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Small Towns

By

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BA in English and French, Cornell University, 2015

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Fiction Writing

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This thesis was examined and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's in Fine Arts in Fiction Writing by:

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On November 22, 2021

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of short stories written by Eve Glasergreen. In Advisor Ann William's words: There are themes of women dealing with sometimes horrific or difficult situations in order to be empowered and move on. These stories handle the psychology of characters as they explore, hide, jump too fast, make mistakes, try to make amends, get into trouble and sometimes out of trouble.

Hirsute

Michelle stepped out of her shower and sipped her habitual breakfast Bloody Mary. It was extra strong this morning because at 11pm last night she learned that Elle Jubilant, her mother, had died. The hospital left a voicemail to say that Elle's heart had stopped while she was teaching a dance class and to please call to make arrangements. Michelle towed off and played the voicemail again. It was the same as last night. She pictured her mother's last moment: Elle gestured in front of the studio mirror before clutching her chest and collapsing to the polished floor on which her cat-eye glasses skidded to stop at a twelve-year old's foot. Michelle imagined the adolescent dancers in their leggings and thick socks clustering over their instructor before one of them was self-possessed enough to call for Callie at the front desk. She pictured her own twelve-year old self finding her mother dead on the dance studio floor and didn't know what she would've done other than stand there, gawking.

Michelle never danced, instead she'd been a soccer player. She thought of the game when she scored the victory goal for her Youth Soccer Club at regionals. She was twelve and everyone called her Midge. That afternoon, Midge didn't register the freezing rain or her shin-splints.

"I can't believe your lips aren't blue," Elle said. Her cat-eye glasses were foggy, making direct eye-contact difficult. Elle undid Midge's ponytail and combed it out with her fingers before retying it. She turned Midge to face her and squinted hard through her milk-glass lenses. She took off her glasses and pocketed them in her jeans, showing her impossibly large and long-lashed eyes. She had been a model in her teens and now worked as a dance instructor and talent recruiter. "What's on your face? Did you eat something?" Midge wiped her face with both hands

and saw only water when she looked down at her palms. Elle rubbed Midge's upper lip with her icy pointer finger. The rain had flattened and condensed the down on Midge's face so it was more pronounced than it had before. Midge squirmed under her mother's gaze and looked side to side, hoping that none of her teammates were watching. Midge made eye-contact with Coach Bryant who was in the middle of a conversation with another parent. "Oh my god. You have hair on your face. When did this start?" Midge shivered. Elle plucked a hair off Midge's face and inspected it.

"Ow!"

On the car ride home, Midge sat on a pile of towels and ripped off her sodden cleats. A new kind of heat coursed through her body—a fear that something was wrong with her and that she had failed to fix it on time.

At home, Midge spent an hour in the bathroom. Her soccer uniform wilted to the tile floor in a disgraced pile that soaked in its own puddle. She didn't bother to hang it up or wring it out. She stood naked in front of the sink with her nipples puckering from the chill and her arm hair standing on end and her wisps of pubic hair pressed against her thigh and her leg stubble poking out of her shins and the hair on her head unraveling into a long straggle of magpie nest. She felt like a creature. Indeed, there was the strip that had been right under her nose for she didn't know how long. It had grown quietly and gradually, and since she didn't spend time staring at herself, she hadn't noticed, or more importantly, she hadn't been bothered.

Now, Michelle ran her hands over her face and saw water in her palms. She had every hair in place today, every whisker plucked. Elle had been the person who wouldn't hesitate to tell Michelle that her face was prickly. Michelle thought of one of the many times Elle had

brought her to the waxing room as a young teen. Giana, the esthetician, laid out her spatulas on a metal tray and turned on the pot to melt the wax. Giana's lips had expanded to twice the size they had been the last time. Midge saw her regularly at Elle's paint-by-number and sip nights. Elle sat outside in the waiting room. The waxing room was perfumed by a diffuser huffing lavender mist into the air. Midge sat in the reclining chair in the center of the room and listened to the mechanical whir. Midge repeated Elle's rationale, *I don't want you to be made fun of*, like a mantra. Giana wore a tight black t-shirt through which Midge could see the outline of her nipple piercings. Midge wondered if she would do something like that one day.

"I'm going to tilt the seat back. Don't worry honey, it goes by fast!" Giana said. Midge gripped the arms of the chair as Giana tilted the recliner back. Giana heated the wax. Midge braced herself. At Midge's pediatrician appointment the previous day, Doctor Lee had taken one look at Midge's face, asked if her periods were regular and concluded that there was nothing wrong with her. Elle wasn't satisfied with Doctor Lee's answer.

Midge clutched her chair to prepare for the burning sensation of hot wax, but to her surprise, the wax was only warm and soothing on her face. Giana started talking as she spread the rest of the wax over Midge's lower legs. Elle had decided it was a waste of time to only wax such a small area of skin. Midge was relieved that they were going to spare her pilose arms.

"You wouldn't believe this guy. Yesterday he comes in and says he wants to buy some waxes for his wife, Val. He says that Val needs a Brazilian. So, he buys twelve of them! Then, this morning, Val comes in and says she doesn't like Brazilians and would rather have her bikini line done. And she says that they're divorcing!"

“Oh, wow,” Midge said. The wax on her face cooled and hardened into a pliable, sap-like substance. Giana ripped off the strip with one swift motion. It stung, but it was exciting to Midge to think that the pain could make her as beautiful as Elle.

Other than Elle’s death, today was like any other day. Michelle’s phone, with several more calls missed from the hospital, was on mute. She saturated a brush with the red pigment and lined the edges of her lips before filling in the middle like her mother taught her. Her husband, Marlin, had left at 8 that morning for work. At 7, she heard him slip into his monogrammed bathrobe and shuffle downstairs. He didn’t know about Elle yet. Michelle needed to keep it to herself. She hadn’t risen until 10, several hours after Marlin, so she could safely ruminate alone and prepare her Bloody Mary. She kept the ingredients in the garage fridge that he rarely used in the fall. Marlin had only asked her once about the hair on her face, back when they were dating, when she was lazy with her morning pluck. His tone had been curious, not accusing. She didn’t answer him, and he dropped the subject maybe because he knew the answer and he could tell she was ashamed.

She downed the rest of her drink on an empty stomach. Once dressed, she sealed her laptop into her purse alongside her lipstick and a leather journal. Yes, she was published, but if her husband hadn’t been a CFO, she’d be bunking with roommates. His money made her look like she lived off lifestyle blogging and romance-novel-writing. Really, she lived off very little. She was too thin for a seed to stick in her uterus. She hadn’t had her period in several months, but as she had learned years ago, skipping it did nothing to stop her mustache from growing. Skipping it made it harder and harder for her to explain to Marlin that she did want a child, but

that she didn't want a child more than her thinness. She would work on her novel today at the *Creamed Bean*.

She listened to the maple and oak leaves crunching under her tires and thought about her reoccurring dream as she drove downtown. Most nights she would enter a candlelit, windowless chamber where a five-foot-tall black bird told her to lie down in a reclining chair. She was naked and she would obey, lie back, and the blackbird's pale and finely manicured hands extended out of its wings. She had to be as still as possible so it could pinch each hair out of her skin one at a time. On the front of her body, it would start with the patches of fur on her toes and end with her upper lip. It would spare the hair on her head. Once the bird was done with the front of her body, it would flip her over and start with the backs of her ankles. The bird was like an automaton—it only knew how to carry out the one task of plucking her nude.

The fender of Michelle's car grated over the bumper block in the parking lot. She muttered *fuckin' shit* to herself, put the car in reverse, and dragged the fender back over the block. The front of the car landed on the other side of the block with a thud. Once she had the car safely in park, she slunk out.

"Look, mommy, she broke her car!" The little boy and his mom stared at her from two parking spots down, the mother with her eyebrows as high as they could lift. Michelle looked away from them and walked into the *Creamed Bean*. She shook out her clammy hands.

The café walls were the color of a splash of coffee in a cup of milk. Air plants in glass orbs dangled from a ceiling that boasted its original tin panels. She approached the counter and smiled at the teenage barista despite sensing his disdain for her.

“I’ll have a large americano please,” she said. The least she could do was order Elle’s favorite drink and think about her while she tried to sober up. If she got another DWI, she wouldn’t have a license anymore. She doubted that Marlin could write another letter about her excellent character, even though he believed all the good things that he wrote about her. Michelle sat between two occupied tables to feel anonymous and opened her laptop. In ten rushed swallows, the americano and its bitterness disappeared. The barista had burned the espresso.

She’d hit a dead end with her romance novel, *Rose’s Choice*, because Rose wasn’t making any important decisions. Instead, she was fading off the page. Scanning the café, she searched for a person to draw inspiration from. This tactic almost never failed her. She pulled her hair into a slick ponytail that concentrated her observational powers.

Most people sat over paninis and coffee on their lunch breaks. No one struck her as remarkable. A man sat across from a woman, two women sat together, but then there was a person who caught her eye—maybe only because she sat by the front window where the sun struck the back of her head and illuminated her short, frizzy curls. Michelle wasn’t used to being caught while people-watching, so it took her off-guard when the woman gazed back at Michelle through pristine metal-rimmed glasses.

Unnerved, Michelle lowered her eyes and squinted at this person. She wore her curly hair cropped close to her round head. Her loose flannel and black cargo pants were smudged with grease. Her nose turned upwards to the tin ceiling in defiance, of who knows what. Her hands interlaced over a book to keep it open until she closed the book and approached Michelle’s table. A whirlwind picked up the debris in Michelle’s chest and swept it around. She pretended not to notice this woman entering her space and her smell of metal and lanolin.

“Hey, I’m sorry to bother you. I couldn’t help but see what happened to your car when you pulled in. I think it’s leaking fluid.” Michelle squinted hard at her, wondering what gave her the authority. Michelle’s cheeks deepened to red. “I’m a mechanic. I wouldn’t mind taking a look for you. I’m Sam.” Sam extended her hand. Michelle took it limply but lingered in the friction of their skin rubbing together. Sam’s fingertips were calloused and warm. Michelle figured that Sam must think she was daft given her lack of response. Sam sat across from Michelle and crossed her arms on the table. Her muscles twitched in her forearms. Michelle felt the table vibrate from the movement of her knee going up and down underneath. Sam seemed ready to spring out of her seat at any moment and go for a run. The concentrated physical energy excited Michelle. It was the kind of energy she had only had between the ages of nine and fourteen when she played soccer.

“I’m Midge.” She hadn’t introduced herself as Midge since she was fourteen. Sam smiled at her widely. Michelle noticed her warm brown eyes and thin blond lashes. She had peach fuzz on her upper lip—the kind of hair that was acceptable for a woman. It drove Michelle crazy when fine, pale-haired women protested shaving and waxing. They knew nothing about unacceptable hair: wiry, dark, abundant. “My car is fine.” Sam raised her eyebrows. Michelle gulped. She wasn’t sure that her car was fine. She thought of what Marlin would say if he saw that she had damaged another car. It wouldn’t be easy to explain because she’d have to omit the three-shot Bloody Mary. He thought she was doing better with her drinking. She couldn’t bear to break his heart that way, so, she’d have to explain that she’d daydreamed, which would be another kind of humiliation. “You know, maybe you could take a look, if you don’t mind,” Michelle said.

“I don’t mind at all.” Michelle closed her laptop and walked outside with Sam. She scrutinized Sam’s walk and concluded that she walked like a boy. Sam was taller than Michelle, in fact, maybe taller than her husband, but that wasn’t too hard to do. She found herself following closely behind. “What do you do?”

“I’m working on a romance novel.” Sam nodded gravely and knelt on the ground beside Michelle’s fender. Michelle couldn’t tell if Sam took her seriously or if she didn’t want to show a negative reaction to Michelle’s response. Michelle wanted to know so badly what Sam thought as she observed the curve of Sam’s back underneath her t-shirt. Her back was muscled and supple. Michelle felt an urge to touch her back, to absorb some of her energy, her physicality. She crossed her arms and hovered over Sam. The damage that she’d chosen to ignore earlier made her flinch. Red fluid spread from under the front of the car.

“Well, you’ll have to replace your fender. And this tire has a bubble. I think we should jack this up to get a better look underneath. The transmission is leaking. We need to patch that asap. My shop is like two miles away. If you want, I can jack it up for you there. You don’t want to wait on this leak.” Michelle rubbed her chin with her thumbnail. She liked the expert way that Sam diagnosed all the problems. “You can follow me in your car. If anything seems terribly wrong just pull over. But it’ll make it two miles.”

“Yeah, I guess that sounds good,” Michelle said. She stood still as Sam got up. Sam tilted her head to the side, and Michelle finally realized how strange her behavior, her clipped tone, must seem to Sam who was trying to help her.

“I’ve got the orange pick-up over there.” Michelle nodded. She started her own car and waited for Sam to pull out before following her onto the road. Michelle’s hands were freezing

from nerves. Marlin's comments from the last time she had damaged the car, just a month ago, surfaced in her mind. He said, *maybe you shouldn't drive anymore. I'm afraid you're going to kill yourself one day*. She had almost no confidence left in her ability to safely operate a vehicle. It was easier for her to say that her skills were lacking than to admit that maybe it was her morning drinks. Or maybe it was Elle. In high school, Elle had yelled incessantly at Michelle while they practiced parallel parking for her third go at her driver's license.

The front of Michelle's car rattled as she followed Sam onto a gravel driveway to *Sam's Auto Shop*. Two men worked on a car at one of several repair stations in the open garage. Chickens bobbed across the bordering lawn and pecked the ground for bugs. Sam parked and approached Michelle. Michelle rolled down her window.

"I'll drive it into the shop for you," Sam said. When Michelle stepped out of her car, her heels sunk three inches into the mud—it had rained the night before—and her feet caved inwards. She fell out of her shoes. Her toes sunk into the mud. She jammed her muddy feet back into her heels and resituated herself on the gravel as if nothing had happened. Michelle caught Sam smiling faintly at her. It was a smile, not a smirk, but it was a knowing smile. Michelle's face burned. She worried that she wouldn't have time to clean the mud off before going home to Marlin.

"You can clean up inside if you want to," Sam said before driving the car into the shop. Michelle could hardly believe how little reaction Sam showed. She was used to reactions, to happy, sad, and angry faces. Sam came back to Michelle. "I'm having the guys work on this one. Do you want to come inside? The office is in my house over there. It's a good spot to wait."

“Sure,” Michelle said. She followed Sam a bit farther down the driveway. Her arms remained crossed, and her purse dangled from the crook of her elbow. They reached a remodeled barn with multiple skylights in the roof. The red paint peeled on the outside. One of the sides looked smooth to the touch—the flaking paint had been sanded down. Three fat orange pumpkins and four knobby gourds decorated the front step. Michelle thought it quaint, but hardly an ideal spot for an adult to live. She started wondering how old Sam was. Maybe she was her age or maybe a little younger. Michelle couldn’t pin her down and she wanted to ask Sam every question that came into her mind.

“Still working on the outside. Started sanding so I can paint it a new color.”

“Oh. What color?”

“Navy.” Sam opened the door for Michelle and followed her inside. The skylights let in the shifting clouds and illuminated the otherwise dark space. It was so rustic compared to any space that Michelle had lived in. Elle’s house was pristine, and she bought everything new. Michelle had made her home the same way. The open door to Michelle’s left gave her a view of the undecorated office. Stacks of paper and pens littered the desk along with several empty, coffee-stained mugs. The screensaver on the desktop cycled through a montage of antique car photographs, some of them featuring Sam standing in front of them. Besides the office and the bathroom to Michelle’s right, the rest of the space was an open floor plan that took advantage of the high barn ceilings. She noticed stairs going up to a loft in the back corner. It all seemed unprofessional and wonderful to Michelle. She could unwind in this place. “Midge, you can rinse your feet off in the bathroom if you want. Do you want some coffee?”

Michelle left her heels on the entry mat and rinsed her feet in the shower. She peered at herself in the mirror and got close to her reflection. She scrutinized her mouth and was dismayed to see her mustache growing back. She could see the dark little spots where the hair hadn't quite broken the surface of her skin. Since her skin had long ago grown allergic to waxing, she couldn't wax anymore without growing an angry rash. And the damn laser treatment didn't work. Those hair follicles sprouted within a day of their removal. She didn't know if she'd have time to pluck before Marlin got home. Besides the one question he asked her early into their relationship, they had never talked about her facial hair. She assumed that any reminder of it would make her unattractive to him. She almost always kept tweezers in her purse in case she needed to pluck in the middle of the day. Depending on her hormones and the weather, it could grow unexpectedly. It grew faster in the summer, and with the fall it had been slowing down. Michelle rummaged through her purse for her tweezers. She'd forgotten them. Instead, her phone screen lit up with another incoming call from the hospital.

Michelle denied the call and wondered if Sam had tweezers she could borrow. She scanned the cabinet to the right of the mirror to see if there were any laying in the open. She saw nail clippers, a comb, a box of tampons, and a tube of personal lubricant next to a vibrator. Michelle blushed and left the bathroom. She took a seat in a recliner near the kitchen and felt surprised by how comfortable she was in the renovated barn.

At home, she almost always wore shoes. If she lounged in the living room, she at least had a pair of slippers on. The cool air on her freshly washed feet felt so good. She extended her toes as wide as she could. Yoga toes prevented bunions. She was terrified of growing bunions. Elle had them and they had made it painful for her to teach her dance lessons the last five years.

“Cream and sugar, Midge?”

“Black.” Their hands touched briefly when Sam passed the mug to Michelle. The contact lingered, tingled the long, bleached hairs on Michelle’s forearm. Michelle felt a glimmer of speed and strength flash through her body. She gulped audibly. She had to ask if Sam had tweezers. Sam sat in the chair next to her, and Michelle wanted her to come closer so she could feel the surge of energy again.

“Do you have any tweezers I could borrow?” Michelle watched Sam’s features change. She had interrupted her in the middle of a thought.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Do you have any tweezers? I have to pluck this before I get home. I had laser treatment a while ago, but it didn’t work.” She couldn’t stop herself from rubbing her upper lip. Sam laughed. Michelle let the sound of Sam’s laugh relax her.

“Pluck what? I don’t see anything. Sorry, I don’t have tweezers.”

“No, you don’t understand, I’ll grow a mustache by the evening.”

“You look fine. Some people would kill for a mustache. You should let it grow!”

Michelle thought about what a great athlete she had been before she, or rather, her mother, started obsessing over her facial hair. She had been the soccer star until she started sabotaging her body and denying it what it needed. Even now, she didn’t keep any tampons in her purse. She didn’t expect to ever have her period.

Michelle’s phone screen blared on the table between her and Sam. Michelle tightened her ponytail and averted her eyes from the screen but had nothing to say to keep their conversation moving.

“You can answer that,” Sam said. “Looks like it’s the hospital?”

“They want to know what funeral home to bring my mother to. Maybe they’ll stop calling me and call my husband instead.” Michelle started to cry.

“I’m so sorry, Midge.” Sam reached across the table and took Michelle’s hand in hers. The warmth coursed through Michelle as she lifted her coffee mug to her lips to conceal her scrunched features, but her hand trembled, and she spilled hot coffee on her blouse. The cream-colored silk, now splotched with brown, stuck to her bustier underneath. She put the mug on the table with an audible thud. Sam inched closer and opened her arms to give Michelle an embrace over the tiny coffee table. There it was, the wound-up energy ready to spring into motion.

Michelle leaned close to her, inhaling the smell of lanolin on Sam’s neck that was earthy and sweet. Michelle leaned back from the embrace to unbutton her blouse, fold, and place it on the table. There wasn’t too much coffee on it, but maybe enough to justify exposing her skin if only to feel the physical urgency that Sam radiated. It made her feel like an athlete again, like she could break into a sweat and push her lungs to their max. Michelle had never been one to make bold moves, but her heightened state was too much for her to control anymore.

“I’m going to have to wash this, too,” Michelle said.

Sam raised her eyebrows at Michelle’s bustier. Michelle saw pity, attraction, and disbelief in the way that Sam sat on the precipice of her seat with each muscle and tendon poised towards her. Michelle knew how good her bustier looked—she had initially chosen it with that evening in mind. Her plan had been to casually undo the first buttons of her blouse in front of Marlin when he got home, but this was so much better.

Sam's lips parted slightly. Michelle reached for Sam's hand again and stroked her fingers. Sam didn't move her hand, but she didn't return the gesture, either. Michelle watched Sam's face while she moved her fingers over Sam's. Sam kept her eyes lowered and Michelle withdrew her hand. The awkwardness of sitting, completely sober, in her bustier, at a stranger's home sunk her in her seat. Her inhibitions came back for a moment, and she felt it necessary to distract from the moment that she had created.

"You know what, I want to see what I look like with a full mustache again. Do you have eyeliner or a sharpie?" Michelle said. Sam's smile returned.

"Yeah, I have some eyebrow filler. It's a dark brown. It'll match your hair." Sam walked to the bathroom and came back with a stick of makeup. She twisted the stick open and primed it by drawing a few test lines on Michelle's hand. Michelle tilted her face up for Sam and closed her eyes. Sam applied the makeup in delicate strokes over Michelle's upper lip. Her hand moved from her wrist like someone practiced in painting. The sensation flushed Michelle to her core. "There." Michelle opened the camera on her phone and used it as a mirror. She turned her head from left to right and pursed her lips. The painted mustache was thick and full, no shy patches like her own, and even flattering like Frida Kahlo's unibrow. She wished that her mother could see her like this.

"Can you take a picture of me?" Michelle asked. She sat tall with her chin tilted upwards in defiance. She felt like she was getting away with something. Her skin was hot. Sam took her phone out of her back pocket and snapped a photo of Michelle. Michelle jumped at the opportunity. "Here, I'll put my number in and send it to myself." Michelle stood up and added herself as a contact in Sam's phone before sending herself the picture.

“You could send that to your husband,” Sam said. Michelle laughed.

“No...” Michelle’s bare feet itched as they stood in front of one another with less than a foot of space between them. Beads of sweat broke out on her temple. Sam leaned closer to her. They kissed lightly on the lips once, and then again. Twice, three times, then four times, but they never went too deep into the kiss. It was like an experiment. Michelle placed her hand on the nape of Sam’s neck and ran her hand against the grain of Sam’s hair. Sam touched Michelle’s bustier briefly before drawing back. “Maybe I will send him the picture.” Before she could have second thoughts, she sent her picture to Marlin without any text.

Sam’s phone rang and she picked it up. Sam lifted a finger to signal that she needed a minute and walked a few paces away from Michelle. Michelle tried to listen to the conversation, but she could only deduce that it was about a car, maybe her car. Michelle imagined what life would be like if she knew how to do something practical and if she paid for her own expenses. She fantasized about running a farm. She would drive her truck around to survey her fields. She wouldn’t do most of the bending-over to weed and harvest, but she would oversee the processes. When Sam came back, her face had changed. It was more serious.

“Good news. We sealed the leak and changed your tire. We can’t fix your fender today; we’ll have to order parts. But everything else is okay. The rattling sound was just a plastic part that came loose underneath. We screwed it back on.” Sam said. Michelle bristled at her professional tone. “Let’s go to the office and you can be on your way.”

Michelle frowned. She picked up her blouse and buttoned it as slowly as she could manage. She followed Sam into the office and took a seat in the rolling chair across from her. Sam typed in the password to the computer and entered the costs of the work they had done on

the car, with a generous discount. Michelle paid. Sam got up and waited for Michelle to do the same. It would be awkward for Sam to leave the tiny office without Michelle going out the door first. Michelle just looked up at Sam.

“Thank you for helping me. I’ve got to do something nice for you. Can I take you out for coffee? Maybe at the Bean? Do you go there often? It’s one of my favorite spots, but I haven’t seen you there before,” Michelle said. Sam inched towards the door by scooting sideways between the desk and Michelle.

“It’s okay, you don’t need to do anything for me. I can tell you have a lot on your plate,” Sam said. She pushed her glasses closer to the bridge of her nose.

“Please, it’s my pleasure,” Michelle said. Michelle tried to sound desperate. Sam hesitated. She gave Michelle a long look and laughed under her breath at her. Michelle couldn’t understand why. Was the desperation turning her off? Michelle pleaded with her eyes. “I want to know more about you.”

“I don’t think so,” Sam said. She squeezed through the gap between Michelle’s chair and the wall and then waited for her outside the office door. Michelle got up and stuffed her feet back into her mud-caked heels. She followed Sam outside while considering how to get what she wanted. They didn’t say anything to one another. The weather had changed since they arrived at the shop. The clouds had gathered into a thick cover overhead, making it feel several hours later than it was. The chickens gathered in group huddle inside their pen and some of them sat on the ground with their eyes closed. She thought that the chickens looked blissful. Michelle felt like a whole day had passed since she had arrived at Sam’s. It had gotten colder, too. Rain started to patter. Michelle tilted her head up to feel the water on her face, but then she remembered her

mustache. The makeup might not be waterproof. She covered her mouth to protect the mustache from the rain and ducked into her car. It was time to see her mother, just as she was.

The Black Diamond Express to Hell

New York City, 1930.

Mr. Ernie Kinglet took what he knew were his last steps in the city. His passage, alone, through Penn Station was his preferred farewell even if he was leaving sooner than he would've liked. 138 feet of cast-iron arches and glass soared above him, letting the late morning light illuminate pools of dust swirling in the air. The space was expansive and full of breath: train steam, smoke, and people calling to one another. The brilliant rays piercing through the glass cast harsh shadows under the brims of each hat. At least one hundred people waited for a train—they cast glances to the grand clock above, or below, to their timepieces. Ernie thought, goodbye, beautiful metropolis, there is nothing as noble as you in Buffalo, but I am ignoble now, so it is fitting that I should go there.

