A crimson trail

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A CRIMSON TRAIL

by

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ABSTRACT

Willing to overstep literary conventions in order to ensure that meaning and purpose reign over structure, cross-genre writing works to push boundaries of genre and tear down the walls of limitation. This cross-genre thesis aims to test literary restrictions of structure and style and, as literary endeavors often do, to rattle our existence. In this thesis, nonfiction and fiction work together to drive meaning to the surface of the page, meaning that is universal in the individual stories as well as in the human experience. Although some characters are fictional and some real, they often intersect, their journeys and discoveries merging into one.

The many voices of this thesis, while diverse, speak to similar themes and meaning. The main character of “Silhouettes,” a homosexual male who yearns to find his identity away from the place he once called home, experiences feelings of abandonment and loss. The narrator of “A Crimson Trail” longs to uncovers truths about her uncle’s suicide and endures similar feelings of loss. “Abandoned Laurels” explores a complex mother-daughter relationship and wades through themes of mourning, regret, and shame. The remaining stories explore similar themes, including those of longing, death, and familial relationships. Shorter pieces are scattered amongst longer works and supplement themes developed in the thesis. Each section contributes to the characters’ longing for identity, recovery, and understanding of the past. These related characters and their stories—both real and fictional—merge in a collective endeavor to sift through loss, explore the past, and, most importantly, find identity and hope in the future amidst the rubble of the present.

DEDICATION

For Dr. Darlin' Neal, my mentor, whose guidance and encouragement propelled me to discover my voice,

For my committee, Dr. Jocelyn Bartkevicius and Dr. Maria Cristina Santana, for your time and commitment to this project,

For my family, whose support continues to bring me great happiness and success,

And for Carlos, who knows me better than I know myself. Your tough love got me through this process.

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STUCK IN STATIC

From the driveway, I see that it’s dark at the front door. No one left the light on for me. I get out of the car and turn around, study the house directly across the street. I gawked at that house when I was little, when my best friend, Alex, and I played basketball in her driveway and watched the redhead across the street get in her car and zoom away. Her husband had brain cancer. Died a few years ago. I used to imagine that man’s head, bald and white, like a baby bird’s hairless skull, its skin translucent. Now she hardly comes out at all. But that woman’s hair, my best friend tells me, is red as ever. He is gone, and she’s only seen when she comes and goes to the grocery store.

I hurry up the dark path to the front door, careful not to slip on the large, square steps that slicken in the rain. I can hardly make out the colors of the steps, but I know they are apricot orange. I ran in and out of that house as a child, crossed those steps in my socks, the bottoms covered in dirt, the dogs following us in and out the front door.

I look for the key. I'm used to ignoring the lock and doorbell entirely. Alex's family leaves the door open when they're home and I don't need to knock. Any other day, I enter the house and announce my arrival, another one of the pack.

I turn the lock and the dogs start to bark. The plastic frame on the inside un-sticks itself from the door as I push. To my left is the living room I watched movies in countless times, the living room where Alex and I staged shows for our families. Where we danced to "Footloose," kicking our legs high, spinning on the balls of our feet as Alex's dogs zoomed beneath us and chased our feet. Where our older sisters sang Spice Girls renditions and our parents applauded our amateur moves. Where Alex's father sat and yelled at his wife and daughters—*I am miserable I hate this place nobody cares about me anymore*. Eventually they just started to ignore him entirely.

I am twenty years old. So many things have changed, but Alex's father still maintains that miserable look on his face—that longing to be back home in Peru with his long-dead father, when he still had money to pay the bills. Now, Alex's family waits for the day when the bank will call and take their home away.

I walk across the small, ivory-white tiles, wondering why the air conditioning is off. It's so hot. The house feels rigid and stiff, like the air is frozen in time. Alex's father was the last to leave. They are all in Orlando for the oldest sister's college graduation, and he was supposed to leave the small dog—Cocoa—inside. Scruffy and Teddy, the big ones, would be just fine outside, alone. It hasn't even been a year since the two females, Scruffy and Cocoa, were left together. When Scruffy nearly ripped Cocoa's head off. I've felt the scar that trails across

Cocoa’s collarbone, my finger lingering over the lumpy, white line. The bill from the veterinarian probably sits on the table still, unpaid.

I turn on the kitchen light, call for Cocoa. Nothing. I walk around the long island that stands in the center of the kitchen, let my hand graze the countertop as I turn the corner. The counter glistened with food years ago, when we were ten, twelve, fourteen, our parents surrounding the island, sitting on bar stools and leaning against its side, wine glasses and beer bottles in hand. My mother sat there, one elbow propped on the counter, occasionally falling to the side, still clutching her wine glass, eyes sagging into sleep while everyone around her carried on.

This was a few years after we all met, that night when my mother sat in the kitchen, tipping to the side. When our families hosted each other for dinner every weekend, when my mother took up drinking again, detaching from the world she’d spent so much time stitching herself back up to. Until the night we walked out their front door, down those apricot steps, and I had to hold my mother up, wrap her arm around my shoulders and hoist her into my father’s pickup truck, I thought it was all fun and games—Alex and I entertaining the adults, the adults sipping from glasses and bottles. That countertop ripe with grilled steaks and salad, cookies and cake.

From my place in the kitchen I can tell the light is on in the backyard. I examine the spot beside the pantry where Alex’s bird once squawked. The bird has been gone for years. He was left alone with the dogs when we were little. Only a few feathers left behind when everyone got home.

As soon as I reach the sliding glass door I see them. Teddy, wagging his golden tail across the dark wood column behind him. Scruffy, front and center, her nose swiping the glass door, leaving a smudge. Cocoa runs around the side of the house, cowers behind Teddy. The air in this house has not started to move, though I flicked on the air conditioning when I walked in the door.

Scruffy lunges for Cocoa. Pins her on her back. She's tearing at her chest, her head swinging from side to side like Eddie with his snowman, his baby, but Cocoa isn't squeaking or flying in the air. She's just lying there, taking it. It's as if I'm walking through molasses, trying to pick one foot up and place it in front of the other. It's like those reoccurring dreams I had as a child, the ones where I'm running the track at my elementary school, trying to pick my feet up off the ground, un-stick my toes from the dirt. They don't move. It's like the dreams in which I open my mouth, wide as it can go, try to scream as loud as I can, stretch my arms out in front of me, but nothing comes out. Silence. I am trying to open that sliding glass door, make words spill out of my mouth.

Scruffy bites into Cocoa's abdomen.

I think of how normal everything was when I left my house not even a half-hour ago. How my own dogs paced beneath my feet, unharmed.

Just minutes ago I was hovering over the sink, washing dishes, wiping food from plates and arranging them in the dishwasher. My dog, black and curly with velvety fur, paced, trying to lick the wet plates with his long, pink tongue.

“Charlie,” I said, nearly dropping a glass from my hand. “That’s disgusting!” I pushed him away with my bare feet and he showed his teeth, snapped, tried to bite my toes.

I placed the last dish in the dishwasher, closed the door and grab the dishtowel from the granite countertop. I wiped my hands and flipped the lights off. My father sat in his black, leather recliner watching television, hand buried in a tub of almonds. From where I stood, behind him, I could see the top of his balding head, the bit of white hair, full in the back, thin on top. My mother sat on the other side of the room in Dad’s computer chair—the one that rolls around, the one I used to play in when I was a kid. She stared off into the computer screen before her, reading emails from the people of her past, absorbed in a world that’s fixed in time. She readjusted the glasses at the tip of her nose. The dishwasher, the TV, the computer—everything hummed.

My other dog, Eddie, ran back and forth across the living room with his toy, a snowman my sister got him last Christmas. We call the snowman his baby. He dug his yellowed teeth into the snowman’s stomach, shaking his head from side to side, nearly popping the squeaker out of its belly.

“Mom, look,” I said, chasing Eddie and his snowman back and forth. “Look how much he loves his baby.”

She turned to me, hand still glued to the mouse. Her lavender tank top covered in Eddie’s white hair. She smiled, watched us for a moment, then turned back to the screen.

Eddie’s coat is mostly white, his legs short and muscular like most Jack Russell Terriers. Brown patches spot his face and his behind. I ran after him, in front of the TV, blocking my father’s view. He craned his head around me, kept watching his show. Another typical night.

I realized I needed to hurry to Alex's house and check on the dogs. That's supposed to be my job for the weekend—looking after them—but they live so close. I thought it wouldn't take long to get there and back. I thought of the three dogs waiting for me. Teddy, the Labrador-Chow mix they brought home from the Humane Society twelve years ago, Scruffy, the Lab mix who still has not been spayed, and Cocoa, a Dachshund, mixed with another unidentifiable breed. I thought of the nicknames Alex and her sisters invented for Cocoa. Peekee. Coki. Woki. I rushed around the house looking for my shoes, purse, keys.

"I'll be back soon. I have to check on the dogs," I told my parents. I heard them murmur I love you as I closed the door behind me, though the TV still mesmerized my father, my mother's mind still climbing over decades. I rushed down the brick steps. Ducked as I approach the black olive tree where spiders like to spin their webs, make homes. I didn't feel the silky webs crawling up my arm as I often do. I got in my car and drove off in the dark.

I stare at Alex's dogs through the door now. I'm still standing inside, frozen. Cocoa was outside, not inside, like she should have been. *Why didn't Alex's dad leave her inside? Why didn't I get here earlier?* Behind the dogs, the pool brims with murky, green water. Beneath that water, tadpoles grow, their bodies sprouting new limbs. Alex's father refuses to drain the pool, says it costs too much, and Alex tells me about the creatures that grow in the water, how the dogs like to jump in every once and a while. I cannot believe this is the same pool we swam in as kids, the same pool we played Marco Polo in, raced in, the pool we smothered with our youth. I stood in this same spot when they brought Teddy home for the first time, when he ran across the lawn, right into the pool's blue water.

I hear my voice yelling out—*Scruffy, get off of her*—but I can't tell if this is another one of my frozen dreams, if my words are full of silence. My fingers claw at my throat and my veins like a bird's spindly feet clinging onto snapping branches.

And then I'm moving. I'm opening the door, scanning the ground beneath us, around us. I grab the golf club that leans against the side of the house and lift it over Scruffy's back. I'm screaming again—*Get off! Get off!* I hear my voice, sifting through the air like honey melting into tea. I'm still holding the golf club up in the air. Cocoa escapes from Scruffy's hold and runs between my legs and into the house. I run inside. Scruffy and Teddy follow. I do not know how I get them back outside, but there they are, outside again, and I'm shutting the door and Cocoa is running and running. Gone again.

