Muslim women are not allowed out past a certain hour.”

Politely, I nod my head, thinking about our cab ride here: *Did I see any women on the street? Were they really all inside?*

I consider asking Akram whether this is a government-enforced law, or simply a religious rule among Muslims. Suddenly, I remember what Todd, our ginger-haired professor, said in the airport: “Ben Ali isn’t big on freedoms—press, speech, things like that,” he explained. “If you ask Tunisians what they think of him, you will be putting them in a very difficult position of having to lie.”

Akram leans forward on the rug and asks, “Do you want to know the real reason men laughed during that woman’s lecture today?”

We nod eagerly.

“It’s not true.” He shakes his head. “No advances have been made for women in many, many years.”

Moments later our waiter returns with tropical-flavored shisha and chai tea. He pours us each a shot-glass-sized portion. Akram reaches for the hose of the hookah, inhales, exhales, and passes.

“Can I ask you something?” Kevin says, turning to Akram.

“Of course.”

“What do Tunisians think of Americans? I mean, how do you perceive us?”

Akram presses his lips together.

“Please understand that I am not one of them,” he says, “but most Tunisians hate America.” He sighs. “They hate Americans.”

I look down and fidget with my glass, swirling a small silver spoon, careful not to let it clank against the sides. Kyle catches my eye from across the circle. Beneath his buzzed blonde hair, he looks seasick, as if this bar were suddenly a gyrating boat.

“But why?” Kevin asks, repositioning his dark-framed glasses, bracing himself for a perhaps obvious but still unsettling answer.

“Because of George W. Bush,” Akram says. “They do not like his policies toward the Arab world, and they associate all Americans with the President.”

My body tenses up. *Why is it so difficult to differentiate between a country’s citizens and its leader? Why are so many Americans and Arabs lumping each other into one foggy, indistinguishable mass—a group defined only by its hatred of the other?*

These questions rest on the tip of my tongue, but I cannot force them to take shape on my lips. Not because I am a woman and this is Tunisia and I am supposed to be quiet. But because I am *me*: often timid and paralyzed in the moments when I most need to speak up. In America, I have no curfews, no men chuckling at my equality, no billboards frightening me into silence. But that doesn’t mean I am always brave enough to be heard. My cheeks are suddenly flushed and red. I know the next day my throat will be sore from all the smoke.

After we split the check five ways, Akram walks us outside.

“We will keep in touch,” he says. “Facebook.” Tomorrow morning, we will continue on to visit the Holy Kairouan and then the Sahara Desert, while Akram stays behind in Tunis to attend his law classes.

In the distance I see a tiny yellow speck heading toward us, up the hilly streets, growing life-size. Our cab has returned. We all slide in, and I stare out the window as we twist our way

back to the hotel: past palm trees and Arabic street signs; past boxy white homes filled with women and children and men; and, past the hovering image of Ben Ali—billboards the Tunisian people will soon tear down and plaster over.

A few months later when I receive Akram's Facebook friend request, I am grateful. When he moves to New Delhi, India to work at the Tunisian Embassy, I will read his employment information update. When he marries a woman in a sparkly pink dress, I will see photos of him dressed in a white robe with thin stripes down the front.

And, years later, when Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution unfolds, Akram will post a Facebook status in Arabic. Immediately, I will copy and paste those words into Google translator and hit return, anxiously awaiting the results:

*I love you people.*

I will read this post of support from Akram, wondering what this revolution means for Tunisian rights—especially what it means for women. I will watch the videos of bright orange fire in the streets and protestors with large posters. Will all this lead to true progress? Or will it simply mean more chaos? More strict laws? More hate?

For now, all I can do is lean my chin on the window and look up at Ben Ali—his devilish grin against the flag's cherry red. The car tires spin against the pavement, propelling us forward, and, in a split second, the billboard disappears behind our cab and there is only blank night sky ahead.

## Vacancies

Dad sits at his wooden worktable, screwing open a tube of acrylic red paint, the basement a dim gray all around him. His back, which he sometimes throws out carrying a big blue tarp full of orange leaves to the woods behind our house, is arched. His tanned Italian skin is rough; the beard and mustache Mom made him shave a couple years ago have since given way to grayish stubble. Red spots mark the side of his forehead where he once had a skin cancer scare, likely induced by one too many summers spent on the Jersey Shore, cleaning the beach and carrying cinder blocks to build a now-shabby hotel, its bar frequented by MTV's *The Jersey Shore* castmates.

In the basement, Dad's elbow knocks into a white ping-pong ball with a dark pupil, blue iris, and squiggly bloodshot lines. It rolls off the splintery wooden surface and parachutes onto a maroon rug caked with dust. Our basement is filled with ping-pong eyeballs. Dozens of them. They peek out of old desk drawers and TV cabinets. They sometimes get batted around like toys by Izzy, our calico cat, her litter box situated next to a big black furnace that heats our house. They disappear under boxes of my old high school binders or trash bags filled with ratty t-shirts only to be found months, sometimes years, later.

"I want to be the Halloween version of *this*," Dad once said as we drove through a nearby neighborhood, an infamous metropolis of Christmas lights.

"How do the neighbors fall asleep?" I asked, squinting at a large flashing Santa with arms curled around the chimney bricks.

Dad squirts the paint out onto a paper plate and dabs a thin brush into it three times. He picks up a plastic eyeball with his left thumb and index finger. With each small stroke, he darkens the red wavy lines on the plastic eyes for dramatic effect. Each year, those ping-pong

balls get slid into eye sockets or glued onto heads that transform our yard for several weeks each October. (Then again, last year Dad forgot about the red bulbs near the front door, and I noticed them flashing a saturated crimson in mid-July.) In the past several years, Dad's taken to inviting over friends to eat pretzel-shaped fingers and gawk at his decorations. This Halloween is no different—except he is also turning sixty, and Mom as ordered a big orange cake with a skeleton in a tuxedo, the words “Aged to Perfection,” inscribed in black frosting.

Up the basement stairs in our family room are ordinary things: a light green love seat and couch, a mantel filled with photographs of honeymoons and proms and bus stops. Wooden cat figurines have been placed atop each doorframe so their tails hang down over the corners. Artwork is meticulously arranged on each wall, portraits of green pears and sheet music and the abstract purple sky streaked an enlightened yellow. The paintings are those my parents bought in Boston's South End art galleries or at local craft shows or else ones inherited when people died—people like Mom's mother, Nana, who took her last breath in a nursing home hospital bed two springs ago. My parents flew me home to Massachusetts from Washington, D.C., to say goodbye, but no one expected her to die two hours later, me by her side. *I wasn't supposed to be here*, was all I could think afterward, envisioning Nana's body: those weak eyes, that sheer skin.

For the next five months, my face was always red and damp: on the way to work, to my apartment, to the grocery store. When one friend asked, “Do you just ... *miss* her?” as if it wasn't enough, I quickly realized *no*; that wasn't it. I felt haunted by death's image, by my grandmother's shutting eyelids, by seeing my mother lose her mother. I was preoccupied by the realization that I, too, would one day sit at a dying parent's bedside.

In the next room over—the kitchen—Mom has placed three cans of artichoke hearts, a jar of mayonnaise, a container of sour cream, and bag of shredded mozzarella cheese on the table:

the beginnings of my favorite dip. She spoons the fatty goo together into a large mixing bowl as I look away to keep from gagging. Mom's hair is thin, a Bambi-brown. She's barefoot and, at five foot four, petite like a wooden figurine sketching model—not tall and gangly like me, the composite of her and my six-foot, coarse-haired father.

“You don't want to help?” Mom asks.

“You know the ingredients gross me out,” I say.

“But you eat them together when they're cooked.”

“I know,” I reply. “That's different.”

She keeps stirring with a wooden spoon, with the same circular arm motions required to win a competitive breaststroke heat. Every once in a while, Mom stops, places a hand on her stomach where the cells were stolen to rebuild the breast she lost to cancer; two years into remission and Dad still has to microwave the heating pad for her each night. Mom takes the Pyrex dish of soon-to-be delicious white sludge and places it in the toaster oven, turning the heat up to 350 degrees.

Dad walks by us with a tape measure, heading to the front yard, to his prized possession: the graveyard. Dad spent the majority of the past year building a new fence. Its gothic-style pointy spears are packed as precariously as a game of pick-up sticks. Inside it are two crosses stained a dark brown, with black rope tied where the two wooden pieces meet. Between those graves stands, a bit taller, one gray Styrofoam cross, which Dad chiseled out of a larger block during his grave-building phase. I endured this period through much of high school as his outwardly skeptical but secretly enthusiastic assistant. Even as a teenager, I couldn't deny my delight in his hobby. “Thanks so much, kiddo,” he'd always say, after I neglected a lab report or Russian Lit paper to stamp bloody handprints all over a tombstone.

While we worked, Dad told me stories: how he once sank in quick sand searching for his golf ball or had his car stolen from a gas station but then found it around the corner without a stereo. Dad loves to exaggerate. He lives for his audience's reaction. His favorite trick is the "fake fall," in which he leans onto the balls of his feet, gradually tumbling forward like a domino block until I flinch. During this game, Dad keeps a very straight face, a mechanical stoicism, but immediately smiles when I back away. Lately, Mom has started cracking down whenever he falls toward her: "Please don't do that ever again," she says, a serious glare on her face.

On the right side of the yard is a smaller grave made of grittier Styrofoam. It reads, "Ezekial Aikle / Age 102 / The Good Die Young." The letters are black, carved back into the foam with a knife and then filled with the darkest paint. Close to Ezekial's plot is a grave to which Dad has molded a tiny skeleton head. Mom and I rolled our eyes when he first read it to us: "Here lies the remains of Ned / Who's rumored to be undead / He rises at night it's said / To try to find his head." The skeleton's eyes are large and hollow, no ping-pong pupils.

In the front left of the yard is Elvis. The letters RIP are carved, along with, "Elvis / Jan. 8, 1935 / Aug. 16, 1977 / Get over it." And don't forget Euell, located just behind The King: "Euell Gibbons / Ate Healthy / Died Anyway." Dad tried to explain the comedy of this to me several times. "He was a real health food nut," he'd exclaim. "Get it?" I was about fifteen years old and suddenly realizing the morbidity of it all—of pretending to bury dead people in our yard, of writing these wacky epitaphs. I knew a few people who died—a childhood friend with a brain tumor, my grandfather of cancer—but never talked to anyone about that grief.

Smack in the middle of the graveyard is a stone taller and wider than the rest. Dad plastered a mask like the face in Edvard Munch's *The Scream* on top, its mouth stretched out into a holler, loud and terrified. One word is carved into the foam with care: "Vacancy."

Today's graveyard contains none of the stones I once printed with fake blood. Instead its graves are those built to replace those that were cruelly wrecked. In 9<sup>th</sup> grade, I came home to find Dad's tombstones uprooted and smashed into pieces. Our pumpkins were taken from the front stoop and thrown against the brick walkway, chucked until they exploded into small orange shards. The debris was everywhere and Dad spent that night clearing it and salvaging what he could. His head hung low as he swept the walkway with an old broom. The next day, Dad returned to his worktable, chiseling and painting new graves while I did my math homework next to him.

Since that incident, there's been at least one notable addition to the yard: Gus the gravedigger. Gus is an automated man Dad built in our basement. He has a wrinkly face with bold brows and deep cavities for his brown eyes. In actuality, Gus was born from a mask purchased at a Halloween superstore, whose mouth is turned downward in a frown. The manikin's body is clad in a red and black plaid shirt and hooded blue sweatshirt (just in case he gets cold). The hood is used to hide Gus's bald rubbery head. The last outfit layer is an outdated jean jacket. Concealing his hands are durable garden gloves. In his left hand is a lantern. Black boots protect Gus's nonexistent feet; his legs are sad little stubs without his leather shoes. A shovel, wooden and long, leans against his chest. On Halloween eve, Dad plugs Gus into the cord that runs all the way back by extension, about 60 feet, to an outlet in our garage. Then Gus's head begins to twitch in unassuming patterns, back and forth, as if he is searching for something but doesn't know what.

Gus is not Dad's first foray into building these automatons. His original success is Guy, a man in an orange jump suit and electric chair with wires hooked up to his poor deflated head. He

too is meant to move, to jerk and jump. Dad used to place him by the garage window so kids wandering up the walkway for candy would see. When they passed, Dad had it rigged so Guy writhed up and down as if being electrocuted while a CD of screams played from our stereo.

A year or two after our graves were smashed Mom arrived home from work to a trail of blood. It dotted the white kitchen table, lined the white tile floor, and climaxed with a pool of burgundy in the kitchen sink.

“Rich?” she began calling out. “Rich?”

His car was in the garage, and his cell phone was on the counter. She hurried from room to room, searching for her husband. Was he in the bathroom? The basement? The shed?

The halls were empty and cold. The kitchen was spotless except for those puddles of red.

She started calling local hospitals, one by one, her fingers shaking. Between dials, the phone began to trill.

“Rich?” she picked up.

He was at the emergency room.

“I called 911,” he explained. “I cut my wrist while trying to carve a damn skeleton ...”

Mom exhaled, gripping around the spiral phone cord, fingers weaving through the negative space.

“At least the blood on the skeleton will be authentic,” Dad later told me, his lower arm stitched up beneath several layers of tape and gauze.

A couple weeks before the Halloween party when Dad turns 60, I agree to help set up the yard. It’s an especially fall-like Thursday, the pines and oaks swaying above like free-spirited red and orange arms. Dad asks me to follow him to the shed, and I do. He squeezes inside and

navigates so far into the small wooden house that I can hardly see him anymore. I move away, wondering why I am here, what help can I be if only one person can fit inside, crowded by plastic people and creatures. Dad maneuvers his way out of the door, carrying a large silver cage in which a skeleton hangs, covered in rags and brown leaves.

I back up onto the grass and wait for him to bring the decoration over to me. Dad breathes hard as he carries him, walking steadily until his foot collides with a root in the ground and, suddenly, the cage, the skeleton, my father, are all falling forward toward me: not fake, *let's-make-my-family-flinch* falling, but real *gravity's-got-me-now* falling. One by one, the cage, the skeleton, and Dad face plant into the matted brown earth.

“Dad,” I call out, running to him. “Are you okay?”

I hunch down on the ground to where he is wincing, face scrunched in pain. He doesn't stir, just clenches his jaw even tighter and lets out a brief bellow.

“OWW.”

For a minute I am worried he cannot move, that he will be paralyzed.

Imprinted in my memory is a slideshow of every time I've watched someone take a bad fall. First: Nana reaching for a glass on the top shelf of our kitchen cabinet as her knees surrendered. Second: an elderly woman collapsing while at dinner with her young family. (Afterwards, I locked eyes with Mom, knowing she too was thinking about Nana's fall in our kitchen, about children watching their parents grow old and weak.) And third: Dad breaking a dining room chair on Christmas Eve and colliding into the windowsill, fracturing one of his ribs. Afterward, he made a joke—something like, “Guess I should start up my diet again”—but I could see he was in pain.