His glasses steamed with sweat from his walk to the station. He polished them with a cloth embroidered with his former lover's initials.

"Sir, do be careful," A young man said, gently cupping Ernie's elbow as though he were a grandfather. He was sixty, but not a grandfather or a father. Ernie, unable to see farther than his nose without his glasses on, restored his vision and realized that the points of his loafers hovered over the tracks, halfway off the edge of the platform. He nodded and stepped back several feet from the tracks and the concerned whippersnapper.

The young man lifted his felt hat and slicked back his hair. Two ladies alighted, one on each of his arms. All three dressed sharp with touches like brocade-banded hats tilted to one side of the head. An erect, orange feather spouted from the fabric on the young man's hat. Ernie

thought the feather made him look like a pansy. The women on his arms wore matching belted dresses in different colors; one in orange like the feather and the other in gray. The woman closest to him had one eye concealed by the brim of her cloche, and the other flickered over him. Her smile was rakish under her red lipstick, under her gray cap and permed, white curls. Ernie wasn't sure why the threesome was so curious about him. Certainly, their glances were not subtle. He hadn't been appraised by the looks of strangers in a long while.

“All you drunkards, you going to Hell on the Black Diamond train!” A man in tattered, black clergy vestments staggered towards the platform. Ernie would miss New York surprises like this. Ladies and gentlemen averted their gazes. “The Black Diamond train start off for Hell soon!” The soused clergyman slumped into the nearest bench, out of breath. He pawed his face with a greasy kerchief. Ernie dug in his pocket for his watch to check the time, but his fingers grasped only his cotton square. He had no doubt that he had put the watch in that pocket. The city didn't skimp on kind farewells.

The Black Diamond, glistening with fresh coats of red and black paint, ground to halt at its station.

“All aboard!”

The train made only one trip in a day, in only one direction, so it opened to cars that were empty save for several attendants in pressed uniforms that matched the train exterior. Ernie could feel the stillness that had been left sitting all night inside the train. He thought there was nothing like a fresh, clean train car. It was a place where he didn't need to do anything except arrive and he didn't need to be anything more than an object moving through time. Turning away from the soused clergyman, he handed his valise to a gloved attendant. Inside: another wool suit, a change

of loafers, crocheting needles and important papers. *EMK*, embossed into the leather with gold-leaf, implied status that he no longer had.

“Welcome aboard the handsomest train in the world!” They said this every single time. The phrase had jerked him awake before when he was about to fall asleep. Ernie recalled the ad in the newspaper from the first time he learned about the train: *the scenery is unequalled and the appointments first class*. His initial trip to Buffalo from Penn Station was a Saturday joyride on the luxury train to diffuse from a week at the once *Berry-MacMillon-Kinglet* law firm in New York where he was partner until recently. His ensuing trips to Buffalo from the city over several years devolved into an escape from his favorite vice; his favorite person. He had only buckled once and brought his lover with him to his Buffalo cottage in the middle of nowhere, towards the end of their affair. He had loved the feeling of sitting in the parlor room of the train because it felt like he could levitate just above reality and he still hoped to love it. He felt like he could leave his public self in the station and suspend himself in a private world free from scrutiny. It had felt *safe* for him and his lover on the train, but ironically, a friend of MacMillon—one of The Three—had been on the train for the first time to vacation with his wife and saw Kinglet touching his lover’s hand under the table. How stupid had he been, to think they were safe from observation in the place that felt most private to him? The Black Diamond was the only place that Ernie would take a break from working, and now he would never work again.

“Welcome, Mr. Kinglet, we’ve saved your preferred seat,” said the attendant of the parlor room. Ernie settled into the velvet chair in the back corner of the parlor, closest to the smoking room and farthest from the dining car. He liked to come and go between his seat and he liked to

enjoy a Cuban cigar. Smoking helped him mull over any current cases, but now he supposed, he had only his own case to consider.

The parlor was arranged with wicker and velvet chairs tilted around coffee tables for drinks and newspapers. Wrought iron lamps and chandeliers hung from the arched ceiling painted split-pea green. Mahogany panels on the walls were polished to such a high shine that Ernie could check his thinning silver hair in the reflection. There were fewer silver hairs and more white ones. He felt that his forced, premature retirement had brought on rapid aging.

Ernie was one of the first onboard and he watched the train fill to its 28-person capacity. There were young couples taking their honeymoons at Niagara Falls. He thought that none of them knew how lucky they were to be starting their lives. He noted with amazement that everyone was one of a pair... but they couldn't all be, there was another oddball in the mix. Oh, it was one of the two women who had come with the pansy man.

The very threesome settled into the chairs nearest him with plenty of chatter. He saw them as undesirable as a flock of starlings. He did not feel the gentle levitation that he craved from his plush seat. Before Ernie could order his White Mule, pansy man inserted himself again,

“Sir, I hope you don't mind if we sit with you. We'd hate for you to be alone the entire trip.” Ernie grunted and removed his hat. The pansy man spoke in a way that milked the charm in his voice until it was saccharine; the kind of man that Ernie loathed to represent in court. His legs were so long that when he crossed them, his pant leg came up to his mid-calf, exposing polka dot socks. Ernie thought that the man's socks were as pansy as his feather. “My name is John Sterling.” They shook hands. “This is my wife, Glorie, and her sister, Miss Lucia Smith.” Ernie squinted at the women and still couldn't imagine that they shared blood. Glorie, the woman in

grey was too pale and pink. Miss Lucia Smith's skin was milky-brown and gold underneath the white powder on her face. The closer he looked, the more it seemed to Ernie that Lucia had some colored in her. Her exposed and unpowdered wrists told her secret—he had an urge to tell her to cover them to protect herself.

“Ernie Kinglet. Thank you again for your kind help earlier,” Ernie said. Lucia extended her hand to Ernie. He took it and he did not feel any wedding band underneath her day gloves. Strands of her kinky hair escaped from under her hat. Like Glorie's hair, it was bleached peroxide blonde.

“Lucia Smith.”

“Mrs. Sterling.” Glorie extended her hand in a manner that expected a kiss. Ernie grasped her fingers and released them. She cocked her head at him. Was she looking for a worm? The attendants came around for drink orders—the policy was that as soon as the train was moving, so did the liquor.

“Three straight Stingers! No, make that four!” Sterling said.

“And a White Mule, please,” Ernie said.

“And a White Mule,” Sterling echoed. “What brings you aboard, Mr. Kinglet?”

“I'd better ask you that. I'm a regular, so I know this must be your first time.” Ernie couldn't be bothered to give them any personal details. If he said that he was retiring...fleeing to the countryside, Sterling would likely ask him about his former career, and if he was asked about his former career, he'd have to somehow deflect any mention of the high-profile firm because it was part of his agreement with MacMillon to never discuss his time as a partner, in addition to paying damages to save himself and Berry from imprisonment.

“We’ve been on every other luxury train in the country. Have you been on the Wind Setter? They had a drink called the Gold Rush with the rim of the glass gold leafed. Hard to imagine anything competing with that ride. But this time we are on our way to Niagara for our honeymoon,” Sterling said, looping his arm around Glorie’s waist. Ernie could hear Sterling stealing the lines to a popular song. He’d heard that too many times over his career. Ernie tried not to chuckle at the idea of a newlywed couple bringing the bride’s spinster sister along for their honeymoon.

“And I am desperate for a vacation,” Lucia said, several beats after Sterling. It was the right thing for her to say because it anticipated his doubts, but she was not a great actress. She moved at a slower pace than the other two, Ernie thought, like wading through sadness. He was movingly at a slow pace, too.

Ernie was not quite sure what they intended to sell him. It sounded like they were witnesses to a criminal event and that they had all conspired to tell the same lie. Especially in Lucia’s voice there was such flatness that he wondered if she was sarcastic. To his surprise, Ernie felt Lucia’s foot dance around his own under the coffee table, but she did not make eye-contact above it. A half-hearted attempt at seduction. He hoped that she did not mistake his stare on her for sexual attraction. More than anything, he worried about her.

The tinkling sound of ice moving in glass alerted them to their drinks. They arrived on the coffee table with folded napkins and hand-blown glass stirrers. Ernie took his White Mule, tore the sprig of mint into shreds, and stirred them into his glass. His drink was the only one with ice. The three other glasses, filled to the brim with cognac, cast an amber glow on the coffee table. Lucia gulped her Stinger, leaving only the dregs behind. She was so small that Ernie

fretted about the liquor hitting her fast and hard. The Sterlings enjoyed their drinks in what society would call a more civilized manner, but they pushed the fourth Stinger towards Ernie.

“You must try it,” Glorie said.

“I have before, but if it really pleases you,” Ernie said. Glorie smiled, revealing a gap between her front teeth, as Ernie sipped from the Stinger. He puckered his lips and set the glass back on the table with a thump. There was far too much crème de menthe in it. It was too sweet.

“Well, I suppose it could be better rimmed in gold,” Glorie said. Ernie grunted and decided that the next drink he would order would be the most bitter on the menu.

Ernie loved the smoking room almost as much as the parlor. He settled onto a stool behind Mrs. Sterling and Miss. Smith and lit his first cigar, a Cuban *Romeo y Julieta*. He closed his eyes to enjoy the sound of the train moving and opened them to watch the cloud of smoke leave his mouth. He liked when there was enough space around him that the smoke touched no one. He remembered the women who would have been thrilled to marry him even if he would have never been a true husband to them.

Glorie and Lucia leaned against the plate-glass windows while they inhaled from their *Le Nil* cigarettes. Glorie bent her neck into Lucia’s, brushed her lips against Lucia’s cheeks and let a stream of gray into Lucia’s ear. It was a real *Julieta y Julieta* show, nothing like when Ernie covered Berry’s hand under the table in the train parlor only for their privacy to be stolen from them by a stranger. This display was to be *seen*, this was *given* to the passengers, perhaps for a later charge, like those street peddlers who handed roses to pedestrians before improvising a cost. Any experienced traveler, like Ernie, would know to close their hand before the stem entered the cupped palm.

Several of the newlywed men clustered in the corner opposite from Glorie and Lucia. One of the men bored his eyes into Lucia while he alternated between puffs of his cigar and sips of his cocktail; back and forth, back and forth. The cocktail sloshed and could not keep pace with the man's thirst. Ernie chuckled and heard the clergyman from the platform: *All you drunkards, you going to Hell...* Ernie agreed with the clergyman that they were drunkards, but he was not sure that any of them were going to Hell. Berry, on the other hand, was certain that they would, that Ernie would, but maybe that Berry himself would be saved.

Glorie looked directly at the men and leaned deeper into Lucia's neck. Lucia was tiring of the performance. When it was her turn to blow into Glorie's ear, she blew forcefully and Glorie wrinkled her nose at the rush of hot air. Ernie could only conclude that Lucia and Glorie were selling themselves, or that Glorie was selling Lucia.

"I don't want to pretend to be your sister anymore," Lucia said. The cadence of her speech was fast and slightly slurred. "You can be the sister and I'll be the wife." Ernie felt like the city was following him, encouraging make-believe; Berry make-believing that he wanted his wife, himself, pretending that he didn't still love Berry, these women pretending they were sisters, then lovers, then friends when they were really enemies.

"Taking turns is only fair," Glorie said. She turned and made a show of startling at the sight of Ernie perched on his stool. "Mr. Kinglet! I thought you were talking with my husband, but it's swell to see you here, with us. May I speak with you for a moment privately?" Ernie nodded. Lucia kept her gaze away from them as though she couldn't hear the conversation.

Glorie leaned her hip on Ernie's stool. He adjusted himself onto the edge of the seat to give himself space from her, but it only invited her to perch on the side with him. The red line

defining her upper lip had smudged from its contact with Lucia's cheek, leaving a nosebleed of a stain. He kept his cigar close to his face to cover her cloying smell with bitterness.

Glorie whispered, "My sister is quite keen on you, Mr. Kinglet. She thinks that you are a fine gentleman, and it must be lonely riding alone when everyone is here with someone else. I don't mean to presume, but I have the feeling that you are keen on her as well. Isn't she a lovely girl? I know people have different feelings about these kinds of things, but if you wanted, we could arrange a meeting, in private, for the two of you." He smelled the third Stinger on her breath.

"Mrs. Sterling, as lovely as she is, that is not my cup of tea."

"Oh. I see. Well, I wouldn't normally offer this, but since I don't believe my husband would mind, because he looks at you fondly, we could spend some time together, tête-à-tête." She blew smoke into his ear, and he felt nothing. "You know where to find me." Glorie slumped off the stool and walked towards the easier men. They offered her their drinks and their smokes. Lucia hovered over the table next to Ernie's, her eyes averted. She kept one hand on the table to steady herself.

A thunderstorm gathered somewhere over Pennsylvania and cloaked the air with humidity. Before anyone could shutter the windows, the rain struck the roof and purple veins of lightning exploded into webs of arteries. The clap of thunder was so loud that the chandelier rattled. Everyone in the smoking car stopped moving, certain that the train had collided with a giant object. But the train kept moving. So did the liquor. The attendants shuttered any open windows and forbade the passengers from the observation platform until it cleared. The lightning had struck close enough that Ernie could smell the sulfur.

“That’s the smell of brimstone!” Lucia said. She stood and directed all her attention out the window. Ernie could not take his eyes off her for how alive and transported she had suddenly grown; he experienced those sensations when he had power over the courtroom, when he worked with Berry and when he loved Berry. Lucia glowed through the white powder on her face. Ernie caught several concerned glances towards Lucia, the kind men give when they worry that a woman is hysterical. Ernie saw a person who needed to escape her situation.

After dinner, Ernie puffed on his last cigar for the evening from the observation platform at the rear of the train. It was the place on the train with the most space to blow his smoke—it faded into the night, somewhere north of Ithaca. The storm had cleared hours ago, but there wasn’t much to look at from the observation platform. The lamp dangling over the platform cast a spotlight on the tracks as they receded and it prevented his eyes from adjusting to anything outside the scope of the light. The sky was thick with cloud cover, anyway. Ernie preferred the route going in the opposite direction, because then Upstate had the daylight advantage. He didn’t care to see much of Pennsylvania, but what did it matter, it was his last ride.

He thought back to when he was a kid, maybe twelve years old, and travelling on a much cheaper passenger train with his parents and his older sister, all long deceased, to see his mother’s family. The Brakemen struggled to bring the train to a screeching halt because a tree fell across the tracks in a storm during the ride. They had to wait until it was cut and cleared. An hour into the trip already, Ernie remembered how bored he was and his inability to stay still. To keep him busy, his parents took him outside to stand on the observation platform. Another train was stopped behind theirs, and he had a view into the Engineer’s car.

The Brakeman sat on the roof, swinging his legs over the Engineer's window. Ernie thought that the Brakeman had the best job. To see how they would react, Ernie turned and mooned them all. The Engineer blew the train horn for him, and the Brakeman hollered and clapped. The sound was electric delight, the horn so loud that it vibrated his butt cheeks. His mother tried to yank up his pants, but his father pulled them down again to give him a spanking that he could care less about.

He didn't believe that he would feel alive in an electric kind of way again. The best he could feel was calm; he would sit in his Buffalo cottage and crochet berets and sweaters with hand-spun yarn for visits to Niagara Falls.

The door to the observation platform creaked open.

"Pleasure is in the headlights!" Lucia said. After pulling off her gloves, she leaned over the rail on the observation platform and hurled an amber stream. The bitter smell hit Ernie's nose. She crumpled against the gate that kept them from hurtling onto the tracks and clutched her stomach. Ernie lowered himself onto the ground by keeping one hand on the rail—the best he could crouch with arthritic knees. He kept a foot of space between them.

"You mean the rear-lights? I think it's behind us. Are you alright?" Ernie said. He could see Lucia's face well, her milky-hazel complexion, her full lips and her eyes squeezed shut. She nodded and squinted up at him. She tilted her lips towards him.

Ernie supposed, to another man, that the sight of her would be tempting. Her dress collar fluttered around her collar bones, and she pushed her elbow through the gap in the rail to push her chest upwards. Her dress bunched around her raised knee, showing skin and stocking. Ernie thought of Berry's last words to him: *you should fix your perversion, too.*

He closed his eyes and imagined the kind of man who wanted her. What would he do? Drag a finger over her knee? What kind of hot smoke was he supposed to blow into her ear?

“Maybe you will change your mind about me. I was told that you would,” Lucia said.
You should fix your perversion, too.

“I can’t. I’ve always been a degenerate. I think that you need to get off this train before someone takes advantage of you.” Lucia laughed.

“Well, I know it won’t be you.” Lucia pulled herself up. Ernie tried to get up and realized that he couldn’t do it without help. He considered asking her if she was white. Instead, he said,

“Can you help me get up?” She bent over him with outstretched, bare hands. He took them. She still smelled of sour Stingers. They were both weak and uncoordinated, but Ernie managed to get back on his feet.

Lucia fixated on scenery that was there but invisible. Ernie considered Lucia’s earlobe. Without moving, Ernie pretended that he was Glorie blowing smoke into Lucia’s ear, bending into the nape of Lucia’s neck while she stood still, hesitating over her lobe before giving it a gentle nibble. Where there was always a zinging burst of juice in Berry’s lobe, Lucia’s was only chilled skin. Pretending was as absurd as mooning the train Engineer. It was dismal to him, knowing that any real pleasure was in New York, where it would stay. What kinds of joys were in his second life?

“Here’s your kerchief. It’s not enough for me to keep. Did you steal it? *CB*, They’re not your initials.” Lucia dangled the cotton square above the rail and fluttered it over Ernie. He reached up with his empty hand, but Lucia, having lost all coordination, opened her fingers too

soon. The maw that the train left behind inhaled the fabric. Ernie couldn't give a damn about a cotton square, embroidered with Berry's initials or not.

"It was a friendly theft. He was my partner. My love. I wanted to keep something of his close after he left me."

"Why did he leave you?" Lucia asked. Ernie hesitated to reply. She added, "my brother was like you." It was one of the most honest things to come out of anyone's mouth that night. Ernie nodded.

"He decided to lose me instead of all the things that he had. Speaking of lost things, do you have my pocket watch, too?" He felt Berry's hand on his under the table, their obliviousness, their suspension in time, the way they hovered above society and consequences before they came crashing down. He felt Berry's hand letting go of his when Berry reformed himself and renewed his vows with his wife, to *pay* for his sins. Ernie couldn't blame Berry for being so scared even if it was more heartbreaking than falling out of love.

Come, Whoever You Are

The Minister's palm covered Charisse's shoulder. She dropped the charcuterie roll that she had been holding as a prop to look busy at the ShopRite. She looked up into his face. He had a mess of dark hair with streaks brightening from gray to white like weeds, but the kind of weed that Charisse would keep in a garden. His eyes, red, watered and squinted like he was chopping onions. Charisse thought their whole ordeal was like chopping onions without being able to look away or wash their hands. It was the first time they saw each other since word of their affair spread, a week since, to everyone who they knew and didn't know. She noticed that his palm was hot and damp on her shoulder because his skin was usually cool. She covered his hand with hers. She had a pale stripe of skin on her ring finger where her wedding band used to be. When she took off her ring in the Minister's bed a week ago, she lost it through the slats of the wide-plank floors in the converted schoolhouse where he lived.

The Minister squeezed her shoulder. He did not feel well to her. She wrapped her arms around him, trying to warm his chilled skin.

"I'm so sorry," he said into her hair.

"You're going to be able to reopen the church, I know it," she said. He sniffled. She imagined his first sermon after the brief hiatus; about forgiveness and empathy and how the entire community would learn from their shared experience. Maybe they would even grow stronger with it. Charisse knew this to be impossible. For the past week, the Unitarian Universalist church was essentially shuttered, and the Minister shunned. There was a growing sentiment in the congregation that no one should come back to the church, for service or any

other community event, unless there was a new minister. Charisse wondered, *how could people who are supposed to be so open-minded be so unforgiving?* The Minister pulled out of her hold but kept his hands on her arms.

“I’ve been sitting in the church for hours on end. I sit in the front pews. I’ll stare at the pulpit and visualize my past sermons, my favorites. I’ll sit there and dream new sermons out of the air... I preached to the squirrels. They’re getting ready to take the place over as soon as I leave it. I think the birds are waiting to make nests. And the septic system is cursed. I don’t know who would buy it from me. Maybe the county will claim it and auction the property. Do you know anyone?” He laughed a dry laugh that turned into a cough. He sounded hoarse and stuffy.

“You’re not seriously thinking about leaving the church? You love it.” She couldn’t imagine him anywhere else and doubted that he could, either. He bought the property twenty years ago—which included the church, the outbuildings, and the Revolutionary War cemetery across the street—with an inheritance and a burning passion to create a UU community. He lived off a stipend from congregant donations, next door to the church, on the grounds, in the Oak Summit one-room schoolhouse. Over the last twenty years, he had cared for the church and nurtured the community in it.

“I don’t know, it’s not what everyone wants, Charisse,” he said.

“I want it for you, you want it, and others will, too, once they see that everything is okay. I want to separate from Mark. You can be more involved with the kids...” Charisse rubbed her ring finger. Her ring remained under the floorboards and off her finger because Mark, her husband, found out about them through a mutual, not-so-anonymous friend. The whole Unitarian Universalist congregation found out within a day of Mark learning.

The Minister kissed her in the middle of the grocery store. What hurt could it do now? He kissed her for longer than he would usually kiss her in public, so long that she ended the kiss.

“Can I come by tonight?” She asked. He grabbed her hand and then let it drop fingertip by fingertip.

“How about some other night?” He said.

“Okay. I miss you.”

“Bye, Charisse.” He pushed his empty grocery cart towards the exit. He left her feeling like she had eaten a rotten piece of fruit. Unease fermented in her all evening.

She didn’t want to disrespect his needs, but her instinct insisted that he was not well and that she should check on him. Once her children were in bed at her parents’ house, she drove to the church grounds. She parked next to the schoolhouse, where his car would normally be, too. There was no sign of him.

Hoping that he would come home, she opened the door to the schoolhouse with the spare key that he gave her and climbed into his unmade bed. The entire room was in disorder; clothes scattered on the ground and some packed into boxes. The last time she’d been there it was clean, and there were fresh autumn flowers in the windows that were now drooping their heads, half-dried. She stuffed the quilts on the bed in between her legs, under her armpits and against her belly to mimic the feeling of being held. The room was cold, and she kept her sweater and wool socks on.

She closed her eyes and waited for the Minister without sleeping, knowing that the earliest that she had to be home for her children at her parents’ wasn’t until 8am. At 3am, in a

half-dreaming state, she answered a call from an unknown, local number. “Paul?” She asked, in the hopes that it was the Minister calling from a different phone. Instead, it was the hospital. Unbeknownst to her, she was the Minister’s emergency contact, and he had been found dead at the scene of his car crash on the windy Old County Highway just hours before. The nervous sweat that broke out under her armpits and on her feet turned the warmth in the quilts into a clammy dread.

“Excuse me!” A woman said.

Charisse was jolted into the present: she stood, with a shopping cart, in ShopRite—reliving the last time that she saw the Minister. The woman hovered over Charisse, trying to nudge her away from whatever she wanted by wedging her cart between them. Charisse wouldn’t let the woman’s impatience move her. She made eye-contact with the stranger, who after seeing that Charisse was in tears, backed her cart away.

The Minister’s funeral was a month past, but Charisse inhabited their last conversation and the night after any chance that she could get; it was most vivid to her where it took place in ShopRite. She hoped that if she kept reliving the moment, she could pinpoint a clue and at least solve the mystery of his early death in her head, even if she never could in her heart. The Minister stipulated in his will that the old stone church and its grounds go to her. She didn’t quite know what to do with the gift yet—she wouldn’t part with it—she considered that it could be a new home for her and the kids. It would be so amazing to live in a converted old church.

What had she missed? What had she forgotten? *Meet me by the fancy sausages*, he’d texted. The grocery store was the place where they became too comfortable, the place where they’d been noticed. It delighted them to think that they were hiding in plain sight, and why

shouldn't they be able to grocery shop for the midnight snacks that they both wanted to have at the schoolhouse? But it was a tough sell for anyone that they kept running into each other, or that Charisse was helping him with a recipe (why, why had she added that part?); they had been disheveled on a Monday afternoon, hastily dressed, with sex hair, and leaning into each other over a red basket full of milk and eggs.

Charisse picked a roll of charcuterie from the fancy sausage section. Her mother had asked her to get some things at the ShopRite. It was a reason to get Charisse out of the house so she could cry away from her kids. As her mother said, she was grieving potentially two relationships at once; the Minister, and her marriage to Mark, because he had run away to his parents to decide if he wanted to keep Charisse or not.

She didn't want to keep him; perhaps he was faithful, unlike her, but she couldn't say for sure because he disappeared and reappeared without explanation on weekends and evenings, sometimes leaving for the entire night and returning in the morning with a shrug. His absences had led to many fights. He refused, on principal, to tell her his whereabouts. On the other hand, her disappearances had been brief—no longer than a few hours, usually when the kids were in school—and always explained. She rarely missed family time, but Mark did constantly. As far as she was concerned, missing time with the kids was unfaithful... and so was calling her a whore.

Charisse's intrusive thoughts would not quiet; *it's even worse because of what it's doing to your children*. The *betrayal* and the *embarrassment* are *shattering* him, according to Serena, their intermediary and mutual friend. Charisse was not as worried about Mark as she was about the kids. She was confident that they were well-loved and that they had the support they needed to grow into mostly stable adults. Her children, Hadley, six, and Grace, eleven, knew only that

Daddy was taking a vacation and that they were taking a vacation at Granny's because Mommy and Daddy were having a big fight. They knew that the Minister had died, too—they went to his funeral, but Charisse figured that his death was only sad to them in a conceptual kind of way, not a personal one. They barely had an individual connection to the Minister. Charisse's biggest worry was that her grief was alienating to them because their worry was different: when the three of them would go back home with Daddy.