So much blood. I trip over myself, looking for her. I follow the raspberry spheres that guide me to her. I run into the master bedroom. She is where she always is—hiding under the bed, away from Scruffy. Hiding under the bed that Alex's father lays in day after day while her mother rides the public bus from job to job. The wood floor creaks as I step into the room. Cocoa dashes out. I follow her past the living room and catch her just before the kitchen. I cannot stop to think about whether she will let me pick her up or not, if I'm touching places on her little body that I shouldn't, if I'm making things worse. *I should have washed my hands.* I wrap my arms around her chest, scoop her up and feel the thick blood on my fingers. I click on lights wherever I see a switch. The office, the kitchen, the bathroom. I stare at the image of my fingerprints, bathed in blood, on the eggshell-white light switches.

I pull my cell phone from my back pocket, still cradling Cocoa in my left arm, and call my father.

"It's Cocoa. Scruffy got her. It's really bad, Dad. Really bad."

I'm in the bathroom now, sitting on the edge of the tub with Cocoa in my lap. Her chest heaves, her lungs fluttering like a hummingbird's wings. I wrap my head up in those wings. They buzz and buzz around my ears. My nose is so close to her abdomen, so close to the blood that smells like rust. It's like my head is buried in a pile of old coins. I can't open my eyes, can't pick up my feet that are heavy with the smell of Cocoa's blood.

My father locks his truck outside. I race to the front door with Cocoa in my arms, past the stains on the floor and the light switches. I open the door before his finger touches the doorbell. He's holding the red First Aid box we keep under the bathroom sink at home, staring past me into the empty living room. He towers over me and Cocoa, and I exhale for what feels like the first time since I picked up that golf club and let it hover over Scruffy's back. We hurry back to the bathroom. I sit on the edge of the tub again, holding Cocoa in my lap. She's on her back this time.

"Is the air on in here?" my father asks.

I nod. "I turned it on when I walked in."

Her rough, black fur sticks to my sweaty skin. She's sweating too, beneath all that thick hair. Her eyes are huge, her eyelids peeled back over the whites of her eyes. The bottom of one eyelid is red and swollen. I hold my fingers over the two holes in her chest, try to stop the blood. Her heart beats hard against my forearm. I'm talking to her, telling her it's going to be okay. Telling her, *relax, I've got you, I won't let anyone hurt you*.

"It's a good thing you love them so much," my father says, pausing to look at me, then Cocoa.

I nod and think of my sister, how I can't tell her any of the details of this night and this blood, how I want to tell her how terrible it is, but I can't. She cries at the mention of a hurt dog, any hurt dog, anything having to do with blood. She'll think of the time that Alex came home and found feathers in the place where the bird once stood in the kitchen. She'll think of the time when I was two and I stuck my finger into the hole of a cabinet door while we played dress up—I was the nanny, she was Mary Poppins—and I pretended to get into the back of a car. The door closed and sliced the top of my left pointer finger off. My sister ran around the house screaming for our mom, wiping my blood off the floor with paper towels as my mother, a nurse, placed the tip of my finger into a bag of ice. We went to the hospital in party dresses. My mother soaked my finger in hydrogen peroxide for weeks, and the first day I went back to pre-school after the accident, she was in a car accident. The tip of my finger grew back, the burns from the airbag on my mother's skin faded, but I can't tell my sister about tonight and the blood.

I grab toilet paper from the roll in front of me and hold it over the wounds. There are two holes in Cocoa's chest, both bigger than my thumbnail. One on the left side, just below her armpit, the other on the right side, below her ribcage. They pulse with blood.

"We need to clean her up," my father says. "Get her in the tub if you can."

My father was a medic in Vietnam. His ex-wife's uncle assured him that if he signed up for a program where he would never have to *go* to war, but simply enlisted as a medic, he could go to medical school for free. But he didn't go to medical school and he did fight in Vietnam for a year. His medals—purple hearts and red stars—hang in bronze frames on the wall beside his desk, next to his high school and college diplomas.

As my father assesses the bandages in that red First Aid box, as he takes out the tools he needs, as he assures me that Cocoa is going to be okay, I'm thankful he wound up in Saigon, in the middle of the war, in the jungles that crawled with armies of ants that rained down over your shoulders and invaded your clothes if you barked up the wrong tree, slept on the wrong rock.

I run into Alex's room and tear through her drawers. I find a t-shirt and a pair of shorts to replace my jeans and blouse. My dad calls to me. *Hurry up.* I get in the tub with Cocoa, turn on the water, test it to make sure it's not too hot, not too cold, but she jumps at my every move, at every splash of water against the base of the tub, every noise my father makes as he sets the white bandaging tape down, pulls the Neosporin out. I talk to her. She lets me get her under the water. I use the body wash with the least fragrance to rinse her off and clean her wounds.

"I'm not sure if I'm getting her clean enough, Dad. I don't want to put the bandages on until she's really clean," I say, looking over to my father. "She's so jumpy. I don't know."

"Just pull her out and dry her off. She looks much better now."

I stand up. My knees ache from squatting over her. I grab the towel and toss it on her back. I sit on the edge of the tub again, rubbing her dry, listening to my father on the phone with Alex's dad. I wonder if she really does look better.

"It's pretty bad. She's got a couple of holes in her chest. Not sure how deep the teeth went," he says. "You sure we shouldn't take her to an emergency vet?"

No, Alex's father says on the other end of the line—loud enough for me to hear. *She'll be fine. She's getting old anyway.*

My father and I stare at each other as we replay what Alex's dad said—*isn't he the one who left her out there with Scruffy? Isn't he the one who was supposed to leave her inside?* We shouldn’t be surprised that he doesn’t seem concerned, that he’s leaving it to fate. It takes us a moment of that staring, that stepping over blocks and blocks of time, to get back to work.

“Make sure she’s really dry, especially by the punctures,” my father says. “Let’s get her in the kitchen. More space on the counter.”

Dad’s right—there’s a place to lay her down in the kitchen, where my father can reach her as he stands. He’s 6-foot-2. The counter reaches his waist. I cradle her in my arms, rise to my feet using only my legs. I don’t want to hurt her or startle her or do anything to make her thrash or jump from my arms. I shuffle out of the bathroom and set her down on the island in the kitchen.

“She might bite. She’s hurting real bad,” my father says. “Be careful.”

“I know. I won’t move her if I think she’s gonna snap.”

I get her on her back, put her in the same position she was in when Scruffy lunged over her and tore at her chest. She stares at me, eyes wide. I examine the swollen, red bulge on her eyelid. My father squeezes Neosporin over the wounds, then sets the long bandages over her, drapes the tape across her belly and chest. We need to flip her, but I wait for her signal. She lets me move her and my father circles the tape over her back. We repeat this until everything’s secure. Until we’re certain she won’t tear off the bandages, that she won’t bleed out while we’re gone. We both know we can’t bring her home with us—Eddie will bark all night and try to attack her. Charlie will run around the house looking for her even though he’s nearly blind, following her scent with his long, black snout. She needs to be in her own house, by herself. Safe.

“You think she’ll be okay here, alone?” I ask. I look at my father, then back down to Cocoa who still sits on the countertop.

"I don't know, honey. I really don't know."

The air conditioning is working, but I'm still sweaty. I look at my forearms and thighs, black with her sticky hair. I kiss the top of her head. I want to flip her over again, examine the bandages and make sure the wounds are completely covered. I reach under her arms and she cocks her head back, ready to snap.

My father scans the room—the blood on the floor, my red fingerprints on the light switches, the doorknobs, my own face. He doesn't say anything.

"I guess we should clean up this mess," I say, though I am thinking that maybe Alex's dad—the whole family—should see this, all this blood, so they know how bad it really is. But the girls were here when Cocoa got that scar across her collarbone. They were here when the blood shone on the kitchen floor. I grab the paper towels and walk to the bathroom. I run the towels underwater.

I scrub the blood from the floor, the light switches, the countertop. I talk to Cocoa, tell her I'll be back tomorrow, that she'll be okay. No one is going to hurt her.

I'm locking the front door, stepping down the apricot steps with my dad, staring at the house across the street again, looking for the redheaded woman. It feels as if only a few minutes passed since I walked in the front door, calling for Cocoa. That everything went as planned—that I walked in the door, gave the dogs their food, and left. I'm on my way home, driving down the dark bend of the road. No cars pass me. My father's truck is far ahead. I park beside our mailbox and walk up the brick steps.

I wash my hands. I shower. I wash my hands again. It's nearly midnight. Eddie and Charlie are asleep in their beds. Sunny, my sister's bird, is perched in her cage, her beak tucked into her chest of soft feathers. *Why didn't I stay with Cocoa? Why didn't I tell Alex's dad she needed a doctor, that I needed to stay at his house with her if he wasn't going to?* I imagine Cocoa in the house, alone, hiding under the bed. I imagine Scruffy finding her way back into the house, digging her teeth back into Cocoa's chest. I am trying to run the track again, my feet stuck deep in the ground, my arms outstretched, my mouth wide open, my screams full of silence. I sit on the edge of my bed in the dark, listening to the hum of Cocoa's lungs.

My father and I return to Alex's house as soon as we wake the next morning. The drive to the house is longer than usual, the walk up the steps drawn out. I open the door and feel the cool air as I walk in. I look for the place in the hallway where the blood was, for my crimson fingerprints on the light switches. I sigh, remembering I wiped it all away last night. I go straight to the master bedroom. There she is, hiding under the bed.

"Cocoa," I say, reaching my hand across the wood floor. "Cocoa, it's me. I'm back."

She inches toward me, dragging herself along the floor until she can stand up, no longer hidden beneath the bed. *She's listening to me. She hears me. She's not dead.*

My father stands behind me as I hold her in my arms. I inspect the bandages and kiss her head. Everything stayed in place, just as we left it. She didn't bleed through.

"See," I tell her, "I told you you'd be okay."

I let my head hang down over her back and feel her chest moving against mine, telling me everything is going to be okay, she is going to be just fine.

One year later, after Scruffy attacked Cocoa. My mother knocks on my door. It's seven o'clock in the morning and I assume she's here to retrieve Eddie from my bed as she does every morning when she wakes. He crawls out from under the covers, drags himself across the bed, toward me. I'm twenty-one. Home for Thanksgiving. My mother rushes in, leans down to me.

"Sunny died," she says. "We have to tell Lindsay."

I sit up. I'm still stuck in that place between sleep and awake, that place full of static and fuzz, uncertain whether my mother's words are part of my dream or if she's really saying my sister's bird died.

