

**IF YOU LIVED HERE YOU'D BE HOME BY NOW**

by

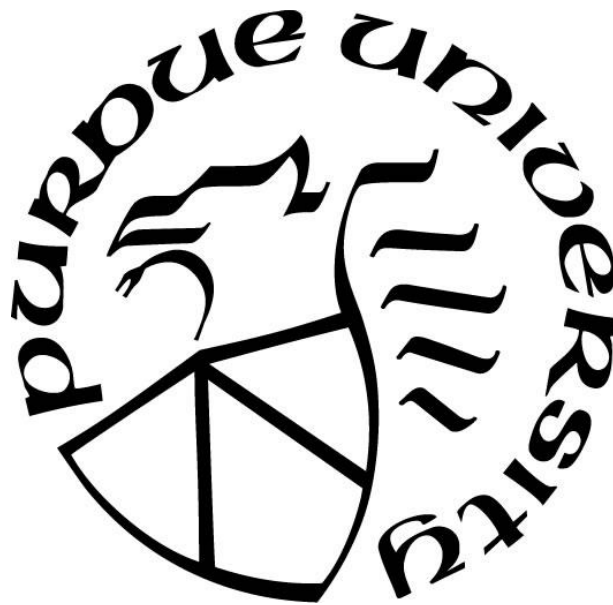
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*for my mother who gave up everything to be mine*

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## PREFACE

The phrase “if you lived here, you’d be home by now,” used to live on billboards for an apartment complex somewhere near Boston. I found out about them from a podcast where the host talked about how she saw the signs when she was stuck in traffic, the bumper to bumper kind. They were supposed to remind motorists that, technically, if they lived right there, they wouldn’t be stuck in traffic still. Immediately, the phrase stuck with me and with, at the time, the character of Lily Harlow who had some pages but not yet a novel. From the beginning of my journey at Purdue, I knew I wanted to write about Appalachia and the things I knew. Over the course of three years, the things I knew and my writing both grew.

Away from home for the very first time, I was reminded of how different things were outside of my small hometown. I learned how different words sounded in the mouths of people not from West Virginia, how to ride a city bus, how to work a thermostat. I ate sushi for the first time and, surprisingly to some, lived in a place where food could be delivered to your front door for the first time ever. For my friends, I was just getting my Masters like they were. But quietly, and sometimes without thinking about it much, I was living in a space sometimes called *after*. As in, what happens when you finally get to leave? When you finally get a degree? I did the things so many people are doing in West Virginia now: I left. It was the hardest thing I had ever done and, as my therapist often says, proved my resiliency.

When I had the honor of going to New York, I found that a lot of people there had many questions about West Virginia but almost no conception of it. I met dozens and dozens of people then and heard a lot of things. Good and bad, but mostly in the middle. Fortunately, when Diane Cook came to visit Purdue and met with me, she forwarded me to a writer she thought would be crucial for me. Through her direction, I discovered Sarah Smarsh. A famed writer who works extensively to write about the working class and rural communities in America, specifically her experience (much like mine) growing up in Kansas. Her most recent book *She Come By It Natural* had a huge impact on the writing (and continued writing) of this novel. The book details the life of mega star Dolly Parton. Moreover, the book talks about the ways in which rural women are resilient and are making their lives known. Most importantly, for me, Smarsh writes about how women like her grandmother are feminists by their actions but not in name. This is because of a lot of things, which Smarsh articulates so much better than I can in this given space, but can be attributed to the fact

that those women were not college students or given access to the materials that end up creating so many feminists like myself and Smarsh. Instead, the word “feminist” has been seeped into a negative connotation that women like Dolly thought to mean “a hatred of men” rather than “equality for all”.

Suddenly, I felt as though the women in my life made more sense because I had access to lexicon of words and feelings to finally place what I had always known. My own mother, like Smarsh’s, had always exposed me to feminist ideas and culture without ever knowing about the different waves of feminism or the academic language used to describe such things. Moreover, my mother (and every other woman in my life) sacrificed a lot in order to have children and begin her life as a mother and wife. Before me, my mother had always hoped she would be a nurse. In the spring of 1995, her own mother, Lydia Ruth Martin, was dying of cancer when my mother became pregnant unknowingly. Her mother died, my parents married at a courthouse in Greenup, Kentucky, and my mother moved in with her husband and mother-in-law. She never went to college.

So many of the things Lily endures were things that happened to me. Going to college, having strained relationships with her parents and parental figures, wanting to be someone other than herself—or at least aspiring to be something greater. Similarly, other events in the book are largely inspired by life and the lives of my loved ones. The stories about young men joining the military simply because it was the only way out was the story for four out of the six grandsons in my father’s family. Addiction too was something we lived through when my Uncle Randy passed away from an accidental heroin overdose in the fall of 2016. Coupled with the stories I grew up with about great grandfathers or cousins or uncles and their plights with marriage, divorce, unemployment, success, love, drugs, death, and family I could see the larger picture of us. I could see the stories for us that are the same for so many in West Virginia. Even the head of the family, Martha, is named after and dedicated to my beloved Aunt Martha who passed in the winter of 2016. She loved books and was, and still is, the matriarchal force that raised me and loved me and pushed me to try. The character she is named for embodies a lot of her qualities.

I have always been a fan of the work of the late Jim Harrison. In the end, it has not been any poem or novel of his that I think of most, but instead his reasoning behind why he dedicated his life to writing. After a fatal car accident killed his father and younger sister in 1962, Harrison made the decision to pursue his calling in life: writing. He said, “there couldn’t be any higher obligation on earth. Because if people you love die, what are you going to do?” I think of the quote

often. It reminds me of the urgency to tell the stories of my life and the lives of those I love when it is appropriate to do so. Because every bad thing that ever happened to me could always be labelled as tragedy or, simply worse in my opinion, written off as something that happens to people who are referred to as *white trash*. Because the very first semester I ever taught at Purdue a student said, “Isn’t it like really really poor where you’re from? Like it’s a bad place?” When left with memories of what has been, I needed to remember that those memories someday could be what is, what will be. Which is a more poetic way to echo the sentiment that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.

For worse and for better, it has always been my dream and goal to create a body of work that would be my honest love letter to home. Along the way, things changed. Names, places, words. I knew from the beginning that I was never going to be a writer that was “good” at plot. But then again, a writing professor once told me that “good” is such a non-word anyway and it means nothing. I write the way I talk. Which can be confusing for some, but for those I love the most, it is simply the way I learned to talk. To put it simply: There are things I need you to know so that what I tell you makes complete sense in the end. Whether you understand that at first or not, I’m taking you exactly where I mean to. That is what makes the writing in this novel special, what makes it mine. It is my voice.

It is my hope that the people “back home,” as well as the people from the Midwest and New York, will love Lily and her family. I hope that someone in Wayne, West Virginia will find a copy of this book at Walmart someday and recognize their home place. It is also my hope that for everyone else this book will be a narrative that gets to join the spaces of other Appalachian writers. In recent years, the voice of one writer in particular has risen in book sales as well as a Netflix adaptation. For a time, Appalachia became synonymous with his name. His rhetoric, about addiction, motherhood, rural living, and the working class was, and remains, dangerous. His words were elevated to the point that some thought it explained why someone like Donald Trump became president. It was an answer.

The rise of one man’s work neglected to elevate other narratives, his became *the one*. Despite the fact that writers like Crystal Wilkinson and Breece DJ Pancake have created stellar, incredible works. Despite the fact that Appalachia is a place that looks like other places and contains other voices beyond the standard conservative, white, upper class one. Knowing this, I felt even more compelled to write. Not only this work, but the many poems and the manuscript

that will eventually become a memoir. My gift in life has been the one of writing and storytelling. I am not the only one with that gift, but I am the only one who can write my life and what I know. So I will.

Appalachia, especially West Virginia, are not one thing. I refuse to believe that there can only be room for one narrative about a place like that and the people who live there. Knowing this, I could never sum up in any amount of space everything I wanted for this novel—for Lily. It is my hope that the work itself will convey that on its own. Though the journey with Purdue is closing, another cycle will begin. This next one will be the one where this novel gets the ending it deserves. And then it will find its way to New York again, but I think this time it will be wiser and ready. When it gets there, the hope is that it will find life in a hundred other places before the hearts of a hundred more people. That journey began in Lafayette, Indiana in some ways. In other ways, it began in Huntington, West Virginia. Beginnings and endings both included, I believe that the stories told in this novel will be told again someday in other ways, for other reasons. Much like the foliage of my home, the stories will grow, fall, and decay. Only to grow back again and that is eternity. That is the hope.

## **ABSTRACT**

This selection seeks to explore rural West Virginia and the cycles that plague it. From addiction, abuse, and poverty, through the lens of three generations of women from the family, each aspect is touched on. The themes of longing, loving, hating, wondering, and leaving embrace each other through the lives of the women and their bonds with each other.

## PROLOGUE

In kindergarten, there were two assignments that I can remember. The ones every student would know about and would look forward to. The first is a homework assignment. We were asked to draw and label a family tree. At the base of the tree, two blank lines are labelled *father* and *mother*. And even at the age of five, tender and sticky, I know that these lines are questions. I understand the infliction involved. What I don't understand, or in a child's own way I do, is circumstance.

"But I live with my Granny and Granddad," I say. Perplexed. The teacher doesn't understand the circumstance either, has no answer. *Just take it home and ask your parents*. So I do. And we sit at the kitchen table for an hour or better, drawing on butcher paper. My leaves are red, golden, brown. *Why not green*, Granny asks. I don't know why, I wanted my leaves vibrant. Granny tries to give the tree some texture. She unwraps a brown crayon from its sleeve and rolls it across the paper. Granddad comes up with names of distant relatives. He spells them out for me as his reading glasses perch on the tip of his nose. On the edges of the paper, his oil-stained hands leave finger prints. I worry that someone will notice the smudges of oil but the way he smiles and works on the recalling of names prevents me from saying anything at all.

Mother and father are not words I use yet. *Mother* I roll around my mouth. Tasting it. My mother is like sunlight I decide. The late evening sun that makes everything yellow. Like the stripes down the center of the road, warm. I think this because I know that you should love your mother. That there should be love involved with the word. Like my mother, sunlight exists but isn't usually on my mind. On that side of the tree trunk, I write *Sunshine*.

Father, I forget. Maybe Father was moonlight, to compliment Mother. It was a word that tasted cool, like a summer night. The kind that shone like the color blue through the curtains of my childhood bedroom at night. Where mother was heat, father was cold. On that side of the tree trunk, I write *Nighttime*.

For months, as my golden-brown tree clung to the wall of our classroom, my classmates asked me how my mother got the name *Sunshine*. I smiled. I lied. I said *that's just her name*. My teacher, now familiar with the sight of my grandparents says nothing. When someone snickers and says, "you don't have a mom," I feel indifferent. Later, on the playground, John would grab the kid by the ear and remind him that mother or not, we didn't play fair. We—or rather he—would

get into fist fights during recess or while waiting for the bus. And then what would it matter who had a mother and who did not? Bruised knuckles and a split lip spoke for themselves.

My memories of my mother by this time are so thin that they feel forced. Like mere suggestions. I know she was tall and she was blonde and so what difference did it make if I called her *Sunshine* or not?

The only other child my age who understood was Richard. He was smaller than the other boys our age. He was also missing one of his front teeth. He too was raised by his grandparents. I know this because Granny would tell me things like *ask Richard how his Mamaw is doing!* Our grandparents were friendly with each other. So we were too.

When the other boys picked on him, I took up for him. Once, I even shoved another boy to the ground and got reprimanded for it. But Richard, John, and I knew that we had to look out for each other. The afternoon of the said shoving, while the other kids played, we sat on the sidewalk next to each other in time out. He told me about how much he loved NASCAR. He wasn't really imaginative like I was. He didn't like to read the way I did. John didn't either. At the base of Richard's family tree it read: *Mamaw and Papaw*.

The other assignment, the last one that I can really recall from my childhood, is a project about your hometown. Everyone talks about the same things. The same grocery stores, the same railroad tracks. I wonder if we will all get the same grade for turning in the same material. Some kids have play dough versions of our town. Some draw lines on poster board. Anxious about it, even at that young age, I tell Granny that I don't know what to do. "Our town isn't that small, Lily. There's more than enough to go around," she says.

She tells me about how the Rite Aid looked when it opened for the first time. How this gas station used to be that one. She rattles off the names of the men and women who own the pharmacy she goes to. I realize that the faces from church, from school, from the gas station are the same names that she lists off. It feels like a big secret. The secret of what was there *before*. Who lived in which houses before so and so did. Who owned which piece of property. Every place is a list of names.

Each time a name would change, from fathers to sons, the places would change too. The Rite Aid was once a family-owned pharmacy and now it's cinder block walls are painted white with the red and blue emblem hoisted high into the sky. Granny remembers it as the land and later as it's many other forms. She tells me how timber used to be a big deal there. How men would

work from sunrise to sunset cutting down trees and hauling the massive trunks out and into town. Before that, she says, salt mines were big.

*And now it's coal* she says. Adding to the list of things that are taken from this place and carried elsewhere. The train tracks the split the town into halves are meant for the train that carries the coal out and away from us. As Granny rattles off more names and places, my small mind thinks more and more. On the list of things that used to be here and aren't anymore, I can't help but include my mother. Even though I know it is my Granny who feeds me, takes me to school, who raises me, I still know that I have a mother. I know that she left here for somewhere else. *Salt, trees, coal, and mothers*, I think.

For my homework assignment, I draw pictures of places before and after. I draw the Rite Aid three different times: once as it appeared then, what it was before, and the as land by the roadside. I draw rows of trees and then cut them down. I try to draw salt mines based on how my grandparents describe them to me. I draw the train with little black lumps stowed on top of it. I try to keep up with names, writing them in next to buildings or trees. In broken, crayon scratch I document my home place. Later, in college, I will just say that I'm from "here." I won't elaborate. Instead, I'll blend in with everyone else who says they're from here.

*West Virginia*. A place born in the civil war and cut out of another place. Where, first, we had an abundance of salt. All of that salt mined and sold. Sometimes, I can taste it. Almost like biting the inside of your cheek and drawing blood. Then there were the trees. The trees cut and sold. I cannot taste the trees the way I have tasted the salt, but I smell and feel them. I learned from an early age that when the leaves on a tree turn inside out it means rain is coming. As a child, I plucked sycamore leaves off of trees and compared them to my tiny hands, to my head. What wonders those trees were and are. Before they're cut down, sometimes ever after.

Then there is coal. The black, smoky mines where it seems everyone has worked. The train carting off the coal runs through the center of the small town I grew up in. It seems so commonplace that I forget what color or even the smell. Eventually, things run out. Greedy hands will run the well dry. Once, my grandmother said that the last thing to be taken from this place would be the women. *Women were like crops*, she said as she was bent over a pot of boiling water. With her hair clinging to her forehead from the sweat and the steamed air. I would imagine us to be corn: tall and bristling. Essential, but still a sight to behold. As you walked or drove by, an attraction even at times. I thought about the elementary school aged, even high school aged,

children holding hands and weaving through corn mazes. Weaving through the women. I imagine that like the corn we kept secrets. When the wind blows, the leaves rustle and serenade the passersby with songs. But when the season ends, as all seasons do, we would be cut down and thrashed. Served up on warm dinner plates to the men of the houses and their children.

In the end, when I arrive to college, I won't speak with an accent or mention that I was raised by my grandparents. I'll pass by without ever talking about the trains or the trees or the names. I'll forget that I ever wondered about why my mother had left too, if she had been taken out and away like timber. But sometimes, when I would drive on the interstate or stop in at a Rite Aid, I would wonder about where the people go. Who stays. Who leaves. Where they go. Tucked away inside of a shoe box are the papers from kindergarten. The family tree and the pictures of my hometown. They'll fade and curl in on themselves for years before anyone remembers that they're there. I'm not sure who they're waiting for. If I'm saving them for my mother to see someday or my grandmother is saving them for me to remind me of who I am.

## CHAPTER 1. HOW IT BEGINS FOR ME

The first time we meet to discuss my work my professor asks me to tell her a story. A story, she says, that she hasn't heard before. I tell her the story that everyone who knows me has heard. The one that is often told when I run into old friends and their new friends. I'm telling it to her now because she has already heard so many from me, but not this one. Not yet. So I say it.

When I was seven years old, I stole a can of Vienna sausages from the local gas station. The tiny can was slipped into my pocket, the one sewn into a blue denim dress my grandmother had just bought from Walmart. My hair was pulled back into a braid and I was missing one of my front teeth. It was summer time then, the middle of June. A mild summer so far. There were visible freckles laid across my cheeks and nose, they magically appear like that every summer. I was wearing a pair of pink sandals, the jelly kind, the ones that sparkled. The sort of shoes that squelched a little when I shifted my weight from one foot to another. Which I did often, especially when I was about to do something mischievous like stealing from Exxon. I shifted my weight like I shifted my options: Back and forth for far too long. The sound of my shoes was the tiny alarm bell which caught the attendant's attention. Mary Kate, a woman who wore wire framed glasses and kept her brown hair in a tight ponytail, heard my shoes before I saw her.

By the time Mary Kate peeked around the aisle, past the bags of chips and Little Debbie cakes, she saw the shiny top of the can slip into my pocket. At first, Mary Kate thought that she would wait at the register. Surely, she decided, I would walk up to the counter and place a wadded up five-dollar bill down, as I always did. I did always pay for whatever I picked up prior to this moment. Mary Kate waited. She listened to the sound of car doors opening and shutting with muffled *thuds*. She watched the heat rise off of the asphalt outside, reminding her to take her car in later to have the air conditioning unit charged, again for the third time that month. She even glanced at the rack of keychains to her right. The display spun around in a circle twice as Mary Kate looked for her name. There was the classic *Mary* and the rarer *Meredith*. Her name was missing from the line-up, so she spun the display again and this time looked for my name. There in neon green thread was the much-anticipated *Lily*.

It was almost as if I knew someone was trying to conjure my name. Suddenly, I appeared in front of the counter. The first time I did it, Granny was called immediately. They thought I had

wandered off and was lost. I would come in and ask for a bottle of water, sometimes a Coke. Always on Thursdays before church. No one ever asked where I got the money. Eventually, they stopped calling my grandmother. This time, however, I didn't even look up at Mary Kate, I simply walked out.

I have no real recollection of stealing the canned meat. I can't remember the jelly shoes or the denim dress. The only reason I even know about the incident is because everyone in town, at the school, at church, and especially the attendants at the town's only Exxon station, tell me about it all the time. Everyone loves to remind me of the time I stole two dollars' worth of sausages, something I didn't even like to eat. When they tell the story, they always laugh and mimic the blank expression I had when her grandmother stopped me at the front door, hours after the initial theft, and demanded that I hand over the can. I didn't have it by then of course. Everyone remembers how hilarious it was for little Lily Harlow to steal from the gas station. Granny, however, remembers how embarrassing it was. How this woman who lived three houses down the road called Child Protection Services and told the agent that I, "must have been so hungry to have stolen sausages from the gas station." After all, I was tiny for my age.

Perhaps the thing my Granny, Martha Harlow, remembers best is the simple reasoning I gave for her crime. *The fish, Granny. I wanted to feed the fish. I had no money, but I could tell that they were hungry.* The fish I was desperate to feed where the small catfish that swam in the deepest parts of the creek in front of our house. As angry as she was, she couldn't remain furious when I cried. I cried a lot as a child. Cried because I felt that there had been an injustice committed on that June day. I could only feel a deep sadness for the fish, who I thought where boiling in the summer heat. The way they lazily swished from side to side seemed, to me, to be a symptom of hunger. I don't know what happened to the woman who called CPS but I know my grandmother would've chewed her out if she ever saw her in public after that. Mary Kate still works at Exxon but they don't sell those cans of sausages anymore so she never asks me to empty my pockets.

I do remember the fish though. I remember the brown water, still clear enough to see through, but brown nonetheless. I loved the way the grit of the dirt and pebbles felt sifting through my fingers. Between my toes. Then the way the fish would appear, then disappear again and again. I remember the cool water being a gift during the hottest parts of the summer. I felt endeared to the fish, I felt alone when I went to see them but I always felt a part of their little spot of earth when I left them. So when someone reminds me, or Granny for that matter, of the time I stole from

the Exxon station we both smile and go about our day. For me, it reminds me that the entire town is watching my every move, that someone could call my grandmother in a heartbeat and tell her anything they wanted to. For Granny, it is a reminder of the need to protect me. *To preserve me*, as she says. *Because this town is full of people who sometimes tell the truth and others who sometimes believe in it.*

She likes the story she says. She wasn't sure just yet if I could get away with it. Get away with writing my graduate work the same way I talk, as she puts it. *Tell it like it is* she laughs. She loves that phrase and hears it often from me, from other students like me. I remember once she told me that nobody ever talked like that in New England where she's from. For that reason, she thought maybe I should do research instead. Write about the origins of something else the families of other writers. But it was also for that reason, she admits, that she let me have my way.

"Write your family," she says, "Start with what your every day looks like and go from there."

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Granny would always say that I was expected to finish my homework. Always within a timely manner. Always while sitting at the kitchen table. Sometimes she would cook while I worked. Smells of browned beef and cooked tomatoes surround us like an adoring crowd. Watching us as we did our jobs. My "little job" she said was to be smart. *Work smarter, not harder* my grandparents always said. In school, I was told how my parents must be so proud. Being smart, like I was, I would respond with, "I never met my dad. And, I live with my grandparents." That was how I became sharp. Like a knife. Quick, like a pistol. Cunning, like a fox. Onry. Compared to objects wild and not.

Teachers at school, people at church, and especially my family all had little nicknames for me. But this—being smart—was the most important thing I could ever be, my grandmother said. She thought it took me an hour and a half to finish my homework. It only took roughly forty-five minutes. With the remaining time, I would write stories in my journals. Sometimes I created fake recipes while listening to Granny recite her own. Sometimes I pretend that my homework was actually to read a certain book. Reading for fun was a foreign concept to my classmates and this way Granny would ask me what I was reading about. I would tell her. Then she would say *sounds interesting* as she added different spices to her mix. I would ask her about what she was cooking.

I wanted to know how she did it, what ingredients she used and how long she had been using them. What she thought I was asking was *what's for dinner?*

When we would eat dinner, we ate in shifts. Granddad and the boys first. Grandad sitting at the head of the table with the newspaper is folded in his lap. He read while he eating. To his left, there would be John. He would eat in under ten minutes, depending on how much he talked throughout the meal. Talking about cars, or girls, or the weather, or whatever happened to float his way. To Grandad's right, there was Eli. John's little brother, the one who never talked during dinner because he's was always thinking about what he was going to do after dinner. In the summer months, he would eat to his content and then rush outside to catalogue frogs and tadpoles. A project that he has been working on for many years of his little life. Granny would ask if he had homework and he'd say *no we don't really do much in fourth grade*. Which is to say, he did his homework on the school bus before he came home.

After the men ate, Granny and I would eat. We sat across from each other and sometimes we talked, but most of the time we didn't. Her with her greying black hair and me with my unruly dirty blonde hair, opposites of each other. I always complimented her food after each meal. Mostly because I knew that no one else would and also because I meant it. When we were finished eating, we did the dishes and put away pots and pans. That's the third shift. The least exciting one. The one where we were the only two people in the house. Everyone else outside working or playing. I'd rinse the dishes and scratch away any leftover crumbs with my fingernails. You're supposed to wash dishes with scalding hot water, so my hands would turn red and pulse with an ache by the time it's done. Granny would say, "you'll make a terrible house wife someday," because I splashed too much. Splashing dish water, she said, was an old wives tale kind of thing. A bad omen almost.

When that shift was done, Granddad would walk in and ask me *are you ready?* Then we would settle into our places in the living room. Him sitting in his chair with the leg rest pulled out. Me on the couch with one of the many decorative pillows in my arms or behind my head. When Granny joins us, she sits across from me on the love seat with her little feet propped up on the coffee table. There had to be a lot of seating on account of all the people who pass through the house. It began with Granny and Granddad. Then their three children, two of which no longer visited the house, my mother and John's mother. Eve and Holly. But the other one, the good one, remained a frequent visitor. My Uncle Teddy, the youngest. Then there were the three grandchildren. Me, John, and Eli. The three of us were a permeant fixture. Like the tile floor in the

kitchen or the tiny crack in the small kitchen window. We are forever projects, or at least, a forever that lasted as long as we lived there.

But during this time of the day, it was largely empty save for the two, sometimes three, of us. We watched *Dateline* every night. Granddad timed me—challenged me—to see if I could solve the crime before the episode ended. The only ones I couldn't solve were the ones where a body was never recovered and the person was just labelled as *missing*. Those cases, Granddad felt, were the hardest ones. If the missing person were a woman with a troubled past, Granddad cried a little. He doesn't think I ever knew that, but once I asked him why he cried. *A parent shouldn't have to bury their children. Even worse, a parent shouldn't wonder if someone else will bury their child before they can.* Lucky for us, those episodes were rare and we didn't watch reruns.

Once, John walked in at the end of an episode. The kind of episode where the husband's business partner is the killer and is found through a paper trail. He plopped down on the couch next to me. Bristling.

"I heard once that if you say 'surprise' before your rape someone that you can get years taken off your sentence. I wonder if it's the same for murder," he said. His nativity—stupidity as Granny called it—shining.

I threw my pillow square into his face, "That's premeditated, dumbass. You get more for that."

Granddad laughed. He called me his Little Lawyer. Little because of my size. Lawyer because I told my teacher once in the fifth grade that I wanted to be a lawyer and Granddad, upon hearing it, said *She'll always argue her case. And win.*

## CHAPTER 2. THE SIGN OF CHIRON

The world, I'm afraid, has always been ending for me. In different ways: Small and large. For better, for worse. Imagine the delight in my eyes every morning when I awoke, and a rapture had not happened—or if it had—everyone I loved and knew was here on earth with me. Each day when California had not sunk into the ocean and no one had been whisked away in the night, I would be grateful for that. Grateful for the lack of an apocalypse. As a child, the older women in church would pinch my cheeks but then remark during and after services about how the Lord was coming back soon. It frightened me that the Lord could come back before I had even gotten my first period, my driver's license, a high school diploma. But being one of only a few children in the church, I never shared my fears. I never asked why they were convinced that the Bible said anything about California, when California didn't exist at all when the Bible was written. I didn't ask them why now? Why did *my* life have to be cut short? It seemed too coincident.

For years, as a child, when there were heavy thunderstorms I would cry. Believing that world was ending, I would hide under the kitchen table and let my chin wobble. My grandparents would try to coax me out from under the table. But with each crack of thunder, I drew further away from them. Granddad would make comparisons. *It's the angels bowling together!* In some ways, it was hard to know if I was scared of the world ending and not being sucked up into the clouds to go to Heaven. Or if I was afraid of that very thing happening in the first place. I was a child and I was frightened. It made no sense to me.

I only wanted to be a child who got to grow up.

Angels, bowling balls, and wagons teeming with potatoes became the standard to soothe me. Perfect metaphors that later came in handy when I took up writing. My grandparents, without their college educations, were deeply poetic. Granddad had more patience than too. He would crawl as far under the table as he could, his long legs making it difficult for him to get very far at all. He looked like the Tin Man, every bend and movement hurt. He never complained though. I could see that he was hurting, something about the lines in his face and the way his eyes were watery. His hair had just started turning grey. In the darkness, under the table, the grey hairs disappeared altogether. I wished that he could see that, see the way he seemed stopped aging for a moment. It wasn't the metaphors about the weather that would coax me out. It was the care and love and patience my grandfather achingly displayed.

It was not shock at all that prevented me from sobbing when the emergency room nurse came in to say that I had miscarried. *Life is hard*. I know that. I've always known that.

*Did you know you were pregnant?* She asks me as she perches on the edge of my bed. She's only a few years older than I am and I think is both alarmed and delighted by it. Delighted to have a young patient she can sit with and chat. Alarmed that someone around her age just lost a pregnancy they weren't aware of. When she smiles, I can see the places around her eyes where crow's feet are starting to appear. A sign of laughter. The bags under her eyes make me trust her a little more. I can relate to her tired and weary. The color of her bags match mine: somewhere between the blue of a body of water and a bruise.

I tell her no. I had been sick for a few days. Tired. Throwing up here and there, but the thought of a baby hadn't ever crossed my mind. I was busy. The guy I had been seeing wasn't even around anymore. He had decided that I was too independent for him. Something Granny and Granddad were tickled to death to hear. From the other end of the call, Granddad said, "I didn't raise you to be under anyone's thumb." He hadn't. Which made it easy to tell the guy that how he saw my freedom was his problem, not mine. We went our separate ways. After that, I created mental lists of all the reasons why it was so easy to excuse him. That he felt like I was too independent was just an opening, a chance, for me to cut him off. Having known him for only weeks, I felt no roots connected to him. It was simple: We didn't work.