The look on his face now—shriveled and agonizing—reminds me of that night.

“What happened?” he asks me, disoriented.

“You fell,” I say, reaching down to him, placing a hand on his back. “I think you tripped on a root. Or maybe those spider webs. Or the bottom of the cage.”

“ACCKK,” he groans, hobbling to his feet in slow motion. Dad holds onto his hip, where the bone has been replaced by metal that sets off every airport security device.

I pick up the skeleton and hold it steady and away.

“Is it broken?” he asks, nodding to the caged bones.

I lift the skeleton a bit higher off the ground. It’s heavy, and I have to summon all my arm strength to make it budge.

“He looks okay,” I reply, surveying the damage. “Maybe a bit crooked.”

“Okay,” Dad says, clutching his back. “Good.”

He limps forward to me and takes the cage with his right hand, grabbing onto his spine with his left.

“I think I may have fractured another rib,” he says.

In the evening I whisper to Mom about Dad’s fall, not wanting to embarrass him.

“He’s overdoing it,” she says. “He always overdoes it. It is *just* Halloween.”

The next day, Dad falls again. This time, down the neighbors’ basement stairs, while trying to carry a large box of decorations.

When I see Dad after his most recent fall, a big purple bruise blotches his forehead. His eyes are puffy around the sockets.

“Maybe this is a sign you should dress up as a zombie for Halloween,” I suggest.

Cars are finally lining up outside for this year's Halloween party. The air is cold, the first bitter day of the year. Nothing can compare to last Halloween when it snowed, a freak October blizzard, light fluffy flakes onto the tip-top of each grave. The wind's weight pushed Gus forward so he looked like he was diving deep into the white Earth.

Tonight, friends and family are all here to see our yard. Dad has the lights rigged so they flick on and off with the sounds of thunder, mimicking the epiphanies of lightning. From afar, our house is bright and bold, but inside, it's the same old paintings, same tired wallpaper, and the occasional rubber spider nestled atop a painting frame or television stand.

Dad suggests we follow him outside with a few guests to see the lights. I grab a coat and make my way down the driveway, toward the unmistakable reds and blues. Dad begins explaining how each motor works, the erratic *Feng Shui* of grave placement. As he motions, his body is a dark silhouette on the brilliant landscape, his own man-made city of lights.

Mom and I stand silently beside him, our breaths smoky and silver in the cold. I wonder how many more graves Dad will build before his hands are too arthritic, before his back gives out, before all these jokes about death lose their humor. My eyes wander from plot to plot, searching those stones for answers, each eclipsed with fog or webbed in white, masked by the humor we hide behind.

### Free Falling Soldier

Ben slips out the sliding door to my balcony. His calloused hands grip two glasses filled with equal parts Newcastle beer and Woodchuck cider. I balance a plate of Brie and butterfly crackers on my right palm and follow him outside. Across from my fifteenth floor apartment is an office building. Its dark tinted windows reflect and warp us into different shapes: Ben, short and stout like a coffee mug, and me, curvy and complicated like a candlestick.

I set the plate down on a small black end table, glancing at Ben. The pale skin on his face is now freckled. A fresh buzz cut seems to push his ears forward so they stick out more than usual. His feet inhabit clunky but durable brown boots that look as if they could use a good scrub in the sink. Ben hands me my drink then takes a few large gulps of his own. I watch his Adam's apple bob in and out like a buoy at sea.

We sit down on two tiny lime green patio seats. Our silence is obvious as we sip and spread cheese, but whether there's nothing to say, or far too much, I do not know. Ben has been like an older brother to me since his mom dated my uncle, and we unofficially adopted him into our family. He is someone I could only ever love platonically, a very dear friend, yet today I find myself wanting to please him like a husband, to prove I've matured in the last two years since we last saw one another.

Ben doesn't mention Afghanistan, the country he returned from last week. When it's briefly brought up, he chokes out only one descriptor: "tribal." I imagine him chanting alone in the mirror. *The people were tribal, the culture was tribal, it was all very tribal.* He is nothing like how I remember him—comforting, wholesome, and wise. His voice is monotone, recounting how he tore his ACL in Haiti playing football with some buddies. When Ben pours another drink, his movements are robotic, as if someone fused a flagpole to his spine.

Ben stands up and tips his nose over the balcony ledge, balancing on his combat toes.

“Don’t freak out at this question,” he says, ankles stretched, rising out of his shoes. “But do you ever wonder what it’d be like to just – ” his voice slows “ – jump?”

I cock my head and stare at him.

“Or not to jump, but to fall all that way?”

I, too, am now perched on my toes, peering down to the pavement, to the sea foam pool, to the inertia of the world below.

What about his next tour? Ben may return with far worse injuries than a torn ligament. Like our high-school class clown, he may not come home at all. I think about what I’d do: hang a yellow ribbon on my balcony—right near the plant Mom sent when I graduated college and moved 400 miles from home. I suddenly have the urge to toss it over the edge, to let those roots feel no weight but their own as they tumble to the earth.

I don’t really think Ben’s going to jump. Not now, not here. But his question leaves me unsettled. I think of the newspaper headlines, the rising soldier suicide rate, what horrific things he might have witnessed abroad.

And so I’ll lie, reassuring him it’s fine, it’s normal, if only to curb his plan to free fall straight back to Kandahar or Kabul.

“Sure,” I tell Ben, faking a smile. “I’ve thought about falling. We all have.”

## Garden of Bronze

Dad pulls up along the curb at Sharon Memorial Park, and Mom slowly unbuckles her seatbelt. From the backseat, I follow their lead, opening my door. Green lawn sprawls to our left. Azales, rhododendrons and fruit trees are tightly packed in every direction. The soft pink sun radiates through their branches. Huge boulders, flown in from Israel's Negev and Sinai regions, dot the land. The terrain encompasses an asphalt labyrinth, ten miles of winding road. The cemetery is divided into sections, each named after a biblical or historical reference: *Beersheeba*, *Sea of Galilee*, *Star of David*, *Massadah*.

The three of us walk towards a small oval sign: "Mt. Zion," where the rest of our family has gathered. In Jerusalem, Mt. Zion is a hill outside the old city, once a fortress and no-man's land between Israel and Jordan, home to sites like King David's Tomb and the Room of the Last Supper. At Sharon Memorial Park in Sharon, Massachusetts, Mt. Zion is a place to remember Marcelle and Leo Saltzberg, my Nana and Papa. I imagine the sepia photograph now hung on my apartment wall. Nana's wispy red hair and delicate smile. Papa's army uniform, his tough façade, gentle heart. I stop and stare into their eyes at least once a week. I wonder if they are together again in Heaven, even though I don't really believe in any place like that. Instead, I like to picture them off sitting in their dining room together, playing gin rummy. Nana puts down her cards to answer the telephone, saying "Haaaalooo" in that drawn-out way for which my cousins and I always teased her. Papa hums that one song he always did as he turns over a pair of Jacks. Sometimes, I think I hear him, like a phantom, a faint melody I can't quite recreate from memory.

*Kavod Ha-met*: honoring the dead. That is why we are here. Beneath the grassy topcoat, this doughy earth, are my grandparents' bodies.

This afternoon is Nana's grave unveiling. Jewish mourning traditions exist to help the living process their grief. My unconventional family—a clan who once celebrated Hanukkah three months late due to scheduling conflicts—follows only *some* of the rules. Typically, close relatives sit *shiva* for seven days after a loss, hunkering down in one home and receiving visitors—a sort of post-funeral wake. *Shloshim*, the second phase of mourning, lasts for thirty days and permits family members to leave their house while abstaining from social events or festivities. Both are a way to slowly ease mourners back into their daily routines. My family is usually too busy to observe *shiva* and *shloshim*, but we always gather to unveil the grave—a tradition that can occur anytime after *shloshim* ends. Most mourners, including us, prefer to wait one year.

I've always thought this is bullshit. Why the torture? Why re-inflict this sense of grief a whole year later, just as they are beginning to move on and process? One year after Nana's funeral, I have finally stopped crying at red lights. I still haven't deleted Nana's cell phone number from my contacts. I am starting to let go, however, and this unveiling is like a big, bleak reminder of great loss. Here, I'm not ready yet to let go. I'm not ready to admit my grandmother's body is beneath this Earth, rather than behind the steering wheel, driving over some curb or some flowerbed, or backing up into a shopping cart, like I've seen her to do so many times before.

But this is the tradition, and I'm getting a little pissed about it. Sometimes, I'd rather forget. I'd rather move on. I dread these unveilings, even though I should value them. What I should do is say, "Oh, isn't this nice. Nana is remembered, even now, even today, a year after her death." Instead, all I can think, as we crowd around her grave, is this: "I want to go home."

I huddle with my parents under a small white tent. Aunt Frances' cane leans precariously against her chair leg. Dad reaches his arm around Mom, cousins hang their heads and pat their lips together, aunts and uncles stand shoulder to shoulder, and I dab my eyes with a tissue. Fabric is rolled away to reveal Nana's grave, which rests on the same rectangular bronze plaque as Papa's. This is not your typical upright headstone.

Sharon Memorial, modeled after Forest Lawn, an innovative memorial park in southern California, uses sculpted bronze markers, flat and flush against the ground, to designate each grave. Sharon Memorial's founders believed this setup would make the grounds easier to maintain. But on the philosophical side, they also believed that humans come into, and go out of, this world as equals. In traditional cemeteries, money can buy a bigger headstone. Inside Sharon's gates, no competing stones rise from the ground. The flat markers, coupled with the Sharon Memorial's careful maintenance and isolated setting create a sort of park-like experience for visitors. Not necessarily better than traditional cemeteries—just different.

Two years after Nana's unveiling, I now sit in the park's administrative building lobby, flipping through a brochure. I'm not sure why I'm here, twenty-four and returned to a place that only makes me feel uncomfortable, edgy, anxious. I do not feel peaceful here; I feel shaky. I do not feel glad my grandparents are buried in Mt. Zion; I feel angry they are not in their little condo on Lake Winnepesaukee, right across from Mt. Washington. On clear days, Papa's eyes would light up and he would point through the clouds and say, "See it? See the Mount?"

But I am here anyways. I am trying to understand this place where Nana and Papa will remain in the ground indefinitely. For whatever reason, I needed to come back, to return, to revisit these emotions I shunned at the unveiling. *Grief be gone*, my body hummed that day. Two

years later, my heart still aches. And I want—no, need—to let go. Nana and Papa are here: under dirt and orange leaves, spring grass, crisp white snow. It's a strange place. A cemetery with modern amenities. The administrative building dons pink, blue, and purple stained glass windows.

The cemetery's history is equally riveting as its future. Sharon Memorial Park's 330-acre plot of land was sold to a group of Jewish businessmen—mainly bankers and financiers—in 1947. Early Rabbinic literature cites constructing a cemetery as one of the most important activities of any new Jewish community. World War II was over and Jews were beginning to shed the fear of European Nazism and reclaim space for their people. The businessmen had recently decided to build a modern Jewish cemetery in the Greater Boston Area. Coincidentally, the cemetery was founded in 1948, the same year the state of Israel was officially formed.

A small-framed woman leads me up a set of stairs and introduces me to Fred Lappin, CEO and President of Knollwood Memorial Cemetery. Fred shakes my hand; his grip is firm and deliberate. The same shade of silver masks his scalp and chin. Fred's office is large and justifiably cluttered, brimming with stacks of paper, magazines, and folders. Fred fiddles with the window shades, continually asking if the glare bothers me, apologizing for the mess. In addition to his responsibilities here at Sharon Memorial, Fred is very involved in the ICCFA: The International Cemetery, Cremation, and Funeral Association.

Most individuals choose a cemetery based on two primary factors: location and where their family members are buried. Sharon serves locations as far as fifty miles away, ranging from the North Shore of Boston to Worcester, Mass. to Providence, Rhode Island. Occupied plots number 37,500; another 30,000 graves have been sold but are currently unoccupied; and, 4,500 remain unsold and available. With its undeveloped acres, the park expects to supply burials for

the next 100 years. The park also has funds set aside to maintain the grounds once they fill up—something required by law of all Massachusetts cemeteries.

Fred hands me a bottle of water and explains that Sharon is a pioneer in pre-need planning for funerals and burials. “At a time of loss, the last thing you want to do is make those decisions,” he says.

Fred may understand this fact more than others. Two years ago his sister, Laura, became very ill and began planning what would happen when she died. Extremely claustrophobic, Laura believed her body would be “eaten by bugs and worms,” if buried. Instead, she told her family she wanted to be cremated.

Cremation has been, in recent years, the largest downward influence on Knollwood Cemetery Corporation, which includes both Sharon Memorial and its non-denominational neighbor, Knollwood Memorial. In the United States, forty percent of the population opts to be cremated. That number is closely mirrored by Massachusetts’ cremation statistics. Still, less than ten percent of Jews select cremation.

Many people believe cemeteries—regardless of religious affiliation or mission—are a waste of space. And in terms of economic return, these critics may be right.

“Is a cemetery the highest and best use of the land?” Fred asks. “No.”

He looks me in the eye and shakes his head. “But it’s an important use. It provides a place for people to remember and memorialize their loved ones.”

Laura discussed options with her family and came up with a solution: cremation *and* adjacent plots for her and her husband. Some of her ashes were scattered in a grave at Sharon Memorial. Fred now visits his sister often. Occasionally, he even talks to her.

“I’m waiting for the day she talks back,” he says with a slight laugh.

I wander back into Mt. Zion—a place I haven't been since Nana's unveiling two years ago. My feet shuffle anxiously; I am cautious not to step on any graves. I reach Nana and Papa and crouch down. Leaves envelop the bronze. I brush them off with my fingers. The memorial reads "SALTZBERG" in large letters. On the left: Marcelle Saltzberg, Oct. 9, 1924-Apr. 24, 2010. On the right: Leo Saltzberg, Sept. 21, 1923-Aug. 2, 1997.

In more traditional cemeteries, headstones are customized to capture the essence of the individual buried beneath them. Congregation Ahavath Torah's Rabbi Jonathan Hausman conducted the burials and unveilings for both Nana and Papa. He recited Psalms and the Mourner's *Kaddish*. He comforted my uncle with an encouraging but forceful pat on the shoulder. Many members of his temple are buried here in Sharon. In a recent telephone conversation, Rabbi Hausman told me he'd prefer to be buried somewhere other than Sharon Memorial. His voice was loud like a clanging bell. It's complete personal preference, he explained, but he'd like an upright stone, an epitaph underscoring his key qualities. He wants to take his children to the cemetery and show them their grandparents' graves. He wants to point at the words on these stones and say: *These are the virtues you, too, should uphold*. One day, Rabbi Hausman hopes his kids will say the same sentence while pointing at his headstone.

There are no epitaphs here at Sharon Memorial. But there are still virtues. Plenty of them. As many as there are graves. Each bronze marker represents a story, a link to the past. This small patch of land roots my entire childhood: cuddling up to Papa on the couch; watching Nana bake noodle pudding; waving to them from the dock at their lake-side condo; and rearranging the magnets on their fridge like puzzle pieces. My memories are jogged by the park's expansive land, crisp air, sturdy trees, large boulders, and budding azaleas.