She felt the bumps of the charcuterie roll under her thumb to slow down her breathing. If she could just focus on the texture, she wouldn't have to think of herself as *adulterer*, *cheater*, *whore*. It was funny, those were labels she hadn't burdened herself with before the congregation discovered the affair and outed her and the Minister. It had been clear to her that the vows of her marriage were already broken. The congregation's judgement, and feelings of *betrayal*, as Serena said, had unleashed those lashing words in her. What mystified her the most was the potent disdain for *her* after the Minister died. His death made him the victim; it was the *result* of her actions.

Come whoever you are, wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again, come; She'd been hearing the hymnal ever since he died. She heard it like a song that she was hearing, not a song that she was remembering. It wasn't playing every moment of every day. It came and went, sometimes in snippets, sometimes in its entirety, for several minutes at a time. She couldn't stop herself from singing to it sometimes, and Grace would yell at her to stop.

She was haunted. The phone call from the hospital sunk into her; the dread pooling around her under the quilts that night turned into a heavy sweat. She flung off the blankets and

pulled her shoes on before walking outside to the church. The morning was pale. She acknowledged in the rational part of herself that he would not be inside the church, but another part of her needed to be sure. The church was unlocked. When she opened the door, she saw a white hand waving to her from the pulpit. The sweat on her body cooled. The door creaked open wider under her hand, allowing a bit more pre-dawn light in.

The hand waving to her was only a piece of white paper fluttering on the pulpit. She stepped up to the pulpit to find the Minister's will folded under a rainbow glass paperweight. She sat on the floor to read it. Everything in the will was *for Charisse, for Charisse, for Charisse.*

She could only conclude that he intended to die. She wept as she thought of the Old County Highway, its many twists and turns, the deer that startled and jumped in front of your car. She wondered how he picked the right bend, how he knew what speed to go, or if he had used the bridge. She pocketed the glass paperweight and sat in the church through the morning. The gothic windows cast light on her in tall pieces that brought life into her like a color-by-number.

At eight a.m., Charisse called her mother.

"Mom, can you get the kids ready for school today?"

"Sweetheart, where are you? I've been calling you since I got up, worried sick that you were dead! Did you see there was a fatal crash on the old county bridge last night? They won't say who yet... still alerting family."

"Mom, it was the Minister. I'm at the church."

"Baby, you need to come home right now."

"I can't move."

“I’ll get the kids ready, Charisse. I love you. See you soon.” Ten minutes later, Ellis, the police chief, showed up at the church to check on Charisse and ask her questions, thanks to her mother. Charisse gave Ellis the will that she found but kept the paper weight deep in her sweatshirt pocket.

She caught herself humming... *wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving...* and stopped. Only by double and triple checking the grocery list was Charisse able to find the rest of the items that her mother wanted her to bring home. *I love you, sweetheart!!* was written at the top of the list in her mother’s gaudy handwriting, in sparkly purple ink. Charisse smiled. She didn’t know that someone could include so many swirls in a simple “I.” Her mother had yet to believe that living in the church grounds was a good idea for Charisse or the kids.

When she first saw the UU church, five years ago in the summer, she was immediately satisfied that she could visually divide the church building into thirds and that all its defining aspects would fall along one of the dividing lines. It was a sandstone square built in 1790, with a gable roof and no eaves. The roof peaked gently—not too steep, and the makers had done without a steeple. Charisse felt that a steeple would’ve overwhelmed the church’s simplicity. The sandstones showed through flaking plaster on the exterior. The American gothic windows had intersecting tracery painted in white. The two white doors in the front were built for no one taller than 5’8.”

She pushed Hadley, one-year-old, in a stroller across the grass, towards the church for the first time. She only brought Hadley because Mark was taking Grace to gymnastics.

White lilies grew in the front of the church. It amazed Charisse, the power of purity symbolism, even in such a liberal place where you could believe whatever you wanted about a

higher power. Nestled under the peak of the roof, a smaller teardrop window looked across the road to the cemetery where the soldiers rested. A rainbow flag strung across the side of the church had frayed from rubbing against the stone.

The congregation wound in a line from the open white door to the end of the path through the lily garden. Charisse listened to the piano music coming from inside the church as she joined the congregation filing into the building. Hadley dosed in his stroller. Once inside, they sang, *come, come whoever you are, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving, ours is no caravan of despair, come, yet again, come, wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times, come, yet again, come.*

She wondered if what she saw was real: people in sandals and socks singing their way through a garden of white lilies, into the church. A gray-haired man in a turtleneck and shorts had to bend in half to go through the front door. She guessed that there were ninety people standing in the wooden pews—some were entire families. A gallery overlooked the open interior. A quilted tapestry of a flaming chalice encircled by many-colored hands hung behind the pulpit.

The Minister shook each member's hand before they took their seats. He buried Charisse's in his large palms. His fingers curled underneath the heels of her palm in a warm way while he welcomed her and Hadley. He was one of the people who had to bow deeply to enter the building.

He had watery and penetrating blue eyes and graying dark hair mussed across his forehead. Some of it stuck to his skin with sweat. He was not a man she was instantly attracted

to. She never thought she would have an affair. The only heat that she felt was from the stuffy interior and from her nerves for everything new.

The Minister guided her to the guest book where she signed her name and email address before sitting in one of the front pews with Hadley in her lap. She felt a chill in signing her name in the book because in so many fairy tales such an action was permanent and eternal. A bespectacled couple made room for her. They all looked genuinely happy to see her and Hadley, as if she was a coming home. The pianist played one more song before the children filed outside for their social justice Sunday school. Hadley sipped on his cup full of ice water and watched the room. He was a quiet and observant baby who she could bring anywhere with her. He was beginning to look more like a kid to Charisse.

The Minister had command of his audience. He moved across the stage without notes or a book for reference. His feet were never still. His stole, rainbow and quilted like the tapestry behind him, flapped this way and that. Watching him talk was like watching a modern dance performance featuring long, silk scarves. Charisse couldn't have articulated what she heard, but it did not matter because she *felt*. Sure, it was a sermon about the possibility of there being or not being a creator of the universe, but it was really about compassion for your fellow person. The flaming chalice lit something in her that she brought home.

Charisse remembered the way the Minister preached when she missed him— if you could call it *preaching* at a UU church. Maybe it was more of a lecture. Maybe it was asking questions. Maybe it was just talking. She missed him talking.

By December, the earth was cold, hard, and she divorced Mark. The kids stayed with her every other week in the schoolhouse, where she now lived next-door to the shuttered church that she had yet to open. A summer project, she thought. She barely knew where to begin with renovations. The truth was that she had been terrified for months to go back in and see the white hand wave to her from the pulpit. She was the Eccentric Parent now. Mark could've said she was unfit for custody by smearing her in court—just look at where she lives, it's no place for children—but she did not believe he would want the responsibility of full custody.

Thankfully, Hadley, at six, was still happy about sharing a bed with her. They slept on a pull-out in the main room while Grace slept in the closet-like second room in her own bed, which thank God they had because if Grace didn't have the sheetrock for privacy, Charisse doubted she would come for Mom's week.

Hadley sat under the moon-and-stars-printed quilt, waiting for Charisse to get in bed after their Saturday night movie of a Japanese animated fantasy. His blond hair hung in a tangle over his shoulders, and he squeezed his stuffed frog, Mr. Broccoli Robbit, close to his tummy. Charisse could thank the toy for convincing Hadley to eat green foods. He wore flannel pajamas and smelled a bit like sulfur from the mineral-heavy well water. Mostly, he smelled sweet, like lilacs and apple juice. She never wanted that smell to go away though she figured that it might with the shower-resistant phase that kids seemed to go through at ten. She had a few more years of the sweetness.

“Goodnight, Grace!” Charisse said. Grace turned the light off in her room, a sure sign that she wanted to be left alone.

“Goodniiiiight,” Grace called back. She talked like she was too old, at twelve, and weary for the entire situation. Charisse flipped the light off above her and held Hadley close until he was too warm and wriggled away. Grace’s flashlight peeked through the fabric divider over the doorway. She stayed up to read for several hours after they went to sleep only to wake up grumpy at the world. Charisse didn’t mind; if her children were there with her, she slept well and felt protected. She listened for the pipes clanking, or any winter sounds, but it was an almost silent night. The quiet was such a relief that she fell asleep before she could hear the hymnal.

Cold water running down her neck woke her at one a.m. A hissing sound came from the wall behind her. Her first thought attached to these sensations was that a snake was curling itself around her and preparing to strangle her in her sleep. She grabbed her neck and felt nothing but icy liquid that shocked her into lucidity. Water rushed from the wall behind her pillow in rivulets. It was beginning to pool in her bedsheets and saturate the mattress. Charisse felt for Hadley. He was still dry on the other side of the bed.

“Fuck,” Charisse said, under her breath so she wouldn’t wake her children. She lay in bed for a minute longer while the water drenched her hair. She had known that the schoolhouse plumbing was hanging on a thread—but she had hoped it wouldn’t need work until the spring. *Just one more winter*, she had whispered to it. She pushed herself out of bed and checked the temperature outside: one-degree Fahrenheit.

Hadley stirred. Charisse felt the mattress again—still no cold water near him, yet. She flipped on the lights. It was getting colder in the schoolhouse, but there was an additional electric heater she could turn on. She’d have to shut off the electricity and the water to stop the flow from the burst pipe. Charisse pulled on her canvas carpenter’s overalls over her mismatched

Christmas-themed pajamas and laced her steel-toed work boots. She wasn't sure what to tell Hadley—a story or a scientific explanation? She shook him awake. He rolled over and pulled the covers more tightly over himself.

“Hadley, there's a leak,” she said.

“No, I didn't pee,” Hadley said, feeling the covers underneath him.

“I know, you didn't do anything wrong. A pipe broke.” She guided him into Grace's bed. Grace offered room under her blankets without asking why and closed her eyes again. Hadley looked up at Charisse with wide eyes. “It's okay, go back to sleep.” They looked so warm nestled together.

Charisse had to go outside to access the basement. She turned to look at the stone church. Its windows reflected moonlight back at her in indifferent acknowledgement of her presence. The windows gazed over the cemetery across the empty street where the Revolutionary War soldiers, and now the Minister, were buried. Was it catharsis or was it torture to be so close to his resting place? Tonight, she was thankful that he was so close.

The hymnal floated on the air, *Come, come*, begging her to go into the church. She was terrified to find another message from him or another left-behind thing. She hoped that the hymnal looping in her mind was not him begging her from an afterlife to let him out of the church. What if his spirit was trapped inside the church like purgatory? The thought stuck with her. Her only comfort was that his spirit was a benevolent one, so when she did open the church, if she ever worked up the courage to, she wouldn't be afraid of him. She was more afraid of his eternal suffering. Not that she believed in purgatory. Or heaven. Or hell.

She unlocked the schoolhouse basement and wasted no time shutting off the electricity and the main water. She relieved the excess water in the system through the faucet in the basement sink as it dawned on her foggy brain that she would have to bring the kids somewhere else for the rest of the night because the schoolhouse would be unbearably cold by the morning. Heck, *she* wouldn't be able to tough out the rest of the night in the schoolhouse and she would have to call Crazy Dave, her plumber, and stare at his hairy ass crack first thing in morning in the freezing sunshine. It was a cliché, but it was true. She stomped back into the schoolhouse.

Charisse shook her daughter's arm and was shocked by the sudden warmth on her hand. She helped Grace gather her layers.

"We're going to Grandma's," Charisse said. Grace moaned and zipped up her coat. "Can you help Hadley get dressed while I get your things?" Grace dressed Hadley in less than three minutes even though he was a half-asleep, limp bundle of heat. Charisse did not want to bring them to her parents' and admit to the insufficiencies of her home. They already thought she was morbid, living so close to the dead, sleeping in his former house, acting as the groundskeeper to his former dream. *His will was a curse on you*, her mother said, despite her efforts to be supportive.

It felt like a stroke of genius when Charisse remembered Hadley's ninja turtle backpack and Grace's messenger bag so she wouldn't have to come back before dropping them off at school, or hopefully, before her mother dropped them off. Grace kept quiet while they loaded into the truck, and Charisse could sense that she'd had enough. Charisse wanted to apologize to her, but she wasn't sure what to apologize about first.

“I’m sorry the seats are so cold in here, it’ll warm up soon,” Charisse said. The truck was slow to start. Five minutes passed before it was warm enough to drive.

Charisse looked at Grace in the backseat, through the rearview mirror, and then directly, by looking over her shoulder when she backed up. Grace closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep. Faking sleep was her favorite form of resistance through avoidance. Charisse drove them fourteen minutes to her parent’s home. They still lived in the same house that Charisse had grown up in, which confused Charisse’s sense of her own age. Where had all the time gone since she was a kid? She felt at once grateful and defeated when she pulled into her parent’s driveway. *Just for half a night*, she assured herself.

Charisse lumbered out of the truck. She picked Hadley up and set him down on the driveway. His indefatigable smile kept Charisse going. Maybe he didn’t know better, but the kid was the most positive person she’d ever met.

“Mommy, Grace was up reading really late,” Hadley said.

“Hadley, stop tattling,” Grace said.

“It’s okay, Hadley,” Charisse said. What a relief it was to have two people in her life who didn’t think about her in relation to the Minister.

Charisse intended to let them into her parents’ quietly with the spare key in the planter hanging over the porch, but it wasn’t there. She checked under the door mat and above the trim on the porch, but the key was nowhere to be found. The door was painted a new color, a eucalyptus green. The color of the door changed almost monthly depending on her mother’s whim. Charisse pressed harder on the doorbell with her thumb than necessary. There was not a stir. She waited a minute before rapping on the door with her bare, winter-cracked fist. A light

turned on. Charisse leaned her face into the window. Her mother, holding back the curtain stared out of it. She had curlers in her hair. Charisse waved at her from only a few inches away. Her mother jerked the curtain closed.

Charisse's dad flicked the lights on in the kitchen and opened the door. He wore a ground-sweeping fleece bathrobe tied closed at his waist. He hugged Charisse first and then the children after as they came inside. Her mother stood at the bottom of the stairs with her arms crossed over a nightgown trimmed with faux fur and bejeweled text across the front: *beauty queen*. Her short silver hair was coming loose from the curlers on the left side of her head. Charisse wondered if her mother could be more of a diva. Charisse's body thawed in the heat of the house. She had acclimated to chills in the schoolhouse and forgotten how relieving it was to relax in a draft-free building.

"I'm soooo sorry to wake you up. One of the pipes burst at the schoolhouse, so I had to shut everything off there. It's freezing," Charisse said. Hadley handed his ninja turtle backpack to his grandpa.

"It's not a problem at all, honey," her dad said.

"Well, let's put the children back to sleep. We don't want to keep them awake any longer than we have to," her mom said. Charisse bristled, because of course that was her intention in the first place, but she agreed. Dad led Hadley and Grace upstairs to tuck them into their guest room.

"Didn't I tell you as soon as you decided to keep that church that you should stay here until it's ready to live in? My god, I didn't even tell you to sell it! I'm a terrible mother. Why did I let you do that?" Mom pulled on the floof at her wrists. Charisse noticed that the trim on her mother's slippers matched her nightgown.

“Mom, you’re helping me right now. And if you want to help more, you can take the kids to school tomorrow morning so I can work with the plumber first thing.”

“Don’t waste your life on that church, Charisse, on him, even though you miss him. You have terrible lines under your eyes. I have some cream I can give you. I’ll take the kids to school, why don’t you go to the spa instead of meeting the plumber? Surely he knows what to do on his own.”

“No. Mom, no. I have so much work to do.” Charisse pulled her eyebrows down with her fingertips.

“Like I said, don’t let the church suck you dry, sweetheart. You want to sleep here the rest of the night? You could still meet the plumber early before work.”

“No, I have to get back, mom,” Charisse said. She kissed her mom on both of her rose-water-smelling cheeks, and to her mother’s bafflement, walked out the door.

Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving, come, yet again, come, blared in her head until she stopped in her front of the church and turned off the truck. The song was telling her to come, come into the church, not to neglect it any longer. She had done her best to seal the building for the winter, but she knew that squirrels and birds populated the place to hibernate like the Minister said they would. Her breath clouded the car window. She sat, staring at the front doors of the church—doors closed since the police finished investigating the Minister’s death and concluded that they could not say for sure that it was a suicide or an accident.

Charisse considered her fear that the Minister’s spirit was trapped inside the church waiting for her. The problem with her fear was that she didn’t believe that the dead lived on as spirits to haunt the living. If his spirit was trapped there, why wouldn’t the spirits of the

Revolutionary War be there, too? She thought it was more likely that the dead only lived on in any way that they were remembered. She remembered him through the limestone, through the gothic windows and the teardrop window, a place that contained and opened; he had represented the only church that she ever loved.

The practical side of her knew that if she was serious about renovating the church into her home, she needed to go inside. She twisted the key to the padlock on her key ring.

When she opened the door, the first thing she noticed was the sound of an animal scurrying above her in the gallery. She couldn't see to the back of the church, but as her eyes adjusted, the pews turned from rectangular shadows into three-dimensional shapes. The electricity was shut off to the building, so she turned on the flashlight on her phone. The room was more frightening with the slim beam of light illuminating the small objects around her instead of the larger room.

Thankfully, she did not see any ghost hands waving in the dark.

The tapestry of the flaming chalice and multicolored hands still hung behind the pulpit. It made her think of the way they had buried the Minister; wearing his stole embroidered with same imagery. She thought of the way she dropped his paperweight into the grave instead of a handful of dirt and how it had plunked on an exposed corner of the coffin in a rude way. She thought about how the Minister's mother, eighty years old, met her for the first time at the funeral after she had first seen Charisse's name on her son's will. His mother hadn't seen him for a long time because of their intense religious differences. She was a Mormon and had little hope for his soul.

Mark went to the funeral, too, and told her he was sorry then, but for what exactly, she did not know. Was he sorry for her loss? Was he sorry for their failed marriage? For something

that he did? He did not specify. Whatever the *sorry* was for, she let him off the hook. She couldn't resent him if she wanted to coparent well, and resentment distracted her from her own healing. Mark was one of the most empathetic people at the funeral towards her. The members of the congregation still gave her a chilly reception, or they did not know what to say to her. The people she had attended countless services with mostly asked about her children and lamented that the church was broken up now. *Churchwrecker* was uttered in her direction.

Charisse sat in the front pew, which was cold even through her parka, and dreamed about the way that she would remake the church into a house for her and her children.

"I don't know how I'll afford it, but I'm going to put in a new septic system. The gallery could be several lofted bedrooms. Downstairs, we'll have an open-plan living room and kitchen." Upstairs, the squirrels, the raccoons, and the Minister listened to her.

She saw, as if the townsfolk were in front of her now, the way that everyone who came to the Minister's funeral dispersed while she stayed behind because she was home. The congregation left for good that day, and that was fine by her.

Sunday Rocking

Most people in Lisle were at church listening to Reverend John. Meera listened to the October morning drizzle against her windshield. The classic rock radio droned. She watched steam rise from the wet pavement. After a sip of her coffee, she got out of the car and tugged her hood over her hair, an old habit now whenever she was in a public place. The mud caking the walkway splashed onto her flare-legged pants. Above, a fluorescent sign read *Jerry's Furniture*. The fog on the front door obscured her view inside.

She pushed the door open with her shoulder so she wouldn't have to take her hands out of her pockets. The smell of rotting wood permeated the building. Cobwebs mummified the stacked wicker chairs, the rocking chairs, the stools, the toilets, and the bathtubs. To her right, at a counter cut from a long slab of oak trunk, a man with steel wool hair slumped over an issue of *Bowhunter*.

"How are you today?" she asked. He kept his eyes on the magazine and didn't respond. *Very well*, she thought, but then gave him the benefit of the doubt that he was hard of hearing. She entered a corridor of stacked dressers and chests. She peeked into the doors of a tall, painted armoire and discovered moth-bitten blazers and coats hanging in a row. She didn't need anything so large, although the old clothes would make a good disguise. She needed a chair for her desk. Not that she used her desk, but she felt self-conscious that if guests to her new home didn't see a chair, they would imagine that she didn't write poems anymore.

She moved into her new house just three weeks ago to escape her stalker in North Spencer. Her fear about what other people would think was true; she wasn't writing poems. Ever

since she'd fled and tried to erase herself on the internet, she lost all her desire to create. Despite all the stories of incredible productivity that she'd heard from other writers when they'd spent stretches alone, dropping into solitude had done nothing for her. Maybe her constant fear that her stalker would find her prevented her from benefiting.

She passed into the next room of haphazard chair stacks. Varnish speckled the ground, or maybe sap. She picked a pile. Decayed chair arms and legs came apart in her hands. The dust and fungus settled in her lungs.

At the bottom of the pile, a dark rosewood rocking chair tilted back on its heels. Its cushion was thick, stiff tapestry. She wondered if it was big enough for her. She set the chair down and leaned into the seat to test its strength. The frame of the chair squeaked, but the back pressed against her back in affirmation. It was small, but it was strong.

The rocking almost lulled her to sleep, but she rose and gathered the chair in her arms—it was small enough. She wondered if it had been made for a child or if people had really been that much smaller than they were now. It had waited so long to go home. At the front desk, the man sat, gathering dust.

“How much is this chair?” He looked at her over the edge of his magazine.

“That one's not for sale,” he replied. Her mouth went slack as she gestured to the chair's condition, but he would not budge. She extracted her wallet and slapped a fifty-dollar bill on the counter. He grunted and slid the bill off the counter before returning to an article reviewing hunting knives. She stood across from him for a moment to wait for more confirmation, but he gave nothing more.

She carried the chair out without another word. She wanted to keep the chair in the passenger seat, close to her, but it didn't fit. She tilted it on its side over the back seats.

She drove home in increasing rainfall to her tall and narrow house at the creek's edge. The view of the house from the road was concealed by a row of yew trees. The buffer made her feel protected. The ground, already saturated with water, threatened to flood her basement. She carried the chair over the pile of salt on her front step and into her house.

She cleaned the chair with her softest linen. The wood glowed; it revealed its red and pink undertones. She blew against the carvings of berries in the frame to remove the dust embedded there. She tucked it underneath her desk.

She felt safe enough to open the window that she usually kept closed and covered by the curtains. She wondered if it she'd made an extreme decision to move away from everyone she knew to get away from one person. She waited for the solitude to kick in and push her into her writing.

A wet breeze came through the room and rocked the chair. The rocking enticed her to sit. Her desk, lonely and smooth, had never so appealed to her. She rocked and watched the song sparrows flock to the birdfeeder on the windowsill. She rocked cautiously, careful not to disturb their feast.

An unusual silence settled over the sparrows before they took flight into the trees. A glossy crow took their place on the sill. Unlike the other birds, it cocked its head to look at her directly. It recognized her. It had found her. She stopped rocking. She sat, suspended in the moment with the crow. She extended her hand onto the windowsill, but she didn't dare touch. She imagined its feathers inking her skin. She felt the patter of its heartbeat, the tension in its

toes, and the erect feathers on its nape and crown. Her mind settled into its mind, until she, too, pecked the ledge with her beak in safe oblivion.

The Red Maple

Edna stood on her tiptoes, pressed her face into the screen door, and followed the paths of fireflies weaving in and out of the July dusk. The perforations in the screen impressed a crosshatch pattern onto her nose. She followed the path of a single firefly that circled the red maple tree that she climbed during the day. Another firefly settled onto the screen. She had to cross her eyes to watch its abdomen pulse yellow-green desire into the dusk.

She knew that the insects flashed their lights to signal to others, to help them find each other. She didn't know much about sex except for a vague notion that somehow, a man and a woman had special parts that needed to come together to make a child and that the child grew inside their mother, as she had grown inside her mother. At seven years old, she did have a strong belief in romance. She thought that the fireflies were the most romantic insects. She also believed, even though she could not articulate it, that love was the force of attraction in the universe. Thus, the fireflies must love one another, and if the fireflies came to her, they must love her, too. She wondered how baby fireflies grew inside their mothers because there couldn't be enough room inside their tiny abdomens.

She tilted her face away from the screen and rubbed the texture that the wires left on her skin. The smell in the air had changed. A breeze laced with campfire smoke turned the air from sweet to acrid. The smell was so sour that she considered closing the door. The fireflies grew sluggish—their lights turned on and off at half-tempo. Some of the fireflies stopped lighting up altogether.

The sound of harmonica music, brassy in the night, and close to the doorsteps outside, startled her. She pressed her face against the screen wires again and searched for the source of the music but could not find it. A faint and sad tune rattled on the air. She didn't want the tune to stop even while it vexed her. Tempted to look for the source of the sound outside, Edna pressed on the door handle. She let it go at the sound of a man speaking.

"Little girl, do you like the sound of my harmonica?" a man said. Edna furrowed her brows and bunched her skirt in her fists. Her mother had been clear about her talking to people she did not know. She had said that most adults were kind, but that you didn't want to assume in case they were one of the mean ones.

The harmonica man continued to play, and Edna heard him, but she could not see him. She thought that the sound of his voice came from behind the red maple tree, but not even a shoulder showed from behind the trunk. She scrunched the fabric of her skirt harder in her fist and willed him to show himself. Was he a mean stranger? Did her mother know him? She guessed that her mother might know him because there was no other reason that he would come to their door at night.

"Edna!" Her mother called from the kitchen. "Close the door, sweetheart, it's bedtime." The harmonica sidestepped into view; he hunched under the red maple tree, barefoot, and wore a quilted coat with brass buttons and matching trousers. The quilted jacket was a patchwork of threadbare and patterned scraps. His wiry gray hair hung in a loose braid underneath his frayed corduroy cap. His disproportionately large green eyes moved rapidly—they enticed her to open the screen door because they were both repellent and startling.