The nurse's scrubs are a dark, navy blue color. She has kind, curly brown hair and a face that beams with love. In other circumstances, we would absolutely be friends. In fact, the longer she talks to me I'm almost certain she would be a permanent fixture in my life. The kind of friend who would hold your hand when you delivered a healthy, planned baby. The same sort who would sit on the front porch with you and talk until the moon and the lightning bugs buzzed into view. For now, she's just a nurse. I could have ended up with any nurse and as I think about that I tell her how grateful I am for her. *Grateful for me? For what?* she laughs. I laugh too.

She explains what I should expect. It's early enough that I don't need any medical intervention unless I want it. I assure her that I don't. I don't really understand why I say no, but something about having to stay here. I'd like to think about it alone, in silence. To decide if I want to mourn, if I should. I'd like to go home. She says there will be pain and more blood. *It's normal* she says. In the sweetest way possible she places a hand on my leg and says, "a miscarriage

happens when a fetus isn't viable for life. I know it's sad, but in some small way, it's for the best. The tissue wasn't right."

After she leaves, I think about what it is I did wrong. Drank too much coffee, smoked a joint with a friend in her apartment one evening. I take too much ibuprofen, I know. I get headaches. I'm in graduate school. Just last week, in a restaurant in town, I kneeled in the bathroom stall and threw up from the pain of a migraine. When I went to wash my hands, I apologized to the woman next to me and promised I was that kind of sick. That I just had a migraine. She asked, "are you still in school?" When I told her yes she added *that's why*. I even let my grandmother dye my hair within the last month. I can never manage to get the color all over, so she does it for me. I'm not even sure if the timeline adds up. I count the days in my head and decide that it is, as the nurse has already assured me, for the best. Without even knowing about it, there could be no fault of mine. But then I think of other things.

How walnuts look like hearts. When, in last of the summer, cars crush them on the road and in the driveway forcing the walnuts to explode. The thin, mint green worm that dwells at the center of the walnut dies too when the walnut is pressed into the ground. It's body and home become one. Sometimes, the nut can be saved and used in baking. But who would want to scoop out the nut, the shell, the worm, all shattered in the driveway? The outer shell, protects the softer material inside. Protects what's tender. Then, I think, that everyone understands what it means to keep a harder, outer shell. That is a metaphor that everyone understands, even if they couldn't define the word *metaphor*. The thing that is less known or familiar is the feeling of being the worm. Having something traumatic happen and, once it's over, not being able to define where your body begins and where the disaster, the shards, ends.

The small television in the corner of my room leaks out little sounds of late-night news. Hometown stories. Some of little consequence like a cat being stuck in a tree. Others, of deadly consequence like tainted water that catches fire as it exits the faucet. I hear the soft words but I rest my eyes, listening not watching. Instead, I watch the nurses walk by and go into other rooms across the hall from my own. Sometimes, they stop and smile or wave and I return the favor. If they haven't seen my charts, I wonder what they think I'm in for. Young, healthy. They must think I sprained an ankle or had a rare case of food poisoning. My outward appearance, I know, does not indicate the loss that has just occurred. I look haggard.

With my free hand, the one without the IV, the trace the imaginary lines between freckles on my skin. I wonder if I had a child if they would have freckles. I wonder if they would have dark hair or if, like my mother, blonde. I imagine they would be taller than me. The more I think about them, I realize, I'm creating a mixture of myself and my own mother. Imagining the best parts of both of us in someone else. Imagining them as a young woman without bags under her eyes that she can feel without ever touching. A girl who smiles and that smile radiates over everything.

My mother hasn't lived here in a long time. She left when I was three. Leaving me with Granny and Granddad. Each time I think about where my grandmother is in the features of this imaginary daughter, I come up with blanks. Suddenly unable to remember if my grandmother's eyes are brown or blue. If her hair is turning silver or white. The shame of the forgetfulness fades away when I realize that all the best parts of my grandmother already live within me. It would be impossible to separate ourselves from each other.

My body was saying that this season was over. Quickly and without ceasing, the season was over and now it was time for something else. Time to sow other seeds into the garden or perhaps ride into another town for another life. I thought I would be dry eyed about it. After all, the nurse had just explained how this was for the best. There was no doting husband to take me home to mourn with. In fact, it seemed as though there might not be anything to mourn. I admired the turquoise blue tiles and the way they complimented my paper gown. My feet, tanned from being outside all summer, look dirty almost compared to the sterile, cold room.

"Is there someone who can come pick you up?" The nurse asks.

"No," I tell her. It's after dark. Granny and Granddad are fast asleep. I don't have any other phone numbers memorized to call a friend, "I can drive myself home." She frowns a little. I feel a low pain in my abdomen too. No one is happy about the situation.

"You should take it slow for a few days and be patient with yourself," she says. Still frowning but saying it with a hopeful tone. I promise her that I will.

As I began the custom of folding myself into my jeans and slipping on my t-shirt, I wondered if it had been legacy that caused it all. If it had been because of my family history of absence. My would have been baby was just getting a head start. They were simply taking part in the long arc of disappearances. The thought of it, this disappearing act, made me weep. In the absence of a little life, my body was teaching me how to mourn.

I feel the damp red stain on the back of my jeans. Knowing that I can't wipe it away or toss the jeans into the trash, I slip them on and button them. As I walk to my car, I make a mental note to throw the jeans away. And the underwear. Maybe even the shirt. I make the twenty-five minute drive to the house I grew up in. It would be easier, I hope, to throw away the pants there. To sleep in the same bed I always slept in as a child and a teenager. Along the road there are the shining yellow eyes of deer and raccoons. When I pull into the driveway, a mother with two fawns quietly steps out of the yard and into the trees. I use my spare key to get in, careful to be quiet. Avoiding the sounds that would wake my grandparents.

The house creaks this way and that while fans circulate. I can hear the slow ticking of a clock in the kitchen, the little one. Granddad snoring. I find a pair of pajamas and fold my clothes once again. This time I take care to hide the blood stains. The pain is less now. The physical pain offset by the IVs and Tylenols. I carefully place the clothes in the bottom of the kitchen trashcan. Careful to avoid getting my hands dirty. Coffee filters and grounds cover the evidence. I wash my hands and throw away paper towels. Adding more to cover.

If I tell my grandmother, I'll just say exactly what the nurse said. She had asked me before, when I told her about ending things with the guy if he was "nice before." As in, were there any other signs that he might not be so kind, so into me. *Nice enough* I said. I wouldn't tell her that he accused me of being unable to love to someone *you just aren't capable of it* he said. Which was true, I wasn't capable of loving *him*. I didn't want to. When we started seeing each other, the agreement was that it wouldn't be serious. He changed his mind, but I hadn't. Each night that he slept over, I would roll away from him and sleep silently, tucked into a ball. He complained that I acted like I didn't want him to touch me. That I was pregnant would be a shock to him too. He probably would have asked me to swallow my pride and marry him. Quit school. Submit. I hear the nurse's voice in head *it's for the best*.

Almost as if my body knows this, I feel a twinge and the pain beats through again. I find the Tylenol in the cabinet and wash two more down. I tiptoe to bed and think about how to explain myself in the morning. If I'll be honest and tell Granny the truth. Or if I'll save her the worry and tell her I just missed home.

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When they built the split-level house I grew up in, my Granny, Martha Elizabeth, had only one child, my mother. She also had a second, arguably better, husband and she knew that, with his

blessing, there would be more children. So they built. Two bedrooms in the downstairs level. The nursery just across the hall from Martha's bedroom. These bedrooms a few simple strides away from the kitchen and bathroom. In the second level, there would be another two bedrooms, a small living room area, and a spare room. I imagine she thought *all of this is mine*. Her first marriage had seen her married to a cruel man who never let her have anything.

Her first child, Evie, slept only five hours each night. Evie was only a handful of moments past her first birthday when they moved in. Her blonde hair still so soft and fine that Granny must have thought she could spin it into gold. In photos, her hair seems ethereal. The gold that Rumpelstiltskin spun to save the life the young daughter locked away in a tower. My mother cried as a baby but never wailed. Just enough that her own mother would come to her every night. Making it a given that the nursery would be built so closely to the bedroom. In her mother's arms, Evie would be rocked as she stared outside the nursery window. A telephone pole, the only one in the neighborhood for a time—most of my life even—casted a blue light all over the yard and the garden.

I am so very familiar with the view now that when my grandmother talks about how her daughters were always looking out the windows as babies, I know what they were looking at. Time never felt real outside of that window. Not matter the time of night or how little sleep had been had. Cars driving down the road were, and still are, a rarity. Outside that window, there could be a pack of wild dogs, thunderstorms, or complete silence. None of us who slept in that room ever cared. My mother rarely slept as a child but did not wail. She never seemed to care for anything outside of her mother's arms, beneath the nursery window.

After my mother, then came Holly. The middle daughter, born in April during a by chance snowstorm. Holly with her head full of hair, favoring her father not only in looks but in kindness. She was a sweet baby. Would lay in the crib sweating with a fever and still in silence. Granny started to wonder if something was wrong with her that her child didn't cry. She spent much of those first months hovering over her. She wondered out loud if Holly understood what was happening—if she had distinct memories of her parents and their floating heads. When she was old enough, she shared a bed with Evie. Slept in the curve of her sister's back and sucked her thumb until she was seven. Granny always said it was a miracle that the girls never woke up with their hair tied into a knot. Evie's blonde and Holly's red, collected into a tight ball. When they got older, they shared a bedroom upstairs but did not share beds.

The house saw lots of sleepovers, a couple stints in softball and cheerleading. I imagine my grandfather spent a few hours pulling the long hairs out of the bathtub drain. Those first four years it was only him and his three girls. He painted their room purple. A soft lilac color. It remained that way for a while. The crib and necessary baby things sat in the attic untouched. The girls often left toys or books strung out over the floor. I imagine there must have been a lot of giggles that erupted from that room after dark. When mom and dad had told them to go to sleep. And they thought it was just so funny that their parents couldn't *possibly* hear them whispering to each other. I imagine that those giggles probably angered my grandmother as she tried to fall asleep herself. My grandfather probably silently smiled as he too tried to sleep.

The last baby was Teddy. The only boy. He became the jewel of the crown in the household in nearly every way. Not as fussy as my mother was, not silent either like Holly. Teddy learned how to talk, crawl, and then walk well before his sisters did. *We won't ever have to worry about this one* his father would say. As if they could predict their lives based upon the small years of their children.

Uncle Teddy would grow up to play baseball and join the cub scouts. In his senior year of high school, he would meet his wife. They would have the peace and stability that his sisters never seemed to craved. He would be the safe bet out of the three, the one his parents could depend on. His children, if he had any someday, wouldn't know much about not having enough of anything. Love from their parents, money, meals. They had it all.

My aunt Holly would have two sons. She would later leave both of her sons with my grandmother. What she did then and does now still is a mystery to each of us. Her oldest son and I would grow up together and become a sort of brother and sister pair. The kind that was often hard to describe to others. *We weren't siblings, we were cousins, but we were raised like siblings.* When he was old enough to have a wish, he hoped with all of his heart that he would join the army. His brother, being so much younger, still lives with our grandparents. At the sweet age of nine, he hasn't quite begun to make wishes.

My mother would have only one daughter. She tried to raise me on her own, at first. Tried to feed me three meals a day, change diapers, hold me. It turns out that I was just as fierce and fussy as she was when it came to wanting to be held. Only the apartment we lived in had no windows to stare out into. Like her sister, she would leave home too. Leaving her daughter with her mother. Her whereabouts were not always easy to keep track of. She would sometimes answer

the phone if called and gave short, but truthful answers. I grew up knowing only stories and hearsay about her and hearing her voice on the phone occasionally. She spoke more like a distant relative and seemed, to me, like someone who only called when she felt she had to. The older I got, the less she felt like she needed to call.

Uncle Teddy's old bedroom became the boys' room. The nursery became mine. When the boys, separated in age by seven years, started to grow apart, the youngest one, Eli would sometimes sneak into my room to sleep. Eventually, he graduated to his own room and sometimes slept peacefully through the night.

My grandparents would try to age the way life intended them too, but they always ended up raising children. The running joke with Granddad was that *we're just so good at it that people keep bringing us more kids!* Sometimes, on holidays, their daughters would call. Although Holly's calls became more sporadic and usually involved trouble. My mother's calls were simply solemn. They usually ended with her being upset with my grandmother or Granny being upset with her. When my mother's biological father died, she appeared for a breath of an hour after the service. Granny opted not to attend and simply said that she owned that man nothing, not even in death. My mother did not speak about the loss. Her hair was dyed black then and I could see the unmistakable dots of mascara that had flaked and fallen on her cheeks after tears. We chatted about school the way we always did. Me telling her I did just fine and her saying, "that's good." In many ways, I thought of her as a removed older sister. Outside of my education, we had nothing else to talk about being strangers and all.

The rebellious one who dyed her hair dark colors and was defiant towards our parents. She always wore some type of leather boots and jeans with holes in them. She had her ears pierced more than once. Something I knew my grandparents didn't like because I had asked several times if I could pierce my own like that.

When people drove by the house at night, I bet they'd remark on how dark it was. How with only one street light, it seemed like our house was the edge of humanity. Once, for the holidays, Granddad strung up blue Christmas lights, blue because Aunt Holley was just old enough to ask for them and still young enough to decide on blue. Not red or green. Never gold or silver. But blue. From the road, you could see the tiny blue lights like icy, little fires complete with a view of the full tree in the living room window. A tree as plump as the cheeks of a child. Precious, delightful, must be the happiest little family. When I come across the photos of that winter and the

lights, I smile and think of how warm it must have felt. How passersby must have thought it was sweet to see such a thing, even in the pitch-black darkness.

When the kids got older, Teddy would bring over friends. Boys who slept on the couch, in the floor. Anytime their parents were out of town, when they were hungry, or tired after fishing hunting playing. That's how Granddad got anything done around here, one boy to do this, another for that. This pattern did repeat itself when John and Eli came to stay. When John had friends over, they often decided to help Granddad out without being asked. My grandfather, I think, had a soft spot for his grandchildren that was a country mile wide and ached like a touched bruise. We were never asked to help repair things.

My grandmother, however, kept the same traditions for me that she held for my mother and aunt. I was taught how to sew when I was eight. At first, for fun. She taught me how to make tiny purses, handles and all, out of fabric scraps. Later, I would only be able to sew enough to return buttons to shirts and fix the holes in my jeans. I was always asked to help with the dishes after meals too. My grandmother always joked about how she would collect things for my "hopeless chest" I often resented the role of the woman in our house. John learned how to fix cars and play sports. He was given pocketknives and shown how to whittle. He was never asked to wash dishes and I envied him for that.

The house changed little by little, but it never emptied out completely. In the attic there are still old boxes of clothes and toys. Some of them belong to my mother and her siblings, some of them belong to me and mine. Uncle Teddy used to laugh about all of his Star Wars toys stored away somewhere up there. How he always meant to come over and get them, but never did. Up until I moved into my dorm at the college, I stayed in the room that was once the nursery. The walls are still purple, though the color feels paler now than it did then. I used thumbtacks to stick photographs and posters into the wall. Out of habit, I kept it clean, this way I would avoid the lectures about how Granny saw a mess every time she went to and from her bedroom.

I kept my door shut at night. A rare moment of privacy that I relished in. I often stayed up past my allotted bedtime reading by lamplight. With my feet propped up in the window sill, sitting in my desk chair on two legs. Later, on occasion, I would open the window and balance myself so that I could sit on the edge with my legs out the window. The cats that we kept over the years would sit in my lap while I mindlessly stroked their fur and thought about things.

Even with the door closed, I could sometimes hear the music of my grandparent's nightly routines. The way their bed would creak and my granddad would suck in his breath and complain about joint pain. Granny too liked to stay up and read in bed. They rarely talked much. Granddad had the ability to fall asleep almost instantly. Granny did not.

When I was fifteen, my grandmother had a stroke. The symptoms started when she went to bed one night. She complained of a headache all evening that day. But when she tried to tell my grandfather that her face felt strange, she found that she couldn't move half of her mouth. I could hear her mumbled talking through the door and laid in bed frozen with fear. The tone of her voice seemed like anger with an edge of panic. At first, I wondered if a mouse had made an appearance but when my grandfather's voice joined in I knew something was wrong.

That night was fast. By the time I opened their bedroom door to ask if everything was okay, Granddad was already over on the opposite side of the bed. He held Granny's face in his hands while her head lolled a little. I don't remember what was said on the phone when I dialed 911. I just remember that same scene of Granny's head tipping backwards and how her words sounded rounded like they had no other shape. After that, I slept with the door cracked and woke up any time I heard voices or movement.

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Once I've crawled into bed quietly, without anyone noticing, I fall asleep within minutes. I dream vividly. Tucked away between school yearbooks and empty journals, there is the dream encyclopedia. On the inside of the cover, Holly's name is etched in with a purple pen. Little flowers float around the curls of her name. I kept the book handy and each morning would flip to the accurate pages. I would underline particular images: Rhinos, silver spoons, even quicksand. Eventually, I discovered that my aunt had done the same. Her dreams were circled neatly. Occasionally, our pens overlapped.

That night there had been a dream about otters living in our bathtub again. I sat in front of the tub with a cloth in my hand, coaxing them. They chattered in their own way and resisted me, did not want to be groomed by me. We sit like that for what felt like the longest dream of my life. But after the pancakes, I looked it up in the book. Otters symbolize joy and happiness. Or maybe I was trying to claim happiness even as it resisted me. On the opposite page, a familiar thin, black circle catches my eye: Ovaries. *Desire for children or to be pregnant.* Then, firmly underlined: *symbolizes fruitfulness, new beginnings, or growth.*

My mother had strawberry blonde hair. The kind that curled at the bottom, giving her hair a bounce. Whenever she would pull her hair back into a ponytail, I would watch it sway with every step. My hair has the same bounce but is lighter, no red tint to it. She had freckles that littered her nose and under her eyes. I imagine that when I was a baby and she held me near her face that I tried to make sense of them. That I tried to cast a pattern within the freckles. If I were an idealist, I would say that a constellation laid across her face. I am a realist. This is how I know that those freckles were from the sun, not the stars. They only appeared during the summer months when she would sit outside in a plastic folding chair and tan. Her freckles would never last through the winter. In one photo of my mother, I can see a pair of emerald earrings—or at least green earrings. She doesn't smile with her teeth in this photo. It would be the last professional photo of her taken before she got pregnant, maybe the last professional portrait she's ever taken really.

When my mother was seven years old, another girl at school accidentally hit her in the face with the wooden seat of a swing. It knocked out one of her front teeth. Granny and Granddad were called to the school immediately and Granny cried. She said *my sweet girl*. Her first baby, the oldest daughter, had her front tooth knocked out at age seven. My mother didn't even cry. She sat frozen in the school office as her mother demanded to know why wooden swings were in place to begin with. She grappled with the principle as though she thought they could reverse time and spare the tooth. But my mother, Evie, never flinched. This was simply another story about how she was always the type to swallow pain. She could have cared less about the tooth. In fact, at school next day, she grinned and bared her teeth for everyone to see. She was proud of the sinew, the gap where once a tooth had been but now there was nothing. She thought it made her look tough. My grandmother thought it was unsightly and she hoped that mom's adult tooth would arrive quickly to cover up the flaw.

This same pulling and prying would continue all throughout their time together. My mother would scrap her knees in her church dresses and would be spanked for it after the services were over. When she was fifteen and tried to sneak past her mother with an extra earring at the top of her ear, Granny pinched her ear and demand to know if it was real. Or if it was some sort of joke. My mother tried to wiggle her way out of her mother's grip and in the process, the earring was pulled out.

After all the crying and screaming was done, Granny threw the earring in the trash. The little silver stud stained with just a little red, gone forever. My mother's ear would always have that little notch. Almost unnoticeable unless you knew the story, unless you knew it was there. What I thought of motherhood was based on these kinds of stories: My grandmother being the mother that wanted her daughter to look something like a doll. Perfect, without scrapes or piercings, with her strawberry blonde hair. And then my mother, the rebellious one. Who wanted to get as far away from her mother as possible. And when she did get away, she pierced her ears again and again, dyed her hair black, and never shed a tear when she scraped her knees.

Early memories of my mother stick to my skin, still slick with the shine of her care. I was three when I started living my grandparents full time. Before that, there were memories. The smell of honeysuckle perfume, which was always thick. She would buy tiny bottles of honeysuckle oil and pour some on her hands before running her fingers through her hair each morning, perfume on a budget. I can remember sitting on my mother's knees while she held me at arm's length from her chest and bounced her legs. She was an awkward mother at eighteen, not even sure yet of what kind of woman she was going to be. The bouncing was her way of saying she was sorry. Sorry she left a soiled diaper on just a little too long and a rash had formed. Sorry that sometimes the formula was too hot and would scorch my mouth. All of which I would forgive her for in a heartbeat now. But I can see how it all made her feel and how unprepared she really was.

I thought she was beautiful. Striking, really, the sort of beauty that a woman comes by when her life is hard. A hard beautiful that shone in her eyes or the lines in the corner of her eyes when she laughed. Despite what an outsider looking in must have thought, we did okay on our own. My mother didn't have much to speak of in the way of belongings and didn't claim to want or care much about those sorts of things. The local library supplied her with whatever she wanted to read. Our furniture came from sidewalks or friends. For a while, the only new things she owned were the things given to her at my baby shower. Pink plastic things and baby blankets. A white crib with tiny, blue flowers painted onto it. In the rare photographs from then, the apartment we lived in seems like it had potential. Later, we thrifted things. Scooped up a chair off the side of the road a time or two.

Plenty of empty spaces, toys scattered on the tan colored carpet. Books stacked on the small wooden table that had uneven legs. The sad secret though, was that it never changed. The apartment never became a home that looked organized or much lived in. There would never be

potential, never a coffee table in front of the loveseat. The small television we had sat on the floor. It was a quiet, empty place.

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When Granny wakes up, she stops and stands in the doorway of my childhood bedroom. Instantly, she recognizes a lump in the bed. She knows it's me. Quietly, she readjusts the belt looped through her housecoat. Pulling the terry cloth strip tight across her waist. Bracing her breath. She sits on the edge of the bed and rests her hand on my ankles. Many times, I have heard my mother, my uncle, and my aunt say that their parents are completely different grandparents than they were parents. I feel lucky. If my mother had shown up in the night, unannounced, Granny might not have given her this courtesy.

"Howdy, stranger," she says. Smiling a little. Her face is circled in morning light sneaking in through the blinds. Her voice is tired.

"Hey, old lady," I whisper back to her. I sit upright, facing her. Oddly enough, I think that I'm about to be in trouble.

I think this is just like the time I got caught cheating on a chemistry exam. And I had to tell her before the teacher did. I thought of the one and only time I came home with a hickey on my neck. That soft purple blossom that enraged my grandmother. Even as Granddad chuckled and said *you tell that boy if he wants to suck on something, he can suck his thumb* she seethed. Sometimes, when she was mad enough, when whatever it was I had done so wrong seemed unthinkable to her, she would say, "you are just like your mother."

In my junior year of high school, we read American literature. Every morning, at eight o'clock, we began our day with a word of the day. Our teacher, Mrs. Wiley, always kept a pencil tucked behind her ear. Her favorite American story was Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. One morning, when discussing the plot of the play, I thought I saw her cry a little. I thought it was odd, but I was the only one to notice. Just a small tear. Almost not even visible from under the cover of her glasses. After class, I asked her what she liked so much about it. The play that is. She said that it wasn't the play exactly. It was the emotion. Feelings of betrayal and loneliness. She asked me if I could guess what her favorite scene was. I couldn't. She said it was the moment when Elizabeth Proctor has come to terms with her faults, the faults that she believes have cast John from her graces. *I never knew how I should say my love. It were a cold house I kept!* She never elaborated

but I always knew what she meant. A cold house is a house without compassion and one full of constraint.

As I think about that, the notion of a cold house, I wonder if she'll see me or if she'll see the reflection of my mother. Laying here in this bed, when I tell her what's happened. There's a chance my bill from the hospital will come to this address. A chance she'll wonder why I look so tired. Why there was a pair of jeans in the garbage bag and why, oh god why, were the pants stained with blood? I treat it like the chemistry test, I just tell her outright.

She's quiet for most of it, her hands still on my ankles. I feel the bags under my eyes while I speak. I bet she thinks its grief under my eyes. Behind her, I can see the broken light switch. It remains in one position even though everyone knows you have to pull the strings on the fan to get the light on or off. I zone in and out, sometimes seeing her face completely. Sometimes only seeing the light switch. It feels like she isn't even breathing and I'm sure that she'll slip up and call me Evie. That she'll see my face but call me by my mother's name. I tell the story like it wasn't even me that it happened too.

*I started to feel really sharp pain in my gut.* I actually thought perhaps my period was finally going to show up after all. Then I felt the first trickle.

In the bathroom of my shared apartment, I felt lightheaded. The blood was more than a trickle. My roommate knocked on the door.

What happened between the bathroom and arriving to the emergency room flashes: Trying to pull up my pants, deciding not to button them after all, my roommate saying, "we'll take your car." Worrying that I'll stain my front seat, which does happen, telling the roommate to drive to closest hospital because there are two close by and she needs to know. Seeing myself in the side mirror of my car and thinking *I've seen a ghost*.

I skip over the stains, the sight of my ghostly face, those are details she wouldn't need. She needs the details that come from the mouths of the nurses. The polite brunette nurse that I thought of as a friend. She wants to hear the part where the doctor says: somewhere between four and five weeks. She especially needs to hear the part where I say that I didn't know. That it wasn't planned. It wasn't on my mind at all actually. That's the part that triggers something in her.

Her lips are pursed now as she nods her head in affirmation. I wait for a response. But all she does is rub the parts of my leg within her reach. If Granddad has heard any of this, he hasn't shown that he has. In fact, I hear a soft snort and I realize he's still asleep. Granny is picking her

words carefully, I think. Her hair now is greying. Looking at it now, I realize that it has been a long time since her hair wasn't greying. She tells me a story instead of saying my name or my mother's name, "The first sign of it was like a wave. It reminded me of being on a boat. When I was sixteen my parents and I went to the beach for vacation and it was the first time I had ever been on a boat. The rocking made me so sick. Sick as a dog."

She's telling me how she knew she was pregnant for the first time. Pregnant with my mother. She is still rubbing my legs, "Like drifting on gentle waves, pulling and pushing. My head felt untethered." She tells me about how her first husband, Hollis, was *a bad man*. She gives me a facial expression where her eyebrows arch upwards, silently saying *you know what I'm talking about*. And I do know. I know my biological grandfather was a drunk, that he beat my grandmother. I stitch together small threads from other relatives, from Granny herself, in order to understand this. But seeing her talk about this way, reaffirms every whisper or every, "don't tell your grandmother I told you but."

She says that in the morning, when Hollis would fold himself out of bed, she would squeeze her eyes shut and hope that she would wake up somewhere else. This wish grew and grew until she must have felt sure that she would cough it up. Like it would feel hard and circular. I know it had to be the case. She's trying to say that finding herself pregnant made her more vulnerable. Made her sick, wishing she wasn't. Not because of the baby, but because of the baby's father.

I stare at my hands. Wringing them, not knowing if it's guilt or just some type of wild sadness now being shared between us.

"You know, I can tell you just about every house I've ever been in. But back then, in my sleep, I dreamed about waking up in my bed. The only bed that was ever mine. Just *mine*. I dreamed about the pink and white quilt Mommy made for me."

I can see that bed has gathered dust, waiting. The same way the bed I slept in last night waited for my return. I imagine how that quilt must have felt so cool to the touch. How comforting that must have been—or would have been.

"Daddy always said *Maybe you'll want to spend the night here with us*. I thought how silly is this? Here I am married now and living with a man. But Daddy always said I could come home any time I wanted to." I never knew her father. He died shortly after my mother was born. For me, he existed in old photos and as the man my Granny called only ever called *daddy*.

“I always fibbed to him on the phone or when he came by to visit me while Hollis was at work. *I love him, daddy.* I would never even think about spending the night alone or away from my husband. I would never. I just wanted to be a good wife.” With that she lets out a breath that I think she’s been holding for a lifetime. Pushing the air out through her nose.

“But Mommy and Daddy kept everything in place,” she says. She tells me the story of her morning sickness. I think it’s her way of asking. Without saying the words, she’s asking *did you ever get sick like that?* But I don’t have the heart to tell her that the answer is no, I hadn’t. I can tell that there are gaps, just like the blood-soaked jeans in the kitchen trashcan. There are things she isn’t going to tell me, at least not right now. She tells me about the first time she ever felt my mother kick inside of her. This time I answer her unspoken question for her, “I never felt anything. Except the pain.”