"Oh no," I say. "Do you have to tell Lindsay right now?" I want to go back to sleep.

"Of course. She needs to know."

I get out of bed and follow my mother. We let Eddie outside and traipse into Lindsay's room. I stand in the doorway. My mother hovers over the bed, runs her hand over Lindsay's forehead and whispers.

"Linds? Lindsay? Wake up."

She groans, reaches for her glasses. "What is it?"

"Lindsay, honey. Sunny died. It must've happened just now. She's still warm." She continues to run her hand through Lindsay's hair and I wonder why she wanted to tell her right away, if maybe she was afraid she'd get too cold, too hard, too far from what Lindsay remembers as her bird, her Sunny. I walk over and tell Lindsay I'm sorry and that I love her. She looks down and wrinkles her forehead. She pushes her glasses closer to her face. My mother asks if she wants to see Sunny.

"I don't know," Lindsay says, still looking down. "I need to think about it."

I hold her hand, waiting for something to happen, anything to make the silence stop, but that's all there is in my sister's room. Silence.

I want to see the bird. I examine her cage, its curved roof, the colorful toys that dangle from it, the millet on the bottom, next to her body. She must've fallen from her perch, her heart suddenly stopped.

The day my sister brought Sunny home, she walked in with the little cage, shouting for us to come into the living room and meet her birthday present, her new bird. We watched the pale-yellow formula slide down the sides of Sunny's beak as Lindsay fed her from a syringe. You could always see her little tongue, the size of my pinky nail, sticking out.

She rests at the bottom of the cage now, partially on her side, partially on her soft belly. One wing is open. Her tiny head rests to one side. My mother comes over and adjusts her so she's completely on her side, the tips of her wings rounded, her entire body curved like a crescent moon. The feathers on her head are yellow and white, the ends flared up off her neck. I examine the two little holes on her beak, the tiny eyelids, the orange feathers that cover the sides of her head. My mother closes Sunny's eyes. I run my hand over her soft, warm body, admiring her long wings, thinking how odd it is to stick my hand in her cage and not feel her nibble on my fingers.

I tell my sister that she looks so pretty, she should see her, it isn't anything terrible to look at. Behind my sister's glasses, her eyes fill with tears. Her long, brown hair curls to her waist. She bites her top lip.

"Okay, I guess I should see her."

We walk over to the cage. Lindsay gasps at the sight of her, on the bottom, not pacing on her perch, whistling—her morning routine. She reaches in and pets her. Eddie is still outside, barking up at the trees, and Charlie paces below our feet, eating the seeds that fell below Sunny's cage.

“She was a really good bird,” she says.

We all agree, rub Lindsay’s back, try to figure out what we’ll bury her in. My father is already outside digging a hole behind the fence, beneath the bamboo, in the shade where sunlight peeks through the trees.

I leave my sister and mother by the cage and sit on a stool on the other side of the room. Lindsay holds Sunny now, kisses her forehead, cries some more. She was eleven and I was nine when she brought Sunny home. She wore her round, pink and blue glasses, a string attached to the sides and draped around her neck. Frizzy hair above her ears. Round face. Wide smile. Chubby through the middle, thin legs, socks up to her ankles. So many days she came home from school crying because she didn’t like the way she looked, the things people said.

She’s twenty-three and lives with her boyfriend. She graduated from college. Twice. She cradles that bird in her hands, a piece of her floating away. The belly, the hurt—gone. Sunny is flying outside in the palm trees and my sister is stretching out before me, her short legs growing long, her hair falling to her shoulders, frizz tamed, face no longer round and timid. Her youth latches onto those soft, yellow wings that flutter outside the door. It’s buried in the feathers, scattered among the orange and yellow and white, gone with the bird that’s finally laid to rest. Outside, beneath the bamboo, my father packs dirt over the tin can we placed her in. He sets a rock over her spot in the ground. Inside, my father rolls the empty cage across the room, then back outside to clean it. The rounded top reaches his neck. He stores it in the garage.

In the corner of the room, beside the windows where Sunny once paced and whistled, where I whistled back at her from the kitchen as I made breakfast every morning, is a square, empty space. No feathers left behind.

It's Christmas time. A month after we buried Sunny beneath the bamboo. My sister and I notice Eddie acting strange. He isn't jumping up and down at the back door to go out. He isn't playing with his baby or running around the house with me. He's sleeping, curled up between my mother's legs in the bed. We watch his chest rise and fall, watch him lick his lips, lift his eyes up to us, then close them. Back to sleep. Charlie's asleep, too. He's sixteen, and Eddie's eleven.

"Maybe we're just overreacting," I say. "But it wouldn't hurt to get him checked out."

"My friend just had to put his dog to sleep," my sister says. "And he wasn't even that old. They didn't know he was sick until it was too late."

My mother's mouth is full of salad, salmon, crackers. We wait.

"I agree," she says, still swallowing. "We have to convince your father, though. You know he won't want to spend the money if nothing's really wrong."

"We just want to be safe," my sister and I say together.

After the New Year we go back to school and to work and to boyfriends in different cities. My mother takes Eddie to the vet. Nothing's wrong. Blood tests come back normal. One week later, my mother returns to the vet. He's lost two pounds in seven days. Something is definitely wrong. Tests. More tests. Ultrasounds. They find kidney stones. Nothing new—he's always had problems with his kidneys. He's on a special diet. My mother returns to the vet again. Pneumonia, the doctor determines. It's pneumonia.

My mother gives Eddie injections three times a day for seven days. No change. He doesn’t want to eat, so my father grills him his own steak. He eats it. Then he doesn’t. My mother forces him to drink water. He doesn’t want to. Vet again for a follow-up. He doesn’t have pneumonia. He has cancer. In his lungs.

My mother tells me this over the phone. I can tell she’s been crying. I wonder how she’s handling this and I know if she were still drinking—she’s been sober three years—she’d be drinking tonight. I’m sitting at my desk, writing a paper. *Cancer*. My face is warm, my chest tight with the word. The letters do not fit in my mouth. I can’t say it. But I think it. Eddie is our tough guy. He kills possums and mice in the backyard, jumps at the squirrels that taunt him from the top of the fence, from way up in the palm trees, behind the coconuts. His little paws are worn from running back and forth on the brick in the backyard, harassing people who walk by, but that doesn’t stop him. But this. Cancer doesn’t fit inside his chest. The letters are too big; he is too small, too tough.

It’s a Thursday, the day I find out. By Saturday my mother is talking about putting him to sleep. He’s having trouble breathing; his chest is swollen, his breathing is too hard, too fast. He doesn’t move from that spot on the bed between my mother’s legs. He doesn’t eat. My mother forces water into his mouth with a syringe.

Sunday. Can’t breathe. Cancer is squeezing itself into his lungs and he’s trying to force it out, my tough guy, but the word is stuck in there, in his lungs, in my mouth, my chest.

I see him on my phone, in a live video. He’s outside in his yard, looking up into the bright sky, the sun warming his long snout, white body, the brown on top of his head. I think of

Sunny, how she was gone so quickly—without warning—and wonder if it'd have been easier if we never learned of Eddie's cancer, if he just never woke up one day.

I want to tell him what I told Cocoa months ago—*relax, I've got you, I won't let anyone hurt you anymore*—but instead I watch his chest move fast, his lungs like little balloons filled to capacity, ready to pop. Instead I tell him I love him, watch him squint his eyes from the sun and know he is where he's always wanted to be. This is the last time I see him. He's up in the trees with Sunny two hours later, his lungs filling and emptying, easy, Sunny's long wings taking them up, up, atop the fence where he can finally get to the squirrels that jeer at him.

My mother hasn't seen a single squirrel in our backyard since he died.

HELLO

You never said no—not really. We exchanged smiles and nods almost every day unless you stayed home sick, which you did only twice, and I worried about you all day when that happened. One time, when you were walking toward me with your friends, you tripped on your shoelaces and I rushed out from behind the trashcan, bent down and tied your shoe. When I looked up, you tucked your hair behind your ear and mouthed *thank you*. Your friends snickered behind you. I nodded, traipsed back to my post.

After that you always said hi to me when you threw away your brown bag after lunch, like you wanted me to say something back, but I didn't know what to say. No girl ever looked at me the way you did. No girl ever looked at the man behind the trashcans and dirty gloves. Before I got the job at your school, I was just another face, another set of lips to pop a pill into, another person that needed to be fixed. The first time you didn't show I thought maybe you just didn't want to see me, that maybe you went out the other cafeteria door with your friends instead. But the second time I worried so much that I snuck into the office before the end of the day, copied down your address and shoved it into my back pocket. I thought of you all night Kristine, tossed back and forth on the cot in my room at the Center, wondering if something had happened to you, if I would ever see your dark, dark curls and deep blue eyes again.

I couldn't sleep, couldn't stop thinking of your smile and how it warmed me, like an explosion rippling through my chest and stomach and thighs, the way I had to stand up behind the trashcan after you walked by, shake my legs out, shake out that feeling I got after I saw you. The next day was Saturday—no school. I couldn't stand worrying about you all weekend, not knowing if you were okay. I showered and shaved, listened to the groaning man on the other side of my room as I slid the blade up and down my neck. I stayed up all night.

I rode the bus up and down 41st the next morning, searching the streets for you. Nothing. I watched the woman ahead of me, her breasts spilling out of her pale-red blouse, grabbing her son by the arm, shoving him back in his seat. They got off on 41st and Haulover, a block from your house. Still, nothing. I pulled the cord for the bus to stop, rushed down the aisle and out onto the street. I ran the whole way—I couldn't shake the thought that you might be hurt, in pain, that someone else had you. When I arrived the driveway was empty, your turquoise bike propped up against the grey garage door. I was proud of myself. Found your house on my own. I went around the back, glancing behind me as cars passed. Cardinals whistled at me from the black maple trees. I whistled back.

From your backyard I saw light trickling from the corner window and I thought it must've been your room. Once I caught my breath I slid up to the house and pried the backdoor open, made my way to the bedroom that flickered with the TV. You lay there in your little bed, eyes shut, arms suffocating your lavender blanket. I slipped in next to you, took your dark curls in my hands and felt that warmth again. You smiled, and I knew I'd been right; you wanted me just the same. I climbed over you, the two of us cloaked in my heat. I watched my hands shed my clothes and wondered how was this all happening, but then you yelled something that sounded like hello, and this time I said hello back, this time I let my hands do what they wanted, that warmth exploding inside me as your words became shouts and then wails. By the time I saw the tiny pool of blood on your pink sheets your father was already standing in the doorway, his deep blue eyes—your eyes—wide open, and all I could say was hello, and all I could hear was you sobbing something back that sounded like hello, hello, yes it must have been hello that you were saying, yes, this would all be okay.