One year before Nana's unveiling, at her burial, our family engaged in another Jewish ritual: the ultimate *mitzvah*, a moral deed done out of religious duty. Mom and her three siblings each pushed a metal shovel into a mound of dirt, pivoted and released the soil into Nana's grave. As the brown earth fell, I fidgeted my fingers together and eventually threw them in my coat pockets. Particles trickled onto the casket, marking the sound of grief and closure.

"People think cemeteries are for the dead, but in reality, they're for the living," Fred told me when we first met. *Nihum Avelin*: comforting the mourners. These customs seem torturous, but perhaps our ancestors were onto something. These rituals are helping us heal, helping us let go. They're teaching us to trust that by instilling our grief with routine, we can ease ourselves back into daily ways of life that now feel tedious or faraway.

Traditionally to conclude a Jewish burial, relatives and friends form two lines. The deceased's closest family members walk through the procession. I followed closely behind Mom and Dad, not far from my three uncles, a few aunts, and my cousins. We headed back to our separate cars and Dad maneuvered the key into the ignition, exiting the park's gate and eventually merging back onto the highway, a swift, unyielding route back to our chaotic world.

## Unsynchronized

Soggy belongings are scattered in Uncle Rob's backyard. Record rainfall has flooded the basement of his Massachusetts home. Mom worries about her brother. She says Uncle Rob will have to move, not predicting that, in the end, it will be easier to pack than remain in this ghost town—the house where Aunt Marilyn died yesterday, cancerous cells eventually spreading from her breast to her bones and blood. Mom is concerned about Uncle Rob's two kids, my cousins: Will they be upset to lose their things? Will they miss the videos of high school musicals—*Little Shop of Horrors* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Will they mourn the easy bake oven and Nerf water guns that haven't seen daylight in years?

I used to play with those toys. My parents would drop me off when I was in elementary school so my older cousins could look after me. Dan, then a gangly teenage science nerd, would pat the top of my head twice and say, "Hi, Lyss." I'd run right past him and hang from the neck of his younger sister, Steph, petting her silky brown hair and velvety skin, wishing we were sisters, and that I wasn't an only child. We'd escape to her room just the two of us and play with dolls or games now relished to the basement. When Mom let me sleep over, Steph and I coordinated gymnastics routines beneath the sheets of her trundle bed, laying on our backs, frantically bending our knees and doing scissor kicks as we hummed Ace of Base songs. During summer vacations, we moved our routines to Lake Winnepesaukee: performing clumsy handstands and synchronized dolphin dives, raising our arms to the sky like Olympians.

My uncle and cousins have emptied their basement, unloaded this ruined past in the backyard. Old IRS documents are baking beneath the mild sun. Next to them are several boxes of old school binders. Uncle Rob hopes they will dry here, outside in the March air.

“Hey,” he says softly as Mom and I turn the corner into the backyard. His voice is low and monotone, his shoulders slumped, his hair thinning to expose the raw, pasty skin on his head. He looks like he hasn’t slept in days. Below his eyes there is a small row of bruise-like lines.

Steph emerges from the door to the basement, carrying a box of crusty papers.

“Hi,” she says, placing the box on the grass.

Mom looks at her brother and niece, and then to the backyard turned junkyard. The last time we stood here was for Steph’s wedding last August, and I remember how frail Aunt Marilyn looked in her pink floor-length dress, how fragile and white.

“Well, at least you can salvage most of it,” Mom says.

“Yeah,” Steph says, her eyes tired and red. “I think we can.”

“I’m so sorry,” she adds, clutching her stomach—the place where doctors carved out some cells to reconstruct her own breast, just two years before. Two women, two breast cancers, two remissions, two recurrences. One family. *My family.*

Mom steps forward and wraps her arms around Steph.

“Wanna go inside?” Steph asks. “It’s too morbid out here.”

We assemble chairs in a circle in the family room. The space is a dim brown box of raggedy couches and chairs, the walls made of dark wooden beam. A big picture window behind the couch displays the front lawn; it’s the only green not masked by objects. It is quiet and surreal inside, as if the walls are a vortex or we are all spinning in our seats. I cannot think straight. My cheeks burn from all the bodies in the room: Uncle Rob and his three siblings and their families. Steph and I sit in chairs on either side of the end table where Aunt Marilyn kept the Sunday *Times* crossword. Now that we’re in our twenties, Steph and I occasionally get a few clues right. We both cross our legs and pull the sleeves of our sweaters over our fingers. Every

once in a while, Dan, who is sitting near the TV, comments on the Red Sox or the weather, and I almost forget why we are there.

Amidst a long silence, Uncle Rob lets out a sudden wail. His is a sound I have not heard in a long time: aching and angry. My head drops, and my arms and legs won't budge. I am frozen in time and space. Mom gets up and moves to the couch beside her brother, places her right hand on his knee, and says quietly, "I know ... "

My parents and I sit in a row of chairs, crumpling and kneading tissues in our fingers, a way to feel productive at the wake. I am sandwiched between them, my guards from each angle: Dad, strong and tall and hardworking, and Mom, tiny and quiet and good-hearted. I tap my feet on the rug, shaking in my black tights. I try to think of other things: a recent job offer, Passover Seder, vacation to Florida. It's no use: I am here. Aunt Marilyn is not. This is real.

Uncle Rob calls to Mom every few minutes.

"These were Marilyn's chemo nurses. The ones I told you about," he says, Mom already reaching her hand forward to thank them.

Another woman approaches Uncle Rob and says, "Marilyn was my son's 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. He wanted to come say goodbye." A shy 11-year-old grasps her hand; he gives Uncle Rob a picture drawn with colored pencils. From my chair several feet away, I can only decipher its rough outline; I'm not close enough to fully understand.

My head and neck refuse to rotate to the left, a rebellion of the body. There, Steph and Dan stand with their knuckles pressed together behind their backs, greeting friends and family who tell old stories until faces become bleary and damp. If I look at my cousins, I will surely break down or run from the room distraught, causing a scene. It's not *my* mother who passed

away; she's standing here next to me, back from her chat with the chemo nurses, rummaging in her purse for another pack of tissues. I turn to Mom—her hair the same shade of golden brown as Steph's, silky and straight unlike my ferocious curls. I notice Mom's skin growing thin like paper, creased from nearly sixty years of sunlight and worry and age.

“Want one?” she asks, holding a Kleenex out for me.

The next afternoon, we are restoration experts, preservation specialists. The coffee table is covered in old photographs—ones that need tending and a hard, flat surface on which they can dry. Dan is sitting on the couch across from me, sorting the images into piles: pictures of siblings; pictures of vacations; pictures of weddings; pictures of grandparents; pictures of the lake where we did underwater handstands; pictures of young Uncle Rob in a simple, sepia-toned world. A world where your basement doesn't overflow with cold teal water the same week your wife dies.

Steph doesn't come downstairs to help us revive the photos. She stays in her room. As a kid, Steph collected the fortunes from Chinese restaurant cookies, hoarding them in her jacket pockets after dinner. “I want to cover my ceiling with them,” she once told me. I imagine her sitting on the old trundle bed, shoebox in her lap, reading through fortunes to see which came true.

Aunt Marilyn's older sister comes to sit in the living room with us. She says something like, “*How* will I ever go on without my dear, dear sister?” Her hair is white and bobbed; her face round and smooth and freckled with faint brown dots; her body broad like a drag queen or football player. She talks only in an abrasive, bellowing tone. “She's just not helpful,” Mom told me at the wake. “She makes everything about her.” I try to nod and half-smile at Dan's aunt but

what I really want is for him to be left in peace. Today, his pain is equivalent to anyone's in this damn sinking house. As we sit here sorting, my cousinly promise is this: to hold back my grief to make room for Dan's.

Mom comes to join us in the living room. She holds her abdomen with both hands, collapsing into a large leather armchair. I think about our chronology; in June, the phone call about Aunt Marilyn's recurrence; in August, the phone call about Mom's. And then, Mom's mastectomy, her remission. Aunt Marilyn's gradual decline.

Steph appears in the doorway near the stairs. I quickly turn to her, an unmediated impulse. My chest tightens when our eyes meet, the uneasy recognition of our mirror image stories. I have no shattered pieces to sweep up, no basement in disarray, no table of sodden, discolored photographs.

*I have a loving, living mother, I think to myself. I have survivor's daughter's guilt.*

Uncle Rob is preparing to give his speech. He's holding note cards and his hands shake so it's noticeable—at least if you watch him like I do: until my eyes water or I must look away. He's wearing a dark suit with a blue collared shirt underneath. Hot air steams the room from vents along the rug. Behind my uncle is a big brown coffin and dozens of flowers in blues, pinks, and lavenders. The curtains on the windows have been drawn open, letting in streams of white light.

Uncle Rob looks down at his notes, takes a deep breath, exhales hard, and says, "I married a woman with the same name as my sister."

His mouth creeps into a slight smile.

“On my wedding day, I looked first to my wife and then to my sister. ‘Hi, Marilyn Saltzberg,’ I said to one. ‘Hi, Marilyn Saltzberg,’ I said to the other.”

A few people laugh.

“I remember it vividly,” Uncle Rob adds, looking directly to his close friends and family in the rows before him.

“I wouldn’t have made it through these past few months without my sister.”

My cheeks feel flushed and hot, unprepared to hear my mother’s name, to see her positioned so close to death, to realize these words could easily be eulogizing her.

“*My Marilyn was an amazing wife, mother, and teacher,*” Uncle Rob says, tightening his lips. “But it’s time to lay her to rest.”

He walks toward the chairs, past his children in the front row, to Mom. She stands up, climbs halfway over my legs in the aisle, and embraces him. I am trapped between siblings leaning over me. On the best days, I tell myself Mom’s cancer wouldn’t dare come back a third time. On the worst days, I wonder if I already know the cause of her future death.

As we’re about to leave for the cemetery, I look back into the funeral room, at the coffin that will soon be lifted up and slid into a hearse. Steph is staring toward the casket, her face stoic and pale except for under her eyes where the skin is pink and puffy. The room is empty except for Steph and her husband, David. His face is round—he is always smiling and cheerful—but today his chin never lifts off his neck.

Steph walks toward the coffin. She kneels in front of it, shuts her eyes, fuses her palms together to pray or else speak to her dead mother—I cannot be sure. I stand by the door, spine stick straight. I am the only person who sees her: my childhood shadow, a motherless daughter,

the last funeral lingerer. David joins his wife, positions his body alongside hers: shins flat against the ground, thighs perpendicular, emulating her curves, her pain.

Suddenly Mom taps me on the back from the foyer and holds out my black pea coat. She stretches the sleeves out, gripping at the collar. I push my right arm in first, nodding at Mom as I twist to shove my left arm through. When I spin around to face the room, Steph's moment is finished, her body again upright. My bones are locked into place as I stand there, uncertain where to go. Steph is slouching, her back and shoulders no longer poised and sturdy as when we pranced and dived as kids. She backs up from the coffin, turns around, moves away, moves forward, toward me, though I know our distance is growing not shrinking. It is not something calculable, not a distance we can swim or somersault or fill with fortune cookies, tiptoeing along them like stepping stones, playing make-believe until we reach one another again. Cousins, and sisters, synchronized again in some parallel universe we'll never know.

I follow Mom outside where it's raining big succulent drops. They plummet onto my hair and forehead, nose and cheeks. The clouds have decided to open up, to torrentially mobilize. All I want is to stand here still, until my coat and shoes are drenched and I am shivering, until I can pinpoint such complex discomfort and pain. Next to me, Mom pushes open a large black umbrella. "Let's go," she says, huddled under the flimsy fabric. I feel the rain hit my skin and imagine the dark line of that glassy liquid creeping higher against Uncle Rob's basement walls.

## Fear and Vending

On a muggy July evening in South Los Angeles, Janet Favela stands at the front of a dimly lit room. A loose black tee, translucent with stripes, hangs just below her curvy hips. As she fiddles with her laptop, Favela appears serious, hunched over a glowing screen. But then she looks up, scanning the dozen faces quietly waiting for her instructions, and smiles from behind her dark-rimmed glasses, soft dark curls, and creamy olive skin. Suddenly, Favela's rigidity seems to melt away like that pesky last patch of ice in early spring.

At 6 p.m., the humidity is oppressive. South Main Street is lined with litter and boxy buildings, their windows barred by metal in this low-income neighborhood. Inside the offices of community-based initiative TRUST South LA, a half dozen bicycles linger in a far corner. The floor is dotted by a rainbow of tiny dried gum. Two rickety fans provide the only reprieve for the dozen men and women braving the heat to meet with Favela tonight. Outside the building, a mural reads, "LEGALIZE STREET VENDING!"

"Listo?" Favela asks, scanning the room. Ready?

An estimated 50,000 street vendors pack the sidewalks of Los Angeles, but all of them are, by law, criminals. Walk down South Alvarado Street and you'll see a man pulling a cart loaded with plastic cones of yellow popcorn. Not far from Grand Park, a young woman with choppy black hair slices up watermelon, pineapple, honeydew, cucumber, and cantaloupe, and then, with a sweep of a shimmering knife, pushes the wedges into a plastic to-go box. At an intersection in Boyle Heights, two women hang clothing off the ends of a sharp wire fence.

LA has 3.5 million immigrants, and its population is 48.3 percent Latino. Many of these men and women turn to street vending—primarily because of the low start-up costs and skill

levels needed—for livelihood, earning as much as \$10,000 per year. But these tens of thousands of vendors work outside the formal economy. According to Section 42 of the city’s municipal code, “No person ... shall on any sidewalk or street offer for sale ... any goods, wares or merchandise which the public may purchase at any time.” Among the city’s top ten largest cities, LA is the only one to outlaw street vending. As urbanites across the country enjoy the cheap pleasures of street food, the vendors of Los Angeles are forced to operate in the shadows.

Favela is leading the charge to change LA’s vending law. At 32, she carries herself with poise, although her tireless passion exudes a sort of youthfulness. Speaking with a gentle urgency, Favela’s good intentions seem written into her big brown eyes, even when her tone flips to stern. She is the main community organizer—and, until recently, the only full-time organizer—devoted to this cause. Her employer, the East LA Community Corporation (ELACC), funds most of the LA street vendor campaign, she explains. There’s not enough money or resources. “It’s only me,” she says, noting that other non-profits, like the Leadership Urban Renewal Network and the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, support the campaign but don’t have enough resources to employ full-time activists like Favela.

Because the campaign needs more voices in order to be heard, Favela spends time out on the streets, recruiting vendors to the cause and talking with them about their day-to-day experiences. She holds weekly meetings in neighborhoods with large immigrant populations like South LA and Boyle Heights and attends town halls, neighborhood council meetings, and local rallies. Most of all, she talks to vendors about what they want from a new vending law. “We’re pushing for a policy that comes from vendors,” she says.