She nods again. This time I can hear Granddad getting out of bed. The bed crunching and springs cracking. Suddenly, I’m worried that she’ll tell him. I’m worried that it will break his heart. I realize that is the sort of the thing would break anybody’s heart. I only have a few seconds, a few shuffling footsteps to ask her not to. When his salt and pepper hair becomes visible, and I know that he has seen me, he smiles big.

“Lily just missed us. She just came to see us and have breakfast with us,” Granny says. Her hands on my legs but her head tilted backwards to get a good look at her husband. Her good husband. She smiles at him. He grins, as if this is the greatest thing he’s ever heard.

“Well, if that’s the case, then I’ll make the teddy bear pancakes. If that’s okay with our guest of honor?” And of course it is. He has no idea what’s just transpired. Instead of taking part is the whispering storytelling, he’s eager to pull out the teddy bear shaped skillet to make homemade pancakes because he knows they’re my favorite. Because he helped raise me, he knows I love those pancakes. Part of me is almost convinced he must know or have some inkling of knowing. He departs for the kitchen and Granny returns her gaze to me.

Maybe my mother was right. The mother Granny was for her daughters and her son was different than the grandmother sitting on the edge of my bed. Motherhood—I understand is sacrifice. The give and take, one freedom for another. I don’t tell Granny that during the night I dreamed about a little girl. One that looked like me, but had dark hair. The same dark hair my mother has now, but for this little lady it was natural. She had freckles across her nose and when she smiled at me, her eyes seemed to disappear in her happiness.

“Do you think you’ll want to tell your mom?” She asks. With her question, it’s like she created a ghost in the room. We both stay silent and look at our hands as if we’re afraid to look up and see a specter there. I open my mouth to say something. But before either of us can say anything else, Eli’s small voice asks, “why is Sissy’s car here?”

“Because Sissy *is* here,” I yell back to him. He runs into the room, just as delighted as Granddad was to see me. He’s wearing green pajamas with a plaid pattern on them. He crawls into the bed between us.

“Did you know that Granddad is making teddy bear pancakes?” He asks. Because to him, nothing is different. Nothing is more exciting for him than to wake up on a Saturday to find me there. To know that pancakes are coming.

### CHAPTER 3. PEOPLE MADE FROM THE EARTH

My professor remarks that they think the people from here are made from the Earth. Sprung forward by the soil and rainwater and somehow bound to where they came from. I tell them that I don't know what that means, because I've never been tied to anywhere else. In a way, I think it's a lovely way to start a fairytale. So, in the tiny office, I tell a story about what the earth does.

At times, the weather would remind us of our place in life. In the summer, thunder storms would roll in with such force that we sometimes suffocated under the fabric of the grey clouds. The only thing worse than the heat was a heat with rain. In town, it wouldn't have been that bad, but living in the holler meant every drop of rain would be felt. Swallowed, flooded. Sometimes, we would sit on the back porch and watch it all roll in. Granny in her red, wooden rocking chair and each of us at her side. If Eli was old enough, he would sit in her lap but he doesn't always appear in those memories, those dreams.

The one that I recall most often, sometimes willingly and other times not, we watched the sky turn black. Far away, we could count the seconds between lightning and thunder. There are so many names for thunder. Nothing of its fury or the way the sound is felt inside of your sternum. Like a rock concert. Nothing of the fear. I thought I was afraid. From the looks of John's face, it would seem as though he was too. His brown eyes were swollen with it too. A reflection of my own, I know. The sound would be best described as a thousand horses, maybe cattle even, stomping their way home. The cow farm we drove by every school day had black and red angus cows, I bet if they all got the idea to thunder home for their dinner the same thing would happen. It was loud.

But then Granny spoke up, making it seem like a fever dream. Like she could hear our thoughts—my thoughts—and needed me to know something, “My momma always said a tornado would sound like a train coming.”

Then I did two things: I wondered if I had ever heard a train that close up before. And then I relaxed a little. A mechanical sound and a natural one would always be different, regardless if my body knew how to spot which one from the other. It didn't sound like anything I knew then. In memory, it still doesn't.

Worse than those storms were the winters. Often, my grandparents talked about the winter of 1977. Granddad told us how he would have to climb the roof of the house to shovel it or else the roof would have caved in. Kids in the neighborhood didn't go to school for weeks. Nothing

like that had ever happened in my youth, a white Christmas was rare. Snow like that of legends was rare. But cold rain, snapping powerlines, and ice storms were familiar. We would only miss school for a day or two, never more. The thought of my grandfather climbing the roof to shovel snow fits into the category of dreams, but believable ones.

The closest we came to that kind of snow would have been the time it snowed for an entire day, all of it coming down hill. I had just started middle school, junior high if you asked Gran. It only took a couple hours of heavy snow before the power went out. Just a little ways up the road, a sycamore tree had fallen and taken the lines with it. Several trees fell that night, it sounded like the rapid crack of gunfire in a war zone. It sounded like the slamming shut of a door that could never be opened again. Eli was a toddler then and he wailed every time the sound echoed through the house. We sat around a kerosene heater and played card games until it was late. Granny's stove was powered by gas so that much hadn't changed.

I sat a kerosene lamp on the edge of my dresser so I could read in the dark. Eli begged to sleep with his brother to no avail. For him, it was like camping out or roughing it for the night. It made him feel manly. For Eli, it was a reminder of how small he was in life. *What if the trees fall down on the house?* he cried. I was the one who relented. That night, and every night without power after that, he slept with his back curled into my stomach.

I angled my arms around his tiny head so that he would lay in the bend of my arm and I was free to read still. More trees fell.

"Why is it so loud?" He whispered.

"I think it's just because the trees are really special, bub. They're big you know. This is their last hoorah. They're sending themselves off with a bang," I whispered back.

"Like a tree party?"

"Like a tree party," I said while I smoothed back his hair. His hair was silky soft and smelled like baby powder. I knew from experience that Granny would coat him in powder head to toe after he took a shower. She did that with all of us when we were small enough. She would pull out the little, white powder puff and turn the small wall heater on. The bathroom will fill up with the clean smell and become foggy. A welcome snow storm that we enjoyed.

That winter we missed school for a week. The school bus never even made an attempt to reach us and we had no way of knowing if school had been cancelled or not. With no television or phone line, we were effectively cut off from everyone and everything outside of our road. When

the snow began to melt, we would venture out in our snowsuits taking stock of the damage done. Pine trees littered the roads and yards for miles. It reminded me of when people get stranded out at sea in the movies and think about how they're surrounded by all of that water and can't drink a drop of it. Pine trees can't be burned in stoves like the kind that warmed our house. Something about them would gunk up the stove. No one was certain what we would do with all of them.

The massive oak trees that stood so tall behind the house were gone too. Those would be pieced apart and burnt for warmth. In a way, it was a small blessing. The trees had fallen themselves, without the labor needed to topple them. In the summer months, Grandad and John would spend days sawing down the trees in the summer heat so we would have a warm house in the winter. The trees had sacrificed themselves it seemed. Even though we were able to see the damage done, and seemingly see the end of storm's aftermath, there would still be several days before anyone could get into town. A little longer still before the power company would get around to getting the lines back up.

I don't remember being melancholic about the event. I remember sharing my bed with Eli every night while the blackout lasted. I read book after book after book since there was nothing else to do. There was the memory of the boiling pots of water we used to take what Granddad so crudely called "a whore's bath." I even remember what the trees looked like coated in ice. How, when the sun shined, the tops of the trees looked like they were burning a blue and white flame. I remember thinking how beautiful and lethal it was. A once in a lifetime experience that I felt special enough to see.

Granny, however, in her seeming eidetic memory recalls finding me staring out the living room windows crying. She said I looked like a wife waiting to hear the news of whether her husband would return from the war alive or dead. At first, she thought I was just watching the icicles melt and fall off into the snow. A trick of the light or perhaps movement on my own behalf revealed tiny tears melting into my cheeks. Ever the stoic matriarch, she pressed her hand into my back and said, "why do you look like you just lost your best friend?"

"I just miss my friends. I miss school. I miss everything," I said.

"This is only temporary," she said. "It will pass."

In the newspapers and in every day conversations that snowstorm was called "an act of god." What purpose could be squeezed from the moniker was beyond me. I never experienced another snow like it again. Anytime it snowed, professors would urge us not to risk our lives by

coming to class. They could never be sure just how far out some of their students lived and so, for them, the snow felt dire. I loved telling them the stories about snow. Often, I would become the wise elder of the conversation. Offering advice on how to drive through weather like that. *Just because it's four-wheel drive doesn't mean it's four-wheel stop* I would laugh. The thing I felt most deeply was just how deep the instinct of survival was inside of me.

I mean, the way we would all band together to help our neighbors cut trees out of their driveways or off of their cars or roofs was a showcase of the friendly, everybody-knows-everybody mentality that the area was known for. But what we didn't talk about was the feeling of trying to sleep in a cold, dark house while hearing the sounds of warfare outside of the windows. If one certain oak had fallen this way or that my bedroom—my grandparents' bedroom—would have been demolished in the night. Nearly everyone in the house would have perished. We didn't talk about how it got so cold that some of our chickens froze to death. Their necks tucked under their wings in a last effort to sleep in their own warmth. Worse still, even if we butchered them, we couldn't keep the meat. But we also couldn't eat three full chickens in one go.

Most of our food went bad too. We tossed out most of it. The meat, the produce, the milk, and whatever else bore the mark of a far passed expiration date or foul smell. When we were able to use a generator, it took so much gasoline to run it that after a few days we had none left. With no way to leave to get more of anything, we eventually just took to staying in the living room together. Around the kerosene heater and lamps, we rarely ever said anything about being hungry or cold or lonely. Even though we felt it, we knew that saying so would just be like rubbing salt into a wound that was bound to fester anyway.

Granddad's truck was what we lovingly called a "beater" and couldn't make it far down the road. If the storm had lasted longer, if the lights had remained off, who could say what would have happened. Perhaps I would have been the one walking in on my grandmother crying in the widow. I imagine that would have said something like *I miss everything. I miss not having to survive.*

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When someone in the English department throws a party, it usually means a series of smaller parties are happening. The graduate students are expected to bring wine but usually end up sitting at a table, alone. Like children during a holiday dinner, we haunt the dining room tables or breakfast nooks. The writers usually have elaborate spaces with glass tables and heavy chairs.

The scholars are the ones with the wooden breakfast nook tables. This time, we sit around the table packed in tightly. On the surface of the table, I can read words like *milk* and numbers where someone's hand was heavy, leaving permanent marks on the table.

The program is still small enough that every graduate student can fit around the table. Myself, one other writer, and two literary studies students. Rather than show up with four cheap bottles of wine, we pulled together resources and came with one bottle of still relatively cheap wine of a blackberry variety. Inevitably, no one will drink it and one of us will take it home.

"I'm not taking this home," I say, "the smell alone makes me gag."

Memories of drinking blackberry wine behind my grandmother's house and throwing it all up immediately after plague my thoughts each time someone passes the bottle around to sniff the booze.

"We could just hide it. Leave it in the towel rack in their guest bathroom or something," Darcy says. Darcy studies medieval literature. She never mentions her work, not knowing anything about her specialty, I never ask about it. Sometimes, however, she does ask me about writing. I tell her I'm writing about my grandmother. She nods politely and doesn't ask anything more about it. Mostly, we talk about the absurdities of parties like this one. Where the music is obscure, mostly vinyl records pulled off a shelf by another guest. We laugh at the suggestion of hiding the wine. We laugh at the absurdity that is having a guest bathroom.

The other writer, Jeff, adds, "they'll just blame one of us and say something like *oh the poor things, they've probably never seen a towel rack*." His voice is airy, mocking. It has always been our experience that some of our professors think we use an outhouse. Jeff plays into it. He creates tall tales about what it's like to have to carry a lamp and a gun to the bathroom at night. The professors we had came mostly from other places, other standings—often higher than our own—and if we could get the joke in before they could we felt less like the white trash we believed they saw us to be. Famously, a former professor asked what the lamp was for. *To see* Jeff laughed. *The gun is so you can see whatever it is you're shooting at while sitting on the shitter*. Jeff has crow's feet despite only being in his early thirties. I guess they're from laughter, from telling jokes like the one about outhouses. My lack of crow's feet is based in the reality of not laughing, of knowing better than to laugh because my grandparents grew up with outhouses. Jeff did not.

Darcy pulls a small, yellow box out of her coat pocket. As she sets it in the center of the table she says, "well, do you wanna figure out who will go home with the bad wine?" She explains

the rules first. You shuffle the cards and think about the question you want an answer to. Then you cut the deck into three smaller ones. Stack them as you wish and hand the deck back over to the reader, to Darcy. Jeff, never to be outdone by a party trick of someone else's creating, huffs.

"I see, you're quiet during the workday but a witch after hours?" His dark eyebrows raise with his voice. I can't decide if he likes Darcy or if he hates her. Either way, it makes me hate him and his jokes a little more.

"You first, Lily." She looks at me, not even letting onto Jeff's air a little. Her hair is a natural red. The sort of fire that makes sense for a woman who studies a society that would have ostracized a woman with hair as red as flame, a woman reading tarot cards. I do as she instructed us to. Unable to shuffle properly, I set some cards down and mix them together as best as I can. In the other room, someone has lit a joint and subsequently started to cough hard. Everyone in that room is oblivious to the smell they've created, but we smell the smoke and hear it as it's passed from one pair of seasoned lungs to another.

"I wish we were in the pot room and not the wine kitchen," I say as I stack the deck again.

"I don't know what they would do if we walked in," Darcy wonders.

"Tell them you can see the future and it involves sharing their dusty weed," Jeff adds.

Darcy holds the deck in one hand and uses her free hand to knock on the deck. As if she were knocking on a door. The visible parts of the deck look like a plaid pattern. No different than a deck of playing cards. She pulls three cards, from the top of the deck. She stares at the cards without saying a word, without moving them again.

"Your question?" She asks.

"My question," I repeat. Not sure how to tell her that I didn't have one in the first place. That I don't believe in the future that lives inside those cards.

"It's better when I don't know," she says. Still looking at the cards, not at me, or at Jeff. She begins to read, flipping the cards over to reveal beautiful pictures. In the first, three women hold up golden cups in a warm embrace. Celebratory. She stops to make sure I'm watching her, but she doesn't reveal the meaning of the women just yet. She continues.

In the following card, I see a grey castle with a couple bearing flowers. Four long, wooden sticks stand. Creating a fallible house. The last card is darker. A lifeless body, face down, with swords in the back of the deceased. Ten swords. The sky above the body is not blue or yellow like the first two cards. Jeff, perhaps finally gaining the insight of reading a room is silent too. For a

moment, the three of us remain like that. Looking. I can tell that the wheels are turning in her mind. I've seen her teach as well as be the student, she's trying to decide how to deliver the lethal blow of the last card.

"Well, the four of wands is a very happy card," She finally says.

"The what?" I ask quietly.

"This one," she pulls the middle card closer, "it's the card of happy thoughts and wishes. Have you ever heard someone say *it's 11:11 make a wish?*" She flips the card around so that the wands are facing me upright. Suddenly, I see the stick house as the time. I understand the reference without having to be told anything else. Darcy, watching me shake my head in a yes gesture pulls up the first card.

"Didn't you say your grandmother had two daughters? Your mother and aunt?" Her sweet eyes shimmer in the kitchen light. She knows more about what I'm writing than I've given her credit for.

"Yes," I answer. I pull this card around for viewing myself. This time I see that two of the women are facing me, the third is facing the other women. Like a mother watching her daughters celebrate something, "What about the swords?" I push the two cards back, eager to hear what the swords mean.

Between the three of us, there are a few college degrees. Enough that I already know that ten swords in the back is a hard way to die.

"Beware the ides of March," Jeff shrugs.

"Beware the ides of March," Darcy says softly back to him. "If you live by the sword, you'll die by it. Sometimes you're the one putting the swords into your own back." She scoops the cards up and returns them to the deck. Clearly, it does not matter to her if Jeff does or does not like her, she would rather stab him.

"I would say that, altogether, this means that sometimes the embrace between three women is a happy kind. Sometimes it is a kind that deeply wounds," she offers, "you know what I mean?"

"Sure," I say. I can feel a headache already blooming behind my eyes. The warmth in my cheeks from wine coolers joins the pain in tangle of nerves. Darcy flips the entire deck over. On the bottom, she reveals another yellow background. This time, the picture is a woman holding in her hands the head of a male lion. The word *strength* in capital letters at the bottom of the card reveal that this card is part of the major arcana. I don't ask her what it means.

Hours after having my own cards read, the party winds down. Darcy has read and read and read the pasts, presents, and futures of nearly every person under the roof of this house. With the help of the blackberry wine, I think she might have even enjoyed it. Tonight, it's Jeff's turn to drive us all home. Keeping with his tradition of making things much harder than they need to be, he decides to drop me off first. So we begin our descent into the dark Friday night by driving thirty minutes into the opposite direction of everything.

Darcy sits in the backseat and hums along to the radio. Sometimes, she opens her mouth only slightly to sing and I smell blackberries on her breath. It reminds me of blackberry picking as a kid. How we would duct tape our socks to the bottoms of our jeans to keep any and all bugs out. As I lean my head against the cold window, I think about that. The last time I can recall berry picking is a time where I must have been twelve, thirteen at the most. Granddad was still driving his blue pickup truck then. That was the trip where I closed Eli's hand in the tailgate on accident. That night we had berry and blood stains soaked into the lines of our denim jeans.

We made dumplings that night. I would shake out a little sugar to sprinkle over mine, taming the sour taste. Blackberry dumplings were Granddad's favorite dessert—actually he called it his favorite meal. The way blackberries smell when they're boiling is a lot like the smell of blackberry wine crawling back up the back of your throat. I feel my face tighten up with the remembrance of it all. I can feel the way my eyebrows knit together and I force the memory out by trying to tune into the radio. An old Springsteen song is playing. Jeff's fingers are drumming along the steering wheel while Darcy hums the backup vocals.

*Come sit by my fire* the man sings. It's a song about a poor musician falling in love with a woman whose father would never approve. The father, I think, is right to tell her to stay away. You can't live on love alone. She should take the chance while it's there to have a clean get away. Instead, the record company calls in at the last minute and Rosalita's father is proved wrong by the advance given to her daughter's lover.

By the end, I wonder if she stays with the musician. If she defies her father and stays or becomes a road wife. We come to a red light, one of the last few we'll pass on the way to my apartment. Jeff clears his throat, causing me to open my eyes a little to see if he's trying to get my attention.

"Darcy, are you uh seeing anyone?" He asks.

I want to applaud him for his get right to it spirit, but I don't. I too hold my breath and wait for Darcy to answer.

From the backseat I hear her hesitate. I think I can almost hear a gear or two turn over, "I am." She doesn't say anything else.

From the corner of my eye, I see Jeff get angry. A silent anger, but his face is flush in a way that only attitude—not alcohol—can create. I wonder what he'll say to her when I get out of the car. I don't know him well enough to be able to guess. I don't even like him enough to want to know more about him. My brain itches in panic and I start to pull apart scenarios.

"Darcy, did you still want to spend the night with me? I thought you said you did and that you brought clothes but I wanted to make sure," I say with my eyes closed. Casual.

"I do," she answers immediately.

Jeff makes a comment of some sort. Something about not being included in plans. Neither of us laughs or says anything else. When we get to my building, we take a long walk. Around the building and up two flights just in case. Neither of us saying much but knowing why we were walking together in a circle almost.

## CHAPTER 4. LEAVING

One Saturday morning in April, I walked across the road to our mailbox. The green one with the red flag, our last name etched in silver letters on the side. The white, smaller box next to it was meant for the Sunday paper. There was always a chance that both boxes would be empty, most of the time they were. Bills and ads aside, there wasn't much to be found. One summer, however, there were wasps. Yellow jackets another one spring. When Eli was six and discovered the wasp nest he declared, *I can't believe the mailman left us waspers!* When I opened the hatch and found a thick yellow envelop instead, I wondered if it would sting.

I had heard stories from classmates and my grandparents about the sort of horrible things you get in the mail. Orders for jury duty, letters from lawyers. Granddad told me once that, when he was a young man, he lived in fear of getting a letter in the mail that would send him to war. Fortunately for us, those things never came. Instead, this was a letter of acceptance. I ran my hands over it, all of the edges, the stamp even. I wanted to open it in the privacy of my bedroom. I wanted to hold in the magic before anyone else could steal it from me. But when I started walking back to the house, I saw Granddad and Granny standing on the porch, watching.

"Is it?" Granny asked.

"Yeah," I said. Knowing exactly what she meant.

Granddad cried. Granny hugged me. Tightly. We opened the letter together there on the porch.

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When I finally arrive back to the apartment, Calla is sitting at the table with stacks of books around her. It smells like dust and lavender, the only lights on were the lamps, creating an orange ambient glow. Calla's glasses are perched on her head, her hair pushed back. That must mean that she's been sitting there for a while. Waiting for something to break her concentration so she could justify stepping away from the table.

"Hey," I say, knowing she heard me come in anyway, but still hoping she'll push back her chair and stand up to greet me.

"Hey, stranger," she says in a very tired voice, "I wondered when you'd appear."

I feel bad, I didn't call. The last time we saw each other, we had gone to the emergency room. I hang up my coat and take off my shoes. As I do it, I tell her what's happened. I tell her about the death in my belly. How it's still slipping out a little. Little by little. I tell her that it feels

like the worst cramps you've had but maybe on steroids. There isn't really another way to say it. I say *it just hurts* and I worry that she thinks I mean that I'm devastated by the loss. A loss I didn't know I was losing. So I stick to talking about the tissue, the machinery of the body working to bounce back from the loss.

I think she knows that I don't know how to make sense of it yet, because she doesn't get up to hug me. She nods her head and takes it in for a few moments. When she does speak, she motions with her hand and says *come see what I've been doing*. The stacks of books are all much older than we are. Not surprising given how Calla researches. She starts from the distant past and works a little closer to the present, but really, she never gets that far before another question arrives—before she decides she's outgrown the project at hand. These books have green and red cloth covers that fray like split ends. Just touching their spines feels like trouble: It could all crumble in your hands.

The titles all say things like *Grieving the Dead in Appalachian Cultures* or, most interesting to me, *The Legacy of Sin Eaters*. She mentions what she's looking for. This time, she's just trying to put together as much material possible to continue her work on the customs of Appalachian families, "Since I'm not from here, you know, no one wants to tell me anything. I've to read to learn anything." She says. She sounds defeated despite the fact that I know she's a very charming young woman. She strikes up conversation with strangers while standing in line at the grocery store or while she pumps gas. But still, maybe because her accent is different, she gets pushed out. In truth, no one would ever have a reason to think she wasn't from here. Often, she exaggerates the long "I" sounds and practices saying words the way Granny does. Wash becoming "warsh" and wheelbarrow becoming "wheel barrel."

It's like a game almost. She really enjoys the work.

"How does your family grieve?" She asks. Leaving me at a loss for words for a few seconds.

"I mean, we just do, I guess. Mostly, it's about food and being together. When Granny's first husband died, people brought lots of lunch meat trays. Weirdly enough, when we found out he died, Granddad read it in the paper. He read it, stood up, and walked into the kitchen and said, 'Hollis is dead,' and then he sat back down to read the rest of the paper," I tell her, trying to remember how I reacted to the news. I didn't know Hollis at all then, so I thought he was just a family friend.

“Do you think your grandmother would talk to me about it?” Calla asks in a soft and sincere tone.

“About Hollis dying? Or just funeral foods?” We both laugh at little. I think about it and consider the time. She would be winding down for the evening anyhow. We figure out a way to sit on the kitchen counter and pull the phone as far as the cord will stretch. I dial the number and we cradle the phone in both of our hands, angling it so that we both can hear. At first, it rings three times and I wonder if she isn’t outside talking to someone or in the shower. But then, as if she anticipated the worry, she answers.

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At first, she isn’t sure what the question means. I tell her it’s for Calla’s project and she tells me that I might as well listen to. *Death sits very close to motherhood, Lily.* She begins to tell us about her grief.

She says she comes from a long line of Simmons. No one knows when they arrived to the area, if they came from Italy or Ireland like most West Virginian families after the Civil War. Although her parents are long gone now, buried in a cemetery far back on her father’s property, she remembers how she grieved them. When her mother died, the casket was closed. Her father, in his own grief, lamented over his wife’s wish to not be seen after death. *Remember me as I was* she said. He called it a coffin, not a casket. I look at Calla to see if that means something. If the choice of words matters. She doesn’t know. She mouths the words: could be a mistake? By then, people were buried in caskets. Boxes that were beautiful on the inside and the out. A coffin is a box with no beautiful purpose. But at his wife’s burial he saw no purpose or beauty in it. Her mama died of general old age she says. Heart disease or something, but she doesn’t remember. She doesn’t even think there was an autopsy.

When her father died, a year or so after her mother, the same ceremony was held. Side by side graves, mourners in black. Martha remembered how people pulled over as the hearse drove them to the cemetery and away from the funeral home. One man, a complete stranger, stepped out of his car and held his hat to his chest. Martha saw it as respect for the dead. Kindness for the living, the mourners left behind. The hearse drove on.

She talked about how important it was to wear pantyhose—something her own mother always insisted on as she grew up. She also talked at length about the food. Lunch meat trays were always popular. When her mother died, she was newly married to her first husband. The ladies

from her mother's church made apple dumplings and passed her the recipe written on a napkin, "You know they put Mountain Dew in those things? You know I don't really care much for it, but I loved those dumplings." The taste of cinnamon and brown sugar reminds her of her dead mother, I think. Even though she doesn't say it. How could you not make that connection?

Looking back, the pain of losing her parents is less now. She raised three children, raised some of her children's children. Grief had all of five minutes, she said. After that, I didn't have the time to be sad. I was a mother. Hearing this, I feel a painful twinge in my gut. Almost like a flutter. What would that mean for me? Since I wasn't a mother, would have more than five minutes or less?

Each morning and each night as she prayed, that was when she let grief have more of her time. Growing in the bedroom across from hers, I knew that on the rare occasions Granddad would be out of town and she slept alone, she would cry quietly. I never mentioned it to her and I'm almost certain Granddad doesn't know. If not for me, no one would ever even know about the private ritual.

"What do you pray for?" Calla asks. She grew up without religion and I know she means to say *what do you ask for*.

"Oh. Hm," she breathes on it for a few moments. In the background I hear Grandad sit down on the couch next to her. I don't think anyone has ever asked her what she prayed for, I'm not sure she knows how to answer the question. Again, Calla tries to mouth something to me so Granny won't hear it: *Sorry* she says and her eyebrows mesh together in an expression of sadness. She's only met Granddad and Granny a handful of times. After the little silence, Granny continues, "I usually ask for God to take care of my loved ones first. Then I ask him to take good care of me. Then I ask for forgiveness for myself and my kids."

I don't want to ask about her brother. I can't even picture him. Asking about how she grieved him wouldn't be right. As if she's read my mind, she tells us about the wake her parents held for her only brother. The memory is so old that she feels like it's distorted. She says things like *I think* and *it's been so long since*. She remembers it this way:

Her mother was made into a very old woman by it all. It seemed, at times, like her body had lived as long as anyone's ever had. Her hair was turning to silver. Not dull grey. It was never white. Of course, Mama's hair had been going grey for a while, but it was only then she noticed. She kept it tied in a tight bun during the whole thing. She said she didn't feel like fussing with it.

She was still not tall enough to see over the lip of the casket but asked her father to show her the body. *The body*. Calla's eyes repeat the words too. The body, because it wasn't her brother, she thought. It was her brother's body and those are two very different things.

Her brother's eyes were closed. He was smiling.

The way it really happened was complicated. Her grandmothers, both maternal and paternal, wanted an old-fashioned wake. One where the body could rest in the home before burial. Each member of the family taking shifts. Someone would sit with the body, keeping watch. Aunts, uncles, other sons, other daughters. Each person sat in a chair level with the casket. Some sang hymnals. *When I die, hallelujah by and by, I'll fly away*.

Her mother didn't want the wake. The last time her son had been in their home, he was alive. She wanted it to always be that way. In the end, her mother convinced her that it would be good for the family. To say goodbye.

The singing was sweet. Food was in abundance. The children played in the grass until they tired. Adults talked and played cards. This is the way a soul must pass: in its home, surrounded by its strongest loves. Granny had short hair, cropped at her chin then. She would stay outside that evening, well after dark. She caught fireflies in glass jars. She still did not yet realize what it meant for her brother to be dead. She could still feel the heat of the afternoon's sun in her cheeks when she finally went back into the house that evening.