And it *was* okay, everything was okay, right?

GUS

I stand in Ivy’s room, between the steel-gray curtains and the bathroom that reeks so badly of blood I must cup my hands over my mouth. They’re sweaty with my breath. I drop them. I’m getting used to the smell. I examine my wife’s slim, agitated body that writhes beneath rigid hospital sheets, look down to my hands. They shake so violently I take my left hand in my right, try to steady one with the other, but the tighter I squeeze the fiercer they shake. I have to let go. She flops onto her left side, then right, then left again. A moan.

Ivy?

If I mess with these machines a little, I think—just a little—wouldn’t she be better off? Blinking lights and dripping bags hound me, their contents red and clear. Clear like the water in the spring we swam in up in Crawfordville, just a mile down the road from my mother-in-law’s, who died last November. Cancer, too.

Maybe I should go for the red bag, the one pumping type A blood into my wife's fragile, purpling veins.

Ivy's been here more than she's been home in the last three months. I've been thinking, why doesn't she just goddamn stay here? I shut my eyes and mash my fingers into the corners of my eyelids, massaging the wrinkles that seem to have appeared overnight.

I'm so tired of driving her back and forth, back and forth, just to watch blood invade her sheets, her body projecting her own blood like it's toxic. Surgery, cauterize, surgery. Nothing helps. It comes up in such big clumps and so often that she's got this red lining around her lips. They're cracked and bloody. I want to kiss the full, caramel lips of thirteen months ago before this thing took over. When we'd been married just a year and she told me, one hand resting atop her Yankees hat, the other in mine, that she wanted my baby. We considered adoption after the prognosis. Cancer killed that, too.

I study the bloody bag, step closer, let my fingers tremble up the string to the very top and pull down, gently.

Gus, the nurse says, opening the door. Gus.

Sunlight slices through the curtain and crawls across her bed. Gus.

SILHOUETTES

The drive to the beach felt familiar, though I didn't know where we were headed. I sat in the back of their truck, blindfolded, feeling vibrations as we crunched over gravel. At least two hours had passed. I lurched forward as the truck stopped short. My forehead slammed into the double doors. I heard them coming and then, light. I felt blood trickling down my nose. I imagined houses sprawled along the edge of the beach, across the westernmost edge of Florida. I wondered if one of them lived nearby, if one of those imagined houses were theirs. Then they stood in front of me, though I couldn't tell who was who. All I saw were the bottoms of their white robes sweeping the sand and all I heard was what sounded like my father's voice, a loud whisper. He was never good at keeping his voice down. It trailed away, that gravelly voice, so I thought it must not have been him. Someone grabbed my left forearm, dragged me out of the truck and into the sand. I was alone again.

I wore thin boxers and a pair of white tube socks—nothing more. The cold breeze whipped my back. They didn't give me a chance to grab a sweater or a shirt or even a pair of shoes. I heard the ocean behind me, rising and falling, first soft and then hard, like the water was breathing, heavy, asleep. It rose slowly first, almost sounded like my granddaddy's wheezing. Then it crashed, tumbled back down over itself like it'd seen something terrible that it just couldn't bear to see again. But then it did it all over again and I wondered why, if that thing the water saw was scary enough to cause it to come tumbling down so hard, it rose back up again. I wondered why it didn't just stay down, calm itself, hide beneath its dark entrails. I couldn't see a damn thing and that blindfold was cutting into the skin above my ears.

The water kept doing its up and down wheezing, but then I heard sand shuffling underfoot, too. The shuffling got quiet for a moment, then loud again. They might've been twenty feet away. Maybe ten. They got real close. I heard their feet coming toward me. I heard their feet kicking sand up into the air, the tiny grains falling back down again, rising and falling like the water behind me. I felt the bumps rise on my arms and legs, the hair on my limbs standing so straight it hardly felt like the hair was attached to me anymore. Someone moved in front of me. I felt their warmth. I didn't need my eyes. Then a hand, underneath my blindfold. I looked down, through the tiny space between the blindfold and my face, and saw a forearm and that tattoo: a red circle with a black cross in the center, a red drop of blood at the base of the cross. The tattooed arm ripped the blindfold from my face, and there they were. All eleven of them before me, hidden beneath white robes. I knew where I was: back in Horseshoe Beach.

During the three months before all of this, before the truck and the blindfold and the cold, a forty-something-year-old black man named Eugene was holed up in my apartment with his eighteen-year-old girlfriend, her stomach growing rounder by the minute, her belly button hardened and protruding the way the smooth edge of a cliff juts out. She was due in July. For those three months that they hid in my apartment all I could think was, if her skinhead brother finds out what's growing inside her belly, he's gonna rip it right out of her. Maybe to eliminate the bad blood. Maybe just to ruin her life.

The first night they stayed with me I watched them from across the room, her pale hands wrapped around the back of his dark neck, his lips gliding across her stomach, moving below the copper-brown sheet Lizbeth stole from her mama's house before she ran off with Eugene. Behind them, a bookshelf filled with my favorites—*Brave New World*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, To Have and Have Not*. Strewn across the tawny coffee table in front of them, junk mail. I turned onto my other side so I couldn't see them anymore, as if it would make me ignorant of them somehow, moved around until I was as comfortable as I'd ever get on my beat-up mattress—the one I took from my mama when I ran off one year earlier. Those of us who left Horseshoe always seemed to be running, though most of us didn't even know what we were running from. Couldn't figure out exactly what was chasing us. Didn't want to.

First there was Lindsay Murdoch, the smartest girl in our eighth-grade class at Clyde Simmons Middle School. Her mama taught at the Bible school down the road and her daddy managed the only grocery store in town, Ruth's. Her daddy also coached our football team, the Clyde Simmons Cougars. She was the kind of girl who knew how to do just about everything right, and up until the start of high school when all the girls matured at an un-humanlike speed and all the boys drooled over the girls' newly-transformed bodies, she did just that. She was class president, had a perfectly-shaped nose and orangey-green eyes, read the news over the P.A. every morning—*Today there will be corn dogs for lunch, a cheerleading bake sale after school under the pavilion, and detention will be held in classroom 110 instead of 121. Have a wonderful Cougar day!* She was on track to becoming just like her mama, forever stuck in Horseshoe, but one summer she went to sleep-away camp in Tallahassee and met this Latino boy named Juan who taught her things she'd of never learned in Horseshoe Beach. When she returned her shorts were so short the teachers wouldn't let her into class, her shirts so tight they crawled high enough up her stomach for us to see her new belly button ring: A blue heart with little diamonds. She went with that Juan from Sarasota, went to live with him and his artsy, liberal parents. At least that's what we heard. Her mama and daddy just pretended she was still away, on a mission trip, joined the Peace Corps, or something.

Then there was Martha Widdel who went to stay with her cousins in South Florida and never came back. Phil Tompkins whose mom hung herself in the guest room that she'd spent six months and one expensive interior designer from Chicago decorating. He just vanished. Whoever else left I couldn't really remember them too well. By the time I got to noticing how many faces in my eleventh-grade class were different, how many people I grew up with who just weren't there anymore, I knew my turn was coming too.

I watched Ted Crawford from across the classroom every day in History, tried to hide behind my American History textbook, which, inside, secretly held the book I read every day—one I'd read a hundred times, *Invisible Man*—instead of the book I should've been reading. I held it vertically in front of my nose, careful not to hit my glasses, and leaned just a little to the right, and even more to the right when the lights were off and we were watching a documentary or when Ms. Siegfried used the projection to give notes. On Mondays he wore a black and red plaid shirt, the sleeves rolled up on each side. The right sleeve always shimmied down his arm by the end of the day. I knew he'd be wearing his black and gold jersey on Wednesdays for the basketball game that night. His parents, Greg and Heather, were good friends with mine. I'd known him forever, always saw him at special dinners and birthdays. But that we'd known each other our whole lives didn't matter outside of those dinners and birthdays, didn't matter when it came to the rest of the world. When it came to being a man.

I was walking half a block behind Ted and his buddy Carl on my way home from school when Carl started bothering Ted about me—about my being different than the rest of the guys, how I couldn't even pretend to like girls.

"Tell that little faggot to stop staring at you," Carl said, "or we'll beat the shit out of him."

"Whatever," Ted said, pushing his right sleeve up to his elbow. "Leave the kid alone. He's just some loser."

Ted had known all along but hadn't said a word until Carl and the rest of the guys caught on. I should've known to stop then. To start blending in as much as I could before someone would start to do it for me.

I went to every basketball game with my cousin Lindsay, watching the way sweat slid down Ted's forehead and over his nose, down his back and into the top of his shorts, the way the back of his jersey was darker by the end of the game, the way he hesitated just slightly before he shot the ball, his biceps flexing.

This was before things changed, before I up and left Horseshoe, before Eugene got Lizbeth pregnant, before my own father dragged me out onto the shoreline.

When Lizbeth found me in Gainesville, I'd just gotten a job working at the coffee shop downtown on 34th and Robinson, working nights and weekends and going to school during the day. I figured out how to get money from the government as an independent, and my grades in high school got me scholarships that, with work and loans and grants, were getting my rent paid and some money in the bank. I spent most days on the fourth floor of the library, just past the literature section, behind the H-K row that had the best collection of early Hemingway work. I lost myself in the history and literature, forgot my loneliness, moving from the dark blue chair with the hole on the arm to the coffee-brown couch behind row L-N, then back to the blue one again. Hours passed like the miles that fell backward beneath the tires of my '94 F150 when I left Horseshoe, my mattress strapped to the back. I was gone out of there so quick.

It was a Tuesday, the day she saw me. I sat there in my chair, the one with the hole, reading *The Unvanquished*. My legs were tucked up into my chest and I wished I had my jacket. I heard the librarian stacking books back into place, the stale odor of yellowed pages traveling toward me as the books came crashing down upon each other. I'd just gotten halfway through the last chapter of the book, where Bayard must decide whether or not to seek revenge for his father's death. I was stuck on the part where Bayard's cousin, Drusilla, stands in a yellow dress with a sprig of verbena tucked behind her ear, forcing herself to become what everyone wanted her to be—a lady. I wondered why she'd surrendered her pride, why she'd let them dictate her life.

"Hacker," she said, craning her head around the corner of the Hemingway section. "Hacker, is that you?"

At first I didn't even lift my head from my book. I let my glasses stay down low over my nose, frozen. I'd gone to Gainesville to assure no one would recognize me, and there in front of me was this girl calling my name. I pushed myself forward in my seat to get a good look at her.