He extended the harmonica in his weathered right hand and shook it like a bone. The harmonica, unlike him, was new and shining with a smooth, silver cover and gold-plated mouthpiece. Several fireflies alighted on the metal. The light from their abdomens doubled in intensity.

Edna wanted nothing more than to touch the harmonica and to know what kinds of sounds she could make with it. It was the most beautiful instrument she had ever seen, maybe even the most beautiful thing that she could imagine holding. She took piano lessons, but when she wanted to bother her mother, she played the cheap and rusted harmonica that her friend had given her at school.

“Do you want to learn how to play? If you come with me, I will teach you how to make this kind of music,” he said. His voice fizzed and popped like carbonation. Edna pressed on the door handle until the latch clicked open. Harmonica Man picked up another tune, this time, it was one that she recognized from a cd of folk ballads that her mother played when she cleaned the living room. Edna slipped through the widening crack in the screen door, but she kept one hand on the door frame. She feared that if she lost contact with the door, she’d be lost like a sailor off a ship. He reached as far as he could to her without moving his feet from the base of the red maple tree. She released her fingers one by one from the frame. They stuck to the metal in the humidity before falling away. He smiled. His smile was as wide as a frog’s and his teeth, like mother-of-pearl, shocked her. He didn’t have any belongings with him besides his harmonica.

Edna’s fear that he could be a mean stranger faded away with the certainty that he only wanted to teach her and share his music with her. He was only four feet away from her now. If

she were to reach out, she could touch his harmonica in his outstretched hand. He leaned forwards. She extended her hand and barely had the chance to touch the instrument with her longest finger before her mother called.

“Edna, I told you to get ready for bed,” her mother said. Edna dropped her hand and turned to look at the door. Her mother came to the screen wearing a bathrobe and a white towel wrapped around her head. Edna turned to look back at Harmonica Man, but he was nowhere to be seen. She didn’t understand how he could’ve left so quickly. It was like he had stepped into the red maple tree.

It wasn’t until Edna saw her mother looking worried that she began to cry. She cried from the pain of the music stopping and from the fear of the stranger that her mother reminded her of. She cried because she missed his song. She cried because her mother’s presence suggested that the strange man had meant her harm. Of all the kinds of strangers, her mother didn’t trust strange men. She knew that she would have gone with the Harmonica Man and she thought about what it would be like to never see her mother again. It was a terrible and exciting thought, one that she prepared for when she pretended that she was an orphan. She knew that her mother would be furious if she found out who she’d been talking to.

“What are you doing outside?” her mother asked. She rushed onto the front step and took Edna’s hand.

“There was a man playing harmonica. Mamma, do you know him?” Edna said. Her mother’s frown deepened the worry line in her forehead. She scrutinized the bushes for signs of the stranger. The wind blew the red maple.

“I don’t know a harmonica man...” she said. She took Edna’s hand in hers and pulled her daughter back inside. She closed and locked the screen door before closing and locking the main door. She drew the blinds and shut the windows even though it was wonderfully cool and breezy for a summer night. Edna couldn’t stop crying. She disappointed her mother because she had not listened to what she taught her.

While Edna’s mother, Margo, did not know a harmonica man, she had sometimes fantasized while listening to ballads like the *Elfin Knight*, that someone cruel and powerful would kidnap her. If she was kidnapped, she would not have to be responsible for her home or her family. She knew that it was horrible of her to fantasize about someone kidnapping her. There were *real* victims who lost their entire lives. In the fantasy, of course, the kidnapper tied her up and threw her in the back of his truck, but he never actually hurt her. He would only threaten her. He would be big and tall. He would bring her to an isolated place far north. He wouldn’t rape her. He would just keep her, and she wouldn’t try to escape.

Margo gripped her daughter tightly by the wrist and led her back inside. She supervised as Edna brushed her hair and brushed her teeth to ensure that her daughter did everything correctly. Edna tugged on the ends of her dark hair with the white paddle brush. As she had been taught, she spit her toothpaste directly onto the drain so it wouldn’t soil the sink basin.

“Wash your hands! With hot water, Edna, or it doesn’t work.”

“When is dad coming home?” Margo pressed her pointer finger and thumb hard into her eyebrows. “Will you tell him about the harmonica man?”

“There wasn’t a harmonica man, Edna. I would have seen him. Dad is home on Sunday.” Margo leaned into Edna’s hair. “You smell funny.” Margo wrinkled her nose. “You need to take a shower.” Margo stripped Edna’s clothes and scrubbed her down with soap.

Once she was clean, Edna tucked herself into bed and turned her light out. After Edna heard her mother walk down the hall and close her bedroom door, she looked out her window at the red maple tree below. She was disappointed not to see the frog-smile or the glint of the harmonica, but she listened to the music over and over in her head.

When she woke up early the next morning, she looked out her window again. This time she saw her mother inspecting the red maple tree.

Edna sat on the edge of her childhood bed while her boyfriend sat beside her and fastened her bra. She was sixteen, and it was absolutely forbidden for her to have a boy at the house. Edna found the rule ironic because her mother subjected her to a string of ugly boyfriends.

Edna held up her heavy, black hair so Hans wouldn’t catch it in the clasps. Unlike the other boys she had dated, Hans was skilled with lacy fastenings because he had practiced on his mother’s bras when she wasn’t home. This, he’d admitted to her when she asked him how he’d learned since she was the first person he’d ever made love to. Edna thought that he could dress and undress her faster than she could herself. She loved that Hans was gentle and mischievous.

She watched the rain amalgamate on the glass sliding door to the small porch outside her room. The door was ajar to let the cool, humid air into the stuffy room. She inhaled the pine scent from the candle burning on the nightstand and felt the quiet that came after every time they

had sex. Hans bent into the nape of her neck and inhaled the metallic sweat and salt left on her skin. His uneven stubble grated against her cheek.

Edna's mother and her abusive but wealthy boyfriend, Jake, were away for the weekend, and she didn't know where they had gone. The previous week, Jake had grabbed Edna's arm and twisted it behind her back when she frowned at him. Her arm was still sore. Maybe he'd strained or torn something in her shoulder. Jake was mad if she looked at him and mad if she ignored him, but he only stayed at their house a few nights of the week.

Those nights, she heard her mother and him down the hallway fucking. She knew it was fucking because they both grunted and moaned to the beat of the headboard, or of the chair, that hit the wall and left indents in the sheetrock that she saw during the day when she went to look for a cigarette in Jake's designer jean pockets. She had purchased earplugs, but she didn't use them because it was awful and fascinating to listen on those nights. She recorded one of the nights when Jake was screaming at Margo before they fucked, just in case she could use it against her mother, or maybe to convince her that Jake did not belong in their home. Edna suspected that her mother doubled down on rules for the boyfriends that Edna had because she was aware, on some level, of the harm she inflicted on Edna through her abusive relationships.

But Edna wasn't thinking about her mother, or her mother's boyfriend, or even her own boyfriend as she sat on the bed. She was thinking about the Harmonica Man, as she often did. She obsessed over the incident from her childhood. She turned it over in her mind to replay the color of his clothing, the sound of his voice, and the glint of his instrument to confirm each detail in her mind. She worried that if she forgot about her encounter with him, she would lose the key to a more interesting life. Meeting him was the most frightening and magical moment of her

youth, making everything else, even dangerous things, seem dull in comparison. She played harmonica, but she couldn't replicate the music that she heard that night when she was seven.

She had talked to her guidance counselor about the memory; it was the only topic she wanted to write about for her college admissions essays. The guidance counselor said that she had an eight-year-old girl, and that children have great imaginations. Edna was furious at the idea that the memory was an invention. The counselor tried to dissuade her from writing about the man for her essays because *no one wants to read about something so irreverent from your childhood, they want to know what you are like now*. Edna wondered, *but what am I now?*

Edna listened to her mother's folk ballad cd every evening even though snippets of it were scratched from overuse. It had become the soundtrack to her existence. She played it softly in the evenings so her mother wouldn't hear it. Her mother didn't know about her obsession—not about the notebook that Edna kept underneath her second pillow in which she documented the red maple tree each evening while tapping cigarette ashes onto the coniferous bush below her porch. So far, nothing out of the ordinary had occurred underneath its branches. The most unusual occurrence that she had documented was five years ago, when a pink thong had been tangled in the topmost branches with the reddest leaves that the tree saved for the month of April. The pink thong could not compete with the tree's vibrancy. The tree was red like a fresh paper cut now.

“There are things I swear I'd seen and heard even with no proof,” Edna said. Hans kissed her earlobe and nibbled playfully on the crystal fastened to it. He chuckled at her. That was his usual response to her incongruity.

“Memory is unreliable, like... I swear I could fly when I was a kid. I must’ve dreamed about it. Wish I still did,” Hans said.

“Who’s to say you didn’t, if you remember it?” He kissed her again, this time on her lips. She figured that he liked her oddness. Even her obsession with the unsolvable incident from her early youth delighted him. But even his delight in her idiosyncrasies had its limits. Hans didn’t respond to her question because they’d had the conversation before. She hoped that she didn’t sound like a broken record.

“I’m gonna rinse off, you want to join?” Hans asked.

“No, I’ll be here,” Edna said and laid back onto her cotton pillows. Hans wrapped a towel around his waist and admired her from a distance before leaving for the bathroom. She sighed and spread her fingers over her hodgepodge quilt. She had made it from the most eclectic thrifted fabric that she could find. How luxurious it was to be alone while her mother and Jake were away.

Edna heard a woo-ooo-ooo from her balcony. She wrapped herself in her quilt and stepped to the screen door to press her face against it. The rain doves who made their nest on the porch ledge cooed and settled over their two white eggs. Both the male and female were there, nibbling on each other’s necks. They had learned to trust Edna enough to go about their business while she watched them.

She wondered why they had chosen her porch instead of the red maple tree just below. She supposed that they felt safer where they were. The rain dove tilted her head and her apache tear-drop eyes at Edna. She was not sure if love was the power of attraction between the two birds, or if it was loneliness, or if it was the need to make those eggs and keep them warm.

It was growing dark quicker than usual because of the overcast sky and the precipitation. She was about to close the sliding door to her porch when she heard the brass sigh of a harmonica. She couldn't be entirely sure where the sound existed because it had become so real to her when she imagined it. A long, skinny leg extended from behind the red maple tree. The baggy, quilted pant leg flapped in the wind. The toes on the foot, each formed like a knobbed and lumpy carrot, dug into the dirt as though trying to reinstate themselves in the earth.

She felt like what she was seeing wasn't real. Her memory of the harmonica man—the parts of it that were correct and the parts that were wrong—conflicted with her present experience. She felt ill to see the thing preserved in her memory move on its own. It was like watching something undead. His leg stretched as far out from the tree as it could before it brought the rest of his body with him. His eyes were a shock of green as they shot through the red maple leaves to stare up at her. She had waited so long for her past to be confirmed, and here it was, realer than it had been. She hadn't remembered the shining belt buckle. While his right hand held the harmonica to his mouth, his left hand undid his belt buckle. She was afraid that he would flash her. She closed her eyes.

“Go away!” She said. The rain doves flapped their wings at her shout. She opened her eyes. Smiling, the harmonica man moved his torso behind the tree before withdrawing his leg behind the trunk. His big toe, which had three distinct joints, disappeared last. Out of her sight, he continued to play a loud and rambunctious song on his harmonica. The sound that had once transfixed her was a cacophony on her ears. She closed the sliding door to protect herself from the call of his instrument. She tried to focus on the sound of water running in the shower.

She couldn't stay put. She pulled on her jeans and an argyle sweater. She ran down the stairs and out the front door without her shoes. Her toes dug into the mud like the harmonica man's toes had. She walked around the red maple tree for a trace of him, for even a shred of threadbare quilt. Her hair was damp now—it stuck in the long fibers from her sweater. She pressed her hands against the tree to search for an opening.

“Edna!” She looked up to see Hans standing on her porch. He wore nothing but a white towel wrapped around his waist. The tiniest corner of the towel kept it in place, and she feared that it might unravel and expose the curly brown hairs that cloaked his penis. He was smiling and holding his pianist hands open, towards her, questioning, but with amusement that suggested he expected to see her walking around the red maple in the front yard.

“I saw him!” she said. He didn't seem to register her fear. Hans opened his white towel in a flash to show her his new erection. His pale penis was bright, protruding from the pincushion of dark hair underneath it. It wasn't until she started to cry that he realized it wasn't funny. He covered himself with the towel.

“Edna? Are you okay?” Hans asked. She shook her head and came back inside. As soon as she was back in her room, Hans wrapped his arms around her and held her head against his chest. He stroked her hair while she cried. “You can always talk to me if something's bothering you. I didn't mean to upset you, Edna.”

“It's not your fault. I know you were joking. I'm going to take a shower,” she said. In the shower, she scrubbed herself with soap and rinsed it away with the hottest water that she could tolerate.

Edna sat at the dining table in her mother's home. "Mom, do you remember when I was little, I saw that harmonica man? Now that I've worked with kids for so long, I can see how their imaginations work. You know, how I could've seen that," Edna said. She was thirty now and an elementary school art teacher. She swallowed another spoonful of the tortilla soup that Margo made. Edna had remembered the Harmonica Man because her mother was playing the old folk cd that she had cached in her childhood room. She couldn't believe her mother had chosen the music for their first meal together in months. Maybe Margo thought that Edna liked the music.

Edna tried to shrug the sound off, but it grated on her as it reminded her of former obsessions that she had worked for twenty-three years to undo. The Harmonica Man was something buried and tightly packaged inside her. She balanced her spoon at the edge of her soup bowl.

Margo sat across from her daughter at the four-person dinner table in a long silence and folded her white cotton napkin on the table. She started with the napkin completely open and then creased the first fold with her thumb so it would stay. She folded it smaller and smaller until the thick wedge of fabric wouldn't bend anymore. She wouldn't make eye-contact with Edna.

Margo was kinder in her fifties than she had ever been, but she had never apologized for bringing bad men into their house. She hadn't dated anyone in several years, and Edna suspected that her mother and father were seeing each other after decades apart. Edna tried to wean herself off Margo's orbit by spending longer and longer stretches away from her childhood home. Love, against her better judgement, was the force of attraction keeping Edna close enough to visit her mother when she felt most compelled to. At last, Margo opened her mouth. When she released the napkin, it snapped open and released its folds across the tablecloth.

“Oh, I do remember. After that night, you stared at the red maple tree every day, waiting for that thing to reappear. I couldn’t tell if you were more scared of the tree or me,” Margo said. Edna did not feel convinced. Her mother’s tone was too theatrical.

By now, a tree service had cut down the red maple tree in the front because it was diseased with a fungal blight called Anthracnose. That was the last entry in Edna’s red maple diary, from ten years ago, when Edna was home for the summer between her sophomore and junior year of college. Edna cried the day when the Arborist came to inspect the sick tree. While she was away at school, she only had so many opportunities to see the red maple. When the time came to cut the tree, the saw tore through the thin bark and sliced into the wood too easily. The tree trunk was as vulnerable as a human throat. When nothing was left but the stump, to be removed later, she was certain that the Harmonica Man had been severed from her forever. She didn’t know if she was relieved or devastated.

“But mom, did you see anything that night? Maybe *there was* something or *someone* under the tree? I was so little, I could have changed the memory.” Margo got out of her seat and stopped the folk music. She lowered herself into her chair, suddenly exhausted. Edna paused in the middle of her sip of water. She placed the glass down slowly enough that it didn’t make a sound. Margo looked into her soup and followed a single tortilla strip while she stirred. She had the sense that her mother was about to tell her something monumental.

“I heard the music too, Edna. And I saw him that night when you were seven.” A chill raced across Edna. She could not pick up her spoon.

“I don’t believe that,” Edna said.

“Well, I wasn’t going to tell you that when you were little. I saw him one other time.” Margo wagged her finger at Edna, as though she had been the one keeping a special secret. “The winter before we cut down the tree, you were away with Dad. I was sitting here, at this table, and looking out the front window at the snow coming down, like we are now. The red maple was heavy with the snow. I was drinking tea.” Edna didn’t know what had possessed her mother to tell the story in such detail, but she continued, “There was a knock on the door. I looked out the window, and seeing no one, decided to get the mail. The driveway was un-shoveled, so I felt like I was wading through the snow. By the time I got to the end of the driveway, I heard the same harmonica music as I did when you were seven. The Harmonica Man, as you call him, was standing barefoot in the snow, playing his music.

“When I approached him, he lowered his instrument and asked me if I wanted to learn how to play. He said he could teach me if I came with him. He smelled like campfire smoke. I said no, I did not want to learn how to play, and I stood there...” Margo’s worry line deepened into a grove between her eyebrows. She couldn’t find the rest of her story and stopped where she was. She looked at Edna and waited for the weight of her confession to show on her daughter’s face. The distress did not show—Edna was calm and unblinking. She didn’t believe her mother. Edna shook her head.

“Those are all the details that I told you. Why are you making this up?” The Harmonica Man’s unbuckling belt flashed Edna’s mind. She shivered.

“The truth is that I think something very bad happened to you when you were a little girl, and I think it was my fault,” Margo whispered. She began to cry and removed her glasses. “I

made the tree sick with the fungus because it reminded me. You kept telling that damned story about the Harmonica Man.” Edna’s heart raced.

“No, no, no, mom, there must be a simple explanation,” Edna said. She covered her mother’s hand with hers, stunned at the creativity and limits of her memory.

Cherry Tomato

If you run exceptionally long distances, usually thirty miles or longer, sometimes you can hallucinate. What was Flo running thirty miles for? She wasn't totally sure, but she hoped that she would hallucinate because that was the most likely way for her to see her friend, Sarah, who died on a ventilator. Even if she didn't hallucinate, the endocannabinoids were soothing for her grief. She had told Sarah, before she died, that she would run thirty miles because that was a goal that Sarah had. Flo hadn't brought much food or water with her. She was going to depend on the kindness of strangers. She figured, if she was more depleted, she was more likely to hallucinate, anyway.

Flo had never ran more than ten miles. She made it to the fifteenth mile of her run—halfway!— and she wasn't anywhere close to hallucination even though her calves burned. A faint high was lifting her from a completely sober state— filling her with the joyful sensation that she could run anywhere and for any duration that she set her mind to. She wondered why she hadn't just asked one of her friends for mushrooms for a quicker trip. Sarah would never know if she got to mile thirty. She could end the run now and call for shrooms.

She really wanted to end it when she was a mile into the hardest hill of the run. The hill was a ten percent grade, grueling for sixteen miles in, and lasted for two miles. The terrain was the rolling result of glaciers scouring the earth ten-thousand years before. Now, it was wine country. She stopped to walk for no more than thirty seconds. Sarah would not have stopped for any longer than that.

Panting in the midday sun, Flo crested the hill and squeezed the last drops from her bottle. She was out of water. Come to think of it, she couldn't remember the last time that she'd had a drink.

She turned off the road to approach a greenhouse, hoping that there would be some water inside. The greenhouse was seven feet high, made of metal hoops and sheets of plastic pulled taught across the frame to trap the heat. A figure, blurred by the plastic film, moved inside. She could tell it was a man with a cap of white hair. She had used the water pump to the left of the greenhouse the previous summer, but no one else had been on the property then. She didn't like to stop on a stranger's lot, but she was parched. The sun had reached a level of intensity that she hadn't expected for a day that was supposed to be overcast.

"Hello! Excuse me, Sir, how are you?" She waved and tried to grab his attention. He went about his usual motions and continued to hunch over his work in the greenhouse.

"Hello? Who is it?" He had a trustworthy voice; warm and full.

"It's Flo, I'm a runner. Could I get a drink of water?" She was overly aware of the way that her shorts stuck to her thighs as she walked towards the opening of the greenhouse.

"Yes, come over here," he said. She didn't want to go inside the greenhouse, at least not too deep inside where she couldn't get out in case she needed to. One of the most important rules was to always have an exit. She peered inside. She guessed that the man was in his seventies. He moved slowly through the tomato plants with a hoe and raked weeds away from the sprawling green plants. Many of the plants had round orange and yellow cherry tomatoes hanging from them. It was the peak of the tomato season. He looked grandfatherly, so she came closer.

She let him take several steps towards her and bring her the hose. She stayed close to the exit, but the length of the hose wouldn't permit it. She took several more steps towards the man. She thought about how Sarah would have trusted him. His hair was even whiter on the inside. The plastic film encasing them blurred the field, the tree line, and the sky outside into a watercolor of beige, green, and blue.

"Thank you," she said as she took the hose. She fiddled with the opening but couldn't get the water to go through.

"Turn the nozzle the other way."

"Like this?"

"Yes, I might need to turn the water on. Oh, I think you've turned it off." He stepped towards her to help her with the nozzle, and she jumped. He didn't seem to notice the spike of panic that ran through her and then drained away once he stepped back. She filled her water bottle.

"There we go. Thank you! I used to work on a farm."

"Then you know all about putting the work in."

"Thank you so much, I hope you enjoy the rest of your day."

"Wait. I've got something that might be refreshing." Her skin itched in the thick greenhouse air. She was ready to leave but she felt compelled to stand there out of politeness. She stood there for Sarah and imagined that she was present, somehow protecting her. Flo rubbed the salt that had collected on her upper arms. The man plucked a low-hanging and orange cherry tomato from one of his plants and tossed it at her, underhand. To her surprise, she caught it.

She looked closer at the plants growing in the greenhouse. In the shaded corner, there was a bin of magic mushrooms. Her eyes widened. He laughed under his breath and hunched over the irrigation tape.

“Do you want one of those, too?” he asked. Flo hesitated.

“That’s alright. Thank you for the tomato,” she said. She stepped out of the greenhouse. Relatively, it was cooler outside. Sweat rolled down her back and temples, partly from the relief of the open space and from having more room between her and the stranger. She ran her fingers over the delicate, taught film that kept the liquid and seeds contained inside the tomato with just enough tension. She looked at the veins running under the surface of the skin before popping the tomato into her mouth.

It didn’t take much pressure from her incisors to puncture the skin on the tomato and to burst its warm contents over her tongue. The taste was intensely sugary and salty after eighteen miles of running—nothing like if she had tasted it in a restaurant. The cherry tomato was so good that it felt like everything in the world was fine; the burning in her muscles, her slight delirium, Sarah’s too-short life. At the same time, the tomato, covered in that thin skin felt to her as prone to bursting into tears as she did.

She couldn’t dwell too long on the side of the road to let the breeze cool her—she had twelve more miles to go before she would finish her run and the sun was already going to be at its peak during the last miles on the exposed route 79. As she reached the first prolonged downhill, she smiled at the rolling farmland in the distance. The tomato, that little capsule of sun-charged energy, and the endorphins coursing through her bloodstream were all a gift even though she was so tired.

At mile 29, she heard snippets of a woman's voice close by. She looked around but couldn't find the source to any of the sounds. The voice was garbled and the words unintelligible. It came in and out of focus, one moment ringing in her left ear, the next in her right, and the next it surrounded her. Flo burst into a smile, convinced that Sarah was talking to her even though she couldn't understand a word. Flo's vision was blurring; it was like she was looking through the plastic film wrapped around the greenhouse, but she knew she was going to make it.

The Wagon Rider

The rule was, if you got to push someone down, they got to push you, too. It was Brendan's turn to push and Daphne's turn to ride in the wagon, blindfolded and handcuffed, down the grass hill, through the neighbor's yard, and into the net of forsythia bushes that caught the wagon before it could speed onto route 22. While Brendan's Welsh mother was working her shift at the nursing home, the neighbor kids would gather at his little ranch on the highway.

Brendan hadn't felt guilty about Maxine shooting down the hill in the plastic wagon or about her tumbling out of the side and accruing a rash of scratches up and down her arms, but he worried about Daphne. She smiled neatly—without showing a tooth—as he lowered the bandana over her already closed eyes. She was good at following the rules. He probably didn't need to blindfold her, but he knotted the bandana carefully behind her head so it wouldn't catch any of her luminous blond hair. He worried that she might float off the wagon during her ride to the bushes. He shook the image off—it wasn't a real concern.

Maxine had the handcuffing honors. She took Daphne's breadstick arms in her scrapped hands and pulled Daphne's wrists behind her back. Daphne wore a homespun raspberry pink dress covered in mud. The handcuffs didn't secure Daphne's wrists too well. Brendan thought that no matter how tightly Maxine cinched them, Daphne's wrists would keep shrinking, smaller, lighter, until full of air but as tiny as bird bones.

Sticky signaled the *all ready*. He was the event official to ensure no one cheated and that no one went too soft. He had oily bangs that stuck to his forehead and a copper whistle that he wore around his neck no matter the occasion. He blew the whistle with an *ocean spray* of spit, as they called it, and Brendan lunged forward to push the back of the wagon. Brendan knew it was a half-assed push as soon as he stepped back. Daphne shrieked and laughed over the lumpy grass even though it rolled half as fast as it could. She had the longest trip recorded once she crashed into 90-year-old Mrs. Carol's forsythia.

"You barely pushed!" Maxine said. The three raced down the hill to release Daphne from her bonds.

"I'm pushing Brendan next!" Daphne said. She dragged the empty wagon up the hill.

"I'm going to help. You went way too slow," Sticky said. Maxine the handcuff queen adjusted the circles to more than twice the size they had been set to for Daphne's wrists. The metal was cool on his wrists. Brendan sat in the wagon with difficulty. He had to pull his knees in tight to fit. He closed his eyes and felt Daphne's fingers as light as butterfly wings over his ears. The world darkened and the whir of traffic on the highway increased in his ears. The ridges in the plastic dug uncomfortably into his back, unable to conform to his growing body. Sticky didn't even let Daphne push. Brendan knew it was Sticky because he could feel the dampness on the other boy's hands through his cotton t-shirt despite the brief contact. It was the hardest push any of them had given another because it had to make up for the futile push.