The time for crying had long passed she said. Everyone had already said their goodbyes.

It was after the fireflies that the night took a turn for her. She entered the house, passing by an old mirror. A mirror she had known all of her little life. That night she saw no reflection. A heavy brown blanket was draped over it. *What could that mean?* she thought. Someone must have broken it on accident. The house was busy.

A relative, a cousin of her grandmother's or someone like that, someone older answered the question, "You have to cover the mirrors."

"Why?" She asked. Having never heard a word of this before.

"So his soul won't get lost in the house on his way out," the women said.

My grandmother ran. Straight to her mother. Screaming, with all her might pulling her mother out onto the porch. Out of the house. In the mess of it all, her parents thought maybe she was finally understanding. It had finally come to pass for her. They wouldn't have to sit her down once it was all over to explain it.

They carried her upstairs, past the mirror again. This time she covered her eyes. Her mother sat in the bed with her, rubbing her back as she cried. After forty minutes of this, she fell asleep.

The following morning, her brother was to be buried. She was put into dress shoes and asked to comb her hair. As the adults closed the casket and prepared for its removal, Martha quietly walked through the house. She touched all of the mirrors. As her finger pressed into the cool glass she pleaded: *Please don't be lost. Please don't be lost. Please don't be lost.*

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After the phone call, we sit down to watch the evening news together. Calla has already made notes on the conversation with Granny. I'm still digesting it all. Especially the line about motherhood and death being so close. I briefly think about my mother and how she must have known that all along. She must have known motherhood would be a sort of death for her. It reminded me of a story that made the news a few months ago.

Somewhere in America, a mother decided that grief was not enough for her. The death of her child was an act, and she—the leading lady—opted to change the arch of the story. It was clearly not a sad story where a child, truly an infant, dies and the mother weeps. It's a story of too much. One where I couldn't decide if I felt sorry for the mother or not.

"This is too much," the boy's mother says in the interview. The huge microphone casting shadows on her tired face. I can see the purples and blues under her eyes. She's becoming a sound bite that everyone will hear, even all the way in West Virginia where her voice met up with us just after my grandmother told us about grief. The boy died of a tragedy. He stopped breathing and for whatever reason, that was the way his short life ended. *I can relate to her* I think but don't say. The same sense of having nothing to go on, no way to know for sure why or how, but then, I think, it's very different circumstances after all. This mother, in her grief, took his body to a church and asked that everyone pray. Another man from the church, in his interview says that she arrived weeping, wailing like a wild woman. It wasn't a traditional wake, but a reawakening of sorts. She asked that her son be resurrected. *Just like Jesus was* she says through her tears.

"Matthew 10:8 reveals the power of prayer. Heal the sick! Raise the dead! Freely you have received; freely give. Lord, wake this boy tonight, wake him," an elated man shouts in another sound bite. He sounds like anyone preaching in the south would. He sounds like his voice is about to give in and that he'll need a glass of water and a handkerchief to wipe down his face. For hours, they prayed over this boy's body. It is the year 1998. The world isn't ending yet. There are sound

bites. Still, they pray over the body. Children in attendance recoil in horror. *His eyelid twitched* as a daughter cries as she hides her face in her mother's leg on camera.

Her mother's blue denim dress is covered in tear stains. *It was just so traumatizing* she says. Despite her own participation in it all. Down a hallway, in the women's bathroom, another little girl sobs, sadness caught on camera too. If she remembers this night, and in all honesty, she will think about it every day, she will probably think about how strange it all was. How this boy's mother loved him so much she refused to leave him dead. Or, maybe, she didn't love him enough to leave him dead. All of the children in this church, to me, seem to be asking the same question out of their own parents: Can't you love me enough right now? Enough to spare me this sight?

Calla shakes her head. The sound of a man shouting like that is entirely aggressive to her, "I suppose they didn't have any snakes nearby?" She asks. Completely sarcastic.

"Those are for the living, Calla. You know the rattlesnakes are for proving your faith and not for raising the dead," I retort.

"You would say that since you're a part of the same cult and all."

"At least we don't drink the Kool Aid," I say without glancing away from the television.

"Oh, I know. The snakes and eating rat poison are totally fine, but Catholicism is just too much," she draws out the vowel sounds of her "too much." She's asked to see a snake handling church before and was embarrassed greatly when Granny told her that no one around here did that. She apologized, afraid that maybe she had pissed Granny off. Instead, she laughed and told Calla *I don't really think I'd want to spend Sunday with rattlesnakes. If you hang around after the service long enough all the other old women at church are bad enough.* She won Calla over with her humor.

Calla returns back to the table with her books, "People have always been weird about grief." She tells me about the dusty books.

How in Wales, Scotland, and even England, when someone died a piece of bread would be laid on their chest. The sins of the departed would be soaked into the bread by way of touch. Every sin. The families of the dead would hire someone to eat the bread. It meant that their loved one would be absolved of all sin. It meant there would be peace for those mourning. They could rest knowing that their beloved had been spared damnation. Whatever remained after death, soul or not, could go on. Free of sin.

Every sin eater would then be weighed down by the sins of everyone. Not only the sins of one, but the sins of many. Sins of their own. Historically, sin eaters were usually poor and in need of both the money and the bread. The whole ritual seems so sad, I think. The reality that you could be so hungry. The reality that the people left to grieve you would insist that you were full of sin.

The story dominates the news for only a couple of days. But even Granny heard about it. She shakes her head in disbelief and in sympathy with the mother. She says, *she took it too far*. That's all she offers about it. Unaware that the same night she told us about her grief, we learned about this mother's grief. And for whatever reason, one gave us pause and chills. The other seemed to be a second nature, just the way things are.

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After Calla goes to bed and the dust of death and books has settled, I quietly pad into the kitchen. Wearing an old, large t-shirt and pair of heavy boot socks I grab the phone and decide whatever number I dial first is first. My mother or my aunt. I twirl the cord around my fingers until they feel cold. I decided to memorize both numbers. But only the numbers. This way, Granddad and I reasoned, I wouldn't be picking one over the other.

## CHAPTER 5. KILLING SNAKES

There are two ways to kill a snake: there is the way my grandmother kills a snake, by using a gardening hoe and pointed shovel to separate the head from the body and there is the way my father kills a snake: with a gun. Every spring and summer there seems to be at least one instance of a snake killing sometimes in the garden, or in the yard, or even the driveway. One summer, a snake crawled up into a car and my uncle and granddad had to pop the hood and fish around before one of them pulled out a three foot long shining black rope. Then he shot the snake. In contrast, one fall I was walking along the hillside with a younger cousin. In our winter coats and boots, we crunched the orange and red leaves and headed for a fallen tree to sit on. I raised my right leg and stepped onto a pile of leaves that contained a large sunbathing snake: it was sunning itself on top of the leaves and did not move but we still saw his white scaly stomach and headed back down the house to tell our Granny. She grabbed an old garden hoe and a shovel. She held the snake down with the hoe while the hand held the shovel above the snake's head and it came down, severing the head from the body.

After that night I started to assess all of the rules and unspoken roles I had been raised to play into. The list was long: always make the man of the house a plate of food before you eat, keep a clean home, don't aggravate the man of the house, you always do what the man wants to do, and of course there was the rule of showering. The main message that I started to take away from it was that my life meant nothing without a man. I existed to make a man's life easier. Most importantly, I felt like what I wanted for myself didn't matter if what I wanted was outside of making a home.

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In this memory, the radio in the backyard is booming like a heavy pulse. Strings of yellow lights are hung along the porch and side of the house, lighting the pathway outside to the keg and the music. Michael, John's long-time best friend, thought the lighting was essential for those who had never been to the house before. For all of the classmate that didn't know that the hallway between the house and the garage is always dark. The second door on the left is the one that leads

to the backyard. You press down on the handle and pull. The twinkling lights were meant to help with that. John shimmies out of the truck with a cigarette carelessly placed in the corner of his mouth.

“You really have to smoke every time we go somewhere?” I ask. Realizing that the moment he knows we’re away from home he can light up. Granny doesn’t have eyes everywhere.

“You really gotta ask me that every time we go somewhere?” He puffs on the cigarette and reaches into the bed of the truck for a six-pack of Heineken, his contribution to the party. He walks around the house, his friend’s house, following a darkened gravel path he knows well. He doesn’t need any help from the festive lights.

“Get laid or something!” He yells through his smoke as disappears.

For a minute my cheeks get red. Even though no one else is there to hear it or see me, I still blush. If we had been actual siblings we would hate each other. We wouldn’t ride together to a party. Wouldn’t joke like this. Granny used to tell John and his brother Eli to act like cousins, not like brothers. *Pretend to like each other*. Eli and John are separated by six years and different fathers. The age gap is enough to make them strangers. But we’re only months apart, ten exactly, so we go to parties together, make jokes. We act like siblings.

I notice a porch swing, with red stained wood, in the corner of the porch. I decide to sit there. Relishing in the nighttime for a minute, taking in the complete pitch of the night. There’s only one streetlight on this road, it’s in this yard. I think about all the times in my life when the streetlight at our own house went out. How dark it gets in our corner of the world. Last summer, John and Michael held down one of the neighborhood boys. Upside down. Pressing him into the pole of the streetlight. Then they took out one of Granny’s three-foot-tall rolls of saran wrap and wrapped the boy to the pole. When our grandparents heard the commotion, they came out immediately and Granddad laughed so hard he couldn’t breathe. Granny did too. It took two pairs of kitchen scissors to cut the wrapping away and someone to catch the boy’s body when he was finally free. John was rolling in the grass with laughter.

But here in front of Michael’s house, there is no one. He was throwing this party, a bring your own beer because I can’t afford any party, to celebrate graduating. Each of the boys in the backyard had been planning for weeks on the where, the when, and what each of them would bring. With so many of them coming there was no shortage of beer.

Once when Michael and John were fifteen, they stole a can of Pabst from Michael's dad. They snuck off into the woods behind our house and took turns sipping from it. John said that it took them half an hour to get through the warm can of beer. *It tasted like piss.* Michael burped and thought he would vomit for a minute before he realized he was just feeling the alcohol in his system for the first time. Michael crushed the can under his tennis shoe and they threw it into a trashcan in the driveway. They completely forgot about it until a week later.

John said that Granddad must have knocked the can over one evening while working on the truck. When he went to grab it, the white can fell out. Crushed but still obvious. He didn't tell Granny. Instead, he asked John to go on a drive with him. John never said what happened then. Whenever I got in trouble with Granddad, which was rare, he always asked me to take a walk around the garden with him. Where Granny is fire, Granddad is a stream of water. Through persistence, he gets the point across. I remembered when John came into the kitchen that night and his cheeks were gleaming with tears. I was on the phone with a friend, Gillian, when I saw him crying. Her voice on the phone kept saying *are you there? Hello?* He went straight to his bedroom and shut the door. *I'm here* I said. *Just distracted.* I never asked anything else about it. He only gave up information when he felt like it. I knew better than to ask.

The swing creaked under my weight and sounded like a bullfrog. I didn't like the taste of beer, I knew so from sneaking sips from the green bottles John kept hidden in the tall grass behind the house. I think he knew that I did this, but his sense of pride kept him quiet about it. Maybe, he thought, I would drink with him too. I pull my feet under me and listen to the waves of music and laughter. A hearty laughter. I imagine that they're all slapping each other's backs and laughing about things that they can only talk about around the crackling of a bonfire. About girls, cars, jobs, and strict parents. About all the things that are about to become trivial. Trivial because college and marriages and babies and careers all come next for most of us. I think that they have already figured this out too. That's why there's so much beer.

"Can I sit with you?" Sawyer appears, surprisingly, standing in the driveway.

"I guess so. What are you doing here?" My face is contorted in the question, the confusion. In my mind I was asking different questions. *How did he know about the party? Why did he choose to come speak to me?* Moreover, I thought about how many times we had had sex. At this point the number was between seven and nine, but I couldn't be sure anymore. I only knew that we rarely ever spoke to each other in public. Sawyer, the boy with the longer than usual hair. That's

how my grandparents remember him. From yearbook photos and town gossip. I picked a “good one” when I settled for him everyone said. *How sad that she’s going to school and leaving him behind* they also said.

Gillian would skim through her own yearbook, from the safety of her bed, while I sat in the floor. *His parents are rich.* Or something like *I heard he dumped a girl last year at Valley because she snorts when she laughs.* Sawyer, she remained convinced, was perfect boyfriend material. No harsh rumors, no extraordinary parents.

Then Sawyer spoke up again.

“I’m friends with Michael too you know.” He smiled but only for a moment before he sat down. The wooden swing lowered with his weight.

“You don’t seem like the type to come out to a holler to chug beer,” I said trying to smooth my voice out, like silk.

“Neither do you.” He lightly shoved my shoulder. The way he sometimes did when he thought I was being funny. This is how he laughs. Not with sound but through movement.

I came to the party because John had come. Only that was half true, I had been invited too. I knew that I would have a corner—a space—where other girls my age would gather and the friendliest among us would laugh and gossip. My friends were here. Michael was like another younger brother around our house, like another younger brother to me. Gillian would soon be here, bringing with her something fruity to drink because she can’t hold down beer. I go to these parties often. After the second round of drinks, someone breaks out a deck of cards. I always win because I’m always sober enough to do so.

“Did John already go around back?” Sawyer asks. I can tell that conversation between us won’t ever be easy again. Now after I said it was for the best if we split. Go our separate ways so we could grow our separate ways. John doesn’t know about my breaking things off with Sawyer, except that we might be fighting since he hasn’t come around lately. He places great emphasis on the word *might* when he teases me about it. John has had many girlfriends and we always keep it to ourselves because they never last more than a month or two. I have no reason to keep Sawyer away from the house. Granddad and Eli love him. Granny tolerated him. John likes him enough to bully him a little. Like John, I inherited a coldness about breaking things off. He set the rules I suppose and I upheld them.

“Yeah, you know he lives to be around other rowdy men his age. It’s good for him.” This makes Sawyer chuckle a little. It was always a game of sorts with him: Me trying with all of my might and charisma to make him laugh and him sometimes getting close to it, but then again not quite.

“You know you can go out back too. You can do anything he does.”

“I know I can. Which is why I won’t. I don’t want to be like that.”

What I’m saying is that I don’t want to drink the way John does. Pass out in someone’s yard face down the way he does. He drinks so heavily that I’m afraid his body isn’t made up of water and blood anymore. He says it’s under control. But some weekends he disappears, sleeping it off at a friend’s house. Once, he even slept in his truck while it was parked in an empty lot right off of the interstate. Anything to pretend like he didn’t get wasted. On the rare occasions when he did drink at home, he does it in the dark. Two bottles at the most. Then he throws the empties as far away as he can. Expelling. Sending them into the trees where they shatter leaving shards of green glass sprinkled among the pines. Sawyer understands. He’s seen the green glass smattered alongside the pine cones and needles. He puts his hand on my shoulder.

Sawyer knows all of this anxiety because I’ve told him in bursts of panic. Walking between classes, when I’m at his house. The drinking got so bad once that Granddad picked up on it. He smelled it is what he said. For any other teenager our age, grandparents are absent figures. But our grandparents are the only consistent people in our lives. Granddad made both of us sit down in the garage with him. By the end of the conversation both of us were in tears too. Only because Granddad told us something that no one else ever had.

“Your grandmother’s first husband was a drunk. He beat her senselessly every time he got wasted too.” I did the math, the possibilities. My mother would have been around a year old when Granny married Granddad. Later that night, when Granddad and Granny went to bed, I heard him say to her *we should have been done with raising kids a long time ago, Martha. I’m too tired to keep having the same talk.* That was all the warning I needed. John, it seemed, needed more time to come to terms with it.

“Well, I’m going in. Are you coming?” Sawyer stands, smoothing out his jeans. A nervous gesture, I think. Unsure of what to say, knowing that this was a drinking party. Feeling the tension of sobriety and drunkenness.

“No, you go ahead.” I say. Walking off, he gives a little wave. Smiling only a little.

I wait five minutes before I go inside. I don't want to be seen with Sawyer either. It would mean that someone would ask and then there would be an expectation. None of which I wanted. So many of the girls our age had little crushes on him. But all of them knew that he was both not paying attention to them and paying way too close attention to me all along.

I was going to go to college in the fall and Gillian and I had made a pact: No boyfriends our first year. A deal that she made because her mother told her that we wouldn't be able to imagine all of the boys we would meet on campus. *Thousands of members of the opposite sex that you never knew existed.* As far as I was concerned, I knew of way too many women in town who started school and quite because they got a MRS degree instead or a controlling boyfriend instead or got knocked up and abandoned by a guy instead. I wanted to get an education and get the hell out. Gillian wanted to be in a sorority like her mother had been too. But after doing the research, she found out that you had to maintain a high-grade average and a "lady like" composure. She decided that this meant that her first year of college would be purely about working hard, pledging, and being a legacy after her mother.

My family doesn't see it that way. My guidance counselor had to help me fill out all of the paperwork. She was the one who told me that the pre-law program at the university was the hardest to get into. I reported all of this back to my own family. Pre-law and sororities. Granddad keeps a mason jar of change next to his side of the bed. Collecting pocket change for me. It's a dull silver: Full of quarters. *I'm saving up to give you some pocket change for when you become a spunky college girl.* He winks when he says it. I think it's the best way he can support me right now. One of the only ways he knows how.

Gillian is waving me over from her corner on the kitchen. This is where the women come to gossip and be among each other. Out back it's mostly a lot of backslapping. Some girls would sneak out to have a beer with a boy she was smitten with, though rarely. Gill's red hair glistens under the light. She is smiling. Once I get close enough, she rests her head on my shoulder. Her cheeks are already a little red from drinking.

"I saw Sawyer walk in." She doesn't move, her head still resting on my shoulder.

"I saw him too." Now she's looking up at me, really seeing my face this time. I guess she sees something that interests her. A spark in my eyes or a feather stuck in my hair.

"So you're really cutting him off then? Nothing else? No more fucking the cute boy with long hair?" She laughs a little, but quietly.

“Watch your fucking mouth,” I say and lightly bop her on the chin. Whether or not she understands it, she agrees. I can tell by the way she sips from her drink again and changes the subject, that we won’t have to talk about it again. We have a pact. I’m thankful.

Someone says something about nursing school. *Are you going? I’m going, my parents are paying for it.* Someone else talks about a hair appointment tomorrow morning to get high lights. *For the ceremony tomorrow.* Someone is always talking. It’s like dinnertime at the house but beer instead of food and no one here is related. Gillian banters with a few people but keeps looking back at me, from the corner of her eye. I finally ease myself into a seat across from her.

“Lily, aren’t you going to school? You got like a full ride or something?” Caroline from my fifth period literature class is asking me a question now. I’m no longer the outsider listening in.

“Um yeah. I got a full ride at the local university. I’ll probably live at home though, it’s cheaper that way.” I’m swirling the contents of my pop bottle as I say it. Also a nervous habit.

“Yeah, but you’d miss out on all the parties and stuff. You could never have a boy over for the night either. My parents have been freaked out about stuff like that since my sister got pregnant her junior year.” Caroline is an over sharer. She’ll share your darkest secret in five minutes flat and never realize she’s done it. Caroline keeps talking about her sister and her sister’s baby. *She’s raising it herself, can you imagine?* Carolina snaps her gum in between her own questions. Sometimes she moves a piece of her blonde hair behind her ear. I’m trying to take in Michael’s mother’s kitchen. She’s decorated everything with chickens. The salt and peppershakers, oven mitts, and even the cookie jar. Chickens. It’s a perfect fit for all of the clucking going on tonight.

Everyone gets quiet and I notice that they’re all looking at me. I reach for my mouth and try to wipe away whatever it is they’re looking at. But they remain affixed. I look around the room and I think that maybe their gaze is directed over me, that I’m in the way. When I turn around and see Sawyer standing behind me, looking at me, I know I’m right.

“I think you should come out here for a minute.” His hair falls into his face and I can tell that he’s chewing on the inside of his cheeks.

“Why?” I ask, trying to establish that I have the upper hand. Trying to fool everyone else. It works.

“Your brother. Or cousin. Whatever he is.” Sawyer spits out with a harshness he’s never had for me before. That’s all he says and he turns for the door so I follow. Once we’re out the door,

he stops me. He closes his eyes and lifts up his hands and whispers, “It’s really bad. He’s really far gone. No one seems to care but it’s too much for me to watch.”

I know what he’s talking about. Before I see it, I know. John takes everything to the extreme. When we were kids and we played truth or dare, he would make me eat a worm or dirt. The worst I ever made him do was eat a blade of grass. His mind works in gears, moving forward, never backward or stopping. He’ll black out or pass out.

When we walk to the backyard it’s almost like nothing has changed. No one is alert or aware. The faces of the boys are illuminated by the bonfire and the shine of brown beer bottles. He isn’t here. Sawyer, much taller than I am, scans the crowd and shakes his head every time he thinks he sees him. It seems like everyone has sandy brown hair. Each of these boys is wearing the same plaid shirt with khaki shorts. All of them have been the first one to vomit at the party or the one who got angry over a joke and stomped off. None of them blink an eye at my searching. I feel a tugging sensation. Something telling me to turn to the left and face the front of the yard. That’s when I see him stumbling forward. Walking aimlessly, away from the party. He was aiming for his truck, I think. I hope.

He is going down. Falling down the creek bank. Thorns, weeds, and water all whip at his face as his body lurches. His hands come up and out. A reflex. The sand of the bank swallows his hands. He lands with enough force to break his nose, his body. Instead, he rolls over. His face smeared with sand, some blood, and water. Then the tears come. He cries like a mute toddler. Expelling the tears fast. There might be sound accompanying the grief but I’m not close enough yet. He vomits. Every beer, every shot. It all floods the section of the creek around him. He can barely wipe his mouth clean before he does it again. Now the amber color of his spit, brightened by the streetlight, mixes with the blood, the grass. All of it staining.

He thinks that no one saw. That he was invisible. The lights from the streetlight and the porch light create little fires in his welled up eyes when he sees me coming. He sits up and pulls at the neck of his shirt. It’s covered in the mess too. It cannot be saved. He sits like this for a little longer. Straight up like something brought back from the dead. Clarity comes over him, his face. He is suddenly sober or at least halfway there. I can’t lift him up with my own weight so I stand there too. Watching.

Sawyer reaches down and helps him up. He doesn't even wipe his hand off after touching him. Instead, he puts one arm around him and we walk toward the porch again. Finally, I break the silence, "You can't go home like this."

I'm so angry with him. All of our lives we've been tethered together. Two motherless kids, living with their grandparents, so close in age. But we're polar opposites now. It falls on me to clean up after him, to hide his problems away. I always wonder if he'd do the same for me. I don't think he would.

"I know I can't." He says it so quietly that I wonder if his throat is dry or if he knows exactly how angry I am. Both must burn deeply.

Sawyer and I look at each other for a minute. I feel lucky. Then shameful. He should never have been responsible for our problems. But he was, he's here. He catches me looking and he mouths the word *shower*. So, we sneak into the upstairs bathroom and John does the rest. We wait outside the door, sitting underneath a painting of a winter landscape with our backs against the wall. I regret that I've stopped inviting Sawyer over.

"How often does this happen?" Sawyer's gaze is still fixed on the opposite wall of the hallway.

"I really don't know. I'd bet that it's happened before but beyond that I can't say. I've never seen it before." I'm trying very hard to remain in this moment. Not to cry out of anger.

"Does anyone in your family even drink? Your grandmother is so strict—"

"She is. And no. No one else does. His mom and dad did though. Years ago. His dad is still a drunk." I can't imagine these people really being his parents though. Granny and Granddad are our parents. They raised us. And yet here we are, sitting outside of Michael Brewster's guest bathroom. Talking about John's alcoholism. We turned out to be such well-behaved children.

"You've never mentioned his real parents to me before." Sawyer turns to face me now and I think he regrets ever saying anything about it or that he thinks this means I don't mean everything I said about breaking up.

"Well, they weren't his *parents*. They're both just gone. His dad left town four years ago." I hear the shower stop and the floor creak a little as John steps out. I stop talking immediately.

Sawyer starts to say something. An interjection maybe. But the bathroom door swings open and the hot air from the shower fills the hallway. He's got a scrape on one cheek and a cut across the bridge of his nose. It looks like his left eye might be fixing to bruise.

“Well. I counted and I have all ten fingers and ten toes. And all of my teeth are still intact.” He holds his hands out, fingers stretched out. If no harm has been done to his body on the outside, then there is no harm done at all. Even though I disagree, even though I think Sawyer would too, we walk away.

When we finally got home from Michael’s, we sat in the truck for a few minutes. John switched the truck off and he sighed deeply. We were parked in the grass, next to Granddad’s truck. There were deer in the front yard, four, they stopped and twisted their necks to look at us. Not sure if they should run yet. John’s hair was still wet from the emergency shower. I knew I had to go inside first. Granny would ask me how the party was. She would assume it was a pool party or what she called “popcorn parties” where the rich kids had people over to eat snacks and sit around while their parents stayed in the kitchen. For the sake of telling the story right, and protecting both of us, I would say it was a popcorn party. I would say that the boys went out back and grilled hot dogs. The girls stayed inside and we munched on chips and salsa and talked about boys. *Carolina told everyone about her sister’s baby.* That’s what I would say. Granny doesn’t go to parties, even if invited, so she would believe me. She would secretly relish in the gossip. Neither of us said anything else that night, I walked in first. John followed behind but went straight to bed.

Overhead, I could hear John roll over in his bed and the sound of his feet hitting the floor. It must have been later then, ten o’clock at the least. He would have had to sleep off the hangover, the hurt of last night. When I walked to the bathroom, I could smell food cooking. Bacon and waffles. She’s cooking us a big breakfast. She catches me in the hallway and smiles, “Good morning, lazy. You both slept in this morning. I figured you were tired.” I shake my head yes to answer her before I shut myself into the bathroom.

My head aches a little. A dull pulsing behind my eyes. I hear the bacon crack and sizzle and the smell makes my stomach vibrate. Looking in the mirror I can see a lot of things. First, I see myself. No freckles or a false front tooth. The scar on my left temple from an accident when I was four when my best friend at the time, Sara, threw a rock at my face out of anger. I see my Granddad’s nose, stern but not cooked or bent. Granny’s eyes, which are the brown of fallen leaves. Thinking of what Sawyer said about John’s parents—his real parents—made me think of my own.

I can’t see my mother in my own face. I push on the skin, smile, even try squinting my eyes but I can’t see it. She was a beauty queen and thin. Granny used to say that vanity should have been a deadly sin because *just look at what it did to your mother.* I frequently thought about

what my mother's beauty had done to her, to me. I was with her for only three years before she left.

Sometimes I imagine that she died in a fiery car accident. Except there was no fanfare or funeral. That she was driving recklessly, with no seat belt on, and went over the edge. Sometimes I thought of her as Hendrix figure, I imagined that she choked on her own vomit after succumbing to her vices. Because she was selfish, there was no one around to roll her over onto her stomach or rush her to the hospital. It's so much easier to think of her as an already passed ending rather than seeing her as my mother. When I imagine her gone, I see fault in her. I see her doing terrible things—being selfish. She is selfish to have left me with her parents. Her aging parents. Whatever happened to her is always her fault. I accept no accountability for it and I give it to no one else.

I turn off the bathroom light and greet my waiting grandmother.

I avoid Sawyer at the graduation ceremony. There are no photos of us together in our cap and gowns. We just stop any and all interaction altogether. Gillian and I remained friends a little longer before she dropped out after her first semester and got married. Then we stopped having any and all interactions with each other.

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For my sixteenth birthday, Granny gave me the dream encyclopedia because she said she was tired of trying to guess what it all “meant” when I told her every morning about the dreams I had. *Maybe you'd like to understand yourself better.* I keep the book by my bed and each morning flip to the accurate pages. There have been dreams about otters living in the bathtub of my childhood home. Otters symbolize joy and happiness. That they lived in our bathtub meant that I was making the most of my situation, I thought. In the past and the present. The bathtub had backwards knobs: cold meant hot and hot meant cold. For months you couldn't take a bath because the stopper had broken, Eli had accidentally smacked with his foot. For those months there were no otters in the bathtub but eventually they would return.

Recently, I've been having a new dream. In the dream, I was standing in our yard, in a nightgown, with no shoes on. My family, all of them, were in two lines, facing each other. They were wearing church clothes. Dress pants, shiny shoes. They were smiling with their hands behind their backs. But then they all pull baseball bats out from behind them. The bats are the old fashioned, wooden kind. *Come here* Granny says. When I reached her, she was still smiling when she hit me with the bat. Across my mouth. I fell down in shock and pain but she told me to stand

up and she kept going. Smacking me across the mouth each time. *You have to finish what you started.* It was a gauntlet. A form of punishment.