"Lizbeth?"

"Hacker? Hacker Jenson?" she asked. "It is you! Thank the lord I done found you."

"Wh—what are you doing here?"

"Long story," she said. "You know how it is."

I reconsidered Drusilla's choice; maybe she'd been right to surrender after all, to avoid trouble.

The first thing I remember is the tattoo. The second, the man's voice.

"Jenson," the man with the tattoo said. "Why don't you start? It's your boy, after all." He laughed a terrifying laugh; it was as if calling me a boy or anything resembling a man was funnier than calling a black man a nigger or a monkey. One of them stepped forward, hesitant. He smelled like fish that'd just been gutted, its remains left on a cutting table under the sun all day. He smelled the way my father did when he came in from the bay, fresh snapper and fishing poles in hand, saltwater dripping from the nets he carried over his shoulder.

I looked up into the two slits of the man's cone-shaped veil, trying to see as far into the holes as I could. Was it Lizbeth's father? Ted's? I couldn't be sure. All of them wore pointed headpieces with slits so small I could barely make out the color of their eyes. It was pitch black aside from the moon's glow and the headlights that beamed from the vehicle up ahead, an eggshell-white van with black lettering across its left side. It was the delivery truck from Ruth's Grocery. Lindsay Murdoch's dad had probably borrowed it for the night. After all, the Murdoch's were good friends with Lizbeth's parents. It all made sense.

The only thing that didn't quite make sense yet was that the man had called the other man Jenson, and that the man with slits for eyes smelled of fish just like my father, and that, as far as I was concerned, my father was no longer my father, but just another man hiding beneath white fabric and hatred. I threw up. It was then that I knew my father was like the rest. I couldn't bear to share that last name with him—Jenson—couldn't bear knowing that was my father standing there before me, ready to give up his only son.

I couldn't blame Lizbeth for leaving—for asking if they could stay with me, even if my knowing about the baby could've uprooted the life I'd finally made, away from Horseshoe Beach. I left when I was seventeen, old enough to have graduated early. Before my feelings for Ted Crawford spiraled out of my own hands, before I grew the courage to tell him how I felt.

Homosexuals are plagued by the devil, Pastor Sutton said to the congregation that Sunday morning after I heard Carl talking about me, the faggot. He looked right at me, hard, like no one else was in the room. I swore I heard him say my name, heard him speaking right at me: *Hacker Jenson, you're going to hell.* I kept my eyes on the back of the blonde woman's head in front of me. Some of her hair was stuck in her dress collar. I wondered why she didn't just pull it out. I let my shoulders hang forward over my torso and kept my eyes cast down for the rest of the service. Mama kept nudging me to lift my head, listen to the good man and respect the church, but I wouldn't budge. I had to leave. The only thing holding me back was my mama and the dog, but soon after that service with Pastor Sutton, I taught myself to forget all about them. When Lizbeth stood there in front of me at the library, her auburn hair matted and a crazed look in her eye, begging me to let her stay, I remembered my mother and the dog for the first time in months. I'd forgot how to forget.

The first night Lizbeth and Eugene stayed in my tiny apartment in Gainesville. It'd just finally started to cool off, the leaves changing as much as they'd ever change in Florida. Green to brown, then green again. Alive, dead, alive. No reds, no yellows, no oranges. No in-between. Gainesville was warmer than Horseshoe—no breeze, no relief. Still, in that apartment, I could feel the air racing in through the tiny space between the glass and the window frame like there was something outside that window to be afraid of. The gap had been there since I moved in. Unlike my rebel father, I was never good with tools. Or women.

Two floors down, below the window, I heard a group of women stumble out of McRan's Tavern and into the dark night. The sky was nearly black but sprinkled with bright stars, clouds nowhere in sight, the way I liked it. Sometimes I'd think I could smell the liquor from the second floor. Always I'd think that the night could smell it too, that the night would get real angry, and sometimes the next morning I'd wake to hear on the news that I was right—that the night *had* smelled the liquor on them, that the night had spit them back out. Mindy Segal, 24, the news anchor would read, killed on impact. The other two, 25 and 21, in critical condition. I could think of others who deserved more to have the night spit them back out.

The noise below the window quieted. I turned away from the window and saw Lizbeth's hands move down Eugene's back, his head somewhere I couldn't see. I imagined his dark hands against her narrow thighs, imagined what would happen if I ever gave them up. The Lizbeth I knew went to church every Sunday, referred to her father as Papa Sir, ran her fingers down to the bottom of her plaid skirt to show the teachers how well she obeyed the rules.

"Look, Ms. Timble," she'd say, smoothing the top of her skirt. "Isn't my skirt perfect?"

They'd nod, let their glasses droop over their wrinkled noses and gaze toward her.

"Yes, little Lizzy, just perfect."

Like my father, Lizbeth's papa was in the Klan, too. But they'd started to call themselves Knights, like they were any different from the Klansmen of the past. Like they were doing something noble, scaring off black folk—murdering if they had to. Keeping things right, in order. *You're going to hell, Hacker, you're going to hell.*

Like they weren't wrong for murdering poor Billy Sudson in 1964, out there on the Suwannee River. Like they weren't wrong for literally skinning the black skin right off of him, castrating him for having sex with a white woman. They cut his tongue out too, so he'd never get the chance to tell his story, let his body float off into the river. It was their fathers and grandfathers and great-great-grandfathers who'd done it. And these sons—my father, Ted Crawford, perfect Lindsay Murdoch's father, Lizbeth's papa and brother—were carrying on the tradition. It was their duty, decades after the Civil Rights Movement and integration, to get rid of the colors that muddied up the white. To keep the purity.

I remember the first time I saw my father's white robes. I was eight years old and Mama'd asked me to stay behind after dinner, help wash the dishes and finish up the laundry. I didn't mind staying home with Mama, never did. I stood beside her on a wooden stepstool, watched her reach her freckled arms down into the sink, waiting for my turn to dry. Garth, our Labrador-Chow mutt, paced below me, waiting for crumbs.

"Now you be careful, Hacker," she said, pushing the hair out of her eyes with the dry side of her hand as she passed me a plate. "Those are my great-grandmama's. Don't you go breaking them."

I nodded and gripped my hands as tight as I could around each one, running the crimson towel across each plate. I'd never met that great-grandmama, but I knew if I broke one of her plates, all the mamas would've been real mad, so I held on tight, made sure not to disappoint any one of them.

Mama stepped out onto the back porch for a cigarette—Newports, like always, the ones that came in red packs with the clear wrappers that I wanted to unwrap for her—so I walked through the living room to the back of our two-bedroom house, past the room I shared with my little sister, Eve, her Barbie dolls and my toy cars littered all over the carpet, and into the hottest room of the house to finish the laundry. Above the dryer hung an old Confederate flag Papa had for as long as I could remember, the corners of it tattered, blue and red threads hanging from the bottom. Just as I opened the dryer door and reached my hands in, Papa traipsed in. His belt was half undone and he wasn't wearing a shirt.

"Papa," I said, "Isn't our flag the one with all the red stripes and the stars in the corner?" I frowned.

"Son." He folded his hairy arms across his chest and rested them atop his belly the way he always did when he was fixing to get angry. He tilted his head up and pointed. "*This* is our flag. And when you grow up, you're gonna hang it in your home, too."

I'd heard him say it before, thought nothing of it, but as I pulled out the load of whites Mama hadn't finished, his words stretched out before me like molasses, impossible to sift through. That's when Papa snatched the robes out of my hands.

"Leave Mama to the laundry from now on," he said, his top lip curled. "That's a woman's job."

It was him, of this I'm now certain. But as I lay in the sand, the moon's haze shining a silver streak across my face, I told myself over and over again that it wasn't. Other men fished and gutted their catch and came home stinking of it, too. Other men had deep, gravelly voices and besides, there was no way he was out in the middle of the night. Mama wouldn't let him.

"Jenson," the man repeated. "I said, handle that boy."

"All right, all right," the other man said. "I hear ya just fine."

My father wouldn't take orders from another man like that. My father wouldn't be out at that time of night. My father was sitting on the front porch smoking Salems and drinking beer out of a can, rocking in the chair my granddaddy rocked in. This wasn't my father.

He came toward me with arms outstretched, grabbed me by the arm and kicked the backs of my knees. To the water, he motioned. The other men traipsed behind, laughing their terrible laughs, and the man motioning me to the water told them to shut their traps, this wasn't funny. At least he and I agreed on something.

When the water hit my toes, we stopped. The man kicked the backs of my knees again. Down to the ground. I half expected him to put a gun to my back, ask me where they were. It had to be about Lizbeth, this I knew by now. I'd overheard her talking to her mama just the night before. Eugene was sound asleep and I lay awake in my bed.

"Mama," she said. "Promise you won't tell a soul. Especially not Daddy—they'll come after Hacker, too. Oh Mama, please don't tell me you already have." She was silent for a moment. "The beach? But why?" There was a gasp and a cry, then she hung up.

In as much time as the conversation had come and gone from my mind, my head was submerged in the icy water, salt invading my nostrils. The water lodged itself into the back of my throat, sliced the soft skin like a knife cutting into a fish. My eyes burned and I realized I could close them, and my mouth. I held my breath. Four, three, two, one. It's almost over, I told myself. I was ready to hide beneath the icy waters for good. I'd stopped counting when the man pulled me out. A second longer, and I would've been away from all of this for good.

"Where are they?" he asked.

I threw up again, this time, all water.

"I said, where are they?"

"Gone," I said, water dripping from my mouth. "Gone."

The men behind the man with the gravelly voice grunted. Some began shouting. We're gonna find that nigger, we're gonna find him.

That's when the man holding me up dragged me farther down along the shoreline, away from the others. His robes were soaked up to the knees, and somehow the fabric around his cheeks was wet, too, though from his neck down to his waist, it was entirely dry.

"There's nothin' I can do to change this now, Son," he said. "You've got to run. Please."

I shook my head, still trying to convince myself this wasn't my father.

“Go,” he said, pointing farther down the shoreline. “Go.” I wanted to let my body float off into the icy waters and count backward until my mind didn’t know how to count anymore.

I looked into the slits and shook my head again, no, when I heard the shots behind us. Up near the truck stood a dark figure, arm stretched out. The robed men fell like bowling pins. They flattened out onto the sand, one into the water, floating away, others invisible, their white robes covering the white sand. I looked up into the slits again—this time I saw they were green, like mine—when my legs buckled beneath me from the weight. I was covered in his white robes, a warmth soaking through them and onto my chest. I couldn’t stand; the weight from the robed man atop me made it impossible to move, but I was able to crane my head over our bodies. Before me stood two figures, one dark and one bright, a crescent-shaped silhouette jutting out from the bright one, the two of them standing there nodding their heads and smiling.