He gained speed for about eight seconds before he lost all sense of his orientation. Where the road was, where the bushes were, where the house was, all gone into nowhere with the twist of a

wagon wheel on an exposed root. He didn't shoot off the wagon so much as crash with the wagon onto the only rock in the forsythia bushes. His head thudded against the rock with a dull echo.

*

Brendan sat on the bleachers in the gymnasium while Mrs. Smack clapped her hands together for indoor kickball. While his head injury wasn't serious, a butterfly band-aid held the open flaps of skin together on his forehead. The risk of bleeding profusely on the gym floor was an excellent excuse to sit out. Brendan hated gym class and the skid burns from running base to base on the polished wood floors. They couldn't go outside because of impending thunderstorms. Through one of the propped-open doors to let in cool air into the sealed Tupperware of a gym, he watched the gathering storm clouds over the expansive field across the street from the high school. How he loved the smell of gathering rain.

Maxine and Daphne were on the kicking team, Daphne in a baggy kelly-green sweat suit and Maxine in basketball shorts. Sticky was a grade ahead, in 10th. None of them talked to each other much once they got off the bus and into the school's laminate halls that were painted a hideous yellow posing as gold, one of the school's colors. Brendan wished they would talk during the day, if only to feel less lonely before meeting at home. He watched Daphne squirm at the back of the line and wondered what was wrong with her. The green sweat pant fabric swayed around her legs—legs so thin he didn't know if he could place them inside the swaths of fabric. Only Brendan noticed when she, a green bolt, ducked out of the open door in the corner. He shuffled around the edges of the gymnasium, behind the gym class warriors and towards the

open door. The wind blew through with a cold front. He peered out of the door to see her against the cinderblock wall, squatting in the grass with her pants down. Her body shared with him something that he hadn't fully understood. She was emaciated. He felt so guilty to watch her, not because of the urine flowing from her onto the grass, but because he could see her bones and tendons, prominent, ridging even the undersides of her thighs. He felt so guilty that he had pushed her down the hill, even if she had been unscathed. She pulled up her underwear and her green pants. He ducked behind the wall and then back out so she wouldn't think he had seen her peeing.

"Daphne?" He said

"Brendan!" She fumbled with the strings on her pants and came back inside as it started to rain.

The next day she wasn't in school and she didn't come to Brendan's house with Sticky and Maxine. No one knew where she was.

That evening Brendan sat at home with his mother, Gwyn. She read her newspaper with a downturned mouth and sipped her ale while he plodded through his geometry. She had unusually long arms that held the paper far from her because she was farsighted and hated to wear glasses. There was a knock at the door. Gwyn frowned deeper before lumbering towards the door. The state trooper struck an imposing stance in the doorway. He was six-feet-five and the shoulder pads in his navy uniform top made him seem larger than he was. Brendan thought about what he had done. Ah, yes, the stolen pack of Twizzlers from the gas station. He was almost ready to admit as much.

“What have you done, Brendan!” Gwyn said. She gestured for the officer to come into their living room.

“I heard that you know Daphne Houtkooper? She’s missing.”

*

Daphne sat in the wagon with her knees pulled into her chest. Her blond curls bounced under her straw hat as Brendan pulled her around her yard. She wanted to show him the chicks that had hatched the past day, but she wasn’t allowed to walk because her heart was too weak. He would pull her anywhere she wanted to go. He’d been pulling her around her yard for a week now, ever since she came home from the hospital and her attempted getaway. It hadn’t taken the police long to find her at the train station.

Her father was pretty much an oblivious vegetable and her mother would force her to eat slices of birdseed toast smothered in tahini sauce, but they were both grateful to Brendan.

Once he got her to the coop, she scooped out of the wagon and onto the grass. Inside the coop was a cluster of chicks chirping under a heat lamp. She scooped the odd one out—instead of yellow down, it had dark chocolate feathers. The light was returning to the skin on her fingers. He watched everything she did with awe because he couldn’t imagine the guts it took to run away from home, but he supposed, she had always been so willing to submit.

The Milk Can Game

Garrett dipped tobacco while clutching a bouquet of yellow roses. Eleven years had gone by since he was last home in Hunts Mill, New Jersey, when he was a senior in high school. He had already moved into an apartment above the liquor store and he would start his job at the water treatment plant on Monday. As he walked out of the Bagelsmith with a bag of still-warm French toast bagels, he passed a new vape shop and CBD shop. He thought it would be better for everyone to cut the crap and put in a dispensary. He felt unrecognizable, having grown a well-groomed beard and weathered by the outdoor jobs he took all over the country and at sea on fishing ships. No one had spotted him yet, but it was only a matter of time in the small town before someone saw through the beard and the threadbare NJ Devils cap. He wondered if he would see her, Danny—whose painting of a blue heron he kept next to his bed—if she still lived here and if he could at least show her how sorry he was. Just like him, there was nothing about her online and he didn't dare ask after her. He had almost killed her boyfriend, Cole, their senior year, and now Cole was dead at twenty-nine from an overdose on heroin.

He crossed the bridge over the Raritan River to the cemetery. Three anglers, bodies all waders, cast lines into the freezing October water. Since Cole's funeral was a month past, Garrett doubted that he would see anyone he knew at the grave on a cloudy Saturday.

"Not yet, John, not yet." Garrett turned to see who was talking. The woman walked quickly through the 19th century headstones as if pursued. She pumped her arms up and down like she was trying to sweat. Plastic bags and scarves tethered to her arms streamed behind her in a blur of color and clashing pattern. Multiple bandanas covered her head and she wore 90s black

sport sunglasses. She wore a lunchbox across her torso like a purse. At first glance, Garrett thought she was making a fashion statement. Maybe she was.

“John, you just wait!” She continued to mumble something unintelligible as she passed him and sped in the opposite direction of town, towards the strip of gas stations and chain stores.

He didn’t remember seeing homeless people in his hometown when he was a kid. He had seen others while driving around town. A woman squatting on the curb with one tooth left, as far as he could tell, and a grocery cart full of cans. A homeless veteran asking for cash. He had offered to buy the veteran a meal, but the man refused.

Garrett stood before Cole’s grave. The soil was still lumpy and soft around the red granite headstone. A wreath wilted against the stone. He didn’t know how long Cole had been using. Ben, the one person beside his parents who he stayed in contact with at home, didn’t tell Garrett more than that Cole OD’d on his parent’s sofa, where he was living. Garrett hadn’t pressed for details. Their conversations once a year consisted of surface level talk, or Ben just left a message. Had Garrett killed Cole, in a way? He placed the roses on the grave and willed Cole to know that he hated himself.

He saw Cole’s disfigured face in a blur of motion; head swaying, nose burst open, a rush of blood soaking his lacrosse varsity jacket. He felt the numbness after the contact between their heads as if it were today. The memory of Cole’s face often resurfaced unbidden— Garrett could only relate it to a Francis Bacon painting and the only reason he knew about Francis Bacon was because Danny had convinced him to take art history with her their senior year since she couldn’t convince Cole. It was probably in the middle of class, sitting as close to Danny as he dared, while Ms. B flipped through slides on Medieval England, that he was most in love with Danny.

Or when she gave him her heron painting out of the blue because *he would appreciate it*. Or maybe he was most in love—at least the most jealous— when he walked her out of class and Cole would be waiting for her in the hallway. Or maybe it was when he noticed that she clenched the cuffs of her long-sleeve shirts, which she wore no matter the weather, that he was most in love because he was full of rage at the sight of a purple and yellow blotch on her wrist. Full of rage and too scared to ask her how.

Garrett shoved his right hand deep into his pocket and spit the wad of dip in his cheek onto the ground where it blended seamlessly with the mud. The French toast bagels were growing cold in the paper bag. His feet, already heavy in steel-toed construction boots, sunk deeper into the ground.

The day Garrett almost killed Cole started as one of the best of Garrett's senior year. Deer hunting at Mountain Point with Ben and Talia, and it was the first time that Garrett invited Danny. Talia was one of the few black students at their country high school where so many white classmates would touch her hair. She had recently shaved her head and wore a neon orange beanie. She was dating Ben, and Garrett wasn't sure why because she was too cool for him. She also sat next to Garrett and Danny in art history. People in town gawked when they went into any establishments together; Ben, Jewish, not white enough for the community of German, English, and Irish folks, Talia, black and Garrett, pale and red-headed but tall and muscled. As unlikely as they were, they were often together, even if Ben and Talia were in one of their many "just friends" phases.

Talia and Danny trailed off together, almost out of Garrett's sight. Ben, patient and immersed in the hunt, had eyes for nothing but the trees as he waited to for movement. Talia

hunted with crossbow, and Danny shadowed her to learn. Red-violet bramble stems crossed over Garrett's view of the two young women. Talia's beanie flashed between the pine trees and underbrush. Danny gestured to Talia, and although Garrett couldn't hear a word they were saying, he watched Danny push her sleeves past her elbows and show her bruised arms to Talia. Talia's back faced Garrett as she hunched over Danny's arms as if to protect them. Garrett turned away and fired his rifle into a tree.

“Dude, what the fuck?!” Ben glared at Garrett. Talia called out to ask if they had hit anything.

The outing was only a prelude to the main event: The Milk Can Game. Hunter High versus their rival. At half time, they were winning at home. Danny, Cole, Garrett, Ben, maybe two other friends— not Talia, she hated football—rolled spliffs and drank flavored vodka in the deserted dugout, behind the bleachers and on the farthest side of the diamond. By the time the marching band performance blared across the field to their seat, it had travelled through the metal bleachers that vibrated with the crowd and was distorted, almost out-of-tune, until it petered into the freezing breeze. The air was icy enough to break and none of them had dressed warm enough, but Garrett was warm with liquor. He was known for being a belligerent drunk.

Cole slipped out of the left sleeve of his varsity jacket to enfolded Danny into his side, under the wool fabric bejeweled with yellow patches. They were both covered in the white flour that they threw at one another in the stands. Danny leaned into Cole's body, slipping her hand between his legs to keep it warm. Cole gripped her hip, his knuckles turning white under his wind-chapped skin when he squeezed her. While Cole pumped Danny's hip with warmth, he

pumped Garrett with smoke—Ben barely got a puff of the spliff he shared with Garrett. Garrett, restless, teetered on one foot and then the other and couldn't take his eyes off Cole's hand.

That's how she gets those bruises. He's hurting her right now.

“You need to go for a walk?” Ben said into Garrett's ear. Garrett leaned towards Cole and Danny. Danny laughed at him like he was being a dumbass. Ben pulled Garrett's arm, which was hot to the touch. Garrett felt like his body was going to take over and that whatever followed next would be a purge like vomiting.

“Dannyzzz he hurting you? Don't touch her.” Garrett pushed Cole's right shoulder.

“Don't touch *me*. What's your problem?”

“Fuck off, Garrett, you're paranoid,” Danny said. She never touched weed. The rest of the group smothered their smokes under their feet and fell into the closest thing to silence—the halftime performance bleating its last notes. Cole stood and shrugged out of the other side of his jacket, leaving him bare-armed. They were a similar size, although Garrett was an inch shorter.

Garrett butted his head into Cole's face. White flower puffed into the air and caught the light coming through the bleacher slats in stripes. The crack of Cole's nose opening and pushing into his head was followed a second later by profuse blood. Cole's head shook like a ringing gong before he collapsed onto the ground. Garrett straddled Cole and pummeled the Francis Bacon face below him, unable to hear the cries and shouts surrounding him because of the ringing in his own head. He felt Danny fall onto her knees beside him and shake his shoulder. He was aware enough to stop moving so he wouldn't hurt her.

“No! Stop! It wasn't him! It was John.” John was her father. She always referred to him by his first name. Her voice came to Garrett as an echo, but it was the only one he could hear.

Dark spots eroded his vision until all he could see was Danny's mouth moving under a layer of snot and tears. His hands, burning and wet, collapsed to his sides before he crumpled on the ground, nothing more than a cigarette butt.

Garrett's family paid for Cole's reconstructive surgeries with the money they had saved for Garrett's education. After the savings were spent, they took out loans to pay for Cole's rehabilitation and Garrett's fine, rehabilitation after his lucky six months in juvenile detention, and one-way plane ticket to Florida to get on an industrial fishing ship. It was a debt that Garrett could not repay his parents. Garrett hadn't fought anyone in years, certainly no one he came to learn didn't deserve it.

As he turned to leave Cole's grave, Garrett bit into one of his plain French toast bagels. On his way back to his apartment, he kept his eyes out for the bag lady, wanting to catch a better snippet of her chatter. He spotted her sitting on a bench by the gas station a block away from his front door. Her layers of pink and purple bandanas made it easy to find her. It struck him that she must be freezing—it had started to drizzle, and it was only forty degrees. But she didn't seem to mind. She gesticulated with her hands. He was too far away to hear anything. He felt like she was watching him, but he couldn't be sure because of her black sunglasses. He took off his hat and walked up the stairs above the liquor store to his apartment where Danny's heron painting sat next to his bed.

That Saturday night Garrett went to see some of those old high school friends at The Cabin. Geezer owned the bar and lived above it. He was the Geezer eleven years ago and he was still. The red neon sign outside flickered in uneven intervals. The rural property surrounding the bar was a yard sale permanently on hold. A freezing fog had settled into the low ground and left

a frost dust over the junk that looked like white flour. Geezer had a 19th century carriage in the back and a few life-size statues. One of a little boy silhouetted against the a school bus, was real to Garrett for a moment before he went inside. A cold and still boy.

The Cabin was quieter, maybe trashier than Garrett remembered it. Buck heads mounted on the walls stared into the dusty room lit with low yellow lamps. The place was no longer quirky. It was frightening. It was so quiet that the entire back portion of the bar was roped off to store furniture. To Garrett's right was the pool room, slightly better lit, windows steamy and full of dying plants. There was a handful of college-age women smoking cigarettes and bouncing around one of the pool tables. A meth head was tweaking in the corner. He wondered if it had only been the allure of no carding that had brought him here in high school.

Garrett hadn't seen Ben since he had been suspended from school and finished his last semester in juvy. Ben had been so loyal over the years, refusing to disown Garrett. Garrett was anxious that his presence in their hometown would ruin the careful balance of their long-distance friendship. They had barely talked about the incident, and never about Danny, and that was exactly the risk that Garrett needed to take.

Garrett felt a deep ache for his friend, when Ben spined on the barstool to face him.

"What's up Greyhound? He's been getting around like a Greyhound bus. Do you still like beer?" Garrett smiled at Ben, and to Garrett's disappointment, another man that he did not recognize. Ben and his friend were already many Corona and limes into the night. Garrett wondered if they had needed so many before seeing him. Garret laughed and gave Ben a long hug. He had the same sharp jaw that jutted into Garrett's shoulder, but a softer belly. Garrett blinked back tears. The gentle curve and warmth of his friend's belly against his was too much

for him to bear. He released Ben and shook hands with Christopher, who he pretended to recognize because he knew Garrett's name. Such is the way of a little town. Ben and Christopher both wore flannel shirts and construction boots.

"Geezer! Can we have some more Coronas?" Ben slid a twenty across the counter into Geezer's leather hand. "Look who's here!" Geezer squinted hard at Garrett from underneath his tall baseball cap and shook his head. Geezer's hand recoiled with the twenty crumpled and protected inside it.

"I don't know who that is," Geezer said and reached under the counter for the beers. Garrett made eye contact with Geezer, about to remind the man that he was a regular in high school, but the hardness in the man's gaze clamped Garrett's mouth shut. It took Garrett by surprise the way that his hometown could be chilly when it thought he was a stranger. But he was skeptical that Geezer didn't recognize him. Was he a stranger?

The beer bottles clanked onto the wood. The surface was etched with initials and curses. Garret rubbed his fingers over the spot where he and Danny scraped their initials with a paperclip—not in a romantic way, but with other friends—and now there were too many marks to tell if the G & D wasn't a C and an O. Garrett heard a lapping sound. The stout mutt below him, tied to the legs of the nearest stool, lapped from a bowl that his owner, a middle-aged man, filled with beer.

"What took you so long to come back?" Ben said. Garret took a half-seat on the stool next to his old friend. He left one leg extended with his foot planted on the ground, careful not to get too close to the beer-guzzling dog.

“Well, there’s not much calling me back!” That wasn’t the right tone; it sounded judgmental of anyone who stayed, an insult to the place itself and to the man getting his dog drunk. Garrett softened. “Aww, you know.” Christopher and Ben exchanged a sobered look. Garrett jammed a wedge of lime into his bottle with his pointer finger. He sucked the citrus on the tip. He wondered how to get the conversation right. He asked them about their families. They were neighbors and their kids went to kindergarten together in the same school system they had gone through as children. Ben wasn’t married, but Christopher was.

“I’ve always said you could come home, anytime. How’s Mrs. Gray?” Ben always had a crush on Garrett’s mom in high school.

“Relocated to Florida.”

“I know where I’m going for vacation!” Ben said. There was a gap in the conversation like a step that was taller than the rest in the staircase. Garrett worked himself up to the questions that he really wanted to ask. It took him so much effort that sweat beaded on his forehead.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about some of the people we used to see, you know, in high school. Do you still see Talia ever?”

“Funny you’d ask. I just visited her in Philly last week. Longest off and on I’ve ever had.”

“Is Danny in town still? I know it’s crazy I haven’t asked before... I felt like it would be inappropriate.” Christopher and Ben fell silent for a minute, leaving an opening that the tv couldn’t fill. “You don’t have to tell me, other reason I didn’t ask is I knew I couldn’t keep away if I knew.” The gap in their response widened, made Garrett wonder if she was dead, too...but Ben would’ve told him.

“Danny is around,” Ben said. He avoided Garrett’s eyes. Garrett let out the air in his chest slowly and his heart swooped up at the possibility of seeing her. His tongue tingled with the *sorrys* on its tip. His hands buzzed with the help that he would offer her to make up for his actions.

“Do you think she would talk to me?”

“She talks to a lot of people, dead people,” said Christopher. “Everyone calls her the bag witch.” Ben frowned at Christopher. Garrett’s chest tightened. He thought of the woman in the graveyard. He scrutinized her face in his memory. It was hers. The round lips, the upturned nose.

“Only the teenagers do,” Ben said. He rubbed Garrett’s back. “She’s a paranoid schizophrenic. I’m so sorry, Garrett, I know you cared about her.” He said it as if she was dead, after all.

“The woman with the bandanas?”

“She broke, Garrett, like six years ago. She’s really sick,” Ben said. Garrett thought of her sitting on the bench in the freezing rain and the fact that no one had done anything about it. He thought about the fact that he hadn’t cared enough about the woman sitting on the bench in the freezing rain before he knew it was Danny. All a failure. He smashed his beer bottle on the edge of the counter. Glass shards scattered across the floor. Beer spilled on his clothes. The dog didn’t bat an eye.

“Why the hell has no one done anything about it?”

“You think we haven’t tried? Just try. You’ll see. Her sister brought her to the hospital once, you know. She was there for weeks, but she came out worse. Did you even know it was her? She gets food, shelter if she wants it at Randall’s, he keeps a barn heated. She won’t take

medicine. You'd have to drag her off the street, Garrett," Ben said. He collected the largest shards of glass from the floor and dumped them in the trash. He gestured to Geezer to hand him the broom and the dustpan. "Sorry, Geezer. I'll clean-up for my friend here. Got a little carried away." Geezer handed Ben what he needed, and Ben swept the smaller pieces into the pan. The owner of the dog untied his mutt and they both waddled out the door.

"Would she recognize me?" Garrett whispered.

"I don't know. She knows who people are, but she doesn't always show it," Ben said.

"Maybe you were right not to ask."

"I just want to make things right here."

"Maybe you start by going to work on Monday, settle in here, take a break from the past." Christopher nodded in agreement with Ben, but he looked deeply uncomfortable to sit in the middle of the conversation.

"I have to talk to Danny. And we have to help her," Garrett said.

"What Ben is trying to say is that people take care of her, Garrett, she's not going to die," Christopher said.

It was 7am on Sunday morning and Garrett returned to the cemetery, this time with a dozen bagels and a hangover. He parked his truck on the road and walked to the nearest bench underneath a yew tree. He couldn't remember what kind of bagels was Danny's favorite, so he asked the girl behind the counter at the Bagelsmith to give him a variety. He held the brown paper bag in his lap while he sat on the bench. Since he had got them early, they were still warm and heated the tops of his jeans. He hoped that he would see her before the bagels cooled. He

figured that she had been here the day before, and some asking around easily offered the information that she often walked in the cemetery because the interred asked her to come there.

In preparation for their meeting, he had shaved his beard so that he would look more like he did in high school when he was always clean-shaven. He was terrified that she would recognize him and terrified that she wouldn't. He thought it was unlikely that she would know who he was and that he would have to explain. He had her little framed painting under his jacket in case that would help her recognize him and understand that he cared. In fact, he wondered hopefully that she had forgotten the entire incident from high school and that they could start a new relationship. They would be like two completely new people, and after she finished her treatment and was normal again, she would be so grateful to him for persisting when everyone else failed her. That's when their friendship would rekindle, stronger than ever before, and she would be deeply appreciative of his protection. As he tunneled deeper into his fantasy, his guilt and shame grew gentle inside him.

He sat on the bench for an hour clutching the bag of bagels. His stomach rumbled and he opened the bag, inhaled the comforting smell of yeast and cinnamon. He bit into an everything bagel which filled the gaps in his teeth with seeds and salt.

He waited. He closed his eyes. He opened them.

Her paisley maxi skirt fluttered over tattered sneakers while she walked towards him, not directly, but perhaps towards the main road. Her arms, lowered to her sides, were cushioned from her hips by canvas and plastic bags stuffed with scarves. The icy wind fluttered the ends of her bandannas around her face. Still, he couldn't see all her features under her oversized sport

sunglasses, especially not from about twenty feet away. He was baffled that he hadn't recognized her.

"Danny!" She stopped and looked around before settling on him. He took off his hat so she could see him well. "It's me, it's Garrett." She approached him slowly with the *wish wish wish* of plastic and fabric rubbing together.

"I know who you are. I'm not a dumbass." She stood about five feet away from him and faced him directly. Her skin was hard worn for a woman of twenty-nine or thirty. Her easy smile had leaked out of her lips into lines in the creases of her mouth. He hoped to get a look at her eyes. He slid to one end of the bench, hoping it would invite her to sit with him. She took off her sunglasses and folded them into one of her plastic bags. Her eyes were bright and frantic.

"How are you? It's been so long," Garrett said. He immediately felt stupid asking a question that sounded fit for a high school reunion, but he didn't know what to say.

"I'm fine how are you?" She said it like one five-syllable word. It was like she had forgotten what intonation was.

"I'm..." *fine* died on his breath. "Not well. Because I think about you all the time and how I hurt Cole." Garrett crinkled the brown paper bag in his lap and had an idea that made him hopeful. "Is Cole one of the people that you talk to? Do you want to sit with me? Could you ask him for me if he forgives me? ...Do you forgive me?" Danny's torso tilted closer, but she did not take a step. "I'm so sorry. I won't touch you."

"That's what John said after every time he hurt me."

"Your dad, he was the one who gave you those bruises, right? I thought it was Cole, that's why I hurt him, and it was like I couldn't control-

“Yes.” Danny lifted her hand to silence him and sat on the other end of the bench. She seemed smaller closer to him. She shrank to keep space between them. Garrett pushed the bag of bagels towards her, and she winced. “You know, you could’ve asked me what was going on back then? When you saw the bruises? Talia did. She actually asked.” Garrett reflected on how obvious that seemed now. If only he had *asked*.

“I can help you now. I can get you something to eat, bring you somewhere warm.” She shook her head. He realized that she was shaking all-over. “You look like you’re freezing.”

“I’m not sure that I want to talk to you any longer.” She gripped the handles of her bags, ready to lift-off at any moment.

“Here, wait, I have your painting.” Garrett opened his jacket and placed the painting on the seat in between them. Garrett squeezed the edges of the bench and willed the painting to be an opening for them to walk through. The heron swooped low over the river. Danny rubbed her fingers over the textured brushstrokes. Garrett thought he saw her smile. “I live here now, and I’m going to help you. I’m going to drive you to the hospital. My car is right over there.” She gathered the cloths and plastics tethered to her before standing up. Garrett grabbed her arm.

“Danny. We have to get you to the hospital.” She shook her arm and her mouth opened but made no sound. She twisted, trying to get free, but Garrett only tightened his grasp on her. From afar, it may have looked like they were dancing with streamers. The fabric that Danny was swathed in flickered around her body. Garrett followed her motions, doubling down and overcoming them.

“AHH, get OFF me!” He lightened his grip for a moment because he didn’t want to hurt her. She broke free for an instant and took two steps at a run before he closed in on her. She

tripped and fell into a pile of pattern and color that was brilliant against the headstones and hunched over to protect herself.

“Danny! You will NEVER get better if you stay out here.” Garrett pushed his arms under hers and wrapped them around her torso before pulling her up. She flailed and cried.

“No! NO!” She sobbed and kicked. Her face was warped. Garrett tried to pull her towards his car and wondered if they could make it there. She was screaming loudly enough that the churchgoers lining up on the sidewalk across the street had turned to watch what was happening. Several of them crossed the street to investigate. Garrett ignored them and persisted towards his car.

Danny went slack and silent in his arms—a dead weight. Garrett stopped moving. Her eyes were open, and her mouth was shut. Her head folded into her chest. Suddenly, Garrett could not move her. Not because it was impossible to, but because he could imagine her father doing what he was doing. Holding her in her catatonic state, he sat down on the ground.