My grandmother hit me two more times. Granddad only once but to the back of my head. The boys, Eli, John, and even Michael got in a quick smack. To the knees and ankles. I thought that I was close to the end of it. Only my mother, her sister, her brother, and a man I didn't recognize were left. I had never seen the man before and so I stopped to look at his face. I paused for only a breath to take in his green eyes and beard. A dark beard that was longer than Granddad's. This man didn't smile but he raised his bat in a stance like a real ball player. Like he intended to knock my head off. Behind me, I heard John scream. He was being hit by the bats now. He broke rank and tried to tell me something so they beat him. So the sequence started over. I was standing in the yard in a nightgown. The grass wet under my feet and, again, Granny said *come here.*

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When I was still in elementary school, I begged Granny for a dog. I would tug on the hems of her dresses, pleading, leaving little wrinkles in the fabric. Each time I asked, she explained that a dog was an *exceptionally important responsibility*. She didn't think I was ready for such a commitment. I still had difficulty picking out outfits that matched and brushing my hair. Were it not for Granny, I would simply exist with a rat's nest in my hair wearing blue jeans with a too small dress pulled tightly over my little body. I probably wouldn't have been wearing shoes either.

"Please, granny," I would tug. "I promise." I would tug again.

"Promise what? To take care of it?" Granny would answer, while continuing to dry the dishes or fold the laundry, whatever banal chore she was in the middle of.

"I just promise. Just a promise." I said.

I had been living with her full time by then for almost a year. With no signs of leaving, a different kind of promise. Shortly after that, Granddad came home with a pup. A small, brown and white terrier that had been born in a barn down the road from garage he worked out of. I beamed with pride in the afternoon sun and trembled with excitement. I bit down on my lower lip, trying not to grin as I awaited Granny's response. I knew if I smiled that she would be inclined to tell me that we had to take it back and to wipe the grin off of my face. I never got any better at that, stifling a grin.

She let us keep the pup. I named her Dasiy. I was supposed to make her sleep in a box during the night, she wasn't allowed to sleep in the bed with me. I would drag the box over to the

side of bed and watch her. Sometimes she would make little noises and walk in circles until she got comfortable. She had soft, pink feet which I loved to kiss when I held her. Granny would scold me and remind me of where Daisy's feet had been previously. *In the yard! Where she shits!* She would throw her hands up and interject, clearly exasperated over my kissing the dog's feet. I would joke and say, *But Granny they're so soft!* And they were. They always were.

Daisy was tiny, small enough to fit in my lap comfortably. I would hold her in my arms like a baby and take her outside with me. That was how my neighbor, another little girl, found out about her. She was the only other girl in the neighborhood besides me. She had long brown hair and her eyes were brown too. We were the exact opposites of each other. Sometimes she would invite me over to play with her dolls. Her parents had an entire spare room in the back of their house for toys. Her dolls had their own homes, cars, and some of them even had horses. I loved going to her house and always asked if we could play with the dolls. She hated it and for a while she stopped asking me to come play with her. *You always want to play with the dolls and I'm just so sick of playing with dolls*, she said. We stopped playing with the dolls. Instead, she would insist we play at my house. Where we would play outside with the dog.

One day, I brought Daisy outside to show her for the first time in a while since she had been protesting playdates with me. She couldn't believe how small Daisy was. *Can I hold it?* She asked. I placed Daisy in her hands and used my index finger to pet the hair between her eyes. She had small, brown eyes. Granddad said she had the sweetest puppy eyes. I was lost in thought about that, thinking about how special Daisy was and how lucky I felt that I got to keep her. While I was thinking, the neighborhood girl wasn't. She sat Daisy down and suggested we go play on the swing set in the backyard. Off we went, thinking the dog would follow or go back inside. Instead, she crossed over into the road and was hit.

From the backyard, I heard the tires slam and screech to a stop. The sound was alarming and I suddenly started running for the front yard. Granny too had heard the car stop. She met me at the front of the house and caught me running. Stopping me dead in my tracks, she spun me around grabbed my face in her hands saying *don't look*.

Later, when Granddad got home and buried the dog, Granny would say it wasn't my fault. She said that Daisy was awful small anyway, *maybe she wasn't ready to be away from her mother*. That made it a little easier, I decided. Daisy was cold and wrapped in old bed sheets, placed in a shoe box. I knew her eyes were closed. Granddad wanted to know if I wanted to walk with him up

to the clearing where he was going to bury her. I shook my head no, deciding that goodbye meant very little to me. It seemed like I was never actually getting to say in time for it to mean anything. When I went to bed that night, I stared at the empty box at the foot of the bed and I thought about the sound of the neighborhood girl saying she was sorry. She just wanted to play on the swings, she didn't think the dog would do that. I knew it wasn't her fault. But I also knew that no one ever got hurt or killed when we played pretend with dolls. Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I also knew something else. I knew I was trying to explain the loss. Explain to myself why it had to happen because it wasn't exactly fair. The fairness of it was what made me cry and scream. I wasn't really ready to grieve either, to feel the full weight of loss. Regardless of being ready or not, it happened. I never went to that girl's house again and she never came back to ours either.

## CHAPTER 6. WHEN I ASK TO INTERVIEW HER

The day that I bring it up to my Granny, originally, is an evening like any other. Standing in the kitchen, I can only see Granny from behind and, even then, only through the screen in the kitchen window. The boys are in the front yard kicking around a ball. Not quite my brothers but still the closest thing I'll ever have to brothers. One of them kicks the ball a little too hard and it flies into the nearby creek. John says *you are shit out of luck, Bud*. The kicker, Eli, takes his shoes off and resigns to chasing after the ball. Granny pets one of her stray cats behind the ears and laughs at the boys. She's letting John get away with making his baby brother get into the dirty creek today. Maybe it's because it's too late to complain, there are already patches of grass stains blooming on the knees of their pants. Maybe it's because of the cat.

The cat seems, based on his ragged appearance, to be the sort of cat who would play a rough game of kickball. Everyone seems to be enchanted by the occasion. Granny spent the morning braiding and unbraiding her hair, standing in the bathroom while I sat on the edge of the bathtub watching her, "so you want to write about me?"

"Yeah. I mean, you don't seem half bad," I tell her.

"And your mother? Your aunt? How are you going to manage that?" She doesn't even look at me when she asks this part. She just focuses on her braid,

"It's for my work, to graduate. That's all anyone needs to know."

I thought about the time she and Granddad took me out to buy the dress I wore to my high school graduation. The only time I could recall my grandparents going to the mall willingly. Grandad in his overalls and gruff voice, pointing at the display cases of swimsuits and cutoff jeans. *People pay hundreds of dollars for ripped jeans*. Then there was Granny, watching all the pregnant women as they strolled with their husbands. Their hands carefully holding their stomachs like a grocer carrying ripe watermelons to someone's car. I picked the first dress I liked. A yellow one with little pink flowers on it. It came from clearance rack. Knee length, no special neckline and it zipped in the back. On the way home, Grandad rolled down his window. Something he always does, but then he said *you're our first girl to do this*. Another enchantment of memory.

I wondered, watching her from the window, what memories I would be revisited by with this project. The day had been mostly unimportant. It was just another day, but I had taken advantage of that to finally ask Granny if she would talk to me, let me write about her. We ate

dinner and had cake for dessert. Watching the boys play ball in the yard felt like an average Saturday, nothing to cherish. But then, I know, this is everything. All of it, grass stains, curse words, and a soaked kickball. I look away from the window and realize that the dish water from the sink has left a damp line across the waist of my dress. I always splash.

As I wiped the counter with a rag and rinse the last dinner plate clean, I hear Granny come through the front door. Her body manages to create the same patterns, same sounds, every day. First the door shuts, firmly but not slammed. Then the screen door follows suit and bangs only once before coming to a rest. Then comes the sound of her house shoes shuffling. She calls them house shoes because she wears them around the house, but they're actually a pair of canvas slip on shoes. The kind that pad softly and don't slap the concrete of the porch or the hallway leading to the front door. Then she opens the door and it creaks like a coffin in an old horror film, announcing its age. After moving out, I sometimes wonder if I'm hearing all of it right or if I have relied on the memory of the sounds for so long that my mind fills in the gaps.

"You got your dress wet," she says as she slips off her shoes.

"I know." I rub my thumb over the wet line. Granny eases herself onto the bench of her breakfast nook. The same chestnut colored nook we all ate at, did our homework on, and played cards on. There are thousands of nicks and scars in the wood, shaped like our names and grocery lists. Granny rubs her index finger over a spot and I wonder whose name she's feeling.

"You know we're proud of you," she says still running her finger across the table.

"I know." I say. Again. With my hand still covering the damp spot on the waist of my dress.

"I just wanted you to know that." It's Granny's job to say the important things. She's the one who grounds us. Always the steadfast pillar of resolve when we were sick or hateful. The reminder that we were only children. What's hard to say, for all of us I think, are the kind things. She could have let us off with warning when we broke curfew or refused to eat the food in front of us. She could have turned us away from her home at the start. But she didn't. The kinder things are harder to say because she *acts* with kindness every day.

I shake my head in acknowledgement. If I said anything at all I know it would change the mood, the sentiment. I can tell that she's been thinking a lot about my asking her about this writing project. Granny remains seated and I can tell that she's looking into the living room where Granddad is watching television. He's resting. From the kitchen, I can hear the creak of the reclining chair. The red recliner whose fabric is so worn it now looks like a shade of pink. The

chair is so worn down in some places that Granny took to laying an old sheet across it, the mint green sheet with a leaf pattern on it. The creaking sounds like a little, wooden cry. Without seeing his face, I know he has succumbed to sleep. His calloused hands are folded across his stomach. His mouth is more than likely open. *Flycatcher* as he would call it, a common pose in this home when someone tires out.

Grandad is a patient sleeper. Solid. As though he lives his entire life for this moment. Such a treasure as it is, it won't last long. He'll hunger and he'll eat. Someone's fence will need mending or a tire changed. The garden still has to be tilled for the summer. When he closes his eyes, I think he dreams in lists: The car, the garden, and the kids. I would hope his dreams are in technicolor or about fantastical things. But Grandad is a realistic man and I'm sure his dreams are just a step above black and white. Dreams that are getting things done, not relieving. All of those dreams leave him exhausted and begging for a moment alone in his favorite chair. While someone makes dinner or does the dishes. While the boys are in the yard and none of them asking for his attention. Always in the evening time, when the sun goes darker and the light in the living room fades. He'll come in and sit down with the lights off, sometimes with the television on. Everything else must be silent for this moment.

One of the boys suddenly walks in, slamming the door a little. John comes rolling in, his shoes still on. Blades of grass tumble off of his shoes and get smashed into the carpet. He keeps his head shaved now. Ever since we graduated, he's had odd job after odd job, but he's kept his head shaved. His brown eyes search the living room, still adjusting to the indoor light. Before Granddad sees him, his eyes open. I hear the chair, too, cry out: unprepared for the solace to be over. John says, "Sorry, Granddad. I didn't know you'd be sleeping."

"I knew you must be needin' something. It was getting awful quiet." Granddad stands up and grunts a little. He smiles through his greying beard and pats John on the back. I think Grandad must have smelled him. The grass stains and a hint of motor oil. He probably woke up and wiped his hands on his shirt, thinking that he was the one who smelled like stains.

"The recruiter is here," John sounds so resolute about it. So matter of fact. I stop for a moment to process it: The recruiter. This is the first I've heard anything about this. Over the week, Granny hasn't mentioned it any time she's called me. I look to her to see if this is a surprise to only me. Judging the empty, stoic look on her face, I can tell that this is a surprise to her as well. I peek out the window again and see the man standing outside. Granny won't let the recruiters come

inside because she doesn't want John to enlist. Whether or not this new recruiter knows that is unclear, but the man is leaning against the front bumper of his car, his hat in his hands. A silver sedan without dents or rust. His posture is very militaristic: Unmoving. His head is shaved too but what's left looks like a shade of dark brown. He rubs his arms with his hands, it must be getting a little cool out.

Granddad stops to look at Granny before he walks outside. I feel like I can see lightning bolts forming in her eyes. Granddad shakes his head. *Acceptance*. Granny stands up and goes off into the direction of her bedroom. The damp spot on my dress grows cold.

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When I was six and John was five, his mother, my Aunt Holly, took us for a car ride. She had bleach blonde hair then, the kind from a box. She would have you believe it was her natural color. Though I knew, even then, that there was nothing natural about that color. Her appearance in our lives was so infrequent that glimpses of her hair are sometimes the only concrete image I have of her. John was moving his head from side to side in musical motion. We were listening to the radio and the windows were cracked. She was popping her bubble gum and driving with one hand. Granny used to snap at her and say *act like you have some sense. Drive with both hands*. Granny always had to remind her to do everything when she was around us. Pick us up from school *on time*. Drive with both hands. Things we knew perfectly well as kids.

She pulled into a crowded parking lot and turned around to look at us.

"I'm gonna lock the doors, guys. You just sit here for a minute and I'll be right back." Her blue eyes seemed believable enough. The way John's own eyes trusted hers seemed like enough for me. So we sat there. Too small for our feet to rest comfortably on the floorboards and my seatbelt felt like a noose pressed into my necks.

We watched the other cars come and go. *Cheese Wagon!* I yelled as I punched him in the arm. He rubbed his arm like it hurt, I knew it didn't. The air started to get muggy as the sun rotated closer, through the clouds. More cars came and went.

"Where are we?" I asked. It had finally occurred to me that I never been there before.

"I don't know. I think we're getting my dad." John shrugged his shoulders and traced his name on the glass of the window.

"Where's your dad?"

"I don't know." Emphasizing the words *I* and *know*.

We sat still, completely quiet for a while. An ad came over the radio for a car dealership. John cut the silence and said, “When I grow up, I want to drive a pickup truck.”

“How are you gonna pay for one?” I asked tilting my head to side, waiting for his response.

“I’m gonna be rich so it won’t be a problem.” He said plainly.

By that time, Holly came around the corner hot. Revving like a sparking engine and yelling. We both sat up and watched. Behind her came the man who must have been John’s dad: A tall man with black hair falling into his face. She stopped and he slammed into her, unaware of the brake check. She shoved him hard and screamed. *Don’t act like no one else has been sucking your dick since I moved in!* I knew that one of those words was wrong. But I had never heard it in a sentence before, never like that.

John snapped off his belt and leapt into the front seat and rolled up both windows. Then he cranked the radio up, drowning out the sound of everyone’s voices, “Don’t you like Kenny Chesney? You like this song.”

I did. A little less in that moment, as Kenny sang a song about forever while Aunt Holly and this strange man were smacking each other with insults while she slapped the man as hard as she could.

“Let’s just sing with the song, okay? And don’t tell Granny. Please? You know she won’t let me see her anymore if you tell her,” He held out his little hand, asking for a shake of agreement. I shook his hand. *Someday we’ll be rich and this won’t be a problem I thought.*

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After the recruiter left, John disappeared in his truck. That beat to hell white Ford he bought for five hundred bucks so many summers ago. At least once a week something falls off or starts smoking and Granddad fixes it. I hear the truck’s muffler talking as he drives up the road. It sounds like a burly man trying to clear his throat, always announcing itself. I sat down on my bed, the spare bed in the spare room now, and counted the peaks and valleys of the drywall on the ceiling. Fresh out of the shower, my wet hair saturated the pillow case and cooled my face. I could hear the muffled voices of Granny and Granddad. His first, saying *why can’t you let it go?* And hers, responding like a cracked whip *forget?*

They don’t quarrel like this very often. Nesting in each other’s skin, prying until the seams pull apart. Granddad taking the side of the recruiter. The nameless man who made only one appearance in our lives but now is resting here. Like a ghost lingering between the bodies of the

living, his only ambition to take away the prized grandson. When the velocity of the words becomes much quicker, I decide to slip outside. I carefully walk through their empty bedroom and into the sunporch. The heat feels like a knock of bad breath slamming into my face. The sunporch, full of pots, pans, old clothes, and sewing machine. A room for all of the things she wouldn't forget, none of them belonging to Granddad. I pulled open the sliding glass door and pushed it closed behind me.

As I walked away, I heard the final sentence of the argument. *He'll waste any potential he ever had there or even worse he could get killed.* John would probably say the same thing. Except he would see it like this: His only potential is in doing dangerous things. Even if it kills him.

It's cooler outside now and the light is growing softer. Sitting in the red rocking chair, I pumped my feet on the concrete to get to the chair moving. The wood of the chair glides over the concrete, gritty. Small lizards dash in and out of the weeds along the edges of the concrete. Their tails still blue and attached. The buzzing and chirping all around makes for a sort of white noise, cushioning the air.

Granny has an answer to everything. Something she learned from her mother and no doubt something my great grandmother knew from her own mother. Some things seemed innate. She could smell a foul mood from a mile away or, worse yet, she could sense mischief almost immediately. That was why Aunt Holly moved out when she was seventeen and had John a year later. Why she hid the fact that she was taking diet pills and drinking on the side with her then alcoholic boyfriend. She was hiding everything about herself up until the moment she couldn't hide it a moment longer. That's why John has his truck, so he can hide too.

I close my eyes and tilt my head back. Suddenly the pressure of tension rolls backwards too. Somewhere to the right of me there is a small bird leaping from branch to branch, unsettled. There's a faint twitch in my gut, almost a hint of shame or guilt, and it passes quickly. Lately, I have to ask myself what it is that's caught within me. Why I hold my breath or feel ashamed. It's not always immediate to me. Standing in the kitchen with my grandparents, damp spot stretching on this dress, I felt it then. It was triggered, I guess. My grandmother, so far as I knew, never had anything like this happen to her. She was a good house wife and a good mother, then a good grandmother. Some would even say that she was such a good mother that she never retired from it.

I realized that she had told Granddad because he hasn't said much to me for days. Even he must feel it then. I know because he sticks his hands in his pockets and he looks at his feet, his boots, while the world goes by. I reach out to him, a hand on the back of his bent arm. He says nothing. I don't know how to tell him that I wasn't ever planning on grieving this as a loss. I didn't want to be a mother, not now. Maybe ever. But looking at him, I understand that this is a grieving of emptiness. I let him say nothing. Let him take his solo walks down the road. I let my family try to pierce emptiness in their own ways while I decide what to do with mine.

It occurs to me that I'm holding my breath. The rustling of the bird sounds a lot like the rustling of clothes. The sound of a shirt being lifted above your head. Then tossed to the side. Or the sound of jeans being tugged off. I hid from Granny too. After school, behind the football field. At parties. I hid from her, especially from her gaze, when I told her I'm going to a friend's house to study. In truth I was going. In lies, it was never to study. It's always to go do something I wasn't allowed to do in my own home. I even spent Saturday nights with Gillian so I wouldn't have to go to church on Sundays. Unlike their first set of children, we always had a delicate respect for our aging grandparents that came with their age. Coupled with being gun shy after seeing the fights and fallouts with John, I found easier ways to hide. That was always my way.

Thinking about that hiding makes me think of when Sawyer and I were in high school. Sawyer who didn't play football or march in the band. Who sat two seats behind me in anatomy until the girl behind me switched out. One afternoon, we were talking about how the skin is the body's largest organ. Someone in the back fell asleep and their textbook slid across the desk and landed like a gunshot. Everyone flinched but Sawyer flung his arm out and against my back. Pushing me away like a mother does when she brakes suddenly and throws her arm over you. The dusty light glowing from the projector cast a spell over us all. Sawyer's eyes were brown but back then I had never noticed. A strong jawline too. His flannel shirt was unbuttoned at the sleeves, a careless gesture. That was that. After class, he apologized. Said he didn't know what had come over him.

His house was full of relics, like our sunporch. He said that a latchkey kid had to have a lot of things to busy himself with while alone. Tattered books and records jammed into shelves. His father collected both while his mother gardened. Her meticulously groomed knockout roses covered every side of their home. The only spot they wouldn't grow was below Carrey's window.

He didn't have the heart to tell her it was because he smoked and threw the ashes—and sometimes the still lit cigarettes—out the window. She always let it go anyway.

The first time was an accident. The sort of accident that is absolutely preventable and also inevitable. Sawyer would run his hand up my back and across my shoulders when we would watch movies on the couch or listen to records. It was an absent-minded gesture which I knew because he told me that, when it came to intentional gestures, he had no idea what he was doing, had never had to know either. We were on equal playing fields. He never even grazed my bra until I pushed his hand further. A gesture that felt more or less like an act of endearment, like he wanted me to know first what he thought of me and second what he saw in me. In return, I would sometimes do the same, weaving my hand through the buttons of his shirt. The first time, I wondered what my grandparents would have said. Old Martha's fury would have burned every inch of that house, every petal.

By the time we approached The First Time, I didn't think about anyone else. We were walking through a field by his house. *Just passing the time* he said. Like we always were. But I knew better, maybe he didn't, but I did. The same judgment my grandmother passed on cloudy skies was deeply embedded within me. Walking back to the house, he put his arm around my waist and I watched a little drip of sweat come down his temple and end under his chin. I noticed the soft greying tint of his chin where hair once was before. He was sure to be careful. With everything he did—everything we did. The longer I spent time with him the more I grew to like him. The less, I think, he seemed to like me. That was what I told myself to justify breaking things off. Then, I thought I had to justify everything I did. Or didn't do.

The night I bought my graduation dress he wanted to see me. We had a system: he would call and ask for John. Then John would pass the phone to me. John drove me over to the Rose Bud Palace as he called it. He lit a cigar as I propped open the door to leave. Before I slammed it shut, John whispered *rosebud* as he let the ash from his cigar dip out of his hands. I rolled my eyes as he laughed, a hearty belly laughter, with the cigar jammed between his teeth. We both knew the number of times we would have to do this were finite. That time was the last. Later, Sawyer told me that he decided to move in the fall. Not to school or for a job. He wanted to go West and see some things for himself. He said *I hope you'll understand*. Like I hadn't said the same thing to him a week before. I couldn't tell if I inspired the move or if the move was a decision made out of spite towards me, but I respected it.

Despite the roses, his room smelled like dust. Shirts and pants tangled together on the floor. It was nothing short of normal to watch flecks of dust float through the light coming in from the window. I joked that he was like a claw machine at a grocery store, ambling and getting stuck, only to finally grab a tiny scrap of something and pull. Another flannel, a wool sock. His trademark uniform, even in April. He had a thing for wearing shirts the color of rust. Carefully, he folded it. In half, then into a small rectangle. He sat the shirt on my lap and his hand lingered there for a moment longer than needed. When John came to get me, he said nothing. Later, he would say that he read it in my face and didn't want to step on my feelings. The way my eyebrows pulled up and inwards in thought gave it away, I guess. He never asked about the shirt I was holding in my lap. I never told.

I didn't expect him to marry me or write me letters from wherever the hell he ended up. Even I knew that the time we spent together would end. It didn't seem like it, but we'd be high school sweet hearts to some extent for over a year. I never worked up the nerve to tell him I loved him. I did. I always did. But I never said it. I wasn't raised in a household where we said "I love you" before bed or before work or school. My grandmother showed me that she loved me by caring for me. My grandfather showed me by spending time with me. Taking walks or watching television. The boys showed it in their own boyish ways. I knew that I loved Sawyer in the way I think most people fear things. I felt it at the bottom of my chest and it made me sick to my stomach sometimes.

Every Sunday morning when the pastor thumped his Bible or smacked the podium, I caught myself not breathing or flinching in fear. I wondered if he knew. If Sawyer didn't, I was sure that in some way Pastor Green knew for certain. My guilt over it wasn't exactly the Biblical kind. If God was mad at me over premarital sex, he was surely mad at me for the times I stole quarters out of Granddad's lunchbox or said *goddamn it all to hell*. I wasn't concerned with that. He was mad, I knew, about a lot of things. Some of them my fault and others not. Whether or not Sawyer was angry did worry me. The spirals of that worry made it easy to shed the skin of whatever young love I had. In the end, I thought, I could always ask for forgiveness.

The knot of pain in my stomach pulsed again. Maybe not even a knot but a bubble almost. The pain was saying *don't forget about me*. As if I could. I had a nervous stomach. The kind to spring forth in action any time I was upset. I sprang up from the rocking chair and began walking fast, a dead sprint, for the tall grass beyond the clothesline. Suddenly, the picturesque landscape before me came rushing forward. My feet hit the dry grass and I could feel the harder pieces, the

strands that grow to be several feet tall and become hay, trying to puncture my skin. The grass closed in around me until it brushed the bottom of my nightgown. I was gasping for breath, trying to stop myself from doing this. A nervous sweat broke out along my forehead and a wave came over me. It felt like I was swallowing a sip of hot water. The birds no longer rustled and the air made my skin feel clammy. Just as I thought I was seeing someone's car wind up the road at a distance, I threw up in the grass.

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Granny catches me walking inside, in my nightgown, sweating. My face is wet from the throwing up.

"What're you doing?" She asks. Confused.

"I had to pee and Eli was in the bathroom," I cross my legs mockingly and laugh at little bit. She shakes her head and walks away.

I walk lightly back to my bedroom, hoping I have a pack of gum stashed somewhere. I reach back in my mental registry, wondering where I would keep such things and if I had any how old the gum would be. My belly now feels like it has filled up with small pebbles. They're cold and packed tightly. I know that it is a special kind of pain that causes you to vomit. It's a reaction to your body not knowing what else to do in that moment except expel. It registers in my mind how funny it is that I'm not even pregnant anymore and still throwing up. Laying on the bed, I take turns curling into a ball and unwinding. The fetal position. I think I might cry for a moment but I can't. I don't even know at this point if I would be crying because of hurt or because of hormone.

On the wall, I take stock of everything hanging. Most of them objects I pinned up as a teenager. A photo of me and Gillian where we are twelve and fishing. The one and only time either of us ever fished. A photo of a dog, Boomer, sitting on the front porch sleeping. An award for a perfect grade point average. My first diploma. The second diploma. Next to the light switch I see a bright square that catches me off guard. I realize the spot is where something used to be and is now gone, revealing a space on the wall that dust hasn't touched. I can't remember what was there to begin with.

When I got nervous as a child I pulled my hair. No one noticed for a while. I'd pull apart split ends, unable to bear they're unevenness. Then I start pulling strands. Eventually, I had a small section of hair that stuck up at the crown of my head. That was when someone noticed. I pulled

my hair over small things. Homework, the bus arriving late, answering adults correctly when they spoke to me. It created the perfect conditions for me to be a stellar student, always on time. I don't think Granny even knew that I was so nervous, she only beamed with pride at the results of it. I must have plucked whatever photo or memento off the wall in the same spirit. With reckless abandon and no concept of what the absence of said removable object would mean.

## CHAPTER 7. PHONING FRIENDS

I wait until I have an afternoon alone to make some phone calls. John and Eli are out together, one less bonding afternoon before he leaves. They've decided he'll go to a camp down in Georgia. I don't want to tell him about the project before he leaves. I'm afraid that he'll change his mind and not want to go. Or he'll be angry with me for wanting to talk to his mom and not want to speak to me before he's gone. Even though I'll miss him, even though it'll hurt, I know this is what he wants for himself. I'll write him a letter in a little while. I'll tell him later.

I try calling the last known number we had for Holly first. But when an older man answered, he said that he had been living there for over a year. And no, he didn't know what became of the woman named Holly who lived there before him.

Then I call my doctor. The same doctor I saw that night in the ER. They can see me today since I told the receptionist that I've been puking for days. It seemed like the best way to get the appointment made without saying much else.

I decide, out of curiosity, to look up Sawyer's phone number in the phone book. To see if he lives here. Granny would probably know the number or know if he lived nearby, but I don't want to ask. His name doesn't appear. I decide to call my Grandmother's best friend, Loretta. Her number has been written down on a slip of paper and stuck to the fridge all of my life. I figure that she'll tell me things that Granny might not.

"Loretta? It's Lily. I was wondering if you would have lunch with me one day this week?" She says she'll meet me at her favorite mom and pop place next Tuesday. At one thirty.

I don't know what I'll need for the doctor, if anything, so I take a notepad and pens, a bottle of water. I call Granny to tell her that I'm going. She doesn't say much. Drive safe. Be careful.

When I get to there, I watch people walking under the awning. It's different than before, in the day time, no emergency. It isn't very busy. Almost no one is around except for the occasional person walking out and going in. It took them two and a half hours to get me seen last time. I was there for eight hours. I didn't recognize the green bushes and mulch leading up the door. I can smell the cedar chips actually.