Favela has worked as a full-time employee for ELACC since 2007, but her passion for helping low-income communities—and street vendors in particular—extends far beyond the past

several years. When Favela was a girl, her father was laid off after working at a factory for fifteen years. He didn't vend on a regular basis, but there were two periods where he did take to the streets to get by: when Favela was a young child, and then again in her early teens. "I grew up helping him sell watermelons. He drove his truck to Bakersfield and we hit the street. Those are the things people do in order to make their families survive and, ideally, thrive." Favela says her parents helped support her higher education; she graduated from University of California-Davis in 2005 with a degree in History and Chicana Studies.

But why now? Why has the outcry to legalize vending finally reached its boiling point? Maybe it's because the unemployment rate in Los Angeles County is alarmingly high—as of Aug. 2014, 8.1 percent. That's higher than California as a state (7.4 percent), and higher than New York City (7.7 percent). The Chief Legislative Analyst's office recently reported that street vending has spiked since the 2007 economic crisis. Vendors also appear to be more diverse, including laid-off professionals, single moms, and war veterans as well as more twenty and thirty-somethings.

Tonight, Favela is meeting with a workgroup of local vendors. They're forming a strategy and discussing the hurdles they'll need to overcome, which are plentiful. Opponents to the campaign have reasonable and valid concerns, worrying about litter, public health, gangs, crime, and an already tight state budget.

This battle won't be an easy one.

Now isn't the time to sit patiently and wait for change. The campaign has gained some momentum over the past year. In November 2013, two members of the LA City Council—Jose Huizar and Curren Price—introduced a motion to legalize street vending. They asked the

Economic Development Committee to review it and report back in ninety days. Favela says that timeline was pushed back until May 2014. Then, on May 13, 2014, Councilmember Price—also the committee chair—postponed the review another ninety days, saying more information was needed. That date has since come and gone. (Most recently on December 2, 2014, the committee met again to review the vending proposal, ultimately sending it back to the Chief Legislative Analyst and delaying any formal decision.) Even after it's reviewed, the vending proposal will need a majority vote—both from the Economic Development Committee and then again from the whole City Council—to become a law.

Favela has been crucial in shaping the proposal because of her intimacy with the local vendor community. Each vendor has a story, and Favela has collected hundreds of them. She knows a man in his sixties who was hospitalized for two months and then immediately back out on the street, selling his goods. “But I need to work,” he told Favela. He hadn't fully recovered, so a few young men in the neighborhood began helping him out, carrying his supplies. “He's so fucking resilient,” she says.

But Favela is also familiar with vendors like Doña Lina, a woman whose husband passed away, sending her into a deep depression. “Street vending got her out of it,” Favela explains. But each time Doña Lina's coolers are taken away, she falls into another short period of angst. She knows a vendor whose young daughter wets her pants even when they are selling—legally—at a farmer's market because she associates vending with fear, the police, and a sad necessity: having to pack up and flee. Favela also knows a female vendor who was harassed by the police. In front of a large crowd, an officer yelled out that she had AIDS—a lie—just to embarrass her and force her to leave.

One of tonight's meeting attendees, an African American vendor named TJ with a dark patchy beard, says he's never been threatened or chased out by the police. "Your average police officer doesn't have time to bother a street vendor," TJ says. "Cars are being stolen, drugs are being sold, some child is being kidnapped. They don't have time to go harass someone trying to take care of families."

Yet Favela says harassment or arrest is a reality for many vendors, and the police have various attitudes—some lenient, some harsh—toward vendors. Either way, it seems the LAPD doesn't always enforce vending laws. Three officers recently testified to the city council that the issue is a lack of resources. Still, between July 2013 and March 2014, 286 citations were given out to street vendors, each of which could result in up to \$1,000 fines or possibly jail time. The department also reported approximately 2,000 arrests of street vendors since 2012. Even though the risk of fine or arrest is fairly rare, it's still real.

One hundred years ago, vendors didn't have to worry about the police. Back then, vending was legal in LA, and foot peddlers could pay a fee to sell merchandise from a stand or the sidewalk. The prohibition of street vending began in 1930, when the city banned vending on sidewalks downtown and in major business areas. In 1974, the LA city council approved a ban on all vending, which the mayor then vetoed, saying, "I believe we need to encourage, not discourage, the creation of new small-business enterprises ..." By 1980, the city finally got its way, banning all citywide street vending. Janet believes the decision was rooted in anti-vendor sentiments beginning in the '70s. By 1980, a spike in Central American immigrants also led to more street vending, and the associated competition they posed to small businesses. Since then, a few attempts have been made to change this law, but none have stuck.

Maybe that's because not everyone is as passionate about street vending as Favela. Jessica Lall, Executive Director of the South Park Business Improvement District—a nonprofit group that advocates on behalf of the area's property holders—believes legal street vending is a bad idea. “We all know the city is pretty tight on resources. We haven't really seen anything in terms of how much it would cost,” she says. “Thinking [the budget for enforcement] is just going to come from permit costs, without seeing an economic analysis, seems naive. And assuming vendors are going to register and pay taxes without strict enforcement is probably unlikely.” The city administrator is currently drawing up a plan to estimate these numbers, but back in 1992, a report said that additional funding—used to pay city employees to regulate and enforce a citywide street vending program—would cost \$1.1 million for just six months. More than twenty years later, the funding needed is likely much greater.

Lall isn't just worried about money, though. She's worried about poorly prepared food that could get people sick; trash and litter attracting vermin; and, small business owners who put their whole life savings into the city's expensive process of getting alcohol and dining permits. “It's not just the issue of the carts,” Lall explains. “It's the safety issues—people getting sick from the food, disposing of the food in alleys. Food will attract vermin.”

Robert Frommer, who works for the Institute for Justice's National Street Vending Initiative, says the point of the law is not to protect certain businesses over others. “The government's role is supposed to be protecting public health and safety,” he says. “Most of the time, the criticism about vending, when you peel everything away, comes down to protectionism. ‘I have a brick and mortar restaurant,’ or ‘I'm a florist,’ and ‘How dare you let these people come out and sell flowers on Mother's Day or hot dogs on the corner?’”

But there's another challenge: even local vendors can be skeptical about joining the campaign. Worried about plain-clothes cops, many vendors often don't feel comfortable giving out their name or information, or will give out fake information. Plus, those vendors who do commit to the movement can be hard to track down. Many don't have cell phones or have prepaid disposable phones. They don't have a permanent office space; their location changes each day. "We're working with a population where we lose phone numbers and access," Favela says. As a result, the campaign faces a real challenge in garnering more support. Not just from vendors, but from all stakeholders.

Favela furrows her brow and says, "We've been pushing your rights, but now it's up to you to push the movement as a group." Its nearing 8 p.m., and the bikes now look like shadowy limbs. Dusk—or the heat—has left attendees seeming sleepy and fatigued.

Not Favela. She's still all pep and energy. But now, there is something raw in her tone. "I'm gonna put a little more pressure on you," she adds, peering around the room. "It's easy to show up for the meeting." She writes some statistics on a pad set atop a large easel:

2,500 petition signatures  
 400 residents organized  
 300 vendors organized  
 600 small business owners engaged  
 300 letters sent to city council  
 Met with 12 city council offices

"What do you think we need to pass this law?" Favela asks. "Do you think something is missing?"

No one stirs.

"We have people, but do you think we have *enough* people?" Favela asks.

A quiet older man in a white tee—Julio—finally speaks up: "We need 20,000 vendors."

The room is still sweltering. A few folks get up to refill their Dixie cups with ice water.

“How do we recruit more people?” says Favela.

“In the streets!” a woman replies.

“We can hand out fliers,” says a dark-haired woman named Marina.

“Going door to door is too much work,” another attendee chimes in, exasperated.

“What about clients?” one man asks. “They support us by buying stuff.”

Favela says this is what organizing is all about: relationship-building. “We believe as organizers that everybody can be a leader. It’s really about getting to know people and understand people—the stuff they’re naturally good at it and then the stuff they need to grow—and then pushing them.” She admits it isn’t always a seamless process. “Sometimes [vendors] are like ‘Oh, I’m only representing myself because I’ve always had to take care of myself on the streets.’ It’s very important to create unity and sometimes in a chaotic environment. My personality can feel a little silly, but we have to have serious moments where we get down to work. This is a large movement. All of us rise or all of us fall.”

A man named Hugo with ballooning arm muscles under his collared shirt says, “I think you have to show urgency and passion.”

“You have to *show* that passion,” Favela says. “Tell them, ‘We’re gonna win.’”

The air outside is finally beginning to cool beneath a bruised sky.

“The ordinance is one thing but it isn’t everything,” Favela confesses. “This is just a tool we’re trying to use in order to fight for vendor rights to survival. It’s not ok to crush small entrepreneurs.”

## The Flats

He takes me to see the flats. It's high tide when we arrive. And dark. Almost midnight. Our car tires crunch over tiny shards of beach shell as we make our way up the white driveway. We grab our bags and he unlocks the front door, careful not to wake his parents. He points to a photo collage in the hallway: him in a baby carrier surrounded by 2x4s and dirt. Twenty-five years ago, his father held him close to his chest as he rubbed brown soil between his fingers. His parents built from the land up, a home in the soft skin of Cape Cod's arm, a town of fried fish shacks and tourists in gingham and stripes. There in Cape Cod Bay he learned to swim and sail and water-ski. He worked as a deckhand on *The Dawn T* during college summers. He gillnetted and gutted codfish. He ate snickers bars for dinner. He obeyed every order until his knuckles bled. And he became the hardest worker I've ever known. The kind who can fix any cable box and scrub any pot spotless and won't ever give up on his girlfriend, even when she briefly considers giving up on him.

He takes me on a quick tour of the kitchen and living room, one big open space: past a table with red chairs and pillows printed with pink, blue, and yellow sailboats; past the regal mahogany desk that once belonged to his grandfather; past vases full of sea glass his mother collects from the beach; and, past a tall, black telescope magnifying the opposite shoreline. We step out onto the deck that hugs the back of the house and venture down a long, winding path, a poison ivy obstacle course, with only his phone to light the way. We kick off our shoes as we arrive at the sand, grainy and cold. He takes my hand and says confidently, "Come on," leading me to the cold blue liquid. There are rocks. And crabs. But he does not tell me about them yet. I can't see his face but I know he must be smiling: the water is home. Then he guides me back a ways and gathers brush from the steep banks behind us. He takes his lighter out and flicks the

wheel near the twigs so they begin to burn. I stop worrying about how many packs he smokes a day, buzzed by the heat and light. Ginger hair and freckled cheeks lit by the flames, he crouches down, inhales, and blows—as hard as possible. For a moment, it looks like he’s breathing an inferno into the landscape. The fire expands, slowly at first, but then quickly, high off his oxygen. The gnats dissipate, no longer trying to bite us, as he grabs two beers from a big blue cooler.

Suddenly, there are screams from out in the water. Not fearful screams but joyful ones. Female voices that are high-pitched and ecstatic to feel the icy sea. “I think I know those people. My friend’s mom and aunt,” he says. On his own private beach it feels like everyone knows everyone—even when they don’t at all. “I used to have dinner at their house when I couldn’t be home,” he will tell me. “They used to say, ‘Your family dinners aren’t much like this, huh?’” And I knew he meant that they talked, they laughed, they ate, and squeezed out of life a sense of normal he never had. Before I can say anything, he disappears into the black night to find the yelping women while I sip my beer and breathe the ocean air deep into my nostrils and lungs.

In the morning we go fishing out of Chatham, drive halfway to Nantucket during low tide and return to the water already rising. A sliver of beach is all that’s in sight. He points to the tip-top of several big rocks and says, “Look there. Some years those are entirely underwater. Others they are ten-feet tall.” We bring towels down to sit on. We walk up to our waists and, when we are brave, dip our heads under to taste the salt. “Don’t go near those,” he tells me, touching my arm. Swarms of black beetle-like insects have plastered themselves to two sailboats a few arm’s lengths away. “Boat bugs.” We swim back a little and plant our feet again in the sand.

The water is shallow and clear. “Don’t panic,” he says, “but there’s a crab right near your foot.” I steadily move back, cling onto him, and begin to tread water. “They pinch hard. Even I scream like a girl.” I give a playful splash. We are tired and it’s time to go in before our hands prune and wrinkle. I want to come back when the tides have changed, so we can walk out into the flats for miles, so we can see what’s below and ahead without the mystery of this murky turquoise water.

He points to a big clock hung firmly next to his mantle, to the left of the fireplace where we’ll later build warmth into a weekend of winter air. There are four panels on the clock: one to measure the wind, the time, the temperature, and the tide. “It works just like a normal clock,” he explains. We’re sitting on the couch in his living room, rubbing our bare feet on a navy blue rug printed with white anchors. His right hand is on my left leg and my left hand is on top of his.

With his help, I am starting to understand the flats, and their rarity in Brewster. Here, they are dramatic, gasp-worthy. The tides pull our oceans toward them, creating bulges. On one side of the Earth, water is pulled away from the land twice a day during low tide. The sun accounts for about 44 percent of this pull, while the moon—due to proximity—accounts for 56 percent of the tidal changes.

A thousand years ago there was no one word for the tides. People referred to ‘flód’—flood or high tide—and “ebba”—ebb or low tide. By the early 1430s, Middle English speakers instead began calling them simply tides, which was defined, literally, as “time”—the moments when the oceans are pulled away. Over the next hundred years, the word “tide” came to be associated with the actual movement and motion of the water. Sometimes, the word is still loosely tied to the notion of time: *Yuletide*, *eventide*, good *tidings*.

I can see how language transforms over time but it's difficult to grasp the concept of such massive change right in front of us, on the shore. What's so interesting about the Bay is its shallowness. When the water is pulled away during high tide, more sand is visible than on the other sides of the Cape, in the Atlantic or even the Nantucket Sound. Since the dip of the coast is less dramatic here, strips or "flats" of sand appear when the water vanishes. "The view is always changing. New rivers, new pools," he tells me. We stare out the sliding doors to the deck. "See where the water looks darker? That's because of the wind, which creates ripples. My pops can look at those dark patches and estimate how many miles per hour the wind is blowing at—because he's sailed so much." His eyes widen and droop every time he mentions his father.

I ask him more questions because I want to hear the sound of his voice, so serious and wise. He is no longer my equal. He is my teacher, my guide. We have different brains: his concerned with numbers and strategy and mine always with language and emotion. I like to pretend objects break when they are sad or angry. "My lap top won't turn on," I sometimes complain. "It's upset because I left it in the car all day."

What I can understand is the only constant is change. Because I do not yet believe there can be permanence in a non-blood relationship. Because I do not yet know what it means to accept someone else's baggage, to make their history an inherent part of yours, to reckon with the dark impressions and craters that cannot be controlled. I want to be reliable and sturdy like an anchor. Yet I fear I am wobbly, unstable like the waves.

This weekend I need to tighten every muscle in my body so nothing can weaken us. It is the first time I have met his parents in the one-and-a-half years we've dated. Six months into our relationship, I began to whine: "I know you aren't close with them, but when can we meet?"