“How can I help you?” He whispered and wept while he waited for the churchgoers to arrive.

Canter on the Cake

The yellow slide on the kindergarten playground bent under the weight of too many children. Diana sat on the bench at the edge of the playground, close to the picnic table covered with preparations for the class birthday celebration. The sheet cake—still covered in a plastic box—waited next to a stack of paper plates and plastic forks.

Diana watched her son, Nathan, but she wasn't too concerned since the ground was made of shredded tires. He loved to jump off ledges, but nothing on the playground was so high that he would hurt himself. One mother hovered over her child to make sure that she didn't run too fast and fall. Once the mother noticed the flimsiness of the slide, the mother pulled her girl from the playground for good.

Diana preferred to be optimistic and to not be afraid of little things. She provided Nathan with makeshift toys of sticks and stones and grass and encouraged him to make his own fun with nature's materials. She thought creativity was an important skill to have as an only child with a single mom. While Diana's sister applauded her for her parenting style, Diana received more criticism than praise from the other mothers. Diana felt them cast sidelong glances at her while she sat alone. Their glances asked her: *why are you so aloof?* She didn't want their approval, but she worried sometimes how her attitude towards the group of parents affected Nathan. She couldn't stand the other mothers, their preening manners and their vapid conversation.

Diana kept her head down in her watercolor art magazine until Nathan screamed at another little boy for stealing his toy horse. She rolled her eyes at the women scrutinizing her and

strode onto the playground. She grabbed her son's bicep and gave his round underarm a squeeze. He closed his mouth, and snotty tears ran down his cheeks, over his puckered lips.

“Nathan, we talked about this. We ask nicely for people to give things back to us,” Diana said. Nathan's lower lip quivered. He wanted vengeance on the little boy clutching his miniature horse.

“May I have Martin back? Please?” Nathan asked. The other little boy, Charlie, tightened his hold on the horse and stared like a cow. “It's my birthday.” Nathan's birthday had already passed weeks ago. Diana hated how kindergarten exaggerated the importance of birthdays. They lasted an entire month at the Sprouting Acorn School. Charlie slackened his grip on the horse and dropped it to ground before running away to his mother. His mother held him close, kissed his forehead, and glared at Diana. Diana caught the woman's gaze—it was Meg, the director's wife, and Nathan's kindergarten teacher. Sometimes, Diana wanted to smack the self-importance off Meg's face. Nathan picked up his toy horse, Martin, and tried to run up the slide while two other children were coming down it.

Diana breathed out of her nose. She didn't know how much longer she could endure the playground, and they hadn't even cut the cake yet. She still didn't have anyone to complain to about the tedium she endured at these events. All the other mothers had been born in the early 80s, but she was a late 90s baby. The cultural gap was huge. The friction between her and the other mothers bordered on frustrated sexual tension. She was different in her appearance from the other mothers. She took pride in the ways that she deviated from them, so much so that she noted their habits and garments to reinforce the contrast. Today she wore a ground-sweeping white skirt and an fuzzy black turtleneck sweater that doubled her size. Layers of indigo, violet,

and turquoise glass beads hung over her turtleneck and swung down to her belly. Stacks of colorful resin bracelets weighted her wrists. Her matted hair hung in two long braids that pressed the sweater against her skin. She had so many knots and tangles that her braids were lumpy and irregular. One of her tattoos—the lily—peeked out of the top of her turtleneck and tucked under her ear.

Nathan had made a point of dressing “normally” that morning. He had chosen a dinosaur shirt, blue jeans, and sneakers.

He had also said to Diana, “Mommy, why don’t you wear the same clothes as the other moms?” The other moms wore variations of blue jeans, slacks, and button-downs in neutral colors. They adorned themselves with discrete tennis bracelets and diamond studs.

“Honey,” Diana replied, “every person is free to express themselves how they want to. This is how I express myself, and you can express yourself however you want, as long as you’re kind to yourself and others.”

Thinking about the conversation irritated her. Sometimes she missed the old Nathan who didn’t question her actions and who had been her closest ally. She remembered how he used to brag to his classmates that his mom had ten tattoos. Now she covered some of them when they went to class events because they embarrassed him.

“Alright, everyone, it’s time for cake!” Meg said. She clapped her hands together and the motion shook the diamond strand on her wrist. The twelve other mothers, and the handful of fathers, joined at the picnic table. Dan, Meg’s husband and the director, helped organize the plates and napkins. He had red hair streaked with silver and a blinding smile. Annie, the

homeroom mom, rifled through her bag for the lighter and placed it on the table next to the cake. Diana hovered in the back row to avoid the orderliness on the table.

Meg removed the cover on the sheet cake to reveal *Happy Birthday!* written in blue across the top. She placed the cover delicately on the side and stuck six candles, one for each child, into the white icing between the words.

“Everyone with a September birthday can help blow out the candles,” Meg said. Nathan sat on his knees and leaned over the cake as if he wanted to eat the entire thing. His curls fell over his eyes and he shook them away.

The other three birthday children sat on either side of him, and Diana stood close behind him, to make sure that he wouldn’t take a slice of the cake. She couldn’t stand how he responded to sugar, and the cake wasn’t vegan. Meg lit the candles—all six of them— while Dan started singing. A cloud passed over the sun, and a gust of wind threatened to snuff the candles before they had finished the song.

“Make a wish!” Annie said. While the other children blew out the candles, Diana watched Nathan grip Martin between his pointer finger and his thumb. The little toy horse galloped onto the cake and blended the blue words into the rest of the frosting. Several candles fell in Martin’s path. The cake’s destruction unfolded before Diana like a stop-motion film. Whatever she did wouldn’t matter. They would criticize her stillness or her reaction.

“Nathan!” Meg said. Nathan looked up at Meg, withdrew Martin from the cake, and sucked on the horse’s legs. “That’s not how we treat nice things.”

“I wasn’t hurting anyone,” Nathan said. He swung his legs under the table and crossed his arms. Meg and the rest of the parents tried to ignore the situation. A few of them gave Diana

sympathetic sighs. Diana placed her hand on Nathan's shoulder to remind him that she was there. Dan cut the cake into neat squares that showcased the strawberry jam in the middle. The frosting was marbled and textured like gravel from the toy hooves.

"It'll still taste just as good," Dan said. His face stayed neutral, but his melodic voice carried across the picnic table to soothe everyone and to remind them that trampling a cake was a forgivable crime. While Dan slid the first slice onto a white paper plate, a flock of geese sailed over the party and one of them shat onto the icing.

Diana considered the bird shit an omen that portended disaster. The same thing had happened on her thirtieth birthday. The boy on Nathan's right started to cry. Diana watched Meg's face contort and found contentment in how ugly Meg looked angry. Nathan smiled, and Diana knew it was because he had already stolen a taste of the frosting.

"Can we still have cake?" A little girl asked. Her eyebrows raised almost as high as the ponytail atop her head. "We can scrape off the top part."

"Oh no, honey," her mother said.

"Well, on the bright side," Meg said, "Our September birthdays made their wishes. You know what I think is best, if we all go home and enjoy the rest of our Friday with our families. We can have some cake in class on Monday, inside, where there aren't any birds or horses."

Diana tugged Nathan's dinosaur shirt and he followed her away from the playground. She didn't have any intention of lingering even if it meant she would earn an unhelpful reputation. Meg and the homeroom moms had stopped asking her for favors. Diana had taught them that the one thing she was good at in the context of the private kindergarten was occasionally bringing in homemade rugelach. But she couldn't make it on demand. She made it when she wanted some

herself. Diana took Nathan's hand in hers as they walked towards the bus stop. They could catch the 11:15 back home.

“When you stuck Martin in the cake today, it wasn't very kind to everyone else. Do you know that?”

“What about the bird? It shit all over,” Nathan said.

“We do not use that word, Nathan. You know that you can choose what you do and that the bird can't control it.” They sat on the bench beside the bus stop sign. Diana looked directly at Nathan, but he wouldn't return her gaze. He watched his feet swing back and forth. Martin's head and front legs stuck out of his front pocket. The horse was painted brown with a white diamond on its forehead. It bared its teeth as though frozen in mid-whinny. “One more strike and I'm going to have to take Martin away for a week.” Nathan scowled.

“Martin was making a wish.”

“And what was that?”

“That you would be like the other moms,” Nathan said. This again. How could she explain that the moms at his school were an unusual bunch of conservative, wealthy, and highly educated women who had chosen to put off children until they were established in their careers. Diana hadn't gone to college. The bus pulled up to the sidewalk. Diana and Nathan took seats inside, but Nathan sat across the aisle from Diana. She let him keep his space. It hurt her to see him wanting more and more distance from her, even though she knew that he needed it.

Diana thought about how she would dress if she wanted to look like the other kindergarten moms. She had everything that she needed in her wardrobe. The trick was assembling the outfit. Her hair would be tricky—it fell past her tailbone in tangles—but she

could brush it and put it up in a no-nonsense way. She had the scarf for the costume too—a pink paisley scarf that would cover some of her lily tattoo. Maybe she could dress up for Nathan when they got home, not to appease him, but just because she was curious to see his reaction.

The bus stopped in front of their apartment building. Knowing that Nathan followed close behind, Diana descended from the bus without fussing over him. Their apartment building—a three-story brick structure surrounded by a garden and koi fish pond—housed mostly retired people who passed their time knitting and watching tv. Diana’s grandfather had left the apartment for her, along with an inheritance, when he passed away several years earlier. It was quiet, as usual, when Diana and Nathan walked up the stairs to their home—number 300. Diana opened the door to release some of the incense-thick air inside their apartment. Blankets littered the living room floor. They had watched a movie while snuggling on the carpet the previous night.

“What do you think. Should I dress up like one of the other moms for you?” Diana asked. Nathan’s eyes grew wide, but he didn’t say anything. Diana smiled at his excitement. “I think that’s a yes. You wait out here.” Nathan sat on the couch and waited while Diana searched her dresser for her khaki pants and her white button-up cardigan. She had never worn them together because she had always feared how bland and unexpressive they would be. She didn’t want to feel like those other women who got mad when geese shat on their cakes.

She wiggled into the pants. She buttoned the cardigan. She un-braided her hair reluctantly, brushed it, then twisted it into a tight bun at the base of her head. She looped the fringed ends of her scarf through the folded middle in the way that she’d noticed the other mothers doing. She rifled through her jewelry but couldn’t find anything understated enough. At

last, she removed her thick eyeliner. The other moms wore “natural” style makeup. The mirror proved how effective her costume was. She had transformed into homeroom mom Diana.

Homeroom mom Diana would have scolded her son on the spot for destroying that sheet cake. After shoving her feet into a pair of conservative sneakers, she emerged from her room. Nathan tilted his head to the side.

“You look different,” he said. He chewed on Martin’s hoof.

“Do you think I look better now?” Diana twirled around to show him her new self from every angle. She waited for him to say that she did look better.

“I don’t like those pants,” Nathan said. With Martin in his hand, he jumped off the couch and landed on the carpet. He crouched low to the ground. Martin cantered to Diana’s foot and mounted her sneaker before peeking under her pant leg. Diana laughed.

“What are you looking for, Martin?” She said.

“Martin wants to see Daniel,” Nathan said. Diana didn’t know who Daniel was. Nathan pushed Diana’s pant leg up until he could see the hind legs of Diana’s horse tattoo on her outer right calf. She had gotten the tattoo in her late teens when she had gone through her horse-riding phase. Diana bent down and rolled her pants up until they could see her entire tattoo. It was about five inches long with a bold outline. It had flowers in its mane. Now that she thought about it, the horse on her leg resembled Martin. Both horses, suspended in the moment of rearing up on their hind legs, were ready to charge.

Double Distelfink

I am sitting in my apartment kitchen and I look at my pathetic American lemons in a blue ceramic bowl on my linoleum counter. It is a solitary Sunday morning, and I thumb through my journal from the previous year, determined to laugh and not to cringe at the person who wrote those pages. My journal is a purple binder that is a leftover from grade school, bursting with loose-leaf paper, some of it ripped and mended with masking tape around the perforations.

The thin, clear plastic pocket on the front contains a blue jay feather, and magazine clippings of vacation destinations like Bermuda. It had started as a honeymoon destination-brainstorming binder—I wasn't getting married—but I had lost steam on the honeymoon fantasizing and started journaling instead. Journaling really meant rehearsing who I wanted to be on a certain day. There isn't much chronology in this binder, but I know my lemon-letter when I see it.

It was February of 2018, and I was hiding, thanks to an internship, in Menton, France, which spoons the Italian border and sits on the Mediterranean. I could walk to Italy on any given afternoon for lunch without identification, and then walk back to France for my afternoon working at the museum. I was in exile. I was preparing what I was going to tell Audrey, my sister, over the phone, by writing her a letter first. This was before *The Apology Tour*, and after *The Amish Goodbye*, and I hadn't yet done much reflecting, even though I had gotten away from Pennsylvania for some personal space.

Hello my Distelfink,

I am mailing you a lemon from Menton. There is special overnight shipping from France to the US, and I'm bribing the postal service because it is illegal to mail you a lemon overseas. Today I went to the lemon festival, la fête du citron. They made huge barges and sculptures entirely of citrus fruits, of lemons and oranges, which all grow locally along with olives. This year's theme was Hindu Deities. I saw Ganesh, and Shiva, and Buddha. They were beautiful, many of them fifteen to twenty feet tall, but out of place next to the Mediterranean and the Jean Cocteau museum. The half-mile walk to ogle the shades of orange and yellow, carefully selected for their color, was great, but what you really need is to taste, not the oranges, but the lemons.

Downtown, locals had carts of lemons and they cut them into bite-sized squares, rind and all. These lemons are as big as grapefruits, and the rinds are thick, starchy, and sweet. You wouldn't guess how sweet the rinds are. As soon as the vendor cut me a fresh lemon, the tart juices sprayed the air and made my tongue recoil in anticipation. These lemons, you eat them in chunks with the rind, and that's how you must cut and eat the lemon I am sending you. The rind balances the fruit's bright sourness, making it possible to eat entire lemons. I don't know what the oranges taste like. Maybe they imported them from India.

You should expect your lemon tomorrow morning. If you don't get it, give me a call right away! I can check the shipping status online. Everything else is fine. I get to walk to Italy every day, and the museum is easy work. How is mom? What about you?

There wasn't an overnight illegal lemon speeding across the Atlantic to Audrey in New York. She didn't even call me the next morning to wonder where it was. Instead, I had called her and apologized profusely for the useless French postal service.

*

I was at home in Lancaster, months before I landed the internship that got me out of the country. The candles on the family dining table went out with a swift gesture from the draft shooting out of the front door. Since it was only my mother, Sarah, and I this evening, the expandable dining table was compressed to its smallest size, which was not big enough for me to sit as far away as I needed. Sarah—who I had at one point called Mom—insisted on making a full spread of spaghetti, meatballs, homemade marinara, garlic bread, and salad, all of which she had placed in individual porcelain bowls and plates. I knew it was a send-off. My silver fork and knife clacked on my porcelain plate, and the quiet Lancaster house amplified the sound of Sarah chewing and not talking. Dad, Adam, was out with his friends at the bar, and Audrey was long out of the house, living with her husband, Landon, in the city.

I hadn't finished my spaghetti, but Sarah took the candles going out as an omen to end dinner. She gathered plates from the table with her square, chapped hands. The porcelain set had painted forget-me-not flowers and a gold-metallic stripe that ran over the edges of the plates and over the lips of the bowls. I was still hungry, but I wasn't going to prolong the meal. Sarah took my plate from under my fork and knife and walked into the kitchen. It was dark out even though it was only 6:30. She kept her head facing the sink. The back of her blond ponytail shined in the kitchen light. I approached her, bussing the glass butter dish as an offering.

“You're not getting a spot in our family grave,” Sarah said as she scraped the plates and rinsed them—you had to hand-wash the porcelain. It was a lesson I had learned when I was eight. One of our Amish hexes hung above the sink. It was the double distelfink, two folk-style goldfinches facing each other, hovering above tulips, from my grandparent's barn, that ensured good luck and faith in your fellow human. In the spring, we had tulips in the front garden. We

even had a thicket of thistle in the backyard that attracted a family of goldfinches. With autumn overripe, the thistle seeds were exposed on the stems. You could see where my mind was going, out of my body, outside, into the thistles.

“That’s fine,” I said. “I’ll outlive everyone and by that time it will be full anyway.” Sarah pauses in the middle of rinsing the salad bowl. She takes my half-eaten plate of spaghetti from the counter and slams it into the sink on top of the pile of other dishes. The porcelain she inherited from Grandma Leah shatters, one dish underneath another, into a wreckage of white toothy shards crowned by the spaghetti prone over it. I imagined the spaghetti multiplying until it filled the sink, until it slithered over the edges of the sink, and further yet, I imagined that it flapped back and forth and slapped Sarah with marinara sauce. I relished the image of her dripping marinara over the kitchen as she wrestled with the Strega Nona spaghetti. I placed the butter dish next to the sink and stood as close to Sarah as I dared. She diffused, and I supposed that my butter dish offering had worked, at least a little, to soften her. Cold butter didn’t take long to melt.

“I’m sorry, that was harsh, of me. You can have your spot back anytime if you get some help. You can’t keep going on like this...I never know what to believe with you anymore.”

“Everything I say is true. You don’t trust me.”

“You’re taking the bus tomorrow morning?”

“Yep.” Sarah sighed over the shattered porcelain in the sink. She stared at it for a minute before she opened the trash and picked out the largest wedges to drop into the can without paying attention to the sauce staining her blue, striped button-down. She shook her head over the mess before leaving the smallest shards in the sink for the morning. Manny, our ginger tabby,

paced over the counter, sensing her distress, and meowed at her. I considered rescuing Manny. I could have tucked him into my duffle and no one would have noticed.

“I’m going to have to find a set exactly like this one before Thanksgiving.” Sarah rinsed her hands and patted them dry on the floral dish towel. She looked me in the face briefly before lowering her eyes to my feet, grasped my arms with her square hands, before letting go and flipping the kitchen lights off. She lumbered upstairs. I stood in the dark kitchen and looked out the window, at the streetlight casting a yellow pool on the sidewalk as Manny meowed into my ear. I was already packed. It hadn’t been difficult to fit everything into a duffle, a backpack, and a tote since I was leaving half of my things as a security deposit that I hoped to collect later.

*

On my way to the city at 8 am, I sat in a window seat next to a woman in her mid-fifties who smelled of cigarette smoke. Her yellowed nails curled over the armrest. I stared out the window. I had never seen the kind of fog that settled over the interstate then. The night before, the last night I stayed at home, and that morning, it had rained, and as the air warmed and as the clouds haunted the highway, I couldn’t even see across the two lanes to the oncoming traffic. One moment, the sun emerged. The sky had two layered curtains, one opaque, and one translucent, that each alternated between drawn and open. When the back, opaque curtain opened, the sun illuminated the fog, so even though I couldn’t see across the highway, everything was lit by a lamp covered in wax paper. Then, the opaque curtain would close, and we rode through the thick, dark fog again. Riding through the fog felt like moving deep underwater.

I rolled up my sleeves to relieve my itchy forearms from my wool sweater. The cigarette woman looked over me to watch the fog out the window, and on her way back to her own business, she caught my Amish Daddy Hex tattoo on my wrist. The twelve-pointed exterior rosette circles an eight-pointed rosette. Depending on who asks, I will either call the good luck symbol a Daddy Hex, or a rosette.

“Whatkindoftattoo isthat?” She asked. I squinted at her, unable to understand what she was saying in such a raspy, nasally voice. For a moment, I thought that maybe she spoke a different language. She didn’t leave any space between words. I stared, completely disoriented. “What kind of tattoo is that?” I could already tell that her voice would drive me insane if we talked for too long.

“It’s a Pennsylvania Dutch good luck symbol,” I said. She pushed up her sleeve to show me her forearm tattoo. It was another circular tattoo; a hokey Celtic knot with snakes and flowers that was entirely inauthentic. She smiled at me as though having a forearm tattoo was a kind of secret understanding between us. I couldn’t wait to get off the bus. She extended her yellow-fingernailed hand to me, and I took it with the tips of my fingers.

“Dana, I’m an artist,” She said.

“Sharon,” I said.

The first time I remember lying, I was eight years old. That doesn’t mean it didn’t happen before—I’m almost sure that it did, but I don’t keep track of time very well. I am atemporal, which is a huge issue for me to function in society. Atemporal people have a 70% greater chance of lying than the average person in the United States. It’s not always that I want to lie, but that because of my nature, I end up lying. I know too many people who take chronology for granted.

I can ask them when something happened, and they know. I never know. Instead, I decide. But I think everyone decides. No one knows.

When I was eight, my friends Corinne and Alexis were at my house for a playdate. We were going to play outside in the sprinklers. It was one of the hottest July days in several years. For some reason, Corinne's parents thought it was a good idea to give an eight-year-old an 18k gold necklace. Corinne removed it with self-possession when she changed into her bathing suit to protect it from the water, which was a startling show of responsibility for her. I made sure that I was the second to change—I took the necklace folded into Corinne's dress pocket, stowed it in a drawer, and when Corinne couldn't find it, I told her, and my mother, that although I didn't want to tattletale, I had seen Alexis steal it. I partly attribute that day to my closeness with Corinne, and to how Alexis faded out of our circle.

Later, on the playground at school, I had shown the necklace to a few select to prove to them that I was a princess, bred and born. I had an unhealthy assurance that I was a princess. I still have the necklace, and sometimes I wear it, but never around Corinne.

I've told friends that my parents are divorced—Corinne still believes that they are—and I've told my parents that I am a drug addict. I don't know if Sarah and Adam believe that anymore. I have never smoked a cigarette, and I do have my limits. I have never touched cocaine. There are some things I would never lie about.

The fog cleared as we approached Port Authority close to noon. The sky had chosen sun, instead of gray. The bus returned to its underground terminal, enclosing us for a few minutes in darkness. I made it all the way from Lancaster, with only a few stops along the way, without talking much. I was glad to have made it across the tri-state without over-sharing. As much as I

like to show and tell, I was too tired that morning from the previous, sleepless night, during which I had pulled four of my cuticles off my left hand for an anxious satisfaction.

Before we dismounted, I decided to send Audrey a message, to let her know I was in the city. I hadn't seen her since her wedding in August. Even though we had plans to visit one another the past September, good and honorable Landon told Audrey what him and I had supposedly done while they were engaged in June, and Audrey had told Sarah what had supposedly happened between him and I, and my plans to visit Audrey were cancelled, as she couldn't see me, but she could live with him, and soon enough I couldn't work from home anymore because I had made too many mistakes, and I needed to learn a lesson, and I needed to learn how to be honest with myself and with my family, and not until then could I undo The Shunning, which was a family practice leftover from my grandparent's former lives as Amish farmers.

Hey Auj, hey, I'm staying in the city with Corinne, want to get together sometime? There are some new paintings in the Dutch masterworks section.

Only a minute later, I sent another: *I've been really lonely. I don't know what I'm going to do if we can't talk. Corinne is doing a lot of cocaine.* Potentially this could mean that I was in danger of doing lots of cocaine.

And another: *We haven't even talked about it yet.*

I wasn't going to deny that I had slept with Landon in the messages. I knew that would turn her off immediately even though I hadn't slept with him. She was more likely to respond if I showed the possibility of repentance, or if I was suffering, so she could be the sister who went high when the other sister went low. She liked me to crawl so she could fly high.

I turned my phone on silent as I descended from the bus and retrieved my belongings. I strapped my duffle across my body. Corinne's apartment near The Battery was four or five miles from the bus terminal. I decided I would walk, at least partway, even though my crap pulled the muscles in my back tight from my neck all the way to my ass. Surrounding myself with people who don't know me, with people who don't care what I look like, or what I'm doing, is like being ensconced in a pile of laundry warm and fresh out of the dryer.

On a brisk, sunny Monday afternoon such as this, people in business attire gathered for ramen or something else delicious. I even saw a woman, through a café window, eating alone in the bustle of lunch hour, while reading a novel. Who could she have been? I feel that the greatest luxury is to be anonymous, because I can be who I want and it is priceless. It was good to be away from the gray-covered buggies of Lancaster.

I took Broadway most of the way to Corinne's. Over the phone last night, she told me that the attendant in the lobby would expect me, and that I only needed to ask him for the spare key to her loft. I imagined that during the time I slept on her couch, we would reenact college. At least, I hoped it would feel that way. It was impossible to intrude on other people's space in college. I never had to ask to visit, I never had to ask to stay.

I didn't tire of walking, not through the Flatiron District, not through Greenwich Village, but the stretch before I reached the Financial District, and the Financial District itself, which is tall and sad, wore on me. It was so easy for me to start the adventure but living in the middle of it was the hard, concrete sidewalks of New York.

Corinne's apartment building reflected the passing clouds. The exterior was sleek enough to deflect any curiosity about its insides. I wiped my forehead with my scarf before pushing

through the revolving front doors. The man at the front desk greeted me with a tip of a hat that was a spoof on 19th-century doormen. They have palm fronds in vases in the lobby, as well as cedar-scented oil diffusers. A resident with a toy poodle collected her mail and waited for the elevator.

“Hi, I’m Abigale Zook,” I said. He welcomed me and gave me the spare key for Corinne’s apartment. Corinne had tied a little note to the key: *welcome home Abi!* I took the elevator to apartment 301A. The front of Corinne’s door had a poster of Britney Spears on her maiden tour.

Inside, the apartment was freshly cleaned, and I felt touched because of it. Corinne was never a tidy person, so I knew that she had either hired a cleaning service, or that she had cleaned just for me. Either way, I was flattered that she cared so much about me. The walls were a soft beige, and the decorations were neutral shades of cream, coffee, and terracotta. She had several framed collector’s editions of Britney posters as well as one of Avril Levine, and one of Deirdre Dart. I dumped my things on a white loveseat before sitting at the coffee table.