I wonder how my mother told Granny that she was pregnant. I wonder if it was as sad for her to hear that as it was for her to find my bloody pants in the trash. I hope it wasn't. I hope she was happy, if not in the moment, then eventually. Maybe it happened while they were washing the

dishes, the way we always do. Maybe she was calm and it wasn't so bad. When she found out that Holly was pregnant with Eli she warned her. That I did know, did remember. She kept telling her that she had to do better this time. John had been living with us for so long then that I think we all forgot that Holly would be around, could be a mother. Legally, she could be but she could never really have been John's mother. Not after all that time. I think Granny knew immediately that she and Granddad would end up with him too. They cleared out an old room full of boxes and clothes and made room for his arrival before they knew for sure. Maybe it was sad for her to know my news, but it also must have been relief.

When the nurse shows up and calls my name, my eyes are moist. I can't be sure if it's the thought of my grandmother being relieved that I had a miscarriage, if it's hormones, or if it's the song playing on the radio. Martina McBride's *Wild Angels*. I stand up and follow her through another door. We don't talk much. She measures my height and takes down my weight. Some things are the same no matter how old you get. The measure you, weigh you, take down your temperature and then you wait.

I wait for only ten minutes before the doctor comes to me. The only other people in the waiting room was a little boy, four years old at most, playing with the wooden blocks and toys in the corner. The nurses at the reception desk were watching him while his mother saw the doctor. This doctor is new to me and very young. She has shiny blonde hair and long legs. When I mention this to her, she laughs and says she ran track in high school. *Everyone notices the legs*. I hear the soft paper tear under my legs.

"You said you were throwing up a lot? Is it after you eat or drink?" Her accent is thicker than mine. Her vowels sound drawn out and quartered.

"It happens every morning. Sometimes in the afternoon. It usually follows pain," I look right her, aiming for her eyes. Hoping she'll pick up on it. Hoping I don't have to talk a lot about the pain. Something about it makes me uncomfortable. Like maybe she won't believe me. Or if she does, she might not take the pain seriously. That is a thing that tends to happen for a woman in a doctor's office.

She scribbles some things down on paper and then stops. She raises her head from the clipboard and asks, "Honey, were you trying to get pregnant?"

I shake my head, “I didn’t know until you did and we both found out a little too late.” She nods and doesn’t say anything else. When she leaves the room, her white shoes squeak a little. They must be new to her.

The doctor draws blood for the test, *just to be sure*. She says the office will only call me if the results are bad. Her name is Becky, she says, not Doctor. She hands me a prescription for something for pain. The same thing they gave me that night in the emergency room. She tells me that if the pain stops I should flush any of the remaining pills. On the way back to the apartment, I think about the time I went to the doctor when I was ten and broke my finger. I never got sick and never broke anything bigger than a finger. That doctor is retired now.

When I come through the door, Calla is back from classes, “Are you hungry?” She asks.

I’m not. But I can see that she is, so I say yes. We drive over to Burger King and she orders food for both of us. I park the car and we roll down the windows and eat.

“You’re going to talk to some family friend first? Not your mother? Or your grandmother?”

I swallow my food before answering, “Yeah. I mean, I’m going to talk to them too. But I know my grandmother, she won’t tell me anything juicy. But if I know already, she’ll have no choice but to tell her half of it.”

“That’s smart. Your hillbilly logic astounds me,” Calla chuckles with food in her mouth.

We finish our respective meals and head home. I take one of the pain pills and lay down for a nap. I dream about swimming again.

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A few days later, Granny asks me if I would run to the store for her. I tell her that I was planning on coming over anyway, so I take out a pen and paper and write down her list. *I’ll give you money back when you get here* she says. She always does. Down to the penny. When I pull into the parking lot of the store, I think about getting the needed ingredients for a dirt cake. Eli’s favorite. I could even pay a pack of gummy worms to stick in it. I mentally add to the list and walk in. Unlike my organized Grandmother, I just start walking. Figuring that if I go up and down every aisle, I’ll be sure to grab everything. Somewhere in the aisle where the cans of soup are, I hear someone try to get my attention.

“Lily?” The voice sounds confused. As if this is the first time the name Lily has ever been said.

I turn around and see a tall man with tousled, dark hair and a big beard, matching in color standing next to me. I feel my eyebrows knitting together in confusion. I don't recognize him immediately, but he must know me. He knows my name. I take what feels like seven hours but is really a few seconds to try to piece it together. His skin is tanned. He must work outdoors. He's wearing a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. It isn't until I look him in the eyes that I figure it out.

"Sawyer," I finally answer.

I grip the handle of the cart so hard that my fingers start to thump with a heartbeat. We don't say anything at first. I feel like the burden of the conversation is on me since he approached me.

"I looked you up," I say. Still looking him in the eyes.

"You looked me up?" He says, now confused.

"In the phonebook. I looked you up in the phonebook," I add emphasis on the last word to make it seem less awkward, less creepy.

"Unless you've got out of state phonebooks, I don't think you'd find much." He adds emphasis on the last word, mocking me. That I do recognize in him. Not much else, "Why were you looking?"

I let out a breath I didn't think I was holding before I defend myself, "Just out of curiosity."

"Well, if you want my phone number you should just ask already."

That's all I needed to hear. Enough for me to know that he isn't mad at me. That six years is plenty of passed time for us. I invite him to walk and talk. Something we did in between classes and when we would go anywhere as kids, because neither of us could drive. He accompanies me. Reaching the flour and anything above my head, even when I don't ask him to. He tells me about living in Georgia for a couple of years. Then living in Florida. He tells me that his dad got sick last year. So he came home. He tells me that he works for a lawn care company or something like one. He asks me about school and is not surprised that I kept going—that I'm still going. He is even less surprised to learn that I'll end up teaching.

"You know, it's a statistic," I say, defensibly.

"What is?"

“When poor people grow up and get jobs, they tend to take jobs they’re familiar with. Like jobs in education. Haven’t you ever thought about how achingly impossible it is to break the cycle of poverty?” He doesn’t have a response for that.

By the time I finished my shopping, we’re nearly on the same page. We’ve talked about most of the relevant pieces of our lives. I get in line to check out and realize that Sawyer is holding one single loaf of bread, “that’s all you needed? Why did you let me talk and carry on for so long?” I ask, a little embarrassed, thinking that I talked too much.

“I was talking too,” He says.

So I take his loaf of bread and pay for it. Naturally, he insists on putting my groceries in my car. I’m a little worried he might just follow me home and insist on putting them away. And then asking if he can stay for dinner and eat said groceries. I say as much to him as he puts bag after bag in the trunk.

“Well, I guess this is where we part ways,” he says patting his hands on his pants legs.

“I guess so,” I answer, shielding my eyes from the sun with my hands.

“You got something to write with?” He asks.

I rummage through the car until I find a pen. He takes the grocery list out of my hands and writes something on it, “Now you can call me without looking through the phonebook.”

I promise him that I will.

## CHAPTER 8. WHO GOES FIRST

I do want to talk to my mother. At this rate, I know that in order to figure out some things, for myself and for the project, I'll have to get it out of the way. In a way, I want to tell her about my miscarriage. Not that Granny hadn't been kind and loving in her own way. Being older, being curious, I really don't know what the want is coming from. I'm beginning to understand that part of the grief, my body's and my own, means that, sometimes, everything will feel like a mass of many other things. There is no way to dissect one thing from another. Somewhere on Granny's fridge there's a post note with a number on it. I haven't spoken to her over the phone in a while. The last time we spoke over the phone, I had just moved into my apartment. She stayed on the phone for roughly two minutes. Sometimes saying *that's nice* or just silently agreeing. She had heard that I had finally moved out. Her voice sounds like she could be a therapist. The really quiet kind who lets you talk for the majority of the session.

"Did you have any problems moving?" She asked. Her voice was so thin and so much like a tapestry that I found myself staring out into and at nothing, listening.

"Uh no. No. Granddad cried a little, but I figure he would."

"Paul is like that," she said. Managing to make the name "Paul" sound like a stranger and not at all like the name of the man who raised her. And me.

The phone call ended with goodbyes. I haven't figured out how to say much else. Hovering behind me, my roommate, Calla, asked who I was on the phone with. Calla and I have been friends since we started college together. Now, I'm working on my thesis for a master's program and she's doing the same. Mine in English. Hers in history.

"That doesn't really sound like a mother daughter conversation?" She posed. Standing with one hand in the pocket of her jeans. I didn't have to say anything else. She knew. "You can love someone and not like them. You can love your mother and not like her. She never has to know otherwise," she said as she walked away to return to her bedroom.

Her mother calls twice a week without fail. Sometimes she even asks to speak to me. Asking about my writing, my plans. The small handfuls of times her mother has come here to visit she's always taken us out to eat. Shown up with flowers. On my list of mothers to interview, I think I should add her. Not that she would have much to add to the history of my life. But she feels like a piece of it. Even if it is small.

I think about Calla while I search for the note. She knows her mother's phone number by heart. If she's written it down in our apartment it's for someone else's benefit, not hers. I find two yellow post it notes. On one, there's a name written in Granny's tight cursive. It looks like a Brad or Brent, I can't tell which. The other, scrawled in pencil, just has a phone number. I grab the cordless phone and dial. Granny is at the clothesline, Granddad working on a car in the driveway. Ben is somewhere outside playing too. I just came to find the number, but agreed to stay for dinner.

The phone rings four times before someone answers. It's a woman's voice. Admittedly, I can't tell if it's hers or not. I feel like I should know. Sitting there, I should recognize her voice at the very least, "Hi. Uh is Eve there?" I ask.

"Evie?" The voice asks. Letting me know that no, it's not her and whoever it is, they know my mother as Evie.

"Yeah. Um this is her daughter. Lily. I was just trying to reach her." I hear the front door open and I get a little nervous. I haven't told anyone yet that I wanted to include my mother in my work. I hoped it would be obvious, that everyone would just assume that I would interview my mother for a paper about family, my life. I don't know how Granny would feel about it, to that I'm trying to talk to mom like this. In a way, she wouldn't care, but I think on the inside she might. She might feel betrayed.

"She's not here. Is everything okay? I know she doesn't talk to y'all much...no one's dead are they?"

I'm speechless at this thought. It makes me a little mad actually. Who are they to think that? Why wouldn't they think that I just wanted to see her or hear her? Simply because I am hers. Not because of any strange grief.

"No. No one is dead. I just needed to get in touch with her. Tell her she can call me back if she wants to. She knows this number," I say and hang up.

I forget that I even heard the door swing open. Sitting with my head in my hands, I can't tell if I want to be angry at the stranger who answered the phone or not. It isn't their fault, but I feel like they have an idea already of Evie's family, her daughter. Not knowing what that image is, that's what makes me angry. Not knowing what they pictured when I said who I was that's what upsets me. The same familiar anger that I've known my whole life. The burning of being unwanted while still deeply wanting to be wanted.

"She didn't answer did she?" Granddad asks. His voice very quiet.

“Uh no. She didn’t,” I turn around in the chair to face him. He has motor oil on his pants and hands.

“She’s never answered anytime I’ve called either.” He wipes his hands on the thigh of his jeans. “She’ll call your grandmother back randomly one night within the week I’m sure.”

I don’t want to show him that I’ve learned something new about him and give his vulnerability away. I had no idea he ever tried to call her.

## CHAPTER 9. MARTHA SPEAKS

The world probably looked so much sadder inside of my grandmother's blue eyes. Miss Mildred, her Sunday school teacher, had eyes that casted looks like daggers of ice. Piercing the unruly children in Sunday school. The looks from this frightening woman made little Martha think about her own eyes and what they held. Blue, she thought were such a sadness. It wasn't that she cried often, not that her eyes broke glances the way Mildred's did. But they looked like they could. They appeared to be the sort of blue like a winter sky with no clouds. Full of potential but also isolating with the intensity of the possibility of rain.

Her mother's eyes were the color of fallen leaves, already plucked from the trees and covered in mud. Sometimes, Martha would stand so close to the mirror in the bathroom try to look for leaves in her own eyes. She wished that her eyes were brighter, maybe not so blue. Not sad. Perhaps green like the leaves that stay on the tree and make the air twinkle.

*I don't mess with nobody and ain't no body messin' with me.* Miss Mildred would say. Her wooden chair creaked like age rolls through an old house, just rocking. Her hair started going gray around her forehead when she was a teenager. During Sunday school, my Granny would watch the grey hairs sparkle in the sunshine. Looking for the world like a silver halo. It was easier to look at her face, her hairline, than look her in the eyes. Even though, Miss Mildred would say that not looking an elder in the eye was disrespectful. But if you stared at the top of her head, she wouldn't know the difference. Sometimes she would even smile.

"Do you understand what I mean?" Mildred's lips are thin as she asks this question. She pulls them in so tightly that the possibility of the wrinkles around her mouth would cave in. Like the caves that crumbled to pebbles in books, Martha thought. Too much pressure pulling on the inside. She was just old. Everyone at church was, it seemed. When it was time for fellowship, the elders shook Martha's hand and pressed her fingers into their palms. She could feel the age in their skin. It was soft.

In this particular memory, when she leaves the service with her parents, she tells her Mama how she's not supposed to mess with other people.

"And they won't mess with you?" She asks amazed. She speaks with the wonderment this being the mother of a little girl. Her voice silky and quiet. She carries her daughter off to the car and runs her hands through Martha's curls.

“That’s what she said. So I guess so, yeah.” Martha says. Letting the music of her voice fall and rise like a child does in her mother’s arms.

“Well, what if they mess with you first?” Her mother asks. Her mother’s accent is hard to place. Like Martha, vowels sounds would be heavier when they appeared in her mouth.

“She didn’t say nothing about that,” Martha replies, perplexed. Miss Mildred would never prepare the young boys and girls for potential the rest of the world bring. She prepared them to be *good*.

Mama laughs a little with Martha still sitting in her lap. Back then, even before seat belts, they were not supposed to ride home that way. But it was a Sunday, so Daddy didn’t protest. The car hummed and the gravel in the parking lot popped and crumbled under the tires. Mama also hummed while brushing through her daughter’s hair. Her fingers tickled, they were so tender in their touch. She hummed along to the radio and Daddy sang. The name of the song has long escaped the lives of everyone in the memory. *Things like that just weren’t important* Granny would tell me. Before long, the humming and song soothed her to sleep. She remembered the smell the powder Mama used after she took her showers and could still feel her cheek against her mother’s arm.

She wore her hair in a tight ponytail to school. From the time she was five all the way through high school, she seldom ever wore her hair down. She tells me that she too great lengths to brush her hair and count exactly one hundred strokes from her special boar’s hair brush. The same brush that Mama used when she was younger and insisted that her daughter have when she became of age. She would then gather her hair neatly, as high as possible, and tie it off with a silk ribbon to match her outfit for the day. She liked the purple ribbons best, something Daddy knew well. Sometimes, when he drove into town, he would return with ribbon. He’d hide it in his shirt pocket. The well-worn husk attached to his work shirts. He would then swoop her up with a hug say, “I think I got a surprise for you.”

Each morning she ate breakfast with her mother and father. She would smile and shake her head a little in response to whatever it was they talked about. The horses, the garden, her mother’s job as nurse. Mama wasn’t a baby doctor, she reminds me, *but she might as well have been*. Mama, who was incredibly tall, five foot ten. Her hair was naturally wavy. She always wore flats, even on special occasions. Martha thought the world of her parents. In the beginning, when they first built the house, it was just them. Daddy had inherited the land and the tools from his dad.

Mama loved horses and brought hers with them. They had been married for two years by then. No children yet.

And even though they prayed hard for one, every month Mama would feel the same bitter sadness when she didn't end up pregnant. The other women at work would give her tips. Each of them patting her on the back, sneaking sticks of gum into her pocket. After a while, the taste of spearmint reminded her of emptiness. By then, they had two horses, a few pigs, and the garden going strong. In the evenings, when Mama came home from work, she would take her shoes off and walk through the garden barefoot, plucking weeds, gathering ripe tomatoes. Sometimes she would feed each pig a strong, red tomato. She would scratch their ears and listen to their grunting. I imagine that she must have cared for them greatly, maybe even saw them as her babies.

Later, in their fourth year of marriage, they had a little boy. Edward came and looked so much like his father that Mama would joke and say that she had little to do with the boy's creation at all. They were so eager to be parents that they often found themselves stopping when they were tired or aggravated and thinking *you wanted it so bad, here it is*. So there they were, rocking the baby in a wooden rocking chair all hours of the night. Daddy, holding him in the palms of both of his hands, singing to him to stop any crying. Mama and Daddy would fall into their bed at the end of the night and sleep so hard that in the mornings they felt hungover. Drunk off of the love they had for that baby boy.

The year that Edward turned two was the same year his sister arrived. Martha, of course, arrived looking like her mother but had her father's nose. She was an easier baby, at least she says she was. I wondered what Mama felt when she held her daughter the first time. But then, I think, the first time isn't really the first time. She held her even closer for all those months before. Then, it was the two of them, close as could be. Sharing a body, a life. Even though neither of them knew or could guess, inside Martha's own body were the pieces that would someday be my mother and then me. All three of us, tied together.

Granny remembers Edward as ornery. The type of brother to lick his finger and stick it in his little sister's ear during church. He could always somehow worm his way into the front seat of the car. Granny always suspected it was because he looked so much like Daddy that their father broke every time. From the backseat, Martha would watch her brother tap the dashboard in time with the radio and sing along. Martha always felt like she was just behind her brother. Before anyone knew it, next year she would be in school with him too, trailing close behind.

The story of what happened to Edward, the same year from Martha's memory of riding in the backseat, is sometimes muddy. In my lifetime, I only heard it twice. Which feels fitting when I consider how much reconstruction had to have been done to get that memory all the way to me. Little details change: What color his shoes were, how many times Mama had told him to always tie his shoes, and, sometimes, his last words are different. What stays the same is this: One Sunday afternoon, after church, the four of them came home. Mama's curls were already flattening out. She was considering what to do for lunch, still wearing the same dress she wore to church.

Daddy had already gone out to finish plowing. It was early in the season of things, the rows still needed to be formed for the seeds that had just arrived. For whatever reason, that day their father had relented. Edward had been allowed to ride alongside him on the tractor. All anyone can ever say for certain is that Edward's shoelaces got caught in the machinery. That, as the moving parts roved forward, he was pulled backwards. All Martha would ever see or know of it was the sight from the doorway. Her mother, hearing the tractor suddenly turn off, headed for the door. When my grandmother tells this story, she says *she already knew*. From behind her mother's dress, Martha peered. She saw her father sobbing and stumbling up the yard holding something in his arms.

Daddy wept and Mama yelled. Really yelled, like she was so angry that hellfire was burning in the soles of her feet and rising. Before Martha could see her brother any closer, Mama turned and wrapped her hands around Martha's face, pulling her into her chest pleading *don't look don't look don't look*. Her father drove Edward into town, to the doctor. Later, when the car returned without Edward, Martha somehow understood. She remembers the front seat of the car, stained red. And how, despite the loss, her young mind could only think *he got to ride in the front seat again*.

The following year, Martha would go to school on her own. Suddenly as an only child, without her older brother. Most of her classmates would never even know that she had ever been someone's little sister. I think that the small courtesy of not knowing must have spared her a lot of grief. With no one to ask about him, there were fewer and fewer chances to open wide the memory. Her mother missed a month of work after it happened. Many of those days are forgotten now. Whatever they did or didn't do, my grandmother no longer remembers. Occasionally, she would remember something. A family dog, a vacation. The rest of her life as Martha Simmons is remembered as a string of memories.

Once she was far enough along in school to enjoy it, their life together had settled enough. Each morning, when she ate breakfast with her mother and father, they would remark at how shiny her hair was or what she was excited for about school. She would smile and shake her head a little in each direction so that her ponytail would swish behind her. As she walked to school, her hair would bounce with every step. In her school photos, she always smiles and her hair seems so much like a piece of her. Compared to the few photos there are of her brother, I can see similarities like their eyes and nose. Beyond that, any other connection is hard for me to make.

According to old report cards, she was an excellent reader. The kind of student that read on an eleventh-grade level even though she was only in the eighth grade. The teachers at the junior high school called her *gifted*. In her bedroom, she kept her bookshelves in proper order. She organized most of her belongings according to the Roy G. Biv rule: Red, orange, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Her favorite books were kept on her nightstand. Sometimes she would pretend to be sleeping when her mother knocked on the door to wish her a goodnight. As soon as the door was shut, she would pull the chord to her bedside lamp and read until her eyes became heavy. Over the weekends, she would sometimes read until it was so late into the night that it was actually quite early for the following day. I'm starting to recognize myself in her even more as she goes on.

Many times, I've asked about her favorite books, the ones she liked best or even remembered. Sometime between her first marriage and her second, she says, she lost a lot of her things. And anyway, she would explain, she never really had the time to read anymore after she became a mother.

"Work and life just got in the way," she says one afternoon while talking with me. She was standing in the kitchen, dish towel in hand, looking directly out the small window above the sink. Deep in thought, "I did like that Jackson novel."

"Jackson? Was that the name of the author or the book?" I ask. Puzzled. Trying to rack my own brain for an answer.

"It was supposed to be a scary story. All the other girls in school thought it was. Nothing really happened in it though," she wiped her hands off with the towel and left the towel in the sink. A few days later, I figure it out. Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, released for the first time in 1959. Having only read short stories, I made a note to myself to find a copy to read. Maybe even to give to her as a thank you. That afternoon in the kitchen continued. Even though she got along well with all of her classmates, she only had one close friend. Her name was Loretta.

She would come over on a Friday night, already in her pajamas, with a blanket and pillow in hand. Both girls would brush out their hair and then they would practice French braiding.

Loretta was wild she says. She hated wearing skirts and frequently ruined pants with grass stains or the stains from her scuffed-up knees. Granny's hair was thick, the color of hay. It got darker as she got older. Loretta would bring extra hair bands over but Martha's hair would snap them. Especially the cheap kind. Which is why she treasured her ribbons even more. Loretta's hair was dark and stick straight. Decades later, when I would know her, her hair would still be dark. Only with small streams of silver here and there.

When Granny was sixteen, she got her first job. She worked as a cashier at a grocery store. It could have been that she needed money to buy a car. She didn't have one of her own and would often borrow Daddy's whenever she wanted to go to town. Often, she would offer to run errands for her parents just to have an excuse to drive. She wore her hair down by then, having outgrown the silk ribbons of her past, something I gather from photographs. As she drove with the windows down, she would steer with one hand and drum her fingernails on the side of the car. She liked the sound of it. The clicking of femininity. I can see her driving like that. She would have looked an awful lot like me, like her own daughters too. On the days when Daddy dropped her off at work, she would sit quietly in the passenger seat. During those car rides, she would study all the signs on the road. Her mother said that doing this would help her ace her driver's test someday. Then she could drive their car more often and further away.

At that age, she thought a lot about the beach and the five-hour drive to get there. In some photos, clearly during the summers of her youth, her jean shorts and tank tops make her look like a typical teenager of the time, headed for warmer weather. At the grocery store, she wore a green smock with one, large pocket on the front. In that pocket she kept a pack of gum, some bobby pins, and a bandana in case it got hot in the store and she wanted to pull her hair back. When work was slow, she would challenge her coworkers to a bubble blowing contest. She could never get hers to be bigger than the size of a silver dollar. Customer's absolutely adored her. I remembered hearing that from Loretta before.

The old women who came to the store after church would always buy her a pack of tea tree gum at the register and tease her saying *don't spend it all in one place*. The older men would smile and ask her how her day was going. She always replied with *I can't complain. Even if I did, no one would listen*. The same phrasing she still uses over the phone or at the store when people

ask about her. Her classmates would wave as they walked into the store. Then they would turn to their own mothers and tell them just how nice that girl at the second register was.

I've seen my grandmother be nice, seen her smile at strangers even. I thought it was chaos sometimes to watch her chastise us, me or the boys, for something and then she'd pick up the phone or run into someone and immediately laugh or seem so charming. I wondered where she learned that trick, but hearing her talk about her first job at the store, I guess I know. She had thought originally that she'd like to be a nurse. Just like her own mother had been. She didn't have the patience for school though. Really, though, she didn't want to see people at their worst. Mama would always tell her that being a nurse didn't always mean seeing someone at their worst. Sometimes you got to be the nurse in the room when babies were born too. But Granny also knew that it meant you could also be the person in the room with someone's baby died.

She doesn't elaborate much on that last part. But I feel like maybe the image of her brother, who must have already been dead by the time she saw him, lingered. I can't blame her for trying to stay as far away from the image of death as possible. She remarks that the uniforms her mother would often wear were ugly as sin. Baggy and not doing any favors for the women wearing them, "Mama would get so mad at me for saying that. How you looked wasn't the point, she'd say."

During her junior year of high school, she took classes like parenting and home economics. Everyone wanted to be her cooking partner in class. Mainly because she would always add a little spice or sugar to a recipe which always made it taste so much better. But they also liked being her partner because it meant that she would complete much of the work on her own. She worked better on her own but couldn't avoid working with a partner no matter how much she begged. Most of this, I find out from Loretta, which was why I wanted to talk to her first anyway. She'll tell me the things Granny won't or can't and pat my hand while she does it.

In her parenting class, the teacher presented each student with a sack of flour. The archaic tradition, the flour was to represent a baby. The sac Granny was given had a small hole in the bottom left corner. Her teacher called it *a defect* and she was tasked with finding a way to patch the hole without making it worse. In the end, she kept a band aid on the bag. For a week, she carried the flour everywhere she went. It started to leave little, white trails behind her and on her clothes. When she would prepare for bed each night, she would find flour on her bed clothes. In her shoes too. By the end of that week, she was disgusted with the flour and its messy nature. It

was, she admitted, her least favorite assignment she'd ever had in school. Worse, even, than the frog dissection she did the year before in biology.

"It made your grandmother cry," Loretta said. "Do you remember what you told me, Martha? You said you had no idea how anyone could want to have a baby because of the mess." Granny doesn't say anything and I forego the chance to state the obvious. The obvious being the history of her children and their messes. Some leaving more flour behind than others. Loretta continues, telling me more stories of their youth. "When your grandmother was seventeen, she asked me to stay over for a sleepover. This time, her parents would be away and had left her the money for food and things. Only, I had a better idea."

She wanted to go bowling with some of the senior boys that night. But Granny didn't really have an interest in boys yet. In fact, she had only ever pined after one college age boy she would see sometimes at the grocery store. She says his name was Richie but she never knew his last name. He came in with his girlfriend one Thursday evening and she had decided that she would rather be single than not. In reality, she thought if she waited it out, someday that young man from the grocery store would be single again. Then she would have a chance. Loretta knew all of this and still insisted that she go.

The night they went bowling Loretta met her husband. He was two years older than her and was slated to have a steady job at the nickel plant after graduation. He was neither ugly nor handsome. Certainly not at all like the guy from the grocery store. At first, she said no. But then Granny pulled her aside and pushed her. *You keep dragging me out to meet boys and now look at you being a hypocrite.* It was true Loretta admitted, laughing and she would marry him two years after that. They were more like a pair of best friends, I'm told. They slept in different beds and he supported her in all of her wild ways. Let her drive fast and wear red lipstick if she wanted to. He was, she says even now, the love of his life even if marriage wasn't for her. He died a year before I was born. Loretta never remarried.

At the end of this session, right before I quit for the evening and stopped taking notes, Loretta says, "It's a shame you couldn't have fallen in love with someone that night and stayed away from your first husband. We would all have been better for it." She laughs a little. Granny says nothing.

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John has finally been cleared to go to bootcamp. He's a year younger than I am, but most people assume we're the same age and that we must be twins. We look a little alike, just enough that the story of being siblings could pass. But I have always thought he favored his mother more than not. His hair is lighter than mine. When he grows facial hair it comes in dark, complimenting his light hair and brown eyes. For a while, he said he wanted to enlist because of the action. A typical answer I thought, but when he got older and tried to enlist, he kept getting denied. Sometimes they said it was because of his grades. Other times it would be the fact that he broke his arm when he was nine or that he was a little far sighted in one eye. He got so frustrated by the end of the process, that one night he cried.

He was sitting in his truck, an older model that he and Granddad had pulled and pieced together. I had walked out to check on him. He had disappeared after opening the mail and finding another denial letter. I climbed into the cab careful not to slam the door.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I offered. Not really sure how to comfort him since neither of us had ever been good at that before.

"I'll be stuck here forever, Lil. Stuck in West Virginia living hand to mouth forever," he says quietly while staring out the windshield.

There wasn't much else to say. We sat there in silence for a few minutes, watching the sky get darker and darker until it looked like a swath of dark blue velvet. I didn't think *here* was bad. I didn't think home was bad. But I never consider how it might feel to someone who was dying to leave.

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My grandmother and Loretta tell me that Hollis worked at a nickel plant. Hollis with the pretty strawberry blonde hair, Loretta says snidely. His teeth looked like they were carved out of ivory, like piano keys. He'd laugh when I said that, she said. Then he'd jam a toothpick behind his teeth and grin. I was busy whipping a snotty nose and changing diapers to notice him the first time.