That was before he explained, “It’s my decision.” Before I believed it when he said it had nothing to do with me and everything to do with them.

Back at the house, his mom is laying on a lawn chair on the deck, white metal and blue wicker that overlooks the ocean. Her body is fragile like a child but her voice is raspy. She’s only five feet tall but envelops any space she enters. Sometimes when she talks, she stops mid-sentence, confused about what she means. “Do you remember that time we went to ... oh,” she says to us at dinner. She often finishes her train of thought with words like, “oh” or “right” or “wait,” incessantly frazzled.

His dad makes a joke about chopping down the big bold trees that block the view from the deck. “I can’t, though. The conservation commission would come after me,” he adds. “But if a big storm hit and they came down ... I wouldn’t complain.” He smiles at me, but there is something worn and tired behind his eyes. Later he will pull me aside and say, “We are so glad you came. We are *so* excited about you,” which will surprise me. When we leave the Cape, his father will hug me hard and long. I am the first girl ever brought here—that much I know.

“I want to walk the flats today,” I remind him.

“We will,” he says.

By now I’ve seen low tide from the deck. I’ve seen the water creep out into the Bay so pods of sand break through the surface. I’ve seen the Earth change in what felt to be a matter of minutes. I’ve seen everything look different than it had before. “It feels like we’re on an alien planet,” I say, giddy. In reality, the difference between the water at approximately 1 AM and 1 PM is only the way daylight and moonlight reflect off its concave blue shell. In the morning we’d be up to our hips in water and after lunch we’d be pointing to tadpoles swimming through foot-high pools and avoiding the sandy mounds. Sailboats would look ship wrecked, suddenly

sitting on gritty ground. “They’re all built for these conditions,” he tells me. “To withstand the tides.”

I think about how we are built: to balance each other out—one stable, one messy—ever changing like the landscape. One night a few months ago, after drinking too much scotch, he tells me about his mother. “She wrote me this e-mail.” He shows it to me on his phone. My eyes are drawn to one line: *I’ve been sober for a month now.*

“Bullshit,” he tells me. “She’ll never get sober.”

“She used to yell at me a lot. She pushed me down the stairs once.”

“She once took a small, plastic blow-up raft and sailed into the Bay. Didn’t care if she ever came back. Trying to kill herself.”

“Now she’s losing his mind. Early Alzheimer’s probably. From the liquor.”

“She can’t remember where I live or what I do for a living.”

“But she used to be a nice lady,” he concludes, my palm now gently resting on his forehead. “She used to be really nice.”

I’ve never met an alcoholic before. I’ve met recovering alcoholics. People in AA. Or people who confess they *used* to have a problem. Maybe that makes me naive or sheltered. Lucky even. I’m not sure. What I do know is the thought of meeting an alcoholic fills me with irrational fear—a dread that leaves me ashamed and uncomfortable. In the week leading up to our trip, I cannot catch my breath at red lights. I dream his mom knocks me down. I dream she tells me I’m not good enough for him. I dream she throws a steel pan at my head. I know I am hallucinating wild exaggerations, but I cannot stop. My mind has a sick tendency to prepare itself for the worst.

Then, I find that his mom is a very nice lady. She makes us eggs and bacon and coffee one morning. She loans us her plastic blow-up raft. She asks me about work and school and my family. She wants to hear the story of how we met. At a family party on July 4<sup>th</sup>, I overhear her tell his aunt that I, too, am very nice. She does not know that we hide beer in the garage fridge or push two twin beds together upstairs. Or that last month I plugged her name into Google and found the police log of her two drunk driving incidents.

She also gets wasted: at dinner, in the evenings. She starts acting different. She is loud. She is bewildered. She is someone she was not before. But she is not angry. She does not throw things. She does not yell at me or try to hurt herself. She is, as far as I can tell, simply sad and lost. As we clear the table and bring dishes to the sink, he looks his mother in the eye: “I want you to go to bed.” Then, he tells me it’s been a long day and we should go to sleep soon, too.

“You want to walk out there?” he asks me the next day.

“Finally,” I reply.

We leave our flip-flops by the stairs. The sand is squishy and cold between our toes. It is the ultimate low tide: the brown goes out for miles and it looks even more foreign than I remember it yesterday. “See that statue, the really faint one,” he points. “That’s P-town, the tip of the Cape.”

We walk out into the flats, avoiding anything that might pinch or prick us. “This is amazing,” I say. We are standing here tall in what will soon be deep, dense ocean. Small pools form every few yards. They are warm. “It’s easier to swim in the Bay,” he explains. “The sun warms the flats during low tide and by high tide they are like a bath.”

He points out different types of dried-up, dead crabs and tells me how much they'd go for at fish markets. He loves talking about the ocean and its creatures. He occasionally tells me that if the pay were decent, he'd start his own commercial fishing enterprise.

“Why don't you?” I ask.

“So you're in favor of a job that has me at sea for months at a time?”

“Oh, right,” I reply. “Well, if you'd be happy ... ” my voice trails off.

He tells me stories of Cape summers. “Man, I wish Pops hadn't sold the boat,” he exclaims. It was a small speedboat—nothing extravagant but fun to screw around in. “I'd take you out and show you some seals. I know where they all hang out.” He misses that boat the way I'd long for him if he moved to another continent. When his parents sell his childhood house and move to the Cape full time, he tells me it's weird and he'll miss those four walls. “But not as much as the boat,” he quickly adds.

“The best was when we'd take out the boat at night and drive around the Bay,” he says. The idea of riding around in the dark terrifies me, even if he knows the coast better than the back of his own hand. Perhaps it's not the dark I fear but the unknown—that dark, dense ocean and its unknown contents. He notices my eyes widen when he mentions night boating as we walk further away from his now tiny house and deck. “Don't worry,” he tells me. “I know where all the big rocks are.”

We've walked a long way and the sky is darkening. It is dusk. Time moves quickly out here in this strange world. “It's time to head back,” he says.

But maybe I want to go forward.

In the flats, I am in control; I can see what's both behind us and ahead. There is no unknown to fear. No change until the tide washes back. No thorny, complicated pasts and

questions of permanence. No deep water, concealing foreign sea creatures. I can see the crabs peaking their pink limbs out of the sand. I know to step around them so as not to pierce my bare feet. And anyway, these crabs are dead. They do not frighten me.

I slowly spin 360 degrees to face him, my dress lifted slightly by breeze as I study what's around me: each angle and perspective and view. Dizzy between all the land and water, I almost forget which way we came from.

### The Credits

The hint of dark hair growing above Andrew's upper lip startles me. He is fifteen, but I will always picture him as the whiny four-year-old cousin who once yanked a yo-yo string still fastened to my middle finger, leaving a circular red mark on my skin.

Today we are at my childhood house, watching *The Lord of the Rings*. One day, three movies (originally books), and more than ten hours. My family owns the entire trilogy, which Andrew has never seen. Later, Dad will grin and ask Andrew if he knows what "orc," stands for, launching into a ten-minute explanation of how author J.R.R. Tolkien hated the Oxford Rowing Club enough to name a slimy mythical monster after it.

Andrew's feet are encased in clunky white sneakers that look at least two sizes too big. Black curls fall centimeters above his eyes. His skin is smooth and olive, a genetic mishmash of having one Jewish parent (Mom's brother, Uncle Woody) and one Hispanic parent (the Honduran woman Uncle Woody knocked up, then married—his third wife, "Number Three"). The pair had two kids—Amy and Andrew—and divorced when Amy was a teenager and Andrew was in elementary school. Uncle Woody has always been our family's black sheep, his life a little less stable than his three older siblings—ones with long-lasting marriages and houses in the suburbs and ambitious kids at good schools; ones without addictions and trouble maintaining any sort of long-term close relationship.

We gather for the movie marathon in my childhood living room. I'm reclined in a brown leather armchair, feet kicked up in front of me, legs in gray sweatpants. Andrew is to my right on the couch. Our other cousin, Em, is curled in a fetal position, perusing vegan food blogs on her pink MacBook laptop. Em is twenty-three, and I'm twenty-five.

We don't have popcorn, but we have Thanksgiving leftovers: juicy turkey meat and sweet syrupy yams and sausage stuffing. Because today is Black Friday.

But a trip to the mall, or even Target, with its enticing sales on digital cameras and charcoal grills, is not in the cards. Today, we have other things on our minds. Today, our parents will be at the hospital until the moon blazes an eerie yellow on black.

The day before Thanksgiving, Uncle Woody woke up with a swollen foot and shortness of breath. His current wife ("Number Four") took him to the Emergency Room. They dated for four years and married last spring by Lake Winnepesaukee, her white wedding gown framed by blue water and mountains. Number Four is an eccentric woman with frizzy blonde hair and a raspy voice. When my grandmother, Nana, died, she showed up at the hospital in a bright yellow velour sweat suit. The zipper was cut low enough so we could see most of her flat orange breasts.

"I'm so embarrassed," Number Four kept whispering to Mom and I. "We came from the tanning salon."

One week from now, Brenton, my boyfriend of two years, will remind me, "She's a nice lady," and I will agree politely as I watch her fall apart. I will hug her; I will nod when she says she loves me and try not to press my lips together too tightly, giving away my façade. I will do all this because there will be no other appropriate way to react. Still, secretly, I will wonder if we'll ever see her again, and I will be relieved when Dad poses this question to a room full of relatives, only to be met with silence.

Mom fields a frantic phone call from Number Four as Dad is preparing to bake his famous Italian ricotta pie for Thanksgiving. She huffs into the receiver that Uncle Woody's heart stopped while he was being examined.

Mom and Dad rush to the hospital. Brenton comes over after work to keep me company. We try to act normal. We buy subs. I order chicken salad with provolone cheese and onions; he orders a steak bomb. We drink red wine. We watch TV sitcoms. We laugh.

“This can’t be easy for you,” Brenton says at one point, his body suddenly very still.

“What?” I ask, pulling back from my sandwich, slightly irked. “I bet this happens a lot. Remember, Uncle Woody has *booone* cancer.” I draw out the “o” for emphasis. “For all we know, he visits the ER every other week.”

Brenton squints at me, ginger brows creeping toward his nose. I turn back to the television and grip my sub with both hands.

When the phone finally rings, it’s almost ten p.m.

“The situation’s pretty grim, kiddo,” Dad says. The volume is loud. Brenton hears and places his hand on my leg. I press the iPhone into my cheek.

“They put Woody into a coma and are going to lower his body temperature to try and stave off brain damage. It’ll be a few days before we know anything.”

I inhale long and hard.

As kids, Andrew tagged along while his older sister Amy and I played on the rocks near Nana and Papa’s lakeside condo in New Hampshire. I was an only child, longing for siblings; they were the closest I’d come. The three of us roamed stacks of slick gray boulders, explorers of an unknown world. We counted those masses until someone broke out in a fit of giggles. We pretended to be our own little family. We imagined some rocks into beds and others into kitchens. We stirred pots of make-believe soup. We retired to the sand, building castles, digging with shovels for Indian clay. I was 10, then 11, then 12, and Amy was 5, then 6, then 7. But

Andrew was always the baby, the nuisance and tag-along, included only to avoid him tattling on us.

We let him be the pet dog. He'd kneel on his chubby toddler calves, not yet developed enough to hold his weight, yapping at us for attention. As a child, Andrew looked exactly like Elian Gonzales, the young boy who was seized in Miami and returned to his father in Cuba. Elian's mother had drowned trying to get to the United States by boat. There is a Pulitzer Prize winning photo of Elian, clinging onto his uncle, with a uniformed man pointing a large gun at the boy's frantic, howling face. Behind the chaos is a closet full of multi-colored plastic hangers filled with ordinary men's clothing: polo shirts and khaki slacks.

At the lake, a cement wall separated two beaches: a manmade upper beach full of dry orange sand, and an organic lower beach, dampened by waves. Before he could swim well, Andrew wasn't allowed down to the shore without supervision. Sometimes, Amy and I would move to the lower beach from our pretend kitchens and stoves, intentionally leaving her brother behind. We blocked out the wails as he trotted back to the condo alone.

On holidays, Uncle Woody brought Andrew and Amy over to our house in Massachusetts. Number Three cooked tamales and brought them to Mom. They were difficult to assemble, a complicated process, so she always made them by the hundreds in their small apartment—a place only thirty minutes away (though I never saw it) that I always imagined as two cramped rooms smelling of strong Honduran spices. Mom would freeze the tamales in small plastic Tupperware containers, pulling them out as surprise snacks for months. Back then, I was a fussy eater, and I never even tasted them.

When he was 8 and 9 and 10, Andrew grew quiet and hated being photographed. At family parties, my other cousins—more than ten loud and rambunctious girls—would chase him

around with cameras, trying to sneak a click. I never participated, perhaps guilty of all those years Amy and I teased him on the beach. He would hide in the dining room, sliding around corners, often grabbing Uncle Woody and using him as a human shield.

Andrew followed his father around at family parties like a shadow. He went outside to watch Uncle Woody chain smoke cigarettes. He stuck by him at the beverage table, where his dad would mix a few ice cubes with Jack Daniels—a practice he'd eventually give up for good. Uncle Woody could be snide, rolling his eyes and sneering up his lip. I rarely saw him smile. He once told me I was a smart aleck in a tone that made me feel small. Another time, I overheard Em's mom say he'd left her an angry voicemail, calling her a bitch.

But Uncle Woody also raised more than \$1,500 for my charity breast cancer race, sending a heartfelt email to everyone he knew. "I'm not the hard-ass I appear to be," he wrote back when I thanked him.

"Did you know Woody mentored people through AA?" Mom will later ask me, looking worn and fragile. "I guess not. He never told anyone but Nana." We will be sitting together on the couch, editing his eulogy. "He did all these kind things for others, but not many people saw that side of him."

The truth is this: a knife jabs into my gut, realizing how few people knew Uncle Woody as the gentle man beneath the tough, marble exterior. To leave this world without connection, without true intimacy, without your family knowing who you really are, might be the saddest thing of all.

When Uncle Woody's heart stops, Number Three—who has spent years growing resentful at her ex-husband, channeling that anger into cruelty toward her son and daughter—

drops Andrew off at the hospital with a backpack for the weekend. He is supposed to spend Thanksgiving with his dad.

“What was she thinking?” Mom asks me. “As if Andrew was going to stay in the hospital all weekend ...”

“She *wasn't* thinking.”

“He’ll stay with us,” she decides.

While Andrew is unpacking his things in our guest room, Mom turns to me. “Keep Andrew busy today.”

She twists her body toward Em, who always stays with us over Thanksgiving.

“Make him smile, okay?”

Soon, one of us proposes *The Lord of the Rings*.

This is our own strange family vigil: watching some hobbits, dwarves, and elves save a fictional land called Middle Earth, trying not to lose our minds. On the screen, a group gathers, signifying a mini-climax of the first movie. The protagonist Frodo, a small hairy hobbit with oversized feet, volunteers to destroy a gold ring with evil powers. I look over at Andrew who is riveted on the edge of the couch, hands clutched together almost like he’s praying.