“You saved us, Hacker. We had to repay you.”

I didn’t need to see the dark figure’s face to know—his deep voice told me it was Eugene and Lizbeth standing before me. Eugene moved his left hand over Lizbeth’s round belly, stroking up and down. “We know this was what you wanted all along, and now it’s done. We all have exactly what we want.”

I couldn’t stop counting backward, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven, ninety-six, and then the moon cast its glow right over me and I saw the blood in my hands, on my chest. I wondered if my father had taken me there to die, if that was what he wanted. Or did he want to die himself, an old, stubborn man, unable to admit he was wrong, unable to look his own son in the eye? I contemplated the men that lay dead on the sand, my mother rocking nervously on the porch, my father’s body still crushing my chest, the two figures hovering over me, my own body drifting off into the ocean, if I let it. Ninety-five, ninety-four, ninety-three, ninety-two. We all have exactly what we want.

FILTH

Filth. It was the only word she could think for the last three weeks, the one she couldn't get out of her head no matter how hard she tried. Wash the dishes, do laundry, pay the bills. It did nothing to erase that word from her mind—not even all the scrubbing she did in the shower when she came home from McRan's that night could get it out of her head. Not even the hundreds of times she cleaned the grime out from under her red nails.

It'd been two years since she'd seen Jacob. When she saw him at McRan's, she remembered everything all at once: his hands in her golden hair, her nails clinging to the soft skin of his back. From across the dark room he mouthed, *you're beautiful*. She forgot the deep purple crescents that laced her eyes when they were together. She forgot the marks on her arms, her hips, her thighs.

It was the way the word peeled through his full lips. *Beautiful*.

When she got home, a different word got stuck in her head. Now it wouldn't leave. She replayed the night in her head over and over: her nails cutting into the skin of Jacob's back—no longer soft—his long fingers inside of her, something else inside of her. *Filth*.

She wished she could cover her face with a mask now, hide from the woman that stared back at her in the mirror. She wanted to leap into the painting that hung above the bed—join the field of yellow roses that danced above every night, hide behind the tall stalks, forget that word. There it was again.

His hands in her hair, on her breasts, around her throat. Every night since she saw Jacob she hid behind those yellow roses, her fingers tracing the invisible bruises on her neck, peering out just for a moment to make sure Jacob couldn't find her again. And then that word.

WINDOW CURTAINS

For nearly an entire year when I am sixteen, my boyfriend and I sleep in the back of my black Volvo station wagon—the very vehicle that my uncle, who has been dead for six years by the time I start sleeping in the car, drove to our home in Miami from a dealership in Fort Lauderdale for my mother, the vehicle my sister drove two years before me, the one I inherited on my sixteenth birthday. It isn't that we don't have a place to sleep. In fact, we have two, my parents' house and his sister's, the house he moved into six months ago when he fled his life in Minnesota to return to his original home—Miami. His best friend died in a car accident a year before he left Minnesota, and Carlos was driving.

It's that we need a place to sleep together. Plus, it's only Fridays and Saturdays, and in my young mind that makes it okay.

My house. Two concerned parents and an anxious, nosy older sister who wouldn't know what to do if she discovered Carlos and me in my bed together. She's two years older than me, but hasn't checked any of the things-to-do-before-you-die off her list that I have. Now and on several other occasions she is a bump in my road of reckless behavior. *Are you doing drugs*, she asks me, that pleading look in her eye, *are you sneaking out again? Why are you doing this to me?* She says I worry her to death, that when my best friend told her how often I sneak out of the house (which I began to do long before my nights in the station wagon) she worried so much that she nearly told our parents. Why are you doing this to *me*, I want to ask. I do admit she holds some ground—the neighborhoods I venture to in Miami, the people I get high with, are not the finest I could choose. I calm her down, convince her that I'm not doing anything crazy, but I can always sense the discomfort that lies at the end of her laugh. I hear the sigh that rolls off the end of her smile, the downward gaze and shaking head that follows the incessant you-are-so-crazys. My house is out.

Carlos's home isn't any more accessible. His sister's is filled with children. Two boys and two girls. The oldest is in my junior class at Coral Reef High School and I regularly bump into him in the hallways.

"That's my boyfriend's nephew," I whisper to my friend Sara.

"Your boyfriend's nephew? Your boyfriend must be old!"

I shush her and laugh it off. He is older, by four years. Still, there is no way we can sleep in sin at his sister's home in front of her children, no matter how screwed up their home already is. (It is a mystery to me that this same woman who got pregnant at sixteen by her high school janitor—which explains how her son is my age—finds my sleeping with her little brother before marriage a transgression.)

This is how we find ourselves in the back of that station wagon for nights on end, white sheets hung up on the back windows to conceal us. We leave the sheets right there in the trunk, for next time. One of those sheets is my parents' old king-size bed sheet, decorated with pale pink and green flowers. There are several slits in the middle of the sheet and when we tuck the corners up under the tawny, plastic window frames we are not entirely hidden. People might see inside if we're not careful. Those sheets smell musty from years of hiding in the back of the linen closet, buried beneath mountains of other sheets and towels.

Everything in that car is a toffee sort of brown—the leather seats, destroyed by the relentless scratching of my poodle, Charlie, and before him my first dog, Zach. The carpet that lines the floor and ceiling, the panels surrounding the windows, the sun visors the center console the armrests—brown. The exterior is all black though, the nose and the butt of the car stretching out in opposite directions, much too obviously a station wagon. The initial thought of driving the wagon sent a crippling fear deep down into my stomach. I envisioned driving up to the entrance of my high school, pulling past the teal gates into the parking lot, everyone hopping out of their convertibles, their bright blue two-door sedans, their trendy Scions and Volkswagens and Jeeps, and me, riding up in the wagon with my sunglasses covering my eyes, the hood of my black sweater pulled over my head, hunched, hiding. I outright refused to drive that car when I turned sixteen, complained about it so much that Grandma nearly gave me her white Nissan Maxima. But she wasn't ready to buy a new car; she changed her mind and took it back.

We park the car in the same place every time: alongside Josh's house. Just fifteen minutes away from my parents' house. Josh—Carlos's friend—has a family of his own inside that house, a baby boy (his) and his girlfriend's two children (someone else's). We need Josh so we can store the car for the night, with us in it. It doesn't matter to him. Most nights he's out doing cocaine while his family sleeps inside the house.

One night, Carlos and I arrive in the station wagon from a party. It's been a few weeks since we started to park at Josh's. We set up the sheets first, like always, tuck them neatly into the folds of the window frames and lay one down beneath us. The coffee-brown carpet that lines the trunk's floor and ceiling scratches our skin without the extra sheet to lie on. We're facing each other, my left hand combing through his dark curls.

"You know what Aaron said to me before we left?" He asks.

"What?" My mind races through the possibilities. There are so many things I hope he won't say. That I slept with Aaron weeks before I met Carlos, that we still talk all the time, that I'm easy, or something like that. I keep looking straight at him, not letting on that I'm afraid of what he'll say.

"He said I should get you a little drunk," he says, looking down at the carpet beneath us. "And then, we should get really high. That I'd have a great night if, if I got the combination right."

I sigh, lean back on my elbows. How ridiculous to feel relief in hearing that. But in my head the other possibilities are endless, worse. The list coils up inside my head. He must want me to look appalled or hurt or something other than what my expression says, because he just stares at me, blank-faced, like he's waiting for me to say something, anything, to contest what he's just said.

I lean toward him to prove Aaron's theory right, and he lets me, though what he really wants me to do is defend myself, prove that I'm not that kind of girl, since he isn't that kind of guy. But I can't feign that sort of emotion when all I want is for him—for anyone—to see I'm not scared of anything or anyone, that I'd sleep in a car or a bus or under a freeway if it means that I'm cool, that I'm that kind of girl.

This is toward the beginning, when we still park the car up against the right side of the house, in between its white wall and the dark brown fence that encloses the neighbor's yard. There's just enough room for the car to squeeze through and for us to open the doors, carefully, if we need to. It's cozy, the car tucked into the crevice like a child beneath warm blankets. Except we're in a car. But we're together, clutching each other all night as if the world is going to end tomorrow, and if we aren't caught in the world's end holding onto each other, my head in the nook of his arm, his arms wrapped around my waist, then what's the point of living at all?

The next morning we wake to the sun slicing through the gaps in my parents' sheet, the one that hangs over the window. We're sweaty. I maneuver through the usual morning tasks: run my fingers through my long hair, pull half of it up into a clip, out of my face, wipe the sweat from the back of my neck, the eyeliner from below my eyes, smear it back into the closest semblance of a line I can make. He slides back into his dress shirt, buttons it up over his white undershirt.

"Morning," he says. "How'd you sleep?"

Like every other morning that I wake up to his face, my head buried in his arms, I want to stay in the trunk of this car with him for every night to come.

I hop over the second row of seats, sling my leg over the center console. In the driver's seat, I attempt to brush the tartar from my front teeth with my tongue, then angle the rearview mirror toward me so I can see my face, eyebrows to chin. I grab the water bottle from the cup holder between my seat and his, slosh the liquid around in my mouth and open the door to spit.

I wipe the side of my mouth and close the door. I pull two sticks of gum from a blue package and offer him one, pop the other in my mouth. He sits there, dazed, maybe still brushing off the effects of last night. I place the square, black key in the ignition and turn. I need to get home since my parents believe I slept at a friend's house—whose house it is this time I can't be sure, for I run a list so long of friends' names, real and imaginary, whose houses I sleep at on the weekends that I cannot fathom how my parents don't investigate further, how they don't persist in asking me why my friends never sleep at my house, don't try to follow me or catch me in a lie (there are so many).

But here I am, shifting the car into reverse, gazing over my right shoulder and out onto the long patch of grass behind me that extends onto the road, 176th street, when I realize my reliance on autopilot teeters on the edge of laziness—*am I too close to that brown fence? Am I going to hit that*—yes, I am. I hear the screech as the right taillights encased in red and yellow and white glass wedge right off the car, halfway, that is, until I hit the brakes.

"Shit," I say, sighing into my hands, planning the next batch of lies to explain the broken light.

"I told you you're always too close to the fence," Carlos says, shaking his head, a smirk of I-told-you-so swiping across his stubbly face.