He walked in behind the boss's husband, Frank, both of them covered in oil and dirt. The sort of mess that my own father called *honest work*. Not the kind of work, out of someone else's home, taking care of other women's babies while they worked. Which I hated more than most things. I threatened to quit and go back to the grocery store all the time. But Mama told me that it was the closest I could get to nursing for the time. Without school.

Frank barreled in with his long beard and chuckled, through the kitchen and to the backdoor. The babies loved him. Love pulling on his beard and babbling with their almost language. Anita, my boss, said that her own children loved the way their daddy smelled. It meant comfort and the end of a long day, that their father was home. Now, when Frank would barrel in, the babies coo and the toddlers try to waltz across the space between them.

Hollis, more stoic, and without a beard or sense of joy, hung back in the kitchen. I wiped my hands off on dish towel, “Can I get you a glass of water or somethin’?”

“No, that’s alright. What’s your name?” He squinted his eyes trying to find a hint of recognition.

“Martha. I work for Anita.” I could hear someone start to cry, waking up from a nap.

“Martha who?” He seemed so sure that he could figure out the mystery of me. He just needed a name.

“Martha Simmons,” I said over my shoulder as I trailed back to the sound of crying.

Hollis followed. Before I could reach into the crib, the Thompson baby. A real chunk with a bad attitude when it came to waking, Hollis wrapped his dirt smudged hands across the baby’s stomach, lifting him into the air.

“Now, little man, you don’t wanna give Martha a hard time do ya?”

## CHAPTER 10. YOUR MOTHER'S SISTER

Anger could sometimes feel like an adopted member of our family. Almost like it should be standing next my grandmother in the only family portrait ever taken, its hands folded on her shoulder, smiling. As if to say *I belong here*. The boys would often get into fights over the smallest of things. Anger boiled over because someone borrowed and lost a baseball or pulled a cruel prank. Sometimes they got into fist fights. Sometimes I fought with them too. The light kind of fights. Ones where Granddad would laugh and say something about how he used to fight with his own brothers. This is the kind of anger expected out of children, out of us.

But then there was another kind of fighting altogether. This is the type of fighting that leads to estrangement and tears. Each of us tries to find the most devastating thing to say to the other. You have to decimate. Otherwise, you end up being hurt. You find yourself in tears. There's nothing anyone in our little family hated worse than that. The tricky vulnerability that wounds. Granny is fond of telling stories about anger. She isn't fond of apologizing either.

The stories of this anger have lived beyond the walls of home. But it depends on who tells the story. Coming from my uncle, he'll tell you about the times his sister pulled his hair out of his head. He'll laugh about it. When my aunt tells me the story, she says it was all over a guy from school. A friend of my uncle's who thought my mother and aunt were sluts. When Uncle Teddy wouldn't take up for my aunt—when he said something like *if the shoe fits* both sisters went for him. My aunt doesn't laugh about this story. I admit that I only even mentioned it because I know so few stories about her.

When she arrived at the door of my apartment, I thought that her voice was soft, small. Sweet, the way I remember it to have been, but still the voice of a stranger. Growing up, I would inherit her old clothes. Green, army style pants that were too tight for her, blouses that she forgot about it, sometimes shoes even. Most of what I had of hers were things forgotten in the dresser or the back of a closet. Knowing how little she made visits, I knew those clothes were a part of an older history. Before she gets to my apartment, I look through photos of her. Most of them were given to me by Granny. She wasn't sure I would be able to get ahold of Holly and felt bad. So she gave up her photos eagerly.

Starring at her standing in the doorway I thought that Holly, like my mother, has a beautiful face. I can see why so many people loved them. Unlike my mother, she isn't very tall. Between

her sister and younger brother, she is the shortest. Her hair was cut in a severe way, right at her chin. She was wearing a red winter coat and a pair of jeans with a hole in one of the legs. She shivered slightly and it occurred to me that she may have been shivering for a while. I apologized for keeping her waiting like that, but seeing her felt so unreal.

She was like a myth. A bad omen. I could tell by the way she said *that's okay. It has been a while* and watched my feet that maybe she felt this way about herself too. Realizing that made my heart hurt. Not knowing was else to do, I pulled her into the apartment and hugged her. Once my arms were around her, I could smell cigarette smoke and felt just how small she was. The top of her head met my chin. She didn't hug me back.

"Do you drink coffee?" I asked.

"Um sometimes. Do you have any?" I thought that was odd. Like maybe she didn't realize I was offering.

"Of course. How you take yours?" As I spoke with my hands, like always, I watched her follows my hands trying to interpret the message.

"Just plain is okay," she shook her head as she said it.

While I poured her coffee and mine, she began to take off her coat and fold it over her arms. She looked like a child on a field trip. Mesmerized by the sights but careful not to touch anything.

"Make yourself at home," I said. Feeling very badly about her hesitancy to trust me or the place, "Calla isn't home yet but you might get to meet her later on!" I offered. Forgetting that Holly wouldn't know I had a roommate. She had no way of knowing much about me at all.

So we talked about her brother. We talked a little about my mother, her older sister. She said that she hadn't seen either of her siblings for months. In Teddy's case, it had been almost two years since she last saw him. She asked questions about him. Was his hair going grey? Did he have kids yet? Does he play sports? I finally had to tell her that I didn't really know much about him either. That I had never been close with him. I think she knew this or could have guessed. Teddy didn't approve of my grandparents raising his niece and nephews. As far as he was concerned, anyone else could have taken us in. That information made me afraid of him as a child. I was convinced he could get us taken away. As an adult, it made me dislike him a lot. Holly made a sympathetic face and asked about her sons instead. A subject I was more familiar with.

I don't know why, maybe it was the idea of my uncle's anger over me, or just the awkward feeling of the situation, but I told her a story about her oldest son.

A few weeks before I left for school, John picked a fight. Sitting at the dinner table, he waited until Granddad had sat down. We were having chicken and mashed potatoes. Grandad hadn't even changed out of his work clothes yet. His hands were blackened with grime and his eyes were tired, wrinkled. Granny and I sat in the kitchen in silence. I forget if we were tired or mad at each other over who had to do the dishes. But I remember the kitchen window was cracked. Late July and the prison of humid heat were kept at bay by a swift breeze. I could hear the wind chimes tinkling out on the porch.

"I leave from bootcamp next week," John said suddenly.

I all but dropped my fork and looked straight at her. I knew she had heard him and that she would be on fire in a matter of seconds. Her greying black hair in a tight bun. She had a steady suntan from hanging clothes out on the line all summer. I thought that maybe she didn't hear him, at first, maybe I had been wrong. Her face remained unpulsed, as if someone had mentioned that the weather was worse this year than the last. Maybe she didn't feel like she needed to comment on things she already knew about.

"You what?" Grandad asked. His tone was even. Not angry or excited. Maybe because he didn't hear him the first time or maybe because he also knew—and John knew—that no one in that house wanted him to go or approved. Grandad was terrified of him leaving and Granny thought he could do better. She pushed him to face the reality of manhood here: get a good job and provide for your family.

He hadn't even told me. Which stung. We had been a team until now, planning on getting out at the same time and leaving this place. I felt deeply wounded. We were as close as siblings through everything. I knew why he wanted to go. He hated the idea of being a carpenter, welder, miner, or an officer in our tiny town. He wanted to travel, no real sense of direction of place, just wanted to go. His grades weren't as good as mine, but I always thought he could get in somewhere, even if it was a community college across the river in Ohio. He didn't think he could and that made up his mind no matter how hard we tried to get him to believe otherwise.

I did his homework for him many times when I knew his grades were slipping. When I knew that he'd be grounded too. Every spring, I attended the cadet ball with him for the high school's ROTC. I tried to help him get out. But this wasn't a part of that plan. This was a new one.

"I'm leaving. Next week." He cleared his throat.

This time he left out the bootcamp part. Holding on to it like a morsel of sweetness he didn't want to give up. Grandad said nothing else. He went on eating, as John watched. Every speck of food was gone before John finally broke.

"That's it? Nothing? No I'm proud of you? I'll write you while you're gone?" His voice was on fire. I could tell from listening that he was like a bolt of heat lightning. Relentless. I had been preparing for a kitchen fire, but he was the one already burning. I continued to stare at my grandmother, waiting. She sat down her fork. I wondered if John could hear that too, if he heard the silver fork click.

"You know how your grandmother and I feel about this," Grandad thought he could be the diplomat and spare a fight with his even temper. He always did that. This time it was like he was trying to say *this again?* He meant well. but it didn't matter, what was boiling over now had been since the first recruiter showed up all those months ago.

The first recruiter was married. I remember the gold ring on his finger when he thought he could shake hands with Granny. He didn't make it through the door before Granny told him to leave. The second one made it to the kitchen table. Eventually, John got smart and realized they would have to meet him at school if they wanted to talk to him. During his lunch or before homeroom. There wouldn't be a meeting of the minds in our home.

"What does it even matter? I'll be gone and you can be mad all you want. I'll be out of this fucking house and out of your hair." *Out of your hair.*

I thought about him being nestled in Granny's coal black hair as a boy. Her follicles a refuge to him. And Grandad's hair, once brown and now grey. A fortress that tried to build him. I couldn't understand why he would want to tumble out of there. But then, I was leaving too. I could understand Uncle Teddy's anger now. After everything, after everything, we were leaving them.

"Watch your mouth," Granny added. Her voice like a bullet splitting all of us into halves. I hoped this would be the last of it. That somehow he would take the hint and stop talking. When nothing happened, the only sound being the metallic singing of forks and knives, I let out a hot breath. I felt myself tearing up. Wanting to cry for him. For our grandparents—our parents. For the little brother we would leave alone in that house. At last I thought I would cry for myself too. For the fact that it should have been clear to me who deserved my tears in that situation, but never having known anything beyond that family, beyond our house, I couldn't number the tears for anyone. Not even for myself.

I thought I could hear frogs outside, chirping, and then John walked into the kitchen. Plate in hand, he locked eyes with Granny. There it was, an anger with no name. Almost a rage. Eli walked in and crawled into my lap. I looked away from everyone, my chin on the top of Eli's head while we both looked the other way. The kind of anger has no rules, nothing off limits. What should I have said? *John, just let it go. Let it go.* Even though he hated that, he hated when I said that. Like I just didn't understand that he couldn't let it go and he wouldn't.

"You can't just be happy for me? You can't just let me fucking go into the service and do what I want?" I could hear his voice breaking. I thought he might cry too. Might breakdown and no one would know what to do for him. What to say or not say.

"You know what I think," is all she said. Her eyes not moving, frozen. If I had looked I could have seen the lines next to her eyes and the way her hair was greying into a little crown. Sometimes I heard her groan at night when she crawled into bed. The groaning sounding like a small death, a giving up. She was tired. I felt that exhaustion when she refused to repeat what she felt. Refused to say out loud what it was about the military that bothered her so much. We all had guesses, but I know that only she would ever know. Not even Granddad could have said exactly what it was.

I like to think she didn't want him to go because she loved him. That she knew she would no longer see him every day or hear his voice. That he would forget to call, because he would. He would have a freedom for the first time that he never had before. He would be able to drink and have no one stop him. Granddad, I think, knew this too. Knew that his own body was old and exhausted and someday he would need help around the house. If John left now, that help would be uncertain in the future. They hoped that we would do for them in their old age what they did for us in our youth. Even though I couldn't blame them for that, we both were holding it against them without ever knowing it.

"You think I can't handle it. That I can't do anything so I signed up for the army because that's it for me. I know," He wasn't yelling, but he didn't have to. It wasn't the volume, but the message he wanted her to hear anyway. It was Granddad who ended the fight. From the dining room he raised his voice saying, "you know goddamn well that's not what she thinks of you."

After I told it, I could tell from the tightness in my throat that the story was too long and too tender. I touched both sides of my neck and felt my heartbeat under the pressure. Holly sat quietly for the entire thing, just listening.

“I didn’t know he was in the army,” she said finally. I felt like I had just knocked on a neighbor’s door to tell them that I had run over their dog by accident. I hadn’t realized she had been this distant. The distance between John and his mother was different for me. She wasn’t my mother. I guess I had thought that someone was keeping her filled in all along. But then again, if John wasn’t speaking to her and Granny didn’t either, that left very little room for anyone to tell her.

I walked across the kitchen to find the photo taken of all of us on the day he graduated from bootcamp. It would be the most recent photo of him. When I sat it down in front of her, she hesitated to touch it. When she finally did, it was like the photo was on fire and burning her fingertips, “He looks so much like his dad. They both do.”

We sat like this for a while she asked if I had any other photos she could look at. I told her that I didn’t have many of him, but she assured me that she wanted to see anything I had. I showed her photos of Granny and I on the day of my high school graduation. Photos of Eli and John growing up. More photos of Eli sitting on my lap. We looked through photos of Calla and her own family. At last, she found the photo of the cat, Feller.

“Mommy would never let us have pets growing up you know,” she smiled and she ran her fingers over the photo.

Granny had always let us have one. One cat or one dog. Before Eli and his love of frogs, that was how it had been. I had never wondered if my mother had had pets. I just assumed that she had because I had. But thinking about this made me realize that I had never heard anyone call Granny *mommy*.

Martha thought that she’d really like to be a nurse. Just like her own mother. She would sometimes wear her mother’s scrubs as pajamas or lounge around the house in them. Occasionally, she would catch her reflection in a mirror and turn around, still glancing. The scrubs made her feel important. She thought they looked professional and made her look the same. She thought about law school too, but those thoughts were rare. She only knew one other girl from town that went to law school. No one knew for sure whatever happened to her, if she had graduated or not. If she really was a lawyer or not.

“You could always get married and never work again,” her dad would laugh when they did the dishes or he picked her up from work.

“Oh yeah, never work again! As if being married to a man isn’t labor at all,” she would laugh back.

Her parents sometimes worried. Not a lot. But sometimes.

The way that I learned that Aunt Holly was a drug addict was slowly at first. In fact, it was kind of like finding pennies laying heads up on sidewalks or in dirt. Little snippets would just come out into the open air, not prompted or asked for. All our grandparents would say when we were kids was that my aunt was sick. Depending on who said it and what word they decided to add emphasis to “sick” meant many things. For a while, John thought his mother was dying of cancer. He even told other people that that was the case.

When we rode the bus home from school, he would sit behind the driver’s seat and carry on conversations like this:

“Did you know my mom is sick?”

“No, buddy I didn’t know that. Is she going to be okay?”

“No, she had cancer. She’s dying.”

Ever the morbid child, concerned parents and teachers would call our house asking if there was *anything* they could do to help us in our time of need. My grandmother would sometimes say that we didn’t need anything but thank you for asking. When she lost her patience, she would say Holly was just fine. Or, if she was impatient and angry, she would simply say *my daughter is a heroin addict not a cancer patient*. I had witnessed some of these phone calls and was always present for the inevitable conversation where we were told to just stop talking about Holly altogether.

For me, that was easy. My connection to her was one of blood but felt mostly like dust. Her senior portrait beamed from the shelf in the living room. She wore a baby blue sweater in the photo with highlighted her vibrant blonde hair. She was sort of like a collector Barbie doll, I thought. One I could never take out of the box to play with. John obviously felt differently, he was old enough to remember what it was like to have lived with his mother at some point. And of course, he remembered much of their lives together when Eli came along too. Right before it all went to hell and she left him at her parent’s house.

I feel like it culminated over years of course but it started in school. With the sickness. Then sometimes a kid would catch on and say something about how Holly wasn’t sick—or worse

still—she was sick in the head. Even though they had no grasp of what that meant, they knew they could wield it like a sword and strike John dead in his tracks. He fought a lot of little boys. He also expected me to fight a lot of little girls in the honor of his mother. Usually, I brushed it off but sometimes we both got into trouble. Sometimes the call to our grandmother was for both of us to be picked up immediately. Or that we would be spending recess inside, with our heads down on the desk.

On one occasion, we were serving our recess detention heads down. It was very hot outside and the coolness of the desk felt really good on my forehead. The teacher left us alone for a minute or two. She went to the bathroom or to get her own lunch. We weren't really concerned with her anyway.

"This is much better than roasting outside," I whispered.

John sniffled. Then he laughed.

Later, when we had to own up to the fighting at home, all John would say was, "It was too hot to play outside anyway."

When we got older, we understood a little better. I think I figured it out first and even then only by accident. It happened when she had an accidental overdose. We went to visit her in the hospital, told only that she had had an accident. I thought maybe it was a car accident. My knowledge of accidents was limited to just that: the kind of accidents where you broke a window with a stray baseball or the kind where you plowed your car into a tree on a rainy night. That was what I anticipated as we walked through the hospital that day. Granddad had stayed home with Eli. They had agreed that the baby didn't need to be a part of it.

That decision felt strange then and still does now. Then because he was our family. Granddad the head of the family and Eli the youngest branch of it. Now it feels cruel when I consider the knowledge that my aunt had died and been revived. For a time, there was no certainty that she would live through the day or that any of us would be granted a farewell. But there was a guarantee that Holly's father and youngest son would have no part of it. Any of it. We didn't hold hands. Granny walked ahead of us, only occasionally turning to make sure we were following.

John looked like he did the day we thought tornado was going to touch down on us. The door was open to her room. I could hear nurses talking, the television was entrenched a talk show. No in her room was speaking aside from the television's speech. I braced myself. For broken windows, for blood and shattered glass. No one knocked, we just walked in. Immediately, I

realized that her skin wasn't bruised or broken at all. She looked quite beautiful to me, the same way she always had. In so many ways, I recognized my aunt in the paintings or angels that littered the walls of the church. The way her hair curled and how her face seemed full of delight.

I could see the smudges of blue glitter on her eyelids and her lips seemed to be an unnatural pink. I admired her rebellion in her beauty. Makeup, Granny thought, was a waste and so I never saw it or owned it. But Aunt Holly embodied it. In every photo I have seen of her growing up, she wore her eye liner thick and her lipstick was perfectly attuned to her cupid's bow. You could never be mistaken about the shape of her. Her eyes or her lips. The same could be said about the way she dressed too. But there in the hospital bed, her white gown gave none at all. She looked like she was swimming in it.

I know why I put it together so quickly. It was because I was searching her for signs of an accident. Trying so hard to find an explanation for something I didn't even know the details of. While she made small talk with Granny and John, I simply watched and looked her over. She urged John to come up to her and to my surprise he obliged. He stood at her left side asked if her IV hurt at all. She said that it didn't. Maybe I thought her situation would be symmetrical, I don't know. But I glanced at her bare arm. The side which her other son should be at but wasn't. That was when I noticed the little marks in the bend of her arm.

"Did they have to poke your other arm first?" I asked. Relieved. Maybe the accident was internal and I couldn't see it but that didn't mean it was deadly or wrong or bad. Shocked that I had noticed, Holly looked down at her hands. I don't remember if she said anything at all. I think it was Granny in the end who told me no that the nurse had only stuck her in the left arm. Thinking of that day, I understand why my aunt was so hesitant to speak to me. As a child and now as an adult. I seemed to know the things she hoped I never would.

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At some point, she stops tracing the faces of our family in the photos. She keeps her hands on them though, which I take comfort in.

"What do you want to know?" She asks.

It startles me to hear the question posed that way. Not that my grandmother hasn't asked the same thing dozens of times, but to hear it come out that way said so much.

“I’m just trying to write about the women in our family and our stories. You can talk about whatever you want to,” I plead with my eyes when I say this. Hoping, hoping, hoping she doesn’t feel like I’m interrogating her, “you can talk about motherhood. Anything you want.”

“Well, as you already know, I don’t really know much about the motherhood part,” she blurts out and smiles.

I don’t know how to respond just yet. To laugh would be to betray my brothers who too grew up with grandparents for parents. But to say nothing would betray her and she came all this way to talk to me knowing that I might not laugh at her jokes.

“It’s okay to laugh,” she adds as she reaches over the table to pat my hand, “Your mom never liked my jokes either.”

She starts out by telling me about her life right now. Which is all news to me. She lives in house with four other women. She doesn’t mention their names but says they’re nice enough and that they’re all just trying to get by. She doesn’t mention a job or if she’s seeing anyone. Spending so much of my life listening to people tell stories, I know that what you don’t say says a lot. What’s missing isn’t what you want to be known. I let her talk on. Eventually, I’ll know when to ask and tell.

She tells me small stories about herself. How she loves going into thrift stores and pawn shops. She shows me a ring on her finger. A tarnished, old silver ring with a little green heart in the middle. *I found this one mashed into some dirt on the side of the road once.* She twirls it around her finger before taking it off and handing it to me. She calls it her favorite. Because green is her favorite color and she likes hearts. I can’t help by thinking about how much she would love Eli. Because his favorite color is green and he chases down frogs in the summer time and fawns over their tiny heart shaped bodies.

After a few minutes of talking about how she walks everywhere, how she takes turns with her roommates sleeping on the couch so it’s fair, she asks me if I’ve talked to my mom yet.

“Uh no. I couldn’t get ahold of her actually,” I tell her. My voice is so quiet compared to hers. So boring. In that breath I hate it.

“I thought that might happen. She’s not bad you know. She just wants her space from everyone.”

I nod as if I understand, knowing that I never will. I think she can read my mind because she asks if she can be excused to go to the bathroom and again I am struck by how polite my aunt is. Twice my age and asking me to use the bathroom as if I had the power to tell her no. I show her where to go and turn the light on for her. The string got pulled off one night and only Calla and I know which tiny bead to pull to get the light to beam on. While I wait for her, I refill our cups of coffee with what's left in the pot. Before I can set them back down on the table I hear a voice ask, "is this the roommate?"

I almost hope Calla is home but then again I don't want her to be. I'm not done meeting my aunt and I haven't figured out my proximity to her. If Calla were to waltz in I might never. To my relief, Holly is standing in the living room and pointing at a photo of me and Calla from our college graduation ceremony.

"Yes," I tell her all about Calla. About her British mother who has a cool voice. Her father who never has spoken much in my presence but never misses a chance to pat me on the back. This little allowance into my life breaks the ice. Finally.

"She looks like my best friend from high school. I should tell you about her. I wish I had pictures."

We return to our coffee and the talking continues. We talk for hours. Until Calla really does come home and as my aunt goes to leave she says again, *I wish I had pictures*. With that, she changes her mind and she begins to talk freely.

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Mama was constantly pulling knots out of my hair. Every night before bed. She used to have me stand on the toilet while she dried my hair and used a round brush to pull the knots out. At some point, she got tired of my complaining about the pulling. Tired of my hair getting knotted and then the way I would cry about being tender headed when she took to sorting the strands out. She took me to the hair salon and told the woman to cut it all, right up to my chin. That was the end of my choice in the matter of me having long hair. I think that was the first time I ever thought she was disappointed in me. I was never what my Mama wished for. Or hoped for. Not the daughter she prayed for. *I was wilder than a buck*.

I don't know if you ever had to have her undo knots in your hair. Mine was always so thick that it didn't always look brushed out—even when it was—and it drove her up the wall. We could

be sitting in church on a Sunday and she'd look at me during the sermon and say, "Holly Lynn did you even try this morning?" One time this girl in school told me that she thought I hid behind my hair but I always thought my hair was just as much a part of me as anything else was. I can't separate myself from it. But that year, that was the one when she cut my hair short. It took forever to get it long again. My hair had been growing out for eight or nine months before I could braid it again. Still, by then it only fell below my shoulder blades. Now, I just cut it below my chin. Not because of Mommy. I do it that way because I always want something new. A change. That's the easiest change to make.

After I cut it off, everybody tells me how "mature" I looked and how I should always keep my hair cut at that length. It seems like the shorter my hair is the more I looked my age. I wonder if they thought I looked like a child when my hair was long? I hate the attention it brings sometimes though. Like they think they know me best by how I cut my hair. When Mama cut it that first time I hated the way everyone looked at me and decided for me what I was or wasn't. That girl never said another word about me hiding after that. That's for sure. I always said when I had kids I would never cut their hair without their permission. That's a big decision for a little girl.

My sister never had to have her hair cut. She never let it tangle, never had to have Mama pry a single knot out of her head. She was even wilder than I was but her hair was always stick straight and beautiful. When Evie and I were little, we used to love walking to our grandfather's barn. The barn kept the cows and horses and we would crawl up into the hayloft and watch those massive cows mingle below us. The trouble was, the barn was a bit of walk and we had to ask for permission to go. Evie, being the oldest between the two of us, would write our momma a note and leave it in the kitchen: *we went to the barn. Be back soon!* That was all it took—all that was required of us as far as she was concerned—was to let someone know we were gone, where we were going to. It spared Mama the fear of having two missing girls. I think it gave your mom an excuse to do something without asking first. She could talk me into doing almost anything, especially the types of things that we needed permission to do and went on without.

We would climb up this steep, red staircase leading to the hayloft. Once got up there, we would leap from board to board and tease each other into jumping across holes in the floor. They used to put these big, square holes in the floor so it would be easier to dump the hay for the cows. I think she only fell down one once. She caught herself at first but it scared us both so bad neither one of us moved for a second. Then we both started laughing. She laughed so hard her arms got

weak and then she really did fall. She had so much hay stuck in her hair that we had to sit out in the yard and pick it all out before we were allowed back in the house.

We would stand in the opening of the barn too. That's where the big fan was and we would watch the cows mingle below us. Evie would spit on the backs of the biggest cows to see if they noticed. They always did, it never failed. If they could talk they would've told on us right away. They would bellow and turn their heads from side to side to see where the nuisance came from. Eventually, a cow would look straight up at us. For the most part, we got away with our play. Cattle and barn cats aside, no one ever saw us there. By the time Teddy was old enough to go with us, we weren't really interested much. I don't think we ever took him up there with us. I know he never asked to be taken.

I always hoped I could take the boys there. But I know they tore it down after Pap died and no one could run the farm anymore. I bet someone has a house there now. It would be the right place to have one. I don't remember how to get there, but I know it was a nice place. Lots of trees and land. When we were growing up, when we would drive by expensive houses and say things like *that's my house*. And then we'd drive by an old out house and say, "that's your house!" My favorite houses were the two-story brick ones. One with a nice, new car parked in the driveway and flowers in a garden. Evie hated all of that. I remember her loving this little white house that had those fake columns around the porch. The people who lived there had the pretty ferns all over the porch. She never even made a comment about what kind of car they drove, if they even had a car at all.

The last time I talked to her, she was staying with some older guy. She said he has an okay house. I asked her if his house had any columns in front of it. She didn't know what I was talking about I guess. She ended up hanging up right after that. We used to be so close growing up but now you would never know we were related at all. I can see it. But I don't think she can and I know she wants everyone to see things her way.

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While I try to type up everything from my recordings with Holly, I find myself distracted by almost every other word. It was the most she had ever spoken to me before but there was still something so surreal about it. It crossed my mind many times if perhaps she were an actress and this was a role for her. At every point in my life when I met her, saw her, she seemed so different

each time. Even though nothing physically ever felt different about her, strangely, she just seemed so hard to read. Thinking about this I realized the frustration my grandmother has for her. The connections between the three of us seem blurry. Most of that incoherence, I know, is because of the nonexistent thread would have tied my mother to us.

Sitting at the kitchen table with the recordings playing and papers everywhere, my head began to ache. The nurse at the emergency room had warned me that migraines might happen for a while. My body, my hormones, were trying to balance themselves after the sudden absence of the potential life they were preparing for. I hit the stop button and decide to take one of the few pain killers I had been ignoring. In my nightstand drawer, the orange bottle had been resting there since I came home after my hospital stay. I fished one of the white pills out and sipped on the glass of water that had been sitting on the stand for days. It all tasted like dust.

I crawled into bed with my clothes still on. On top of the blankets and pillows I just let my body stiffen. In response to nothing in particular, for no reason that I could gather, I laughed.

So much absence. So many missing threads. The laughter echoed somewhere in all of that. A laughter that said *maybe if you find the missing mother you'll find the missing threads.*

## CHAPTER 11. THIS TIME, SHE ANSWERS

Before I call my mom, again, I think about something my grandmother told me. A story about the time my mother was living with a roommate who was less put together than she was. The story didn't horrify me, but it made me wonder what lines she felt she had or would cross. As a mother, even if perhaps she was an absent one, when was enough enough? When I let my mind wonder, I began to hear it my own mind. I heard my mother's story but imagined it as though she were telling it to me. To anyone.

*My hair got long again.* The blonde started to pull through. Then even I couldn't lie anymore about it. My friend is asleep on the couch. She won't remember anything when she wakes up. But I fed her, listened as she took a shower. I used what little bit of milk she had in the fridge to make her some oatmeal. Made her drink a glass of water. When she finally began to snore, I noticed a single oat stuck to her chin.

Tomorrow she'll complain about the empty milk jug.