One day soon, I will dig through albums and find this photo: Papa’s hand is on my shoulder. My hand is clutching Amy’s arm. Uncle Woody sinks into our gray leather couch with baby Andrew in his lap. I am no older than ten.

There is a brown stuffed bunny on Andrew’s dark peach-fuzzed head. A beanie baby. Nana used to buy them for us when we came to visit her at the lake during summer vacations. They’re on all of our heads, balancing like plates in a circus act. On mine there is a dog with a

brown and black eye patch. On Papa's there is another dog with small black spots. On Amy's, a lamb, fragile and petite—just like her (another story altogether). And on Uncle Woody's an orange giraffe is falling forward. He looks strangely clean-cut, wearing a navy sweater over a light blue button-up shirt. This is not the white-faced, sickly way I will remember him.

I'm looking at Amy, and Amy is looking at Andrew, as if we each feel responsible for our younger protégé. Papa and Uncle Woody are staring right into the camera lens. We're all smiling except for baby Andrew: he's looking aimlessly away.

On Thanksgiving Day, Andrew sits in our living room with Dad, an astronomy nerd, and our older cousin, a biophysics PhD candidate. He asks questions about chemical formulas and proteins, black holes and asteroids, and listens intently to their answers. Andrew is a high school sophomore and is taller than me at five foot ten. He plays four instruments. He is eager to get into a good college, to make something of himself. This is what I learn during the days Uncle Woody is unconscious and Andrew stays with us, desperately waiting for news.

The biophysics PhD offers to bring Andrew to his lab over winter break. An aunt promises to take him on college tours. An uncle says he'll buy tickets for a symphony at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Something tugs at me from deep inside my chest: I want to pull Andrew in close, to parent him, our make-believe pet dog, barking on the beach by the lake. But I am awkward and unsure how to reach out to him, this young man I hardly know. I look around our house—painted green walls and new hardwood floors, where my parents will soon stand together, picking out stainless steel kitchen appliances and laughing at Dad's stupid jokes—and feel ashamed of how much I have.

“I played the clarinet for a week,” I tell Andrew upon finding out he’s learning a new instrument. “But then I quit.” My shoulders shrug up a bit.

“I guess it just got —” my voice slows “— too hard.”

He flashes me a brief and courteous smile.

At lunchtime, we each assemble a plate of leftovers, microwave it for about a minute, and return to our seats. Andrew has already slid the second movie disc, *The Two Towers*, into the DVD player. He gets up immediately after the first film ends, though I wish for a ten-minute break to rest my eyes from the bright screen. But we are committed to finishing, and to distracting Andrew.

The night before the funeral, Andrew stays with us again. He doesn’t have a car, or a license. And Number Three wouldn’t dare attend the service with him.

In the morning, Andrew’s eyes are dark and drooping. He looks at me and admits, “I can’t sleep.” Someone toasts a bagel and pours him a tall glass of orange juice.

It’s time to leave for the temple, so we gather in the living room. Em and her parents are here again, too.

Everyone is in dark suits or dark dresses with tights, hair slicked back.

Andrew grabs a navy blue tie with multi-colored guitars from his suitcase.

I give him a nod. “That’s awesome.”

He positions the tie around his neck, fumbling, not sure how to loop it correctly. He is fifteen, but still so young.

“Need some help?” Dad asks, reaching toward Andrew’s chest.

At the funeral, Number Four is falling all over herself, coming undone like a loose bed sheet. Her sheer gauzy tank top scrunches down to reveal her tanned chest. With every sob, Number Four pulls the material up like an uncomfortable strapless gown. She does not walk; she waddles. Her feet perform a wild dance not controlled by her brain. A cousin with blonde hair holds Number Four up by her arm and carries her into the back room, where about twenty of my family members have gathered before the service.

Later Brenton will say, “They dope you up when your spouse dies; it’s common procedure,” and things will make more sense. Actually, I will feel a little bit foolish for not having realized this—especially after the funeral when I watch Number Four squeal joyfully as she chases a two-year-old down the hallway. She will suddenly seem a creature so full of pain and sadness and confusion that even J.R.R. Tolkien couldn’t have created her.

Andrew holds it together. He sits in front of me in the temple benches, between an aunt and uncle, near his sister. He cries but does not make a loud scene. He is reserved. I can barely see over his dark curly fro. He seems taller now, despite the childish guitar tie around his neck.

My fingers won’t stop kneading a damp crumpled tissue. *If I was brave, I’d place a hand on his shoulder*, I think to myself.

I tear off little pieces of white and watch them fall to the floor.

We’re onto the third movie, *The Return of the King*. I get up and go into the kitchen to grab a glass of water. The tile floor is cold under my feet. I gulp, gulp, gulp and refill. When I return, Andrew is hunched forward again, chin resting in his palms.

In the corner, Em is being the usual space cadet, scooping reheated artichoke dip onto slices of French baguette. The glowing screen bounces off her blonde hair.

Finally, the ring is destroyed.

But not every ending is happy. The main hobbit, Frodo, is about to sail away on a ship representing death. Wind ripples his dark curly hair. This adventure has changed him; he has witnessed too many gruesome things; he has had to grow up too quickly; now, he must move on.

A brown boat, built from majestic tree trunks, sits still in the nearby water. Frodo looks at his closest companion. “Your part in the journey goes on,” he says. A gray-haired wizard leads him onboard. They sail slowly away until the ship becomes a small speck lit by spotlight.

I look at Andrew as the credits roll onto the screen.

“That was so good,” he says softly, stretching his arms behind his back.

“*So* good,” I echo.

He picks up the remote and presses stop. The room dims, and my cousin becomes a lonely shadow on the couch. I am only beginning to recognize Andrew’s outline: spiraling hair, broad shoulders, and those gigantic feet, leading him into this new fatherless life.

I reach over and click on the lamp.

### Hurricane Diaspora

“Old ammo keeps washing ashore,” my cousin Tina says, reaching for a burnt bite of crust. We are eating Dad’s homemade pizza—oozing with fresh mozzarella, dotted with basil leaves—around my parents’ dining room table. My father comes from a big Italian family, and pizza is his specialty—he makes it to show off—but tonight he used a new pan and the crust is black as night. Everyone keeps reassuring him, saying, “It’s fine! It’s still edible!” but he seems bummed, shoulders slumped as he sighs and lifts another slice. Around us, the walls are glossy, a robin egg’s blue, and it is late May, windows open so we can feel the cool night air. If this pizza is an attempt to reclaim some sense of his foggy heritage, then surely Dad has failed.

Tonight, we can’t stop talking about Hurricane Sandy and the Jersey Shore. “The beach used to be a fortress,” Tina continues. She works at a hospital and is more than ten years older than me. I am twenty-six. Tina’s hair is dark, curly, tied back into a messy bun, cheeks round but pale like a cartoon chipmunk. We both break the tanned skin Italian stereotype. Still, Tina is easily more connected to this legacy than me. With two sets of wholly Italian grandparents, she was born and bred in New Jersey. She knows how to cook our grandmother’s sweet balls, a delicacy of doughy round spheres with colorful sprinkles that stick to the tips of your fingers. She even knows the name of the town where our great grandparents grew up, a small village an hour outside Naples. My parents once visited and were treated like royalty, chauffeured around by the town historian as everyone stared and pointed and whispered, “Americanos?”

My skin color is lightened by my mother’s Jewish roots. I am descended not only from Italy—from mozzarella and prosciutto and red pepper flakes used to dot my father’s pizza—but from Russia and Poland, from great grandparents with peachy white foreheads and throaty Yiddish accents. Most days, when I look in the mirror at my pasty skin, I feel more connected to

this Jewish side. It may seem strange, knowing this: I never went to Hebrew School, and I was never Bat Mitzvah'd, and I always confuse the blessings that come directly after, "Baruch atah adonai." But I associate this deeper connection with family intimacy: we see my mother's siblings and cousins at least once month, and I grew up with her parents, my grandparents, visiting often, a loving, guiding force. My mother's family is the loud sort of clan you couldn't get rid of if you wanted—meddling and nosy, but always well intentioned. Because I am an only child, the cousins on Mom's side feel just like siblings—we grew up playing in the sandbox and building elaborate blanket forts—and, so, I desperately want them to stick around.

"A pizza bagel," one camp counselor used to call me. An Italian Jew. Some days, these two sides feel irreconcilable, like a Venn diagram where my own identity bursts the seams between two overlapping circles. No vertical teardrop is an adequate container for my two converging selves.

Next to me, Dad pours another round of tequila—not Grappa or Limoncello—into the shot glasses I bought him last Christmas at a small store called The Salt Cellar, where everything is made from Himalayan salt mined in Pakistan's Khewra Salt Mines, a coral color because of trace minerals like iron oxide. Whenever Dad drinks—or sits outside in the sun for too long—his forehead and cheeks turn the same light rosy red as that salt.

Dad raises his sluggish silver brows, and pushes a shot glass toward me. I curl my upper lip into a sneer and slide it back, mostly because I cannot hold my liquor like Dad and Tina—no, this is not a gene passed onto me—but also because I want to suck in every word of this conversation without some fuzzy drunk halo. It's not often that I get to see my father's family.

"Now the shore is mostly destroyed," Tina adds nostalgically.

I imagine bullet shells, unidentifiable scraps of metal, filtering onto the golden beaches of the Jersey Shore. Beyond the flooding, beyond the photos, I know little about any of this. I know little about Sandy, which hit two years ago, and I know little about my father's family. I could ask Dad for more details, but I don't. Instead, I construct them—his siblings and parents—into my own mythology. These people I want to claim as ancestors. These people I want to know outside photo albums and family folklore. Always, I picture my father's childhood in sepia tones.

This weekend, Tina is visiting us from New Jersey with her older sister, Michelle, and her father, my Uncle Ray.

Michelle cocks her head, flashes her two crooked front teeth, and says to me, "How old are you?" She asks this every few minutes, locking our fingers together so tight they leave a red mark because she has Down Syndrome.

"Mi-*shelllll!*" Tina scolds half-heartedly. "You can't just ask people their age!"

I bend my knees a bit and rub her back—Michelle is a good foot shorter than me in her baggy jeans and oversized sweatshirt—and repeat, "I'm twenty-six. Aren't I old?"

"Wooooow!" Michelle says, eyes wide like little googly buttons. "You're old!" Then, she laughs, heavy, pulsated puffs from her lungs, as I nod and give her shoulders a playful pat.

Tina rolls her eyes—a look that lovingly says, "I know, I know, she'll never learn"—then quickly smiles. She is so poised, with access into this world—a world that should be *ours*, not hers. My cheeks are warm with envy.

"How old are *you*?" I ask Michelle, realizing I have lost track after years apart.

"Forty-two," she says, holding up her right index and middle finger like bunny ears.

"No waaaaaay," I reply to Michelle. "You can't be forty-*two*! Where does the time go?"

Suddenly, Mom walks by and whispers, “Isn’t she just the cutest thing you’ve ever seen?” and then tiptoes off to the basement to find a new bottle of red wine to uncork.

I have not seen Uncle Ray or my cousin Michelle in nearly a decade, and I have only seen Tina once in this time span. My father’s four siblings have become a Diaspora, dispersed to Orange County, a far corner of Jersey near Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts—where my Dad and Mom and I reside in a small suburb of Boston. We live near the town where Mom grew up, Newton, known for its large Jewish population and good public schools.

Perhaps because we rarely visit, or because he rarely talks about it, I can only grasp onto small snapshots of Dad’s childhood in Jersey. Dad grew up in Newark, home to the airport and Calandra’s crusty Italian bread. A gritty and rough neighborhood. Once, Dad’s car was stolen and he found it around the corner without the stereo.

But I also imagine siblings sitting on the stoop of their skinny three-story house; riding bicycles down the sidewalk; tap-dancing in the kitchen with Uncle Mickey—he was one of the greats, even danced with Ginger Rogers. During college, Dad spent his summers working on the shore in Seaside Heights. Each July, his family migrated to a rented beach house in Lavalette. Dad cleaned the beach between 2 and 6 a.m., carrying cinderblocks to build the pool at a new hotel—the same hotel with a bar now frequented by MTV’s “The Jersey Shore” cast mates.

Dad’s Italian roots run deep, inherited from his parents in a way I cannot claim to know or understand. Perhaps because he is a second-generation Italian, and I am only a lowly third on the family tree; the knots that connect us to that little village outside Naples loosen and unwind over time. Dad still remembers that on Sundays, his mother, my grandmother, Albina, made raviolis from scratch. She laid a long white bed sheet on top of a mattress and pressed the ricotta

between doughy squares in the very same place where she and my grandfather slept. My father has inherited many recipes from his mother—her red sauce, her meatballs, her tangy ricotta pie with powdered sugar on top.

I never met my father's parents, Albina and Tony, my paternal grandparents, but I've heard a few stories here and there—from Dad, his siblings, even from Tina. She was tough and tall. He was a joker. I was named for her, so our initials would match. Albina Casale, Alyssa Cathryn.

Neither of my father's parents were in good health. Both died before I was born.

Hurricane Sandy swept away the Jersey Shore, but remnants of the past—memories of warfare—are still surfacing like bones at an archeological dig site. It's not just ammunition, though. It's bright green sea glass and medical syringes and a huge oil tanker. All have washed ashore. How peculiar, I think to myself, that my father spent his summers on those beaches. My father left Jersey for a job, and then for my mother, but sometimes, I wonder if there was more to the story, more to the squall.

Mom and I took Dad to Seaside Heights a few summers ago to eat fried dough and soft serve ice cream and walk along the beaches where he used to drive a zamboni-like truck that picked up soda cans and empty Doritos bags. We stared at the bright lights of the boardwalk and meandered through the arcade, Dad pointing to games he recalled, but mostly lost in a sea of new technology, unfamiliar video games when he was of the pinball era. Actually, Dad was somewhat of a pinball wizard. When I was young, he often took me to an arcade called Fun Spot as a treat—though I'm not sure if it was more for me or for him. After letting me ride the bumper

cars, Dad always gravitated towards those big, tilted glass boxes, pulling quarters out of his pockets as his eyes shimmered just like the silver coins.

I saw photos of Seaside Heights after Sandy, and it did not look anything like it had when we visited with Dad. A boarded up Shore Store, with wooden planks set down where the floor damage occurred. Bright red and blue ride cars toppled over like a messy playroom full of Lego pieces. A panoramic of sand, not pavement, where yellow shutters speckle quaint beachside houses. White curls of ocean water washing up onto the boardwalk, restlessly, to the benches where beach-goers like to sit and watch the sun set, like a grapefruit dropping into the horizon. The roller coaster, curves and dips of track metal, several feet under gray water.

A shoreline destroyed. Two summers later, ninety percent of Seaside Heights has been rebuilt. It might not look exactly the same. But it's been repaired, replenished. At least enough so that people can go on living their lives.

I once asked my mother if her parents were upset when she didn't marry someone Jewish. "You'd be surprised. The Jews and Catholics have a lot in common," she said. "Both cultures are all about family ... and eating."