I opened my purple-binder-journal and added a sheet of loose-leaf paper in between the two previous entries. I date my entry: When I Met Deirdre Dart in New York.

Dear Audrey,

Today I met one of your favorite celebrities while I was walking in the city. She was eating ramen. She was just like you would imagine her in person; stylish, elegant, gracious, even happy to see me. It’s so rare to meet someone famous who is happy to say hello to a stranger. I had my notepad with me, so I had her sign a piece of paper for you. On another note, It’s been so good for me to work from home, now it’s easy to transition from Lancaster to the city. I’ve

reworked five different websites for large retail companies. I can't wait to see you! We can get together more often now that we live closer.

Closing my purple binder, a current of fatigue shocked my system. I couldn't write anything else. Sarah had really drained me. Corinne had left a pile of fluffy blankets, a body pillow, and a regular pillow for me on the couch. I wrapped myself in the blankets and belly-flopped on the couch before closing my eyes. I didn't take long for me to fall asleep, and during that time, I had one of the most remarkable dreams that I can remember having:

I was at home in Lancaster, staring in the antique bathroom mirror, the kind of mirror covered in black, ink-like splotches so the round, pallid reflection of my face was overlaid with spots like a rotting apple. I had this burning feeling on the right side of my neck. It felt like something was pushing through my skin. I rubbed it with my fingers and felt a mound, about the size of a clementine, but I didn't remember injuring myself. In the mirror, I could see that the mound was red and pulsing. It started to grow—the clementine morphed and stretched into a miniature head that extended from collar bone, up my jaw, and under my ear. Another face was trying to grow off my own. I felt it with my left hand. The face took form. A nose, a toothless mouth, and closed eyes budded underneath my fingers. The mouth wriggled as it tried to make sound, but it couldn't. I could feel the mouth longing, struggling to call out, to say something.

I ran into the kitchen clutching the alien face growing on me. I called for my father, Adam, to help me. No one else in the house would help me but him. He knew what to do. He took a kitchen knife from the drawer, and as I knelt on the tile floor, he sliced the face off with the precision of a surgeon and saved me from the duplicitous growth. Yes, my father often knew what to do when other people in my family didn't. I wished that he knew what to do now.

I woke up from my nap late that evening to Corinne's voice.

"Hello, my child, how are you?" Corinne said. She ran her hand over my hair with her long, soft, and bejeweled fingers. I felt each ring press into my hair. I wanted her hand to stay on my temple, to warm me, and to keep me. It was dark outside now, as dark as it could be in the city, and Corinne had lit a vanilla-scented candle on the coffee table. I felt safest with Corinne, safer than anywhere else in the world.

"You won't believe this, I saw Deirdre Dart while I was walking here," I croaked. Corinne nodded and smiled. She knelt beside me, her knees digging into the plush shag carpet.

"That's the city!"

"How is Mr. Mack?" Mr. Mack is a Hedge Fund Manager, Corinne's boss, to whom she is second in command.

"He's great." Corinne leaned over me and took my hand in hers. I noticed that she had gained some weight since the last time I saw her in August. Her breasts peeked through the top of her black blouse and the undersides of her upper arms spread over her ribs. She was beautiful, but I also wondered if her sixty-hour work weeks were catching up to her. She hadn't yet taken off her makeup, but I looked for hints of dark circles under her concealer. I hadn't noticed it before, but she had whiskey on ice in a blue glass tumbler on the coffee table behind the candle. She picked up the tumbler from the table and gave it a swish, the ice cubes jingled, before taking a sip. Her auburn hair curled over her shoulders in loose waves that looked effortless even though I knew they were the result of toil in the bathroom.

"Do you think I slept with Landon? He hates me," I said.

“No, of course not! I can’t believe how your family is treating you.” Corinne knew how to say the right things. My phone buzzed from where it got stuck under my back. The image that I used for Audrey flashed across the screen. It was a double distelfink, two goldfinches facing each other, almost kissing over tulips. The Goldfinch is also the State bird of New Jersey.

From Audrey: *Sure. We can meet at Cleopatra’s Needle, it’s close to the Met. 1pm?*

Me: *See you tomorrow Distelfink!*

I thought maybe it was cruel to call her by our childhood nickname for each other, but since I had secured a meeting with her, I didn’t think I could rub her the wrong way. When she was eleven, and I was seven, we had even dressed up as goldfinches for Halloween. I felt satisfied enough that she would see me and satisfied enough that I could run into her like Dierdre Dart in the middle of the city, on any given afternoon, eating ramen. Maybe I didn’t want to see her the next day. If we were close enough, maybe we’d face the same direction, and bend over some tulips, for a sister’s kiss.

Out the Window

You were five years old and notorious for gleefully running out of restaurants and into parking lots or busy streets. Those incidents were spontaneous—they terrified our parents— but this was your first plotted escape.

I'd never been so impressed and frightened for you. It was a late May day. Kindergarten was almost finished, and I was preparing to graduate from second grade. I sat at the kitchen table to draw a picture book for class with crayons. Instead of completing your reading log, you wanted to go outside. But you weren't allowed. You threw your snack plate on the ground and your log on top of it. You smiled at the sound of the plate breaking. Where do you get those great ideas? Carrots and crackers scattered across the kitchen floor. Jupiter, our dog, scarfed them up.

I stared, feeling at once impressed by you and smug that I had never and would never do something so *bad*. Mom picked you up and locked you in your room, where you would stay until dinner. I continued to draw with a focus that I imagined was professional. Mom minced onions while wearing swimming goggles, and Marty, our stepdad, worked at the table. Ten minutes later, I saw a little girl with blond ringlets digging under the swing-set in the back yard. *Is that Avi? Ohmigod that's Avi.*

The three of us rushed into your room to discover an open window; the screen expertly removed and leaning against the foundation three feet below. Mom and Marty didn't bother to bring you inside because it was that damn impressive. You won!

Since the twins were on the way, Marty finished the basement for us, which meant that we each had our own room, but sliding doors and a peek-a-boo window kept us accessible to each other at all times.

Dad had us for the weekend. After our afternoon YMCA swim, we sat in the parking lot and learned that he'd been married before, right out of high school, to a woman named Brenda. We wanted to know, what happened to Brenda after she left Dad? We did not ask.

The closest that we lived together was in the shed that Dad renovated because the trailer was too shitty to sleep in. You called it the *Shack and the Shed*. We slept on the top bunk and it thankfully it smelled really good because the frame was made of cedar. When we were nine and eleven, what was more magical than listening to frogs on the pond outside an insulated shed?

From our basement room at home, you quickly learned that you could climb onto your shelf and access your ground-level windows. Even though I was the older one, you showed me how to sneak out of your window and into the evergreen bushes on the side of our ranch house. You would leave your window open ajar for quiet reentry. It was harmless. The only drug that the neighbor kids provided you after dark was candy from the five and dime. They were my friends, too... but I was not invited to the midnight party. Everyone knew that I wouldn't, couldn't sneak out of my window.

Your window was a trick that you would continue to play. I did not tattle, but I wish I had. Would it have changed anything in high school if we had nailed the basement windows shut?

We sat at dinner; Mom, Marty, the eight-year-old twins, and you would not come to the table. You walked across the kitchen for a glass of water. There was an inch of your skin

exposed on your hip. *FUCK* was etched there. The lines, the scratches, were uneven, like you had used the end of a twisted paperclip or another blunt object. Mom noticed and demanded what was on you—you tried to hide it. *Nothing*. I was immobilized but ready to hurl.

Every time you went into the bathroom, I was scared that you would come out bleeding. I wished mom would be more shaken. She was too habituated to mental illness from her work with people in crises. She broke down only when she was the only one allowed to visit you in the hospital.

When you came back home, you said that the bananas were crunchy and that you had met kids with *serious problems*.

You visited me at school. You used both of your hands to pat my cheeks and tell me that I get smaller every time that you see me. I don't! And you're not getting any taller now, so it's impossible that I "keep shrinking." I am happy to give you the illusion that you are tall! You are my Big Little Sister, and I am your Little Big Sister.

You brought weed for us to share. You ground the flower, and I looked at the tiny Sanskrit stick-and-poke tattoos between your fingers. It was eleven pm and we sat in my studio apartment.

You disinfected the needle and prepared the ink. I exposed my inner bicep. You poked me once, leaving a blue-black dot meant to turn into an evergreen tree composed of many little dots. I said *OW* and pulled my arm away. I was too tired—and let's be honest, too *wimpy*, for you to complete the work. I assured you that I wanted to finish it another day, but I still have my first and only tattoo; a dot that I pretend is a period. Sometimes, I want to ask you what you went through in high school, but the window is closed, the poke is there on my arm, and I know

enough. When we smoke, we laugh hysterically at each other and you tell me to *stop staring* at you. I'm not staring at you!

Burning Bluegrass, Chapter One

Priscilla strode across the pitted yard to her pyro shed. The cicada nymphs climbed out of their subterranean chimneys to chorus in the mid May humidity. She was going to turn 16 in three days. A cicada flew into the shed from the opening in the roof, landing on her arm, which was so freckled it could be mistaken for tan from far away. Priscilla thought of fire when she looked at the new cicada with its red eyes and orange legs. Its feet on her hand stuck with impressive strength. She couldn't decide if the cicada was dumb or fearless. She picked it up and placed it on the ground.

Crumpling her home-ec papers, she dropped them in the metal bin with a match to kindle the wood. Ms. Robinson's note, *this is a terrible fabric match*, dissolved. The wood was damp and sent billows of smoke through the hole in the ceiling. She sprinkled a dash of potassium chloride, courtesy of Mr. Herb's chemistry classroom, over the flames to turn them purple. No one else used the shed in her backyard, so it became her fire lab. She stored matches, gasoline, magnifying glasses and chemicals that turned the fire different colors. Her mind slowed down at the sight of the flames consuming. Her body calmed. She let go of the rumor that she heard from her half-sister, Candy—that her father was moving home, to stay, for the first time since she was eight. She let go of thinking about the beautiful fabric swatches that Nancy, her other half-sister who lived in another, better home, had brought to home economics.

The first time that she saw someone light a fire that wasn't for a practical purpose was in middle school—she was a sixth grader, and the boy was an eighth grader wearing tattered jean shorts. At recess, he whipped out a magnifying glass and funneled the sun into a beam of terror

onto an anthill, then onto pieces of trash in the dirt. She stared from a safe distance. She tried at home with her own magnifying glass but could not get the light hot enough to burn the grass. Even in her initial fascination, she did not condone hurting any living thing with fire. It was clear to her that ants could also suffer. Once she started lighting things on fire in middle school, it became difficult for her to stop. She grew into an expert on the controlled burn and what could turn the flames different colors or emit different scents. She burned newspapers, books, old clothes, plastic, herbs, and anything else that could be interesting. Her favorite way to burn an object was to use sunlight and a powerful lens.

She had several pink burn-marks and scars on her freckled hands from letting matches fizzle out too close to her skin. Once, she added too much gasoline to a pile of wood next to the train tracks, lit the pile too close, and jumped back too late to save her hair. The smell of burning hair was her least favorite smoke-smell. She attended the beginning of classes with a chunk hair missing from the front of her face. Headbands and bobby pins did nothing to cover the damage, and she was not allowed to wear hats to school.

When Paul asked what happened, she made the mistake of telling him that she'd burned it off when she got too close to a fire, earning herself the nickname Pyro Priscilla, or Pyro Priss, or just Pyro. Before they started calling her Pyro, she was Slut because her mother, Mary, and her older sisters were known by that name. She much preferred Pyro to Slut. Pyro was said with some grudging respect and a bit of fear, but Slut was in the lowest ranks, right above what white people called black people in Bluegrass.

Once she was satisfied enough by the fire, she extinguished it with sand and went inside their shotgun house. She could barely hear the chorusing cicadas over the sound of the television.

The house was five rooms long, each following the next, with no hallway through the middle. The only way to get from one room to another was to walk through a room. The kitchen and bathroom in the back of the house had a small second floor, the camelback—an attic-like room where Priscilla slept if it wasn't unbearably hot. When it was too hot, she slept on the back stoop outside the kitchen door on a hammock strung across the porch rails.

The living room was thick with cigarette smoke that blurred the television light. Priscilla opened another window next to Mom who was fast asleep with her feet propped on the arm of the couch and her cigarette burning out in an ashtray on the ground. Her crimpeline dress, covered in an orange floral print, bunched around her dimpled thighs. Priscilla could smell Mom's sweat and the grease on her from serving hot browns at the diner. Her curled black hair fell over her face and her gray roots were showing since she hadn't dyed them in a month.

A horror movie was playing, one that Priscilla had seen on TV before. It was the scene when the ghost of the murdered wife possessed a little girl; not just any but the daughter resulting from the husband's affair. The possessed little girl would try to kill her mother, but in the end the little girl and her mother would survive and banish the spirits of the scorned wife and the murderer husband. Nothing scared Mom. She was like a cicada that way, and Priscilla thought the same question applied to her: was she dumb or fearless? Priscilla was calloused, too, especially to gore and jump-scares. Whenever the television was on, it was to watch a horror movie, a soap opera, or the Derby. A week past, Dust Commander won the 1970 race. Priscilla didn't care much about the stallions, but she did take a strong interest in the first woman jockey to ever compete in the event.

Sal and Candy, her half-sisters, shared the moth-bitten loveseat that was upholstered in corduroy. They were both in their twenties, Irish twins, and worked as waitresses at The Spinning Wheel diner with Mom. Priscilla's earliest memories of them were when they were twelve and thirteen and often her caretakers when Mom was indisposed to watch her or if she was taking extra shifts at the diner or the bar. One of their favorite pastimes had been to "cook" Priscilla in a bucket full of crawfish to make "crawfish pie." Priscilla still hated going into freshwater.

Sal draped her legs over Candy's. She wore droopy overalls that exposed the heart tattoo on her chest that was intentionally identical to Janis Joplin's. Sal's sole ambition was to become a tattoo artist, but there were no women artists to train her and no man would yet take her on as his apprentice. Priscilla greatly preferred Sal, who although absent most of the day and night, took a genuine interest in her, to Candy, who at twenty-two not only still called Priscilla Pyro but took any opportunity to pinch her or yank her hair. Priscilla sat in the wicker rocking chair for five minutes and was almost ready to go to her room when the landline rang above the couch.

While the screams on screen could do nothing to rouse Mom, the phone did. Mom reached for her cigarette butt first, relit it with a plastic lighter, took a few unhurried puffs with her left hand, and then reached for the phone with her right.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded gravely from smoking and dozing. Priscilla strained to hear who was on the other end of the phone. "So you're getting in late?...Okay...Everyone will be asleep... come in quietly." She hung up the phone.

"Who's that?" Candy asked without turning her face from the screen.

"It was supposed to be a surprise." Mary said.

“Ohhhh,” Candy said. She exchanged a knowing look with Sal. They all had Mary’s dark hair and almost looked like full siblings. Priscilla gulped and thought of the rumor that she heard that her father was moving home for the first time in eight years.

“Who?” Priscilla asked. She was tired of her mother’s many surprise male visitors. Mary looked at her, lit another cigarette and tried to hold out, but Priscilla stared her down.

“I wanted it to be a birthday surprise for you! George, your father is moving home to stay,” Mom said. Priscilla took the cigarette out of her mom’s hand and stole several draws before offering it back. Mom swatted her hand, meaning Priscilla should keep it. Mom loved to swat her hand to say no or *pay no mind*.

Priscilla did not consider George’s return a welcome surprise. She would consider it a surprise if he remembered her birthday or her birthyear for that matter. She suspected that Mom had waited to tell her so she couldn’t protest.

The horror movie was ending, and Priscilla rocked back and forth in the chair. She remembered some of her father’s face from when she was eight, but she had not seen a picture of him since. She had a mental image of him only because she’d replayed this memory so many times: His cold blueberry eyes looked at her while he was kneeling to fasten her “jelly” rubber sandals before he left for good. He had wide, high cheekbones and crew-cut blond hair. By now, she suspected that the memory had morphed his original features into something untrue because of the years that passed. He had never lived in the shotgun house for longer than a few weeks at a time. He was away for weeks to deliver truckloads of products across the country. It didn’t matter what the products were; whatever needed driving.

Sometimes he would drop by for a weekend with an envelope of cash before disappearing several months. When she was little, she would have a crying fit every time he left because when he was around, he was the only one who really played *with* her. He made doll villages and race car towers with her. Sal and Candy, along with making crawfish pie, gave her horrendous bangs, dressed her in burlap, and gave her sips of bourbon until Sal got smart enough to end Candy's reign over the two of them.

When Dad was away for eight years, Mom talked nonstop about her suspicion that he had another family, or at least other children. He called once in a while. Priscilla did not say hello to him on the phone, but Mom said that he asked about her. To comfort Priscilla, Mom would say, "you're probably not his only one," and sometimes, that helped Priscilla believe that his absence was not a result of his disappointment in her. Mom also liked to say, "Candy and Sal don't have their father around none either, he's scared of the country," to remind her that her position was not unique.

Over the years, his absence became less remarkable, and Priscilla asked about him less and less. While George's absence lengthened, Mamaw took more frequent visits to the shotgun house to check on her only granddaughter and to bring her presents, sometimes to bring cash for Mom. She would drive the two miles from her tobacco farm in a 1950s Ford truck and park across from the front door that opened almost into the road. Mamaw would honk her horn for Priscilla to come out to her. It was Mamaw's idea to name her Priscilla in the first place—some attempt to introduce Priscilla into a higher class that Priscilla doubted she would ever enter.

"Is he staying at Mamaw's?" Priscilla asked. She hoped.

“He’s staying here, honey,” Mom said. Priscilla wondered, why now? Why not years ago? Why not never? Was it because she was halfway through high school, and that he was scared she wouldn’t finish, just like everyone else in her family? Was there other pressing business in Bluegrass that brought him home and made it convenient for him to see her? She was suspicious of him, of any man or boy too old for high school. They came and went.

“What about Scott?” Priscilla asked. Scott was Mom’s most recent boyfriend. He invited himself over on weekends and he and Mom would fill the house with pot and cigarette smoke.

“You won’t see him again. You should be excited. It was all George’s idea. And he sounds real serious about living and working here,” Mom said. She picked up the ashtray on the thrifted shag carpet and dumped it out the window. Mom pulled her dress over her thighs where it had bunched too high. Priscilla didn’t believe that George was serious about them and resented the idea that she should be present or excited for his return.

“I’m turning in. He won’t be here until late, so you’ll see him in the morning,” Mom said.

“I’m fixin’ to work early at Mamaw’s, I don’t know if I’ll be here to see him tomorrow,” Priscilla said. She did not have an obligation at Mamaw’s, but Mamaw was always happy to have her. If Priscilla could have things her way, she would watch her dad from a distance, somewhere he couldn’t see her, so she could decide to approach if she wanted to.

“C’mon Priss, he’s your dad. Can’t you cancel at your Grandma’s?” Sal said. Priscilla knew that Sal would do anything to live near her and Candy’s dad. He was a tattoo artist in Louisville but found it hilarious that Sal wanted to learn the trade from him.

“Nope,” Priscilla said. Mary closed the door to her bedroom, which in the shotgun house meant that the rest of them would have to walk outside the front door and then reenter through

the back stoop to not disturb her. Sal and Candy hopped on the couch before Priscilla could take it. Candy flipped through channels without pausing on any one for longer than five seconds.

“Would you just pick something?” Priscilla said. Sal yanked the remote from Candy.

“Must feel weird that you haven’t seen your daddy in so long,” Candy said.

“Nah, not really,” Priscilla said.

“But it’s been eight whole years,” Candy said.

“Cut it,” Sal said.

“You *sure* you still want to live here when he moves in?” Priscilla asked.

“Well, he might not be here that long anyway. I’ll wait,” Candy said. Priscilla rolled her eyes and leapt out of the rocking chair. She hurried outside the front, around the side yard and into the kitchen. It was a mild spring night. The thermometer outside the kitchen said 73 degrees F. Another night, she might have preferred to sleep in the hammock, but she felt too exposed and too easily accessible by her father. Given the structure of house, it was difficult to escape anyone, even the ghosts that Mom believed walked through the house at night. Since the all the doors lined up to make a straight shot through, it was irresistible for the dead.

Priscilla rushed up the steep stairs to her room, the only place safe from ghosts. It was less than 90 square-feet, but she loved to lock herself away in it. She sat on her creaky mattress and waited, paralyzed by the knowledge that her father was on his way from somewhere to her home. What would they talk about? What kind of interest would he show in her now? Would she learn anything about what he’d been doing the last eight years? Her windows were open. She wanted to burn something again, mix chemicals and make colored flames, but she didn’t want to

leave the safety of her room again that night. Now that the cicadas were quiet in the trees, every sound in the house was amplified.

Another memory of her father: it was an unusually cold October day, and he was home for a weekend. Priscilla was sitting on the back stoop with Mom and Dad. They were smoking cigarettes and drinking beers. Dad loved to wear his WWII army jacket whenever he was home. The olive wool was spotted with tiny moth-bites and there was a golden patch on the chest with an eagle outstretching its wings across a circle. Priscilla was drinking chilled milk, cooling her off too much from the inside so she started to shiver. Dad took off this army jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. It smelled like old wool and countless rains, sweats and smokes. She played with the still-golden brass buttons.

He left the army jacket for her without making a fuss about it; he simply left it on her bed for her to discover before he was gone. The uniform jacket was folded underneath her bed now. She thought that it was ironic that he had paraded around an honorable discharge patch from his service because he had no such permission to leave her and Mom. To her, he was a traitor.

Priscilla stretched onto her back. An hour into her wait, she heard Sal turn off the TV and go to her room. Priscilla checked her watch; a plastic children's Timex with Ronald McDonald on it. It read 11pm. She took out her flashlight and sifted through her milk crate of books. She decided between two of her well-worn paperbacks, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Little House on the Prairie* before settling on *Little House*. Burning things was a comfort to her, but so was Laura Ingalls Wilder.

At a quarter past 1am, Priscilla heard the chimes hanging above the front door jingle. She listened to the sound of heavy footfalls and the bottom of the door squealing over the entry matt.

She could tell that he closed the door slowly to make as little noise as possible. But to her, every sound he made was amplified. The lock clicked shut. She held her breath, as if it would give her away on the other end of the house, while he entered Mary's bedroom. Even though the house was five rooms long, they rooms were so short that she could hear almost everything they had to say with all the windows open. Even the cicadas were politely quiet until the morning. Her parents' conversation started with a wet kiss.

"Is there anything in the fridge?" George said.

"Don't go in there, you'll make too much noise," Mary said. "Priss is upstairs."

"Does she know I'm here?"

"Course. You know, you haven't sent money in ages to help with her. Are you saying you're gonna provide something for Priss? She wears Sal and Candy's old crap to school."

"Don't worry, I brought some things for her. Nothing Mamaw can't do though." There was another wet kiss followed by a breathy, quieter exchange that Priscilla couldn't understand until it sounded like their mouths turning into one orifice. She wished she couldn't hear.

Despite her better instinct, she imagined what he brought for her. It had to be something beautiful or valuable to make up for so much time. She hoped for a gift that showed he knew her well, like a microscope, a crystal from a place that he travelled, a pair of quality binoculars, or even a pair of brightly colored new Keds. She fell asleep imagining the gifts that he would bring to win her favor.

It was 4:30 am as she walked by her father's truck. She took in the Indiana license plates without stopping. She had no idea that was where he'd been. She had one hand in a box of

Wheaties that she took with her out of the kitchen to lessen her chance of seeing anyone before leaving. Not even Candy would be awake for work until another hour. She figured that if her father was here to stay, as her parents said that he was, they had plenty of time to see each-other, and she would set the terms. She would make *him* enjoy some of the waiting he'd inflicted on *her*.

The walk to Grandma Mamaw's farm was up and down two miles of rolling bluegrass hills, away from any main roads. There were horse and cow pastures, and fields of tobacco and soybean. The pre-dawn light hit the cobwebs that were spun in the fields overnight. In a few hours, they would be gone, destroyed by birds and the other animals waking.

Priscilla reached Mamaw's farm before sunrise. The two roosters were crowing. Mr. Red bobbed on top of the fence, and Mr. Black perched on top of the little barn where the two horses and the goats stayed. Mamaw was sitting on the front porch of the white farmhouse, swinging back and forth on a rope bench. She held her usual morning glass of coke and sipped it with a red and white striped straw. Even on the weekend she wore her uniform: a blouse buttoned up to the collar and tied with a silk scarf or a bandanna. Her blouse was tucked into women's work overalls with wide pant legs and a square neck. On top, she wore a knit cardigan with several cloth patches. Ever since Priscilla could remember, this is what her Mamaw wore. She was seventy-five and had grown up in a two-room shanty boat on white-only section of the Ohio River, where she had lived until flooding had forced her and her family onto land in the 40s.

Priscilla waved her cereal box as she approached and Mamaw raised her soda glass. She joined Mamaw on the front porch and took a seat next to her. Mamaw wore thick lenses that enlarged her eyes. They were the same cold blue color that Priscilla remembered as her father's.

“Dad is here,” Priscilla said.

“Where? George’s not here,” Mamaw said. She slurped the last of her soda and placed the glass on an empty keg.

“At home. With mom. He didn’t call you?” Priscilla said. Mamaw huffed.

“This calls for some smokes before we feed the animals. He hasn’t phoned me in months.” Mamaw took out her folder of rolling paper and loose tobacco from her own fields and rolled two cigarettes with expert, wrinkled fingers. Her nails were yellowed from nicotine stains and pruning tomato plants. She handed Priscilla a cigarette and gave her a light before lighting her own.