It's only seven o'clock now. Dark because it's December, but still so early. I wonder if her body even knows that. If her joints and eyes realize that she's sleeping through the evening, well into the night. Across the street I can hear someone yelling. Car doors slamming. Busy sounds that are typical for this place. *The Simpsons* are on, with the volume turned low. Even though she won't hear it, I turn it down just in case. She has weird memories sometimes when she's passed out like this.

Once she passed out in the bathroom and slept in the tub. In the morning, as she swallowed four ibuprofen and sipped her black coffee, she recited in perfect order the list of people who had come in and used the bathroom while she lay there. I never understood that. How she felt the need to go so far—for so long—that she ended up on her stomach in a bathtub while people took a shit next to her. She thinks it's humorous though.

"You knew I was a snake," she says sometimes when she feels like I disapprove of something. *You knew I was a snake when you met me.*

She had a kid too. But he's younger than mine. His name is Joseph. I've seen him once. He was wearing Spider Man pajamas and mismatched socks. She got him for the night, but it didn't last long. By the time I came to the house, he was crying. She said *he won't stop crying. He just won't stop fucking crying.*

He was hungry. She hadn't planned for that. What little money she had, she'd spent on cereal and milk. Captain Crunch because she said that all kids loved that kind of sugary stuff. She thought they would have cereal for breakfast before her parents came back to get him. She offered him a bowl, but he didn't want it.

I can't remember if he called her parents or if she did. But when they got there, I was trying to wipe his nose with toilet paper. It was like muscle memory. He had no idea who I was, but he held my free hand with his little, sticky hands. He had brown eyes.

He cried even harder when her parents walked in. I couldn't tell if it was out of relief or exhaustion.

*Jesus fucking Christ, Lynn. You can't fix him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich? I knew you couldn't do this.* She seemed a lot like my mother then. Like she ran on grit and gravel, spitting fire. She didn't say anything to me and her husband stood in the doorway, holding Joseph. He rocked from side to side with the boy, bobbing almost to soothe him. I thought I heard him say something to Joseph about pancakes.

I realized that maybe he had called them. I wondered if they taught him their phone number because of this visit. If they recited it over and over again for weeks leading up to it.

I couldn't remember when I learned our phone number. I must have been in junior high by the time I ever even used the phone. I never called my real dad. I never knew of him to call me either. We had to sit in the kitchen to even use the phone. The cord wasn't long enough to reach anywhere else. Even when we got older, when my brother met his girlfriend or Holly wanted to talk to friends. We had to sit right there where mom and God himself could hear everything.

It was all for the best then. That Joseph knew his phone number. Lynn really liked him. Sometimes she'd remind me that he weighed seven pounds even when she had him. Or that he had a dimple under his chin. I just don't think she ever loved him. That was what made the difference. She liked him enough to keep calling and making those visits. She went to see him hungover, sometimes still stoned or drunk.

I didn't have the heart to tell her, but if she loved him, I think she'd just let him be. Let him grow up without her and have a chance.

But then again, I always thought I loved my daughter too. But I couldn't remember how much she weighed when I had her. I don't think I even wrote that number down.

I realize a little later then I should have, that the version of my mother I have created sounds a lot like me.

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Sometimes when we were going on a long drive my mother would let me drink juice in the car. This time it was apple. Then there was the smell of cake baking. Vanilla. The kind that came from a box. Granny would make a box cake occasionally when there was a surprise. No time for the real thing. I was exhausted from playing outside, the long car ride too. Granddad let me sit on his lap and I melted into him. His chin and the top of my head fitting snugly together. He rocked his chair back and forth and patted me on the back. Then she left.

Sometimes, I would hold my head underwater as a kid and pretend to swim. I could hear my heart pulsing in the hot water and throbbing out of my ears. Someone would knock on the door and it sounded so odd. Like a stone skipping far ahead of me on water. The voice would reach me but only faintly, only as an echo. When my mother left, it sounded like a fleet of rocks all skimming the surface at once. It sounded like distance.

She left a bag of my things sitting on the table. A bag that I had helped pack, thinking that we were spending the night with my grandmother. *Together*. Like we sometimes did. Like the time the electric bill didn't get paid in late November and we slept on an inflatable mattress in the living room. Because my grandparents wanted it to seem fun. Because they didn't want to talk about how their daughter had showed up on their porch, cold. And their only granddaughter, so tiny her bubble coat, had snot dripping out of her nose. So they blew up the mattress and we watched movies together and ate popcorn. I fought with Granddad's hands as I tried to stand up. I tried running for the door. Somehow understanding that a bag left behind without her meant forever. Before I could reach the door, Granny swooped with one arm and pulled me up to her. She squeezed me until I stopped crying. I hadn't noticed the tears. She held me tightly and said *you can't run in the house while there's cake in the oven*.

If you run while baking, it will make the cake go flat. I learned the hard way. Thinking about calling my mother, or as her sister had hinted at before she left my apartment, going to visit her made me realize two things. The first being that time is nothing. When she left me there, I was three. Twenty years later, it feels like it was yesterday. In the way that a day can last seven years on some planets. Since then, we had seen each other a few times. Mostly, I saw her in dreams and

photographs. On the whole, our separation was seemingly final and forever. But then again forever never does seem to last a lifetime either.

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Since the last attempt, I hadn't heard back from the women who answered the phone nor my mother. At this rate, fuck etiquette, I think. I call the number back. With every family member within earshot, I call and wait and steam. It rings three times, but the same woman from before does answer. She says that she forgot to tell Evie I called, but I could reach her at a different number. *She moved.* So I dial that number and wait. It only rings one time and the voice that answers does sound like mine.

At first, she apologizes. She moved in with someone and she's been busy. It wasn't personal, she stresses. Before I can tell her what I want, why I am calling, she admits that she's already talked to Holly first. Aunt Holly called her days ago and explained everything. The interviews, what she had already told me previously, and that I wanted to talk to my mom.

"I thought about it. I wanted to talk to you. But I guess I thought I'd leave it up to you make the decision, if you wanted me involved in your work or not," she pauses for a moment and when I don't speak she gains wind once more, "Do you want to hear the story about when I found out that I was pregnant?"

I'll give it to her, she does wait. It is a story I haven't heard before. I reach for paper and a pencil and sit down, "Yes, I do." I say it without giving in much, my jaw still tight. So she tells the story.

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The first gas station was closed. The sign, written on with a black Sharpie, said, "gone to church." Peeking through the glass windows I can tell that I wouldn't find what I need here anyway. There were grimy fingerprints all over the glass, like other people have come here looking for the same things. It's was just a small store filled with junk food and trucker hats. They don't get a lot of would-be expecting mothers there. The other fingerprints, I thought, must have belonged to the burly truck drivers who passed through there. The ones with long beards and license plates from Mississippi and Kansas, anywhere and everywhere but here. The sun felt so hot, coming down in beams and smacking the pavement hard. I had to squint to get a good look up the road. It was a ten-minute walk to the next station. Another Marathon station.

Occasionally, a car passed me as I walked. The whipping of the air around the moving cars startled me every time. Even at a distance. I turned my chin to the opposite side of the road to avoid anyone seeing my face, just in case.

At the next station, there were two cars parked at the pumps. A silver sedan and a blue pickup truck. One on pump one and the other at seven, I remembered thinking *coveted number one and lucky number seven*. The pickup truck was missing whole chunks of paint and there were quarter sized holes around the trim. Rust. No one was in it, so I figured they must have be inside paying for gas. So I lingered at a distance and hoped they would come out sooner rather than later. After a few minutes passed, it was clear that whoever those cars belonged to must have known each other. Or they knew the cashier and because they were all inside talking. The old *how are the kids? The wife? Say hello to your momma for me!* Knowing how people back there are they were talking about the weather or maybe bitching about the president. Those seen to be the only acceptable topics of discussion outside of the home. The weather is always too much, hot or cold, and the president is always to blame for gas prices. This is how conversation at the gas station works.

There was a little bell jingle on top of the door when I walked in. An older man was chatting up the young cashier. The man, someone I thought I recognized but couldn't place, was wearing a tattered flannel shirt. His hands were dirty with grease too, the same way Paul's were. He patted the top of the counter and said, "It's another beautiful day in the heartland, young man." I could see the cashier was confused.

He tilted his head to the side and said, "We don't live in the heartland." He clearly had never spoken to or been teased by the older people in town before. Which was a rookie mistake.

"Well sure we do." The old man smiled and shook his head affirmatively.

"No...we don't. This is B.F.E, old man. The heartland is in Kansas or some shit," He started grinning but only because he thought he was talking to a senile man I'm sure.

"Let me ask you this, is this the place where you were born?" The older man leaned across the counter a little.

"Yeah. Born and raised in this shit hole."

"And your mother, doe she live here too? Your siblings?"

"My mom and two brothers. Why?" The attendant was nervous now. I had to admit the gag was getting better and better. I mean, I could just see this geezer showing up to the cashier's

house as part of some sage “respect your elders” parable. That boy kept stepping backwards the closer the old man got.

“Well, son, wherever your home is that’s where your heart is. This is the land of hearts. This is where the people are.” He patted the counter again and reached into his shirt pocket.

He pulled out a ten-dollar bill to pay for his gas and then left. It’s not like he disappeared or evaporated. It’s just that when he left, the air in the gas station changed. I could feel myself sweating, smell myself even. It clicked when the man got into the silver car, he was one of the men from church that mom talked about all the time. He leaves church early so he can go home and not get stuck in traffic. His name was Roger.

That’s was when another man, the pick-up truck driver, walked out of the bathroom and asked for a pack of cigarettes. His gruff voice scared me a little, coming from behind me. He didn’t see me standing in front of the water display. Something about the old man and his truth made me nervous now. He seemed like an important puzzle piece that was now sitting in my hands. Waiting. The cashier handed over the cigarettes and stared out the glass door after the man. *It was probably for the best that I just buy a water and leave* I thought. Besides, the cashier looked like he was my age or a little less, maybe Holly’s age. He asks *is this all for you?* Which struck me as odd to say.

In middle school, we used to diagram sentences. Picking apart the verb, the subject, the adverbs. We boiled language down to a means of understanding. When the cashier asked me that, I wondered what “this” meant. The bottle of water. The mysterious old man. I’m in the middle of a pilgrimage after all. *Yes* I said. *This is it for me.*

The next station was another long walk. Another fifteen minutes ever further down the road. I drank half of the bottle of water while walking. I crossed my fingers and hoped like hell that I was invisible to every car passing by, at this rate they were all coming from church somewhere. I started to make up hillbilly statistics in my mind. *One in every three vehicles passing by belongs to someone who knows your mother and will tell on you.* They were all going to and coming back from Sunday service, or skipping it and going grocery shopping. Taking advantage of the emptiness of the stores and the sense of guilt for not going to the service. The thought of getting caught made my mouth dry. Which was becoming common place now given how often I was throwing up until there was nothing left to throw up. It made my throat ache. Then the tears started rolling. I had no good excuse to give to anyone if they asked where I was going or if they asked why I was crying. I was too exhausted in every sense of the word to make one up.

I could've said that I was just walking. Three years before this, an eight-year-old girl from the next town over went missing. The last time anyone saw her, she was walking on the side of the road. That answer would only work if I wanted more questions. I could've said I was going to a friend's house. I would have even made up a friend. Call her Karen or Sophia. Say that she goes to the university and I met her when I was applying to school. It occurred to me that there was a whole bundle of lies that I would have to create. All to cover up a secret. The reason I was trying to find a mostly empty gas station on a Sunday afternoon.

When I finally get to the last station it was empty. No cars or old men. There wasn't even a cashier at the counter. This station was on the border to the next county, the busiest station most days. This was the station all the college kids bought their cigarettes from. It was a quick in and out, no questions asked. I found the aisle I was looking for: Advil, motion sickness pills, travel toothbrushes, and then there it was. In a red box with a generic font, no brand name, box reading *pregnancy test*. Looking around, I gathered that no one was there because it was starting to rain. Steadily, it became a down pour. The numbers on the pumps and the yellow lines on the road were no longer visible. The little bell on the door rang and my heart leapt out of my chest.

It's just a passerby. Trying to get in from the rain. He wasn't recognizable to me and given that he didn't even look twice in my direction, I doubted seriously that he thought much of me. By then, the sweat stains were visible. My hair, pulled back, was beginning to curl from the heat. I could feel warmth in my cheeks too. If not from the sun, then from the exhaustion of the trip. I pulled out my stash of cash from my pocket. Five dollar bills I've collected from running errands for mom. A couple twenties. I kept all of it together. There was still no cashier at the register. The rain was coming down in waves, sheets really, and I know I would have to wait it out before I could walk home.

The cashier walked in through the back door. I hear her voice yell *I'll be right here in just a moment*. I'm so lost looking at the rain and the stranger who is also looking out into the rain. I watched the rain water run through his hair and down his shirt and he shivered a little. I didn't notice when the attendant appeared until I heard her say, "Sorry about the wait. I was taking my smoke break and didn't think anyone would come in with this rain."

"That's okay," I said. It really was. I couldn't leave until the rain let up. How would explain where I had been the whole day *and* why I was sopping wet?

“It sure is coming down,” she said. She turned around, wiping her wet hands on her shirt. “I didn’t even know it was supposed to—.” She stopped and cut herself off the last bit. I turned to face her to see what the problem was, why she’s stopped talking.

It’s was Laura Jean. Laura Jean from across the street across from the high school. A girl I grew up with, we grew up with, I guess. She was younger than me. We were in a gym class together once. She thought I was too slow. Unless we were playing volleyball and then I was a big, fast bitch.

“Oh.” Was all she said. She looked at me and the red box and rings it up. “It’s eight ninety-nine, Eve.”

She must not have liked the fact that someone who knew her, and knew she was underaged, was smoking cigarettes on the job. I handed over the money and whispered, “You didn’t have to say my name, you could’ve called me a bitch and that would’ve been just fine.” She gave me the change and the box and I rip it out of her hands like pulling a band aid off. Even though it’s raining, and it’s raining hard, I decided to sit outside instead.

“Eve!” she yelled after me and the stranger at the window turned around to see what the fuss was about. No one said anything else and the bell above the door clanged open one more time.

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My shorts just soaked up what little bit of water was gathering on the concrete. The tips of my shoes were also soaked. The awning wasn’t long enough to cover everything. I felt like I could vomit again. Like it might be sweat on my cheeks and not tears. It could go either way at that point. I could smell the rain much better now, more acutely than ever before. It smelled green and cold. It was amazing how many things smelled and tasted different after I got pregnant.

“Eve,” Laura quietly came out of the store and tried to sit with me. She couldn’t exactly face me or mimic my posture because of a potted plant next to the door. Or what was left of the plant which was really a functioning as an ashtray that smelled terrible. She twists instead to face me and her hair got all wet. She must dye her hair to get it so dark, I thought. When she’s as close to comfortable as she’ll ever get, she speaks up again. “You didn’t know I worked here?”

“No.” My voice cracked. The word felt like ice and was pulling my flesh apart.

“That’s fair. I just I didn’t know you were pregnant either.” She thinks it’s funny. Or else she thinks she has to funny in order to get through this moment between us.

“I don’t know if I am or not. That’s what the test is for.”

“Where are you going to take that? At your Granny’s house? Your grandmother would scare me to death,” She propped her elbow up on the pot. Her arm is covered in freckles, I hadn’t noticed that before. Sweating in the gymnasium and all, we probably didn’t know each other well. I wonder if they appeared as she grew up.

“No, I was going to take it here.” I can’t look at her when I say it because it feels like I’m asking for permission. She caught the hole in the plan so much quicker than I had hoped she would. The thought of sneaking a pregnancy test into the house made my head feel like air. Buzzing.

“I took one once. Last year. It was negative obviously. I didn’t take it at home because I just knew my dad would smell it out. I could just see him knocking on the door and asking ‘is that a pregnancy test? In this house?’ So I took it here in the bathroom. I peed on my hand on accident at first. In the excitement of a negative I forgot to wash my hands. Sold some old woman a bottle of coke and put her change in her hand without even thinking about it,” she says.

Even I have to admit it, that’s funny. I laugh a little, then a lot. It’s absurd. Two young women sitting in the rain, one with a pregnancy test in her hand, and they’re both laughing. The curtain of rain around us made it feel a little private, absurdity and all. The water even washed her eyeliner away. Little trickles of black just streaking her cheeks.

“Come inside. I get off in thirty minutes and we can walk somewhere together,” She lend me her hand and pulled me right up off the ground.

I sat on the stool behind the counter while she restocked different shelves. This store was different than the second one was. No scratch off tickets.

“Ole Henry doesn’t believe in them. He says it’s gambling and it’s bad for *your soul*.” Laura explained.

“But someone could drink gasoline and that would be bad for their body. Or binge eat a ton of Little Debbies and potato chips and that would also wreck their body,” I offered.

“Yes, but it’s the soul we’re most concerned with here. Your body is only a temporary home,” She tossed the empty cardboard box that used to hold chocolate bars. It’s still raining but not as much as before. The stranger from before promptly left after I rushed out. Laura says that he asked if he could help either of us out and she said *how? Can you unfuck an eighteen-year-old girl who might be pregnant? Because that’s the problem, I think*. She said he was thoroughly disgusted and walked out. I watched him but he couldn’t see me for the pot being in the way.

“What will you do if you’re not pregnant?” She asked me as she worked. Her word choice caught me off guard. Everything about that day. If I had to guess when the last time was that she and I spoke to each other I would have said never. Making fun of each other during gym class isn’t really talking to each other.

“I guess I would probably make the decision to never, ever have sex again,” I twisted and turned on the stool, from Laura to the wall of cigarettes, and back. Maybe Henry shouldn’t sell cigarettes either but I suppose they don’t affect the soul.

“That seems a little over the edge, don’t you think? Maybe make the decision to not have unprotected sex again instead?”

“Well, now you’ve answered my question.” This time I make her laugh.

“And what if you are pregnant?” She didn’t look up when she asked this time. I watched the back of her dark head as she pulled boxes off of shelves.

“I guess I’ll have to focus on my body. Since my soul is already in bad shape.”

“Do you think you can raise a kid by yourself?”

“One baby can’t be too impossible,” I laughed a little at the thought. A drunk eighteen-year-old acts like a child, I knew that much. I had been the drunk child and the care giver. But I didn’t really believe I was pregnant at that moment either. Sometimes, I still don’t believe it.

Before we get another word in, the door opened and someone walked in. I saw the uniform first. The tan pants and shirt with black boots. A gun on one hip and a baton on the other. A state trooper. He was there for some chewing tobacco and didn’t ask any questions about why I was behind the counter. At first, he even thought that I was the cashier until Laura came around and took his money. He seemed really young and his face was really pale. He said it was because he worked on nightshift. He started to ask me who I was before Laura cut him off and said, “well, we’re just about to get off our shift and I have to give the new guy here a play by play on everything she did wrong on her first day. So we’ll see ya around.”

I always thought she was a really smart girl. The kind that didn’t know how to outsmart a cop because never needed to know how to. She was honestly very pretty: Long, dark hair and brown eyes. Tall. She did play basketball in high school and maybe in college before but I never saw her again after we graduated. Her parents were farmers and she was in the Future Farmers of America club at school too. Very smart, like I said. Someone you would have been friends with, Lily. Maybe.

Just when we thought he was leaving, the trooper put one hand on his hip and the other hand on the counter. I could see the halo around the neck of his shirt where his hat kept his face dry from the rain. He said, "I got a call saying that there were two distraught young women here. Crying and yelling at a man who came in to wait out the rain." He looked at me like a bird of prey would eye a mouse in a field. Determined. I don't know what to say and Laura doesn't at first either, though I could see her cheeks get warm with anger. I decided I should tell him that I don't really work here but Laura comes behind the counter and says, "You know, I'm the one who yelled at the guy but only because he was hanging around. You can't blame me for not wanting to be left alone with a strange man." She paused and pointed up at the sign on the door, *no loitering*.

"You're a Harlow." The trooper said suddenly. He looked at me and I could tell that he's guessing that I'm the one who was crying, "Are you a paying customer then, Miss Harlow?"

Laura and I looked at each other. Both of us asking the other without words what the other should say. I forgot that I've sat my test on the counter and quickly grab it. He looks at my hand, not moving. Laura pulls out a box of candy, Red Hots or something like that. Almost like she got it out of thin air. She shakes the box a little and says, "What? You never lost a bet with your friend and had to down some cinnamon candies?"

Her eyebrow arched and I had to do everything to prevent my jaw from dropping.

"A Harlow hanging out at the gas station crying and eating spicy candy," the trooper says. He shakes his head and finally does walk out. On the way, he looks at Laura and points at her saying *stop yelling at your customers*.

Laura rubs my back a little and didn't say anything for a couple of minutes.

"Where'd the candy box come from?" I asked.

"This? This thing?" She asked. They she opened up her hand to reveal another pregnancy test, "I got it from the same place you got yours."

We sat there for a little while, then there was a loud crack and snap outside. The lights went out.

"Another tree down." Laura said, "This happens every time there's heavy rain. Every fucking time."

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Laura locked up the station and stuck a note to the glass door. *Power out, my shift is over*. She said that Henry was accustomed to this, it was the second time the power had gone out in a

month or something like that. She couldn't ring anyone up and it was dark enough in the store that no one would come in anyway. The rain had let up and all but disappeared. The splintered tree was across the road and wrapped in sparking lines. *That's the most exciting thing to happen here since the last tree fell* Laura said. She did have a sense of humor.

"You still need to take that test," She said, looking at me with softer eyes this time. She had freckles across her nose too. Hers where there all the time, not just in the sun.

The freckles made me love her.

I agreed to let follow her, wherever she was going seemed like the right place to piss on a stick. When she asked, I felt safe.

"Are you worried that they'll be upset with you?" She asked as she drove her tiny car.

"Oh my god, no." I thought about it for a minute. Granny has had to clean up much bigger messes than this I thought. The idea that my parents might have to help raise another baby—a baby that wasn't theirs—that was what made me afraid. The fear settled in for the first time then. Teddy was still young, but after him they would be done. Able to enjoy their golden years. I think Laura must have understood. *Laura Jean the Gas Station Queen* coming in hot to save the day. She had a genius revelation. She told me crouch down in the backseat so that people wouldn't notice she had someone else in the car. She absolutely loved the idea. After the trooper, I was starting to feel like a common criminal.

"I could've just laid the front seat back you know," I said from the even smaller backseat.

"Where's the fun in that?" She added, smiling. "If my parents see this, it will keep them up for weeks."

I finally sat up in the seat and asked, "Where are we going?"

Laura answers, "We could go to my house. I live far enough away from you that you can have some privacy. My parents will be eating Sunday dinner with family so they aren't home." She didn't seem stoic or cold at all. Nothing like I thought.

"Your house that is in spitting distance of the high school?" Sara asks.

"It's Sunday. It is also nearly five in the afternoon?" Laura looked at me from the rearview mirror and raised an eyebrow. I could just tell that my sister would never believe me when I told her about Laura. About being pregnant. Any of it.

“Besides, the only thing I’m guilty of, if we get caught, is: number one slinging Little Debbies at the Exxon, which is my job. Number two, yelling at that guy at the Exxon, which is sometimes my job. And, last but not least, giving you a ride to my house” Laura Jean laughed.

“And your friend was behind the counter with a pregnancy test and a wall of tobacco products the whole time,” I said. I figured that she was more quick witted than I ever would be and I had nothing for that.

She told me all about living on a farm. That she hated it. She said that her mom called her LJ and that she preferred it to Laura Jean. She was going to go college somewhere in Virginia with a full ride scholarship. She wanted to be a doctor or a veterinarian or something, I forget. She didn’t date so we didn’t have a lot in common to talk about. We read some of the same books but she liked the Russians and I had never read anything by anyone from Russia.

“I always thought you’d be a beatnik or something,” she said after a while of silence.

“Yeah?” I was actually anxious to know the answer. This would be the first time anyone outside of my household had ever imagined me amounting to nothing. At least, the first time anyone said it to my face.

Laura shifts a little in her seat, “No really. Like the good kind, I mean there is no bad kind. It just means you’re chaotic but liberated.”

After everything, I found that to be the saddest part. I expected her to say something else. I don’t know what, but something else. I felt like maybe she knew someone else had called me that before and meant to say *white trash* instead. It’s a childish let down. I knew that when my stomach started to grow, everyone will say it out loud and to my face then.

She pulled her car into a long gravel driveway. A modest sized, blue house with a brown wooden door sat off to the side. There were flowers in the yard, just like mom’s. The face of a dog in the window. A bull terrier she named Spuds. *After the Bud Light dog*. There didn’t seem to be any neighbors, despite the fact that the school was so close by. Looking at it, I could tell that she knew the privacy would be a little peace. It was almost like she could read my mind and knew what I was thinking. It would be the last time anything was peaceful. I don’t know if she noticed it, but I cried a little. I really did.

Laura’s bathroom wasn’t themed like ours. Cause you know, my mother loved the beach and seashells. I assumed that everyone who makes even just a little bit of money had a vacation

like themed bathroom. Or even a nautical theme. Instead, she had grey hand towels and generic hand soap. There was a small window above the toilet, I remember how the light was slated down at my feet. I read the instructions three times. Back to back. Then, thinking of the story Laura told me, I became hyper aware of the possibility of peeing on my own hand. So then my hand started to shake.

I missed my hand but managed to hit the stick. The box said to wait three minutes so I set it down and looked around again. The tiles were white and cool under my bare feet. Laura washed her hair with hibiscus scented shampoo, I can see the pink bottle on the corner shelf of the shower. That was when I saw a framed photo hanging on the wall, next to the door. Except, it wasn't a photograph at all. It was just a sentence, a simple sentence. In red lettering it said *may you live every day of your life*.

It only took a few minutes for the tiny, pink lines to show up. Exactly two. Just a little bit bigger than an eyelash. No bigger than a minute.

When I came out of the bathroom, I could hear Spuds racing down the hall to me. Laura said he would do that. *He doesn't know a stranger*. He sniffed my legs and jumped up to sniff the stick in my hand. His tail stopped wagging.

Laura was sitting in the living room. With her hands in her lap and her feet propped up, looking out the window.

"Well?" She asks.

I sat down in the floor across from her, my legs too weak to make it to the couch. Laura sits up and takes a defensive position, "It's positive isn't it?"

My head fills like it's losing air pressure. For a minute, I thought my head was actually swaying, "Yes."

Laura looks at her feet. She's still wearing her boots. Maybe she thought there was still a chance too. She fiddled with her hands for just a second before she crawled over to where I was sitting. Just like before, she made herself comfortable and squeezed in next to me. Even the dog was silent, off in another room.

Laura speaks up, "You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

"Oh right because there are so many other options," I whispered. Laura said I looked like a zombie. I sounded like one too.

Without saying what she actually meant, she was trying to tell me it was okay if I picked another option. We didn't say the word but even still, that word hung from the ceiling fan. As if it were spinning, waiting for someone to snatch it out of the air.

"That's not even an option and you all know that." I said. Based upon the way Laura withdrew her hand and looked back out the window, retreating back into her chair, I knew what I said was true.

There was a girl in the junior class once who got pregnant by a local boy. A boy who wasn't a boy, but instead a twenty-year-old working construction. The only reason anyone knew that she was ever pregnant was because she had her boyfriend kick her in the stomach. Hard. Her mother had come home from work early and heard the commotion. She walked into her daughter's room to see him kicking her and her just crying. He was arrested and she went to the hospital. That's when the doctor told her that she was pregnant and despite the assault, everything was fine. Her son is probably in his thirties now. I used to see him at the grocery store but we don't know each other. I only knew his mother's story. When he was still young, I watched her talk to him and coo over him and I wondered how painful it must have been to need a solution so badly and then to never get it. To have to find a way to move on with the options you were given.

As I'm lost in thought, I don't even see the flash of black and white fur. I don't even hear him coming as he rushed in. Spuds flew through the living room and his jaws locked on that pregnancy test. Then off he went again, running for the bedroom. Laura and I both looked absolutely shocked. Laura seemed embarrassed even, her mouth was wide open and she tried to say something.

I wave her off. "It's okay. I didn't want to keep it anyway. Get rid of the evidence, right?" We both laughed, I cried a little.

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I wanted to be honest. But it took me almost two weeks to decide to be. Whenever I felt sick, I found ways to cover it up. I took showers in the morning, that way the running water covered up any sounds. Teddy would come scratching at the door each morning. Something he never did before, but all of the sudden he decided he too wanted to take morning showers. I thought, at first, he knew that something, but he hadn't decided what it is yet. He would lean against the door when I finally got out of the shower, his body heavy against the door, I'd have to push the door and use my free hand to swat his face. He grumbled but eventually walked away. Off to the next thing.

I kept thinking about how I was going to tell mom. I planned to. I wanted to. I just didn't know how.