I don’t allow my lips to curl up into a smile. I don’t laugh. *I can’t let him be right.* I listen to his instructions and pull forward to un-wedge the car from the fence. I open the door, nearly slam it into the white wall on my left, and stomp through the un-cut grass that just reaches my shins. It’s not so bad. I brace myself against the rear of the car, bend my knees and try to shove the glass section back into place. It won’t stick, but it’ll get me by until I come up with something. I walk around through the grass again, its leaves tickling my calves, and get in the car.

“I’ll tell him I parked in a tight spot and when I came back it was like this, and that it must’ve been the big truck I parked next to. What do you think?”

“I thought you would just tell him that you backed out too close to the side of something, like you did.”

“Why would I do that?” I roll my eyes—I’m not going to take the blame, feel the weight of responsibility latching onto the bottoms of my feet. I can’t look my dad in the eye and tell him it was *me.* My fault. My flaw. I can be that girl at parties, at school, in the trunk of the car or on the beach in the middle of the night. But I cannot be that blemished girl to anyone who has known me since I was a little kid, smartest in the class, the only kindergartener who walked to a first grade class every morning because her teacher knew kindergarten was a breeze for her. The girl who won spelling bees and played piano. The girl who organized her desk and made her bed everyday, made dinner for herself—independent.

Over a year later, I’m alone in my bedroom, on the phone with my friend Tiffany, trying to decide whether or not I should call the police. Carlos is at our friend’s house taking too many pills. Tiffany tells me there's nothing else I can do, I've already tried calling him and telling him to stop, I have to call the police. But I think there must be some other way. *Have I even done anything at all?*

"Just do it," she says.

I call, report that my friend might be taking too many pills. I don't even know if I give them the address. I don't even know if it's eight Advil he's taken or twenty painkillers.

Fifteen minutes later, the doorbell rings. It sounds longer than usual, the chime. My bedroom hollows out into a cave, the endless ringing echoing off its concave walls. I'm sitting on my bed in the middle of the room.

"What do I do," I ask her, because since I broke up with Carlos two weeks ago, I possess an insatiable impulse to ask her what I'm supposed to do every time something goes wrong, and something goes wrong all the time these days.

"Answer it," she commands. I sigh.

We are seventeen and the police are standing outside the front door of my parents' house, at midnight, and I'm supposed to just answer it.

"Hold on a sec," I tell her. I uncross my legs, plant them onto the wood floor and grab the corner of my tall, oak dresser. It's dark in my room. All the lights are off, but the glare of the moon slices through my pearl-white blinds and I see a girl in the mirrors of my closet doors. I do not recognize her.

I walk toward the door, grab the brass doorknob with my right hand and twist all the way to the right, then pull, attempting to ensure that a creaking will not sound from my doorway as I escape. I've had practice. From my doorway I peer down the hall and shoot toward the front door where my father stands, already gazing through the peephole. *How is he already out here?* I cannot remember how long it's been since the doorbell rang anymore. How long did I stand in my room, sweaty feet glued to the floor, staring at the girl in the mirror? He's looking at me now, eyes wide. I see the blue-green of his irises. I imagine he sees the exact same thing: my blue-green eyes, inherited from him, wide open, glaring back at him—a reflection. I imagine he's just as confused as I was when I looked in the mirror and saw that girl I didn't recognize, because he's just standing there, staring at me, his pale, hairy arms crossed over his chest, his round belly protruding below.

"It's for me," I say. I wonder how this girl is brave enough to tell her father that the police standing outside her door at midnight are there for *her*. I've seen the fright in Daddy's eyes before, like when he got the call last summer that I was not fast asleep in my bed but rather, waiting for him, handcuffed and drunk, at the South Beach police station. It's that familiar mix of wide-eyed shock and anger, worry and fear that his little girl is not okay, that he was not able to protect her from everything, that stops me in my tracks.

I recoil as I watch his thin lips recede into a tight line, infinitely long and dry like the water line that scars the ocean's shore at low tide. I watch him turn the lock on the door and push.

"Hello, Sir, how are you?" they say. "We got a call?"

The first thing I want to tell the two cops who stand in my doorway is that they're idiots. I examine their navy blue uniforms. The tightly folded and pressed collars, sleeves that stop right in the middle of their biceps, black belts that hold their straight-legged pants up high, black accoutrements that adorns those belts—gun, stick, bullets. Tiny notepads clutched in their palms.

Their fingers curl around the notepads as if they're trying to block me from reading what's written on the lines. I step forward, in front of my father, and rise onto my tiptoes, worried they know something I don't. Worried I won't be able to think on my feet.

"You have the wrong house," I say, folding my arms across my chest as I realize I'm not wearing a bra. I'm not sure if I fold my arms because I catch them looking at my chest, but I'm cold and I'm not wearing a bra.

"Excuse me?" they say, looking me up and down again.

It's December and it's chilly. Even for Miami. Goose bumps rise on my arms and legs, but it's inescapably humid and like the girl in the mirror, the cold is gone just as quickly as it came.

"You have the *wrong house*," I repeat, remembering my father still towers next to me, though he's yet to get in a word.

"No, no," one of them says. "We've got the right place. 10900 SW 134th Avenue?" It's the short one who says this. He's nearly a foot shorter than the lanky cop who stands, very still, on his left. The short one shifts his weight from left to right, stepping closer to the door. I decide to address him first.

"Yes, you have my address right, but this is not the house you were supposed to go to," I say. "You must've gotten this address because I called from here, but I sent you to my friend's house, right over there. In Devon Aire." I point over the small one's head—he's about 5-foot-6, which makes us the same height—toward the neighborhood where they should have gone. *Shit, how could they have screwed this up so badly? Why did I call from the house phone? Why didn't I use my cell?*

As soon as I open my mouth to explain—Hey, here's the address, scram already—the little guy steps forward.

"I'm gonna need to see your ID, young lady. You, too, Sir."

They're making my father look for his wallet, and I know by now he's lifted his brain from its slumber and is actively participating in what's going on. He's not a figment of my imagination, standing there next to me. *So many loose ends to tie up,* I think, imagining the heavy lifting I must do once these guys step off the front stoop.

Behind the cops palm trees rustle, their wide fronds wrestling, their long fingers dancing in the wind. I think of the sound of my mother stuffing brown, plastic bags into one another as she does every Sunday when she puts the groceries away. I think of another tree that still stands in the backyard, my initials carved into its trunk—*CM*. I wonder how long it's been since I've seen that girl who climbed its branches and took a key to its trunk with her best friends nearly ten years ago. She is not here.

My father retreats into the house and I follow, slowly, peering over my shoulder at the cops. They're in a sort of huddle, shoulders hunched in toward each other, scribbling notes in their books and looking my way like they've just uncovered the next Bonnie Parker. I watch my father tear through the mess of papers that cover his desk. Credit card bills, mortgages, files, files, files. My name is written on some of those papers—my credit card bill, cell phone bill, grades. The back of my neck is warm. So are my hands. Sweat trickles through the hair on the top of my neck and the sides of my face as I watch him pick papers up, throw them back down.

He finds his wallet on the dark wood surface of the circular table that sits between his desk and the front door, the table my grandmother fell from while changing a light bulb when I was an infant, not even a year old. She stepped onto the desk and fell, broke her leg in three places, stayed in the bedroom that would later become mine with that cast propped up, watching soap operas all day. My sister and mother question my ability to remember that image—Grandma's leg propped up on a stack of pillows, a small TV hanging in the far left corner of the room. Someone cradled me in their arms as they stood in the doorway and spoke to Grandma. I stared right at her, eye-level with her cast, her auburn hair frayed about her face, the white, white pillows underneath her cast and behind her back, her attention devoted to the soap opera that glared from the TV, the TV hung up on the left side of the room. No matter how hard it is for them to believe I didn't just paint the picture from a story told to me from someone else's memory, I know that memory is mine.

Dad grabs his ID and shoos me off to get mine. I'll tell Dad this is all just a silly mistake, it has nothing to do with the fact that my ex-boyfriend—Carlos—might or might not be taking too many pills right now in the living room of our friend's house in Devon Aire, that everything is just fine—I am just fine—and I am still his innocent little girl standing in front of her second-grade class, winning the spelling bee, getting straight A's, narrating from memory the kindergarten production of *The Gingerbread Man*. I will convince him that I'm not the stranger he was just staring at, the one who sneaks out of her room night after night to get drunk and high and hang out with boys. *No, no,* I hear the cops repeating in my head, *we've got this right*.

I think of a time just months before all of this, before the cops and the pills and my father's worried eyes. Carlos and I are still inseparable. It's been nearly a year since we started sleeping in the car. Parking alongside Josh's house is no longer sufficient. We pull all the way into his backyard now. Carlos opens the brown gates, I drive through, and we cruise around to the left side of the house where no one can see us unless they peek through the window. It's dark outside. One or two in the morning. We're listening to a song by Bob Marley and Lauryn Hill, the bass turned up as loud as it can go on the old stereo. I manually roll my seat back and lie down. I'm high enough that the music feels like it's playing inside my head, that my body is weightless, airy. Lauryn and Bob are singing just for me, *Turn your lights down low, and pull your window curtains. Oh, let Jah moon come shining in—into our life, again.* Somehow we manage to crawl into the trunk and set up the sheets again—two on the windows, one beneath us—that moon shining in through the torn curtains.

The next morning I wake before he does. Something isn't right. I'm not sweaty this time, but I feel some kind of moisture beneath me that I cannot explain. I sit up slowly, trying not to wake him, and I see blood beneath me that must've arrived overnight. I shut my eyes and press my fingers against my forehead. *He can't see all this blood. What will he think?* It's all over the sheets, the crimson stains that I'm sitting in. *How will I make it to the front without him seeing?* I sit back on my elbows and conjure up different scenarios. *I'll wait for him to go to the front first, then wrap the sheets around me and jump out of the trunk, walk around the car and get into the driver's seat, sheets still wrapped around my bottom.* I'm sweating now, the moisture on my neck and the small of my back matching the moisture beneath my legs. All I can think about is getting in the shower. All I can think about is how peculiar it is for this to happen to me.

I think of the morning I woke up in Tiffany's sister's dorm room at the University of Miami. I'd just turned sixteen, hadn't met Carlos yet, and could hardly remember the events of the previous night. My head was pounding and I felt like I had to pee, bad. I went into the bathroom and discovered an odd, red stain on my underwear. It couldn't have been that time of the month again, I was certain. Then I remembered Tiffany elbowing me, pointing me toward the guy in the corner of the room who'd been staring at me all night. I remembered getting into a car with that guy—Dane—and that's when these words began to repeat over and over: *we can try it, if you want, I promise I won't hurt you*.