Mom may have been right. But I've often wondered why I feel so Jewish, even though I was not really raised at Temple, or reading the Torah. Is it just because of family tightness? Something tells me that it's not the only reason why. Usually, I come up with this: I am part of a population that almost didn't exist. A group of people that Hitler tried to extinguish during World War II. My Polish and Russian ancestors experienced a deeply painful genocide and persecution and loss. Maybe this is why I feel some sort of hardness in my bones, an urge to consider myself a person of Jewish descent. Some tiny voice inside my chest always seems to

claim, “You must carry on this sense of Jewishness because there are millions of people who no longer can.”

“Have you been back to the shore since the storm?” Tina asks Dad as he takes another gigantic bite of gooey mozzarella. Since Dad is the youngest brother, he and Tina seem more like cousins than uncle and niece. Lately, they’ve been playing a lot of Words with Friends, an online scrabble game. All spring, Dad has been chuckling to himself from the loveseat in our family room, embracing his iPad, and saying aloud, “Oh maaaaan. Tina got me good with that last word. She’s kicking my ass!”

Dad leans back in his chair, dazed, and stretches his elbows out above his coarse silver hair. “I haven’t been back,” he says. “But we went to Seaside for the night a few summers ago. Got all my favorites, like Marucas Pizza.”

I wonder why Dad ever left Jersey, and if he ever wishes to go back, if he feels like a fish out of water so far away from his family and people. Newark is a culturally rich place, full of Italians. Suburban MetroWest Massachusetts is, quite frankly, lacking in this department. But Boston has Italians—lots of them. Maybe that’s why Dad loves to take us to the North End section of the city to wait in line for Regina’s Pizza or grab a few cannoli at Modern Pastry. It all seemed too easy, though, for him to drift apart from his family; I cannot ever imagine my mother being far away—in distance or mind—from her own.

Hurricanes are strange phenomena. So large and forceful and frightening, tearing through towns and coastlines with fury. The energy released during a massive hurricane can be equal to ten atomic bombs each second. In reality, they are fed by something as simple and unthreatening

as the right recipe of warm air and water. The word hurricane derives from a West Indian word, *huracan*, or “big wind.” They form like an engine, nourished by moist, tropical air below. A cyclone of clouds amassed, with the ocean’s evaporating water, a low-pressure system, rising air to feed the eye. Wind spinning, rain scattering. When the storm reaches land, things often calm, lacking water below to refuel. But often the damage has already been done. Hurling debris and heavy rains that lead to floods and even landfall and mudslides.

Through perhaps similar chaos, Dad has drifted apart from his family. He calls his brothers and sister on Christmas Eve and Easter, but we are lucky to see them once a decade. I am left with little choice in this matter of family and heritage. It’s out of my control. All I can do is survey the destruction, and wonder why no one ever made an attempt at repairs.

I remember a story Tina told me two years ago when I met her for a drink. The story was about Poppy—that’s what she called our grandfather. Tina said that, as a kid, our Uncle Anthony saw a car while walking through Newark. “Poppy was in the driver’s seat,” she said, “but in the passenger’s seat, there was a strange woman—one Anthony didn’t know or recognize.” My heart suddenly felt heavy. Was Tina telling me about our grandfather’s mistress?

One word startled me more than anything else: Poppy. I did not know a Poppy; I did not know any paternal grandfather. I felt a pang of jealousy that Tina spent time with our grandparents as a child. What was Poppy like? I wanted to ask her, but it felt so wrong, so uncomfortable, to call him that. Plus, I was suddenly having trouble forming a complete sentence.

Tina continued, “Anthony confronted Poppy that day, but he never told anyone else what he saw ...”

I shivered, thinking about what Tina had just told me and the way I'd carry her words in my chest cavity until I died. I quickly reconfigured all the stories I'd been told about her, this woman I was named after; this woman who used to slip the waiter a can of tuna fish because my adolescent father was a picky eater; this woman whose husband was unfaithful. The last detail suddenly seemed to overpower what little I knew of this mysterious grandmother whose initials I share.

Maybe this family has secrets I'll never fully understand. Secrets at the eye of this hurricane of displacement and scattering.

Just like Jews in Europe during the Holocaust, Italian Catholics were discriminated against here in America. After large-scale Italian immigration to America at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, my people were continually viewed as foreigners who stuck by their own clans and didn't try to assimilate. They could only get lower paying jobs and were considered uneducated. First generation immigrants often took menial jobs—in rail yards and fishing and mining for gold. They struggled and suffered so the next generation could have a better life. Anti-Italian sentiments were also associated with anti-Catholic feelings, at odds in a Protestant America. In New Orleans, Southern Italian immigrants were often hanged because they had darker skin.

But Italians are *still* discriminated against. Every time I see a depiction of a “guido”—an Italian American man with slicked back hair and bulging muscles—I cringe. Or every time I think about *The Godfather* and the mob stereotypes. Or how they're depicted in expensive, fancy suits and fast red Lamborghinis, the “bad guys” in most movies and shows. Maybe these reactions are a sign: my Italian-ness tries desperately to bubble to the surface and take its rightful place within the whole.

“C’mon,” Dad says, again pushing forward the tiny pink shot glass. “Just have one.”

Maybe it’s because I’m sick of Dad nagging me. Or perhaps I just want to be a good Italian for once—the kind who can handle her liquor. Maybe because I am a little jealous of Tina for knowing our grandparents, while also angry at her for shattering my imagined family folklore, my perfect portrait of the Martino family past. For helping me understand why it may have been better for Dad and his siblings to disperse, rather than to hold on tight. It could be easy, I think to myself, to act as my father did: to turn away, to leave New Jersey and never come back because there is still an entire coastline to clean up, whereas all Hurricane Sandy did here in Massachusetts was knock over a few lawn chairs. Suddenly, I feel something anxious crackle up and down my windpipes, and I do not want to feel anymore.

I look over at Dad and wonder what it’d be like to be one hundred percent Italian, a child of one culture, not two or three. I wonder if he feels more Italian than me, or more Italian than I feel Jewish, and if there is any reconciling these at-odds forces within my being.

The process of winds colliding over the ocean is called convergence. When these masses of air begin to collide, air rises in the center, an updraft. The hurricane’s momentum, its energy, its drive. Was there a specific collision that caused my father to leave behind his past, to let go of the place he grew up? Or was it just benign air, harmless moisture converging, which led to this vortex of thundershowers and storms?

“Do we have any limes?” I ask Dad, pinching the glass and shaking extra salt onto the space just underneath my left thumb. I tilt my head back, lips salty and chapped, shooting back every last icy drop of Tequila. The liquid goes down smooth but sour.

## Stripers and Bluefish

The engine thrums beneath the rubber soles of my sneakers, sending vibrations into my ankles, kneecaps, and hips. On each of my love handles is a cupped palm, elbows bent, forming sideways Vs below my gray ribbed tank and frizzy brown bun. I stand like this, hands firmly in place, feet shoulder's width apart, to keep my balance. I am not used to the Atlantic's sudden waves, to my whole body being jolted back and forth on a fishing vessel. I am not used to the conflicting sense of adventure and fear, this swirling lack of control. All around I see a blue-gray abyss with foaming white caps. No land within sight. The sky above is bright but hazy. It's mid-morning in late June.

Today, it's just me and the men: my redheaded boyfriend, Brenton; his stoic father, Drew; and the boat's veteran captain, Steve. We are on a thirty-two-foot sport fishing boat with an open stern and covered wheelhouse, speeding away from Chatham, Cape Cod. The boat's white wooden sides contain dark letters of its affectionate name, *Nota Problem*. Steve, who is an old friend of the family, had the boat custom built. He doesn't often allow women on board. He is making an exception for me. Some might consider this troublesome, but I'm not concerned; I understand men and women need their own spaces. I also understand that some women—many women, actually—would not choose to be here: on a rocky boat just after daybreak, stomach churning over at the sight of fish guts.

I understand because I believe I am one of those women—the kind who'd prefer to wave off the gutsy crew from the dark wooden dock. One week ago, I fought Brenton about coming along on this fishing expedition, a trip very much out of my comfort zone. “But what if I get seasick?” I asked. “You'll take Dramamine before,” he said. “But I might get drowsy and fall asleep ...” We are twenty-five and have dated for almost two years. We've both taken a few

days off to visit the Cape, where Brenton's parents now live year round. He works at a rental car company. Long hours with angry customers. The water is his escape. When we are here, I swear I see freckles form on his face under the beating sun. Little brown dots on his pale, smooth skin. Sometimes when Brenton is napping, head turned away in my lap, I get bored and trace my right index finger along his neck freckles, writing secret messages or drawing stick figure girls and boys until he opens his eyes and groggily pulls me toward his chest.

Brenton feels at home in the sea—a setting that's provided lessons of toughness and resilience—whereas I often crumble at the very concept of the unknown. The ocean looks so dark and dense. The mystery of what is below, or even ahead, can make me come undone. I've often wondered why he is brave where I am fearful. Are we a product of our parents, or even gender expectations? Was Brenton pushed to be a tough man? Was I coddled into an anxious woman? The answers may be no less murky than the liquid blue beneath this boat.

But I am here. Bobbing up and down, often ferociously, completely at the water's will. The air is cool against my cheeks. Actually, it's rather thrilling. This hands-on-hips balancing act is precarious, certainly, but also a rush. I'm beginning to adjust to the rhythm of these waves. The sun pokes its head out from a pack of lumpy cumulus clouds. I've rubbed on SPF 30 but forgot my nose. Tonight it will be an embarrassing shade of Rudolph red. Earlier this morning, I washed down a tiny white Dramamine pill with a plate full of eggs, a mug of coffee with milk. My stomach is only slightly queasy. "Nauseous?" Brenton asks with a worried look. "No." I smile. "I feel fine." We are already miles from Chatham and miles more to Nantucket Island, stuck halfway between two sandy coasts. "The boat doesn't just turn around if you puke," Brenton warned the night before. But I feel fine. I am fine. The slight knots in my abdomen

slowly fizzle away. “Thank you for bringing me here,” I say, nodding eagerly and squeezing Brenton’s leg with my left hand.

For the past hour, Steve has been at the helm of the boat. “I’m excited,” I said sheepishly upon meeting Steve, who was excavating fishing rods from below deck when we arrived. “I haven’t been fishing since I was a little girl.” He seemed then a quiet man with white hair and wobbly hands, but now I see that Steve is in the zone. He is smart and calculated, in tune to the sea’s subtle changes. Periodically, I watch him turn on the radio and listen, squinting and assessing the best plan of attack, the ideal location to cast our lines. Finally, he turns off the engine and the boat slows to a stop. I hear waves crashing against *Nota Problem’s* wooden sides.

“Okay,” Brenton says to me, raising his golden-brown brows. “Go time.”

He pulls out a white plastic belt with a circular indentation the size of a golf ball. He wraps it around my waist and knots it tight. “You’ll need this to fight this fish and win,” he says, showing me how to place the rod handle into the belt notch. I imagine that without this thick plastic shield, I might develop a notch-shaped bruise above my belly button from pushing the pole into my own skin.

Brenton gently takes the rod from me and says, “I’ll cast it this time, but then it’s up to you.”

My eyes scan the line. Dangling on the end is a small metal jig bait with rubbery neon hairs. Suddenly, adrenaline begins pumping through my body. I want to catch a fish and eat it for dinner. I want to take a photograph of myself holding it up like a prize. I wait anxiously for that joyful tug. All four of us are standing near the stern, breeze blowing across our faces, staring toward the invisible shore we left behind.

After a few minutes of waiting for a bite, Steve shakes his head, signaling *no, not here, this is not the spot*. He walks back into the wheelhouse. He turns the radio volume notch up. Brenton takes my rod and hangs it back up on the side of the boat. Then, we're off again, skimming the water with speed.

I am on a fishing trip with a family of seamen. Men who are good with their hands, who appear calm and collected in dangerous situations. A father and son who crave challenge and adventure and seek it among the waves. Who bond inherently over fishing and boats and this big, expansive sea. Drew is not an experienced fisherman, but the water still feels like home. Because he is a sailor. The kind who regularly wins regattas. Ones with serious sailors. Not *this-is-a-hobby* sailors, but *this-is-a-lifestyle* sailors. When Drew was a child, his family had a small house on Lake Wequaquet in Centreville, Cape Cod. He likes to tell us how he was once the best sailor and water skier on the lake. Now, Drew is in his sixties, struggling to find work after years as a high-level executive for Welch's, the juice and jelly company. Now, he spends every sunny summer weekend in a boat on the Atlantic Ocean.

This morning as we slowly mazed our way out of the marina, Drew came close to me and pointed his finger forward, annotating each boat so I could learn. "That's a cat rig." His eyes widened. "Over there is a dinghy ... Look! A schooner." He used words like mast and mainsail and boom—ones I had occasionally heard, but never bothered to look up in a dictionary. His sentences blurred together as I stared at the beautiful sails—crisp reds and blues and whites—cinched tightly like a bed sheet one size too small. This new world was alluring.

"So," Drew had said after his brief lesson, gesturing ahead. "Can you tell if that one's a cat boat or a schooner?" My eyes squinted. I wanted to keep up, but felt lost in this setting of

multi-colored sails. “I think I need a few more lessons,” I said, pursing my lips, slightly ashamed.

I can’t be too hard on myself: Cape Cod is in this family’s DNA. When Brenton was just a baby, Drew bought a plot of land in Brewster, on the Cape’s bay side, intending to build a summer home. More than twenty years later, a large frame hangs inside the front door, haphazardly filled with dozens of shiny, collaged photos, visual documentation of the house’s foundation being sawed and bolted and cemented into a finished home. One of those snapshots displays Drew—his tanned skin and buzzed brown hair—with Brenton in a baby carrier strapped to his chest. My boyfriend is small and rosy-cheeked, and above his ginger head, Drew’s eyes are full of anticipation.

Brenton has spent every summer of his life by the ocean. As a kid, he played on the beach with the neighbors, searching for dead crabs and making up games in the flat strips of sand that appear during low tide. As a teenager, he bought logs at the corner store, chopped them up with an ax, found twigs and brush to keep his beach fires aglow until 3 or 4 a.m. Those years, he also worked as a lifeguard at a nearby resort called Ocean Edge. “I’ve always been a strong swimmer,” he often boasts.

By college, Brenton was sick of working as a guard and secured a new job with Steve’s help. He would work as a deckhand on a commercial fishing boat, *The Dawn T*. He needed some money. He knew it would be difficult work. On his first day, the crew took one look at him—a pale college kid with freckles and bright red hair—and figured he’d never last. “Hey kid, don’t even bother coming back tomorrow,” one said squarely after his first day. *Kid*. That was what they called him. Brenton refused to quit or complain. He worked through the pain, hours of excruciating muscle burn. He hauled codfish from nets and cut them open until his knuckles bled

and his arms ballooned. He slept only between midnight and 3 a.m. and ate snickers bars for breakfast every day. He grew strong and tough and hard. He became a man. By the end of August, the captain cracked a rare smile and said, “Anytime you need a job, kid, you’ve got one here.”