“Well, how’s he look?”

“I haven’t seen him yet.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“Can I stay here tonight?”

“The day just started.”

“I know.”

“You can stay here any night. You could even live here this summer if you want.”

Priscilla’s eyes widened. She hadn’t considered living with Mamaw a possibility.

At lunch time, after they’d fed all the animals and weeded Mamaw’s personal vegetable garden, Mamaw took a phone-call. It was George asking for Priscilla, but Priscilla told Mamaw to tell him she was busy working. After the call, Mamaw said something that stuck with Priscilla,

“He grew up on the water. He doesn’t know how to stay. It took me two decades to unlearn moving around all the time.”

It was Sunday night and Candy pulled Sally back by her hair while Mary screamed at them to stop from across the room. Priscilla slunk into the ranch house and leaned against the closed door. There was nowhere for her to go when this was happening. The fight meant that they had gone drinking after work to celebrate their off-day Monday.

“Where are my tips, bitch! You’ve got double.” The drunker Candy got, the more certain she was that Sally stole from her. To be fair, Sally pilfered Candy’s tips once, but the rest was likely delusion. Mary pressed her hands into her knees and lumbered in-between her daughters. Her hair was styled with extra volume, adding several inches to her normal height. Mary slapped Candy’s arms. Candy relaxed her grip on Sally’s hair only to grab her around the waist and lift her high enough that her feet weren’t touching the ground. Candy leaned back and her knees buckled, sending them onto the carpet. Priscilla wanted to be her estranged half-sister, Nancy, so bad.

“No. No! Stop,” Mary said above them. She towered with all the authority of a figurehead.

Priscilla turned to her left and jumped at the sight of her father sitting in the kitchen over an issue of the Tucker Tribune. He looked relieved to see Priscilla. Priscilla looked back to her half-sisters. Candy had relinquished her grasp and Sally lay sweating on the floor with her dark hair spreading underneath her like an oil spill. One dry heave later, Candy stumbled into the bathroom and locked the door behind her.

George’s body tensed as though he was about to leave his chair. His torso leaned forward but he seemed to be waiting for a sign from Priscilla to come towards her. When she gave no

indication, he cleared his throat. Mary smoothed her hair and took a seat on the other side of the kitchen table.

“Hi Priss,” he said. George’s eyes were wide and his mouth slightly open like it would help him take-in Priscilla. She was mad at her father for not knowing what to say. (*build into the scene to show how she’s upset that he doesn’t know what to say*) He gestured for her to come closer; she did. Her memory had stayed true to him. His eyes were just like Mamaw’s. He was young-looking for a man of about fifty—his short blonde hair had no salt or Flo. He dressed like the truckers she saw stop through the diner; in

“How old are you now?” George asked. Priscilla frowned. It was not the right question to ask. She thought about him strapping on her jelly sandals before he left for so long and wondered how he could forget her birth date. Was it a rhetorical question? Something to start the conversation?

“Fifteen,” Priscilla said. “I have to do my homework. It’s too loud in here.”

Oculus

It was the summer that a persistent afterimage followed Greer's gaze everywhere. The shape imprinted itself in the center of her field of vision like a specter and spectator, at once changing the way that she saw everything and viewing all that she did. Weird changes kept happening to her body since she turned forty-five, five years ago. Along with her bodily changes, she had a nagging feeling that she had done nothing of creative importance. What did she want to create? She did not even know that. She considered herself a massive failure; she couldn't even identify what it *was* that she should have made or done by her forties. She kept sane because she worked with her hands to weld, hammer, etch precious metals, and set stones. But she saw making jewelry as a craft, not a true art form, and the glitch in her eye was preventing even that satisfaction.

The afterimage on Greer's vision appeared one day while she was driving home late from *Clarity Jewels*—her niche was impeccable diamonds—at dusk, in a drizzle. The street and car lights glared off her windshield. At the last intersection before the turn onto her street, she could not tell what color the light was, too late. She flew through the intersection just as the cross-traffic had a green light. She hit the gas and narrowly missed an accident. Her hands trembled on the steering wheel the last mile home while she tried to blink the glowing orb out of her eye. Her first rationalization: was this the start of menopause?

It wasn't; her period came on time. The ophthalmologist, Mary, called Greer's specter a retinal edema of unknown origin, which made Greer think of a UFO—which it was—but Greer decided that the edema was secret power given to her for a purpose. She didn't believe in flukes.

The edema had to have blessing folded into it; If it was sentient and purposeful, she could live with its uncertain lifespan and origin. Greer was full of dread that she channeled into excitement.

The bright burning spot on her vision begged the question: was it light from another world tearing through her retina, puncturing her tiny blood vessels, to project itself, sometimes blue, sometimes yellow, always brilliant, on the backdrop of things that she could not only see but also touch? At its worst, URE, or Unidentifiable Retinal Edema, aka, “Yuri,” botched menus, instruction manuals, cups of coffee, or as now, precious stones.

Yuri trespassed all over the brilliant-cut diamond between her jeweler’s tweezers. The stone scattered light across the table, but it could have been Yuri sparkling, too. She hadn’t given up performing the hands-on duties in her shop since Yuri’s onset. Instead, she tried working and seeing through her peripheries. If she didn’t focus directly on the diamond itself, but on something just above it that was the same distance to her face, she could nudge Yuri out of the way. It was tricky to “look” at something while paying attention to another.

Greer peered through her monocular, with her left eye—the one that Yuri lived in— at the diamond. The monocular was a tool she had not figured out how to use with her impairment. When she looked through the eyepiece to assess the stone’s clarity, she had only one place to focus her gaze in the lens. The iridescent oil-spill of Yuri’s body made it impossible for her to assess the stone with the magnifier. Yuri’s humanoid, or at least mammalian shape endeared Yuri to Greer. Although Yuri was a blob, it also had four symmetrical appendages that suggested arms and legs, and a little nob of a head budding on top like an embryo. Yuri wrapped itself around the diamond to give it a hug. It was a sweet-natured and persistent thing.

Greer considered the fact that by now, Yuri's short-term visa had expired. Mary said that Yuri was benign and would go away on its own, but that if it didn't, Greer would need more testing. Greer hadn't gone back to Mary for more tests. She didn't want to force Yuri out of her. Besides, she was fine! Sometimes, she even walked to work instead of driving. Yuri was pumping fresh blood through her body.

Greer tried switching to her right eye to examine the diamond through the monocular, but she had an unusual form of color blindness in that eye that allowed her to only see values. While she could assess clarity with her right eye, she couldn't assess the diamond's color. She had always depended on her left "jeweler" eye. Disappointed, she cast her monocular aside and placed the three carats on a blue cushion inside a plastic box. She wondered if Yuri would learn to see things for her, if her jeweler eye could grow stronger, if they could learn to communicate with each other. They had not arrived there, yet.

"Samantha!" Greer said. Samantha propelled herself across the workshop in her rolling chair to Greer's workstation. Samantha was about ten years younger than Greer, white as an English countess, and wore chunky beanies over her buzzed head. Greer encouraged Samantha to keep the beanie on, so she didn't look like a neo-Nazi. Samantha was an excellent metalsmith and equally adept at grading gemstones, if not as talented as Greer. Greer handed Samantha the monocular and gestured to the diamond on the blue cushion. Samantha huffed but got to work with pale fingers blackened by metalsmithing.

Greer crossed her arms and hovered over Samantha to watch her assess the stone. Samantha rotated the diamond in her fingertips and held it under the monocular. Greer had been able to grade stones with her naked eye. Even as she cared for Yuri, she demanded: why her

jeweler eye with its prize-winning 20/10 vision? Samantha wrote down a K on a piece of paper for the diamond's faint yellow tint. The color in the stone was something that Greer could've pinpointed in one glance, and Samantha had needed forty seconds.

"You probably weren't able to see, but this stone has a cloudy imperfection in the middle. It's not good enough for us." Samantha said. Greer frowned. "Are you ready to meet the parents, G.B.?" She was the only one who called Greer G.B. Greer breathed hard through her nose.

"That makes it sound like I'm twenty!" Greer said.

"You're never too old to meet the parents. It's easier to get along when you're the same age, right?" Samantha said. Samantha didn't say it judgmentally, but more in a matter-of-fact way.

"It depends on if they voted for Reagan or not," Greer said.

"They won't think you're a bimbo," Samantha said. Greer smiled, but she lingered on what Samantha had said to her. Even the reference to her not being "too old" alluded to her being too old. She dreaded describing her geriatric eye issue to Vincent's parents. How could she admit that she couldn't drive or do parts of her job? Yuri would exemplify all her age-related shortcomings and imperfections. Worse, his parents could catch her anthropomorphizing the edema. It would be even harder for them to understand her hopes for Yuri.

"What will they do if I tell them I've been married? No one wants their 23-year-old to date a divorcee. Thank God I don't have any children," Greer said. She only meant it in the context. There were many years of her life when she did want to have children, but she had miscarriages. She glanced at herself in the mirror on the way out. As usual these days, she looked

like Yuri because that was what she could mostly see in her reflection if she looked from less than two feet away.

“Good luck, G.B!” Samantha said.

The previous summer, before Yuri colonized Greer’s retina, Greer was flipping diamonds from old rings into new engagement rings like pancakes. On June 4th, Greer happened to work at the front display counter instead of the workroom. She had just gotten a pale lilac manicure that complemented her dark summer skin. She knew that she looked great. Who wouldn’t want to buy diamonds from her? She folded her hands across the counter to display long fingers that assured competence and beauty.

A young man walked in only five minutes after opening. He brought the 10 a.m. sunlight with him. His dark curly hair brushed his ears, in need of a trim. When they made eye contact, he smiled nervously from the left side of his mouth. He had the warmest brown eyes, a color that she rarely saw in precious stones. He was so young—basking somewhere in his twenties—that Greer wondered if he could afford anything in the display. She noted his slim, athletic frame that tapered at his waist. He wore skinny jeans, something that Greer rarely saw trustworthy men her age wear. She speculated that he was a runner given the way his calves and quads jutted underneath his denim. He wore fabric flats and when he walked, he tilted forwards on his toes with wound-up energy. She could see *so* clearly. She thought maybe she had seen him at the local café. She hoped it wasn’t the time when she’d spilled her coffee on the register because she’d misjudged the placement of her hand.

He pressed his palms hard into the edge of the display cabinet and stared, through a pair of nerdy glasses, at the pink sapphire rings. He moved his mouth side to side so the skin around

his nose bunched and stretched. Greer decided that he had no idea what he was looking for, which was an attitude that she didn't usually see at *Brinded*. She had a discerning clientele. She chose a gentle approach for this customer and smiled at him as he leaned on his right leg and cocked his hip. He propped his elbow onto the counter to support his head while he gazed into the display. She had never seen someone behave that way in the shop, either. She noticed the light reflecting off each hair of stubble that pushed out of his skin. His pores were tight and small. Sometimes it was unbearable to see so much detail on a person's face.

"What do you think a girl my age would like?" He asked. Greer heard intelligence in his voice. She chuckled and leaned over the counter opposite him. She laced her hands together for him to admire her fingers. She had been told by men that she had a hot touch, and she was thinking about that now, about the heat that came out of her fingertips and how it could relax the most uptight people. She hadn't dated anyone for several months, and that was a long stretch of solitude for her that she felt keenly.

"How old is that?" She said before she could second-guess herself. He took his eyes off the rings and focused on her face.

"22," he said.

"What kind of girl? What kind of occasion?" Greer asked. She was overly aware of her blouse tassels fluttering over her nipple despite the buffer of her undershirt.

"She just graduated from college, and she doesn't know if she wants to stay together. She's smart, pretty, funny, she likes antiques...but she's hard to..." he trailed off and gestured in the air with his hands as if all these qualities were expected, so expected that they verged on boring.

“Hard to please?” He blushed and nodded. Greer could easily assimilate the role of confidante. Conspiracy was part of selling jewels. “Did you just graduate, too?” Greer suspected that he did not want to ask this woman to marry him, but instead that he felt like he shouldn’t lose her because of her excellence on paper. He ran a hand through his curly hair. He raised his elbow just high enough that she saw tufts of armpit hair sticking out of his t-shirt sleeve.

“Maybe, more... particular. I don’t know. No, I still have another year. It’s taking me a little longer for a dual degree, Urban Planning and Landscaping.” He fixated on a purple-blue sapphire in the display. Greer had never seen a young man blush as deeply as he was now. He blushed through the black stubble on his cheeks, infusing even the hair with a glow. His sincerity drew her closer.

Greer wouldn’t usually dissuade someone from making a purchase, but she felt inclined to convince him not to. She sensed his hesitation to choose something, as though he felt pressure to buy something expensive for a smart, pretty, funny girl who liked antiques. He looked too thoughtful to be in love.

“I’m Vincent,” he said.

“I’m Greer.” She extended her hand across the counter to shake his. The effect of her skin on his appeared immediately on his face. His lips parted slightly, and he looked into her eyes for longer than she considered typical between strangers. She smiled, smug on the inside. He gulped, but he didn’t look away. She wondered how old he thought she was, or if her age mattered to him. It surprised her, but his age did not matter to her.

“Do you have anything less than \$200? I’m feeling like I’m at the wrong place,” he said. The question helped him withdraw his hand from hers.

“No, you’re in the right place,” Greer said and guided him around the displays to look at some of the tiny vintage turquoise rings, none of which would be good enough for his soon-to-be-ex. He admitted that none of the rings suited her, which Greer took as his way of accepting that he wasn’t going to buy this girl jewelry. When he left, she didn’t expect to see him again, except for maybe in passing at the coffee shop, even though she wanted to.

A week later, he waltzed back into the shop at opening, again, when no one else was there. He had shaved that morning. She could tell because there was not one hair pushing through on his chin. It took only an hour for her to see stubble forming after someone shaved.

“Camilla and I broke it off,” he said. He spoke with an urgency that jumbled his words together. Greer raised her eyebrows.

“Pardon?” She asked.

“How are you?” He asked. She had heard what he said, but she wouldn’t embarrass him.

“I’m well.” She was making it hard for him. He looked good that day in cutoff jean shorts and a band t-shirt with a group on it that she didn’t recognize. She looked down at her pencil skirt and long-sleeved button-down. He approached the counter and stared at her, begging her to make a move. His shoulders were tight around his neck. “What’s the band on your shirt?”

“Oh, it’s TV on the Radio.” His shoulders released. Greer thought about how young he was—almost thirty years younger than her ex-husband. What if he wanted to have children one day? She wouldn’t be able to. Even if her body surprised her by growing a child all the way, the increasing risks of pregnancy as she got older terrified her. She thought about the new details she could see on herself as though with a loupe: the corners of her eyes creased like a paper bag, the smile lines on each side of her mouth, and the stronger line on her right side since her smile pushed deeper into that cheek. She liked that curved line and its insistence on joy. Vincent tugged her further into that joy. With her ex, the two curved lines on either side of her mouth had been parentheses that enclosed everything she said into asides. She felt that Vincent listened to her.

“Do you want to meet for a drink around nine, after dinner?” She said.

“I was really hoping *you* would ask,” Vincent said. He was too giddy to stay in the shop for long. Greer caught a glimpse of him shaking his head on his way out the door.

Now, almost a year into their relationship, Greer met Vincent outside her shop. He pulled up in his silver Kia with the windows rolled down. Greer sat in the passenger seat and bent in to kiss Vincent on his lips. Yuri danced over his face, so Greer closed her eyes to forbid Yuri from watching. She didn’t want Yuri to have access to her most intimate experiences. She had been closing her eyes lately during sex, even when Vincent’s belly cushioned her backbone since she was certain that Yuri could watch, and if she felt watched, she couldn’t have an orgasm. This was a problem because Vincent wanted to look into her eyes when they were intimate. *I don’t want to have an audience*, she would say. He didn’t ridicule her, but he did suggest that she see a

therapist in addition to going back to the ophthalmologist. But she was waiting, waiting for Yuri's purpose to grow clear to her. She would continue to observe it until she understood.

"How is Yuri today?" Vincent asked. He tried to make light of it.

"Yuri is maybe a little too excited? How is my Vincent?" Vincent drove them out of town and into the rural hills where his parents lived.

"I'm ready," he said and squeezed Greer's hand on her thigh. He looked ready; he was dressed in his usual black, but this time, freshly ironed pants and button-down. Greer slid the cover off the mirror behind the passenger sun visor. The two lights on either side of the glass rectangle evoked a miniature theatre. Yuri pulsated, turquoise and neon, on Greer's face in the reflection. Greer pursed her lips at Yuri and wondered if it was bloated today. Yuri felt heavy in her eye, tempting her to take a nap. While Yuri was usually two-dimensional, it looked three-dimensional on her reflection today, as if it had gorged itself on her over the night to inflate itself into reality. She shrugged. Yuri was well-nourished. She was taking care of it.

She looked slightly to the side of her face so she could layer another coat of mascara on in the peripheries of her vision where Yuri couldn't interfere. She kept her makeup to a minimum—Yuri made sure of that these past three months—but it kept her feeling youthful to look natural, even if her forehead, creased by constantly raising her brows, gave away the lifetime she had spent working, marrying, trying to have children and failing, divorcing, and living alone, without Vincent. She wondered if Vincent had caused Yuri to appear. She had known him, and loved him, for eleven months, and now, Yuri for four. She had never used a condom with Vincent. That had been a thrill for him—he'd never had sex without one.

The willow shook off the light rain outside of Vincent's parents' house. Greer's eyes widened. The house was a faux-castle large enough for a family of ten. Sprinklers hissed on the well-trimmed lawn around a pond with a sculpture of a duck in the middle. Greer wondered why anyone would run sprinklers so close to a water source, not to mention on a rainy day. She'd always known that money can't buy taste.

Suddenly, it struck her that she was the unworthy male suitor in a fairy tale who had come to prove himself to his love's royal parents. She would have to slay something and bring it freshly bleeding to the wrought-iron door to earn him. The parents would of course despise her at first, but there was some hope; if she could overcome something insurmountable, they would see that she was worthy of him despite her defects. She prayed that the turrets did not have any crossbows in them.

Vincent led Greer through the Renaissance-inspired door, and into the house that smelled of lemon. She found the source: three oil diffusers in the foyer. Vincent's mother emerged from the kitchen, her husband trailing behind her. Greer smoothed the front of her white dress. She had chosen white because it was neutral, symbolized purity, and concealed perspiration. A bead of sweat ran from her armpit, under her dress, and into the waistband of her thong. She hadn't experienced nervous armpit sweat since high school. The extremity of her nerves was unusual for her. Talking to people she didn't know was one of her specialties. Another bead of sweat crept down her upper lip.

"Greer! I'm Bernadette. We've heard so much about you," Vincent's mother said. Her voice was the deepest voice that Greer had ever heard from a woman, and it echoed off the vaulted ceilings. Was Greer imaging the medieval chandelier trembling? Bernadette took Greer's

hand in hers and gave it a professional shake. Greer smiled her customer service smile and tried to ignore the way that Yuri pulsated at the sound of Bernadette's voice. Yuri shook on Bernadette's mouth. Was Yuri having a seizure? No, it couldn't be that Bernadette's voice had changed Yuri. Yet, Greer did not want Bernadette to talk again. Yuri calmed after Bernadette finished talking.

"I'm Mr. Stills." Greer stutter-stepped towards Mr. Stills, but he did not shake her hand or even take a step closer to her. Her warmth did not thaw his frosty reception. She let it roll off her. She didn't need parental approval to feel good about herself, especially not from peers who she guessed had voted for Reagan. Vincent squeezed her hand. She would figure out the way into their hearts, whatever it was. With the side of her hand, she wiped her forehead to clear newly forming perspiration. Maybe *this* was menopause.

The two couples took seats in spacious leather armchairs in the living room for an aperitif. The massive fireplace crackled and gave off heat that battled the air conditioning. The hearth was large enough to roast a whole human body inside. Greer was amazed that the Stills had produced the sanest person she knew. The mantle was covered in candles and family photos of Vincent, Bernadette, and Mr. Stills. Greer reflected on the sadness of growing up as an only child, without any pets, in a fake castle. Vincent and she found more similarities with each passing day. She didn't visit her parents much, either, since they often sat in silence in the living room, as they were with Vincent's parents.

"Do you have any children?" Bernadette asked as she handed Greer a vodka spritz in a crystal glass that refracted light across the coffee table. Greer flashed a look at Vincent to demand why he hadn't said anything to the contrary beforehand. He blushed. Again, undeniably,

Bernadette's low and vibrating voice stirred Yuri. Greer lost her gaze in Yuri's twitching appendages. Yuri danced over the crystal glass in Greer's trembling hand when she took a sip of her vodka spritz. She could barely land the rim of the glass on her lips even though her sense of touch had grown stronger in the past months.

"Thank you, this drink is very good. No, I don't have any children, and I've never been married," Greer said. She crossed and uncrossed her legs for some air on the growing stickiness between her legs. Mr. Stills looked at her damp face without blinking.

"That's good, it would be so difficult to manage your relationship with Vincent if you had kids. Where do you work? Something to do with jewelry I heard?" By now, it was obvious that Greer was sweating and there was nothing that she could do to contain the hot flash. Her cheeks burned red. Bernadette's speech triggered Yuri again, as though Yuri was ready to defend Greer from Bernadette's pointed questions.

"I... I work at a... I own a..." Greer tried to articulate her work but the words, even the concept of her job, would not take shape in her mind and could not pass through her lips.

"Greer is a jeweler. She owns a well-known shop in town," Vincent said. He was leaning out of his seat, watching Greer intently.

"Well, are you alright?" Bernadette asked.

The concept of working as a jeweler felt alien to Greer. The only image she could associate with jewelery was a close-up of the interior of a diamond as it turned underneath a light source. As the diamond turned in her mind's eye, she noticed a cloudy patch in the middle of the stone, a blob of fog on an otherwise bright day. She felt like she was staring inside of herself. The imperfection was so obvious! It had always been there, waiting to burst open. The reason

why she was sitting in a large leather armchair broke into abstraction. Her body was there, in the chair, but her mind was not. It was funny. She laughed. She felt Vincent take her hand. She felt his skin on her skin from a distance. His parents leaned closer to Greer as if that could help them understand what was happening.

“Should we call an ambulance?” Bernadette asked.

“Greer?” Vincent asked.

Instead of following Greer’s center-vision, Yuri fixated on Bernadette’s mouth with a purpose that convinced Greer of Yuri’s sentience. Yuri’s globular appendages grabbed Bernadette’s lips like a tick. Greer felt Yuri—with a sensory immediacy that she could not feel through her own body—latching onto the visual of Bernadette’s mouth, and somehow engorging itself on the sounds of Bernadette’s voice. As Bernadette kept talking, perhaps asking Greer if she was okay, Yuri inflated until it completely covered the vision in Greer’s left eye. The sound of Bernadette’s voice had been exactly what Yuri needed to induce its own birth. The colors in the living room grayed while Greer resorted to her colorblind eye. Greer clenched the crystal glass in her shaking hand. The vodka spritz rolled over the edge of the glass and onto her lap.

Not only was Yuri monopolizing the vision in Greer’s left eye, but now, Yuri’s right appendage stretched onto her right eye. Threads of brilliant light, white-hot like metal out of a forge, extended over the room. Greer turned to look at Vincent. He placed his hand on her knee, and through the lighting-web of Yuri’s body, Greer noticed the concern on his face, but she couldn’t feel the worry. She wasn’t worried at all. Maybe she trembled, but it wasn’t because she was scared. She was soaking wet with perspiration. One of the few intelligible thoughts she had was that she was miscarrying again.

Unable to grip her drink a moment longer, it dropped on the plush carpet without a sound and spilled over her toes. Her hands shook violently, and her knees bounced up and down. Unbridled kinetic energy coursed through her body. Her complete loss of control felt like pushing something bigger than herself out of her body.

Bernadette continued to talk. What she was saying, Greer could no longer understand, but Greer knew that the sound of her voice perpetuated Yuri's explosion.

Greer could see color in her right eye! The colors she saw did not originate from the light spectrum known to humans on earth. The colors were auras surrounding Bernadette, Mr. Stills, and Vincent, and they had the same shape as Yuri. Yuris danced everywhere: on inanimate objects and people alike. The three-dimensional projected beings grew facets that disregarded the rules of light and shadow. They looked to Greer like opaque, rotating gems somewhere in-between raw and faceted to reflect as much light as possible. She gawked. Soon, she could not see any objects. She could only see Yuris, but they were the most beautiful things that she had ever seen.

She had given birth to something spectacular through her eye. Yuri had chosen her because only a jeweler of her skill could understand the Yuris' beauty and form. Only a jeweler with a hawk-eye could handle them with the care they needed. She had been patient enough to wait for the precious substance of unknown origin to squeeze itself out of her. To Greer, the Yuris' vibrating dance performance was an exuberant *thank you: thank you for believing in us and letting us exist, thank you for your retina, and for the blood vessels there within.*

"I think I do have children now," Greer said. Vincent was kneeling over her on the ground and holding her head. At some point, she had fallen onto the rug. She saw black and

white spots, but no more Yuris. When she closed her eyes, she saw the impression of Yuris under her lids. She kept her eyes closed tight to keep the impression there, but it soon faded to eigengrau, the shifting and swirling landscape of color and darkness.

“The ambulance is coming, babe, hang in there,” Vincent said. He stroked her wet hair.

“No, no, I don’t need it,” Greer said. She didn’t want to see a diamond ever again, even if she could now that she had known light and color beyond anything tangible.

When the ambulance arrived, the emergency responders gently lifted her onto a stretcher.

“Can you open your eyes for me?” The paramedic asked. Greer refused.