When Brenton first told me we were going fishing today, I asked curiously, “On *The Dawn T?*” He froze. “That would be like me taking you to a factory.” What Brenton meant to say was that boat was no place for a girl—*especially* one like me. I did not feel compelled to argue. I had no desire to execute such manual labor, to carry and slice with fiery biceps and thighs. Yet I was jealous of something: Brenton was hardened by that work, prepared for the unknown in a way I did not feel my own experiences and upbringing had done.

From age ten to sixteen, my childhood summers were spent at Jewish sleep-away camp tucked into the hills of rural New Hampshire, where I enjoyed arts and crafts, Israeli dancing, and also, shooting. At the riflery range, I’d lie on a thin striped mattress with a long gun angled against my torso, pulling the trigger to release five tiny bullets at a circular bull’s eye twenty-five meters away. I was no expert, but that click felt good, damn good, like a flash of power I never thought I’d have. At the waterfront, I passed the ten-lap test that depleted my lungs of oxygen and qualified me for water electives. Those summers, I learned to kayak and canoe. I learned what it felt like to anger your arm muscles. I even learned to water ski off a sturdy beginner’s bar stemming off the side of a small speedboat. This was not your typical rope and handle bar. Still, I could pull myself up. I could skim the water’s surface with ease. It was something I would not try again for another decade—until I began dating Brenton, and he brought me to the Cape.

Drew’s brother still owns that lake house on Wequaquet and, the same summer we go fishing, Brenton’s cousins invite us over to water-ski. We whiz out into the lake and Brenton

hops off the boat edge. He stands up on his first try—speeding around the lake as I watch with pride. Periodically, he removes a hand from the bar to rub his eyes with his knuckles. I can tell his contacts are bothering him and feel concerned. That doesn't stop Brenton from gliding majestically across the turquoise surface. He eventually goes down while attempting a tricky jump, soaring right out of the skis. "Nice one!" his cousin laughs.

Next, it's my turn to jump into the icy water. I shove my feet into a pair of chubby skis. After three tries, I barely force my body upright. I'm no longer very athletic or persistent; I'd rather just sit on the boat and watch. When I finally do stand, Brenton and his cousins yell, "Go! Yes! Go! Don't stop! C'mon!" I count: One Mississippi ... Two Mississippi ... Three. *That's enough*, I think, releasing my grip from the handle bar. My body quickly sinks like an anchor. I shove those skis off and climb back up into the boat. Brenton gives me a soggy hug, grins, and says good job. I dig my fingers into his back, suddenly wishing I held on a bit longer.

Back on *NotaProblem*, no one has given up yet on finding fish. Not even me. Steve drives us toward a limitless blue backdrop of ocean and sky. Everything feels so stunning and spacious out here. The water shimmers like finely cut diamonds in the ground. We're all still hopeful the fish will discover the bait. Finally, the boat slows again. Brenton hands me a rod, which I ungracefully cast into the blue. I place the handle into my belt notch.

Our boat position is clever, thanks to Steve. We're floating above a sand bar, a raised piece of ocean floor. The bar pushes the water up, forming a standing wave filled with many small baitfish. The striped bass arrive to devour them. This sliver of sand is our fishing haven. The sun hangs directly overhead. The wind sways us back and forth. We wait.

Suddenly, I feel it. A slight pull. A gentle tug. A harder yank. I got one. I got one! *I got one!*

“Hey, look, I got...” I shout as I stumble, nearly swept off my feet by a bumpy wave.

I catch my balance. Brenton gives me a reassuring nod. “You can do this,” he says.

My left hand grips the rod handle. My right hand clutches the reel. My palms quickly turn red. Brenton stands behind me, whispering in my ear: “What you need to do is push the rod down, and then as you pull it back up, crank the reel as fast as you can.”

“Okay,” I say, slightly skeptical.

I push down, the rod fixed in my belt, and then crank, crank, crank as I slowly lift.

“Good. Again.”

I repeat the process: a gradual push, then a quick turning of the wrist. My arms begin to burn. My legs feel like jell-o. Part of me wants to quit, to give up. I am tired. I feel weak. My muscles are tight. Plus, my stomach is starting to churn again. I shove these thoughts out of my head and concentrate on the line.

I push, crank, repeat for five grueling minutes—it feels more like twenty!—until Drew hollers something inaudible, and Brenton joins him at the side of the boat. Rays of sun warm the fabric of their baseball caps. Brenton pulls my line closer with his forearm. Drew hauls the fish onboard. He plops it down in a small built-in fish box that drains gunk and goo out the backside of *Nota Problem*.

Drew turns toward me. “You just caught your first striper,” he says, beaming.

Striped bass, also called stripers, linesiders, rock, pimpfish, or rockfish, have long silvery bodies and dark stripes. They are prized by fishermen—partly because they’re tasty, and partly because they nearly disappeared in the late seventies and early eighties, likely from overfishing.

In 1982, only five million stripers remained along the Atlantic coast. Now, they again number more than fifty million in the region.

On Cape Cod, regulations allow a catch limit of two stripers per boat. Today, we catch about seven, hauling each fish onboard like a tiny body bag. We throw all but one striper back into the ocean. I lean over the boat's side and watch each silver streak wriggle away.

Brenton and I pose—him holding up my bass—as Drew snaps a photograph. “I wanted you to hold it,” Brenton will later explain, to which I will respond, “Oh. But it was all slimy!” Months later, I will stare at that photo and regret not leaving my fingerprints on those goeey scales.

In my only memory of fishing with my father, I am maybe six or seven. We arrive at a pond near our house in suburban Massachusetts. We have two rods. His is long and sturdy. Mine is fragile, kid-sized. Slowly and patiently, Dad teaches me to hook the worm bait. I'm not grossed out—they are soft and slick between my fingers—but the odor is putrid. My tiny chicken legs stick together in the humid air. Dad and I stand—sometimes silent, sometimes joking around—on a small dock for an entire afternoon. We don't catch any fish. Once, I hook something that looks like a cross between an old brown coat and a pile of wilted spinach.

“Oh, well,” Dad says as we are packing up. “That was still fun.”

On the way home, he buys me an ice cream cone to cheer me up. My disappointment disappears as vanilla soft serve melts into my long brown hair.

There is another story my father loves to tell. When I was twelve, I needed some money. Dad offered me a job weeding our front yard, where two large patches of braided green stems were overtaking the grass. These were not your average, neophyte weeds. They required pulling

up from deep below with all of a child's might. My tiny hands dug into the earth, shoveling dirt with my garden gloves, tugging at those tiny fractured trunks. I lasted about an hour, soon confessing to Dad I did not think I could do it. I could not dig far enough down to extract those roots. I quit before I had barely begun.

Before today's fishing voyage, Dad warned me to buy Dramamine. "Better safe than sorry," he said, looking me in the eye beneath his coarse gray curls. He is visibly disappointed when I go on adventures without him. I am his only daughter, his only child: oversensitive, overprotected, an over-reactor to problems both big and small—a broken laptop; a stressful four hundred-mile move; an illogical phobia of bed bugs. Without fail, Dad offers to buy a plane ticket or drive cross-country for me. He is the kind of father who always said, "That's okay, kiddo. Maybe next time," after my middle-school team lost a basketball game. He is endlessly patient, loving, and kind.

He still pushed me. In the evenings, Dad brought me to the basement and had me run wind sprints. He chucked the orange ball at me as hard as possible, over and over again, because I once dropped a long pass during an important game. When my breathing grew heavy, he brought me a glass of water. He said, "Take a break." He said, "That's enough." He said, "Am I pushing too hard?" Now I question whether Dad stopped because of who he is—a kind, gentle man—or because I am a girl. Would he have pushed more if he had a son? Did Drew raise Brenton differently than my father raised me?

"I had a healthy fear of my parents growing up," Brenton once said, in a way that made me believe Drew was a strict and harsh father—at the very least, tougher than mine. Now, I've sat with this father and son near a blazing fireplace. I've watched Drew's earnest expression as he divulged stories about managing supply chains, working in Manhattan among the country's

most competitive businessman. I've watched Drew glow telling these stories of adventure and challenge. And I've witnessed Brenton nod his head seriously, interested and compelled, craving the type of success his father once had, invested in the kind of hard work I believed Drew raised him to love.

Recently, I asked Brenton if Drew was hard on him as a kid. I expected tales about being forced into the deep end or made to tread water for hours. I expected something far worse than wind sprints. "I dunno," Brenton replied. "He was loving and nice."

At family gatherings, Drew sometimes pulls me aside, saying, "We are so glad you're here. We are so happy to have you with us," softly kissing my cheek. I've always seen him this way: affectionate and endearing. Brenton's answer still surprised me. I had thought my boyfriend strong and hard because of his upbringing, because his father raised him like a boy, pushed him hard to become a man. Drew didn't force Brenton into the deep end anymore than my father forced me to run basketball drills. Either of us could have quit on the spot. Maybe we opt into these challenges ourselves because of some sub-conscious desire to feel joy when we overcome them. Maybe that's why I am beginning to love this feeling of instability, these back-and-forth jolts by the ocean's furious waves.

Brenton hands me the rod as the engine stops again. We cast it together. The sky is a phosphorescent blue. Clouds have cleared. Specks of water spray up off the sides of the boat and onto my skin. They feel refreshing. We're still rocking about wildly, like a plastic toy boat in a stormy bathtub. In just a few hours, I have become skilled at pretending my feet are glued down to this deck. I have realized how quickly I can adapt when immersed in conditions that require

me to accept the unfamiliar and go with the flow. By next summer, I will be the one begging Brenton to take me fishing one more time.

Again, I wait.

And wait.

And wait.

I feel another tug. “Got one,” I say confidently. But something feels different. The line jerks harder. This fish is stubborn. A fighter. A winner. He’s pulling me toward the side of the boat. I can barely hold on. My shoes are slipping and sliding against the deck.

“Shit,” I say. “This one’s really fighting me.”

I focus on form: slowly lift, then lower and crank, crank, crank. Repeat. Lift, lower, crank, repeat. It takes more than ten minutes, but I finally reel the sucker in close enough for Brenton and Drew to grab him.

“I thought so,” one of them says to the other, holding the fish up like a medal.

Brenton smiles. Drew looks me in the eye.

“A bluefish,” he says.

Bluefish are a popular game fish with a hint of blue-green in their silver bodies. Sometimes they’re referred to simply as “blue.” They have razor-sharp teeth and are infamously scrappy fighters. They often attack large schools of fish. They are fast and aggressive. Even when their gills cannot process the air’s oxygen and they begin to overheat and die.

Recently, a college friend—also in her mid-twenties—asked her long-term boyfriend if he considers himself a boy or a man. She told me this while we sat on a plushy tan couch in her Denver apartment. I was visiting for a long weekend.

“A man,” he replied to her without thinking. “I’ve been through a lot in my life. I know how to take care of myself.”

My friend and I laughed over calling ourselves *women*. How raw and strange the word still felt on our tongues. “We are women!” we declared, nodding our heads sideways and saying no, that’s not quite right, not yet, maybe we’re still just girls? She choked out the lyrics to a Britney Spears song—“I’m not a girl, not yet a woman”—as I burst into a fit of laughter.

Brenton is a man. A resilient, tough, hardworking man. Why, then, do so many of my girlfriends have trouble calling themselves women? Perhaps we’re more hesitant to seize our adulthood? Less encouraged to display toughness or take care of ourselves?

I’m still holding the red fishing rod, lazily as I rest my arms, while Brenton tries to unhook the sharp metal point from the bluefish’s mouth. He holds onto the gills with one hand and yanks the hook out with a pair of pliers. He later tells me: if you get a hook in your skin, you’ll go to the hospital, but if you get a bluefish tooth in your thumb, you’ll *still* go to the hospital. They are equally sharp and dangerous. He throws my bluefish down in the boat box. It continues to spasm, loud flapping sounds of panic against the fiberglass. I feel my body tense up and then release. I am not terribly alarmed by the death of this fish; out here, it seems to be but another life cycle, the natural world’s ups and downs, the same rhythmic motion I have endured all day on this turbulent boat.

Brenton picks up my fish. His scaly body gleams in the sun. The fish keeps struggling for a few moments in his hands, and then: nothing. Time freezes. The boat seems to stop rocking. We are all very still.

I am here. I am on this boat. I am standing firm as the unruly ocean tries to shake me down. I did not puke. I did not quit. I am tough, too. Maybe my strength is subtle. I do not act

masculine or hard by outwardly seeking adventure and thrill. I do not hide my anxiety and fear. I am full of panic and excuses. I really do prefer to sit on the dock and watch. But that doesn't mean I won't have a good time when I buck up and climb aboard.

I once believed this: if Brenton is a bluefish, then I am surely a striper. He is a fighter, a competitor, a winner; I am the cautious one, likely to become extinct. These labels are too simplistic. Brenton can be anxious and afraid just like me. Those are his subtleties. One day he confessed that sailboats frighten him. He craves the comfort of an engine, those whirring sounds signaling a safe way home.

Drew lays the dead bluefish down flat near the fish box. He looks so fearless. But even Drew can be spooked. He often tells the story of how he once sailed into a mile-long mass of fog, thinking he might die in the ocean he calls home. He was sure his tiny sail would crash into a large, sturdy vessel. Miraculously, he made it through that opaque haze, unscathed but humbled.

We all seek to be fearless. We all fear the unknown. Different influences mold us into who we are. I imagine summers spent working on *The Dawn T* and feeding beach fire flames with gasoline, shooting rifles at targets and running wind sprints in the basement. We may be wired to grow into thrill-seeker or homebody. We may be pushed or comforted, making us seemingly hard or gentle. We may even succumb to foolish gender expectations: Men *should* act tough and strong; it's *okay* for women to be anxious or afraid. Then, in moments easily overlooked, we tend to break those molds.

Brenton pulls out a knife with a shimmering blade. Bluefish are a dark, oily fish. Unlike stripers, they need to be gutted right away. The most intense sport fishermen don't even let them

die on their own terms; they clock them in the heads with a metal bat to speed up the process. Their meat will taste better if the blood is released quickly.

Brenton slits the fish's throat. A thick mucus-like material leaks out. He slices at the pectoral fins, pulling the knife down through to the fish anus. The body cavity is open, ready for dissection. The guts are now loose. With a gloved hand, he pulls them out in one large mushy mass.

Brenton throws the organs, slimy and brown, overboard. They drift away in the current like seaweed. Drew, gloved hands covered with splatters of red, leans over his son. He gives a nod: *a job well done; this will be dinner*. Brenton wipes a smidge of guts onto his forehead. I watch—jealous of how easy they make it look: roaming the open ocean, slicing fish, radiating masculinity and toughness. But it's okay; I am beginning to understand that I, too, could be the type of woman who finds herself at home in the sea. I glance from father to son, wondering if someone might display a rare trace of vulnerability, thinking one might wince at this grotesque showcase of crimson and slime. They don't. Then again, neither do I.