Hovering over the toilet in the bathroom that morning, I looked down at the stain and closed my eyes, holding back tears. *Is this what I really wanted? For it to be like this?*

I look down at the stain beneath me now as I sit in the back of the car. I look to my right at Carlos, still fast asleep.

Keeping the sheets wrapped around me, I lift one leg and then the other over the backseat, then get into the driver's seat without him noticing the sheets are still wrapped around me or that I'm even awake. He stirs in the back.

"I'm up here. My phone rang," I say. "I must've forgotten to bring it to the back last night."

He meets me in the front, gets in the passenger seat, still sleepy and unaware of my lies. I pull out of the backyard and onto the street, make excuses for why I'm driving so fast, why I don't have time to get breakfast, why I need to get home. I drive down US-1 with the air conditioning blasting. Sweat still slides down my neck and back. I pull up to his sister's pale-yellow house and send him off. When I arrive at my own house I bunch the sheets up into a ball, throw them in the passenger seat and run into my house, straight to my room. I change, then go back out to the car when no one's looking, and sneak the sheets into my room. I know I need to wash them—*what would I say if someone were to see these sheets?* But I cannot take my eyes off the stains. I stare at the pink and green flowers, the deep red splattered across the sheets. I see the blood of that morning in the dorm room. I hear those words repeating—*don't worry, I won't hurt you*.

I stare at the blood on the sheets in front of me, wondering why it's so hard to just throw them in the wash and forget about it all. Wondering what might've been if I'd never discovered that blood in the dorm room—if it'd never been there at all—if instead this blood was not a heavy period but rather, that first-time blood I lost to someone who doesn't remember my name. If instead of my first time being snatched by a complete stranger, it could have been with Carlos—the man who actually knows my name. The man who actually looks into my eyes, not past them. Maybe, then, I would recognize the girl in the mirror. Maybe I could look into my father's eyes and admit all I've done.

I manage to explain to the cops that *someone* might be taking too many pills at the house in Devon Aire—the house they are supposed to be at—that it might just be a bluff or a misunderstanding, but I didn't want to take the chance. My father stares at me, then the cops, who've finally registered what I've been trying to tell them all along.

"Okay," they say, nodding their heads and scribbling more notes. "You have a good night." The cops trot down the burnt red and brown brick steps, slide into their Impala, and drive away.

My father closes the door. It's dark inside; we never even thought to turn the lights on. The darkness reminds me of nights I choose not to sneak out the window—the window is more a nuisance than an advantage, except I can lock my door from the inside when I use that escape—

nights I waltz out the front door and hope my parents remain asleep. They do. I look down at the carpet, recognize its dark blue and red patterns swirling into one another, examine my feet and unpainted toenails. He stands between the circular desk and the dark brown, Victoria-style rolled-back couch, fingering the brass buttons on the arms, finding the empty holes where buttons are missing. I want to go back to my room and shut the door.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"I just need a second," I say, turning around to glance at my bedroom door, then back at him. "I'll talk to you in a minute."

I walk down the hall, back into my room. It's still dark and the phone still rests on the bed.

"Hey. That was the police, at my door. They came to my house by accident and my dad answered. He's asking me to tell him what's going on," I say. I can't stop my voice from shaking, can't stop my hands from trembling. Then that wretched question I cannot stop asking her. "What do I do?"

"Tell him the truth; you'll see how much better you'll feel, I swear."

Can I really just tell him? Just tell him the truth? She is worse off than I am—always smoking weed, doing extacy, hopping from guy to guy. And I'm asking her what to do, because for some reason she's made me feel safe, like I can trust her with anything, unlike my other friends—the ones who carved their initials into the tree in the backyard with me years ago. I think that this must be a step in the right direction, telling the truth, but somewhere in my shaking voice I know it can't be right. I cannot see this now, this connection between Tiffany and the bad things that happen. *How is she so calm? Why does it seem like she's smiling on the other end of the line?*

I scan the posters on the walls of my room—the wide Goo Goo Dolls one to the right of my door, the long Beatles one to the left of my closet, the neon, glow-in-the-dark Sublime sign that hangs above the left side of my bed. The door-length Bob Marley print on the back of my door. I wonder how I got myself into this mess, what my parents think of me. That look in my father's eyes. I watch as the shadows from the street outside my window glide across the top of the Sublime poster, the whir of the passing cars in sync with the headlights that streak across the wall. Everything zooms by.

My father knocks before I have the chance to come up with something.

"Caitie? Can I come in?"

I open the door and tell him look, it's fine, I was just worried about, about Carlos, because he sounded really weird on the phone and my friend was texting me, telling me he was acting strange, so I just wanted to make sure. But it's fine, I swear, everything's cool now, Dad.

Within ten minutes the police arrive at the house in Devon Aire, take Carlos to the hospital in an ambulance and pump his stomach. It isn't necessary, but they do it anyway. His sister calls me over and over, trying to find out if her brother is okay, and I can't even answer the phone because somewhere inside of me I know I did wrong—not the worrying for his health part, but calling the police. I know I should've driven over there first to see what was happening. I should have thought about the repercussions he would face. That this will be on his record for good—attempted overdose. That somewhere inside of me I think that maybe, because I think I must listen to Tiffany and break up with him—*he's twenty-one and you're seventeen; you're* *going to college soon and he's staying here; you have a life ahead and he, well, he should find his own*—I did all of this to get him away from me. To do as she says when I can't even do as my father says, when I can't even do what's right—be with the man who held me for nights on end in the back of my station wagon, who turned his head when Aaron said I was easy, who, unlike the guy who lied and said he wouldn't hurt me and left stains for me to find the next morning in my friend's bathroom, looked directly into my eyes—never past them.

Weeks later, after the cops and the ambulance, Carlos sits on the edge of my bed and tells me the first thing they did was search him, check him for weapons. Of course he didn't have any. His tan skin is pale now, like the color's been wiped out of him. His t-shirt is loose around his waist, something I haven't seen since we met over a year ago. He's lost at least ten pounds. I feel as though I've been punched in the stomach, the wind knocked out of me. I don't tell him how I feel. *I did this to myself.* He is the one who should feel this way—betrayed.

"They lifted my shirt and saw my stretch marks," he says, and I envision the long, pink lines that trail up and down his stomach, remember when I told him months ago he shouldn't be ashamed. I imagine how, instead, they thought they were scars. I wince.

"They accused me of trying to kill myself before. They thought my stretch marks were scars from a blade or a knife or something—that I did that to myself."

And he couldn't defend himself, I think, *he couldn't tell them that his under-eighteen-year-old girlfriend broke up with him and it's her that he is scarred from, not the medics' supposed blades.*

I stare at his face and examine the deep, purple circles that lace his eyes, the too-skinny neck, the pale cheeks. I see his face sinking further and further into a raging storm, black clouds rippling across his face.

From the living room where my father sits in his leather recliner the television buzzes with words I can't make out. My father hasn't asked me what's going on, why Carlos is back. He only asks us if we're okay.

The sun beams through the blinds in my room and I remember Carlos and I sleeping in the back of that station wagon, the sun slicing through the ripped sheets on the windows, our bodies intertwined. In my head, the music of that night: *Turn your lights down low, and pull your window curtains. Oh, let Jah moon come shining in—into our life, again.* I lean into him, let my hand graze the back of his neck. I think that this must've been Tiffany's plan all along—get Carlos out of the picture, distort his image in my father's eye, have me to herself again. I can't be sure.

He looks back at me. This time his eyes are filled with those black, black clouds and I wonder if he's looking into my eyes like he used to or if something's changed. I imagine us in that station wagon again, the sun stretching across us in the early morning. *Turn your lights down low, never ever try to resist, oh no. Let your love coming shining in—into our lives, again*. I wonder if we'll ever pull through those brown gates alongside Josh's house again, if we'll ever hop into the back of the station wagon, make curtains out of torn sheets, lay a sheet beneath us to shield our backs from that rough, rough carpet.

BRANCHES

You're seated at your desk with all of the essential items you will need for this task. Laptop, coffee—there must be lots and lots of coffee—paper, pen. Door's closed, no one's home. You must write, write for an hour, or two, or however long you can manage to warn off the crippling fear of how much your work is lacking, how far you have to go, how you can hardly get past the stain of spilled coffee on the notes in front of you.

Then the tree. It claws at your window. It won't stop. The branches grow longer and longer under Florida's summer rain, long enough to scratch your window while you're forever trying to write. The screech of the branch's longest point—a nail, it seems, for there is nothing closer to describe this sound than that of nails on a chalkboard, something you used to imagine in your mind as a child over and over because you couldn't make it stop—make it impossible to work. Forget calling maintenance. They will never arrive to fix the problem in time. In time for you to salvage the little capacity you have left to work, before you really lose it.

Forget it. You're standing atop your desk now, scissors in your left hand, pushing the window open. One leg bent for support, the other as close to the windowsill as it can get without risking the chance of falling through, you lurch forward. You grab the naked tree branch with your right hand, scissors still in your left, and pull. The branch is inside your room now. You wonder how it has grown so long, how it reaches inside your room yet still it bears no leaves.

You know it was you who just stood atop your desk and pulled the branch toward you, but you're starting to sweat, having that menacing branch so close to you, the window's glass no longer separating you from it. You look down at the scissors in your hand, consider letting go of the branch altogether. You wanted it gone, wanted it to leave you alone, get out of your head and let you work, but now as you brace yourself with your legs, toes curled over the edge of your black desk, left hand attempting to saw through the branch's fingers, right hand holding onto its base as best you can, you cannot move.

Just do it, quick snip. Let go. Get to work. You see the coffee stains below you, ruining your notes. Whatever's left of the coffee in your mug has gone cold. You gaze behind yourself at the unmade bed, the colorless walls. You turn back around and cut through the branch with the scissors. Then the branch is out of your room it's gone no more screeching no more distractions but still, this room, it's a mess. You must get back to work, close the window, place the scissors in their box, sit, sit, sit, write, write, write, you can do this, no more goddamn tree, get to work.

The screech again. You stare at the branch's shavings on your desk, the jagged edges staring back at you. You look out into the field of trees, watch as a squirrel jumps between the branches, a dog at the bottom of the tree snarling up, up, into the tree, jumping against the trunk and howling.

MINE

The night I saw you walking down Plymouth Street with your hands shoved deep into the pockets of your black pea coat, your auburn hair tucked behind your ears, something pulled inside my chest like a car backfiring, a jolt—that lurch before the seatbelt yanks you back. Instead of the seatbelt, it was my hand pressing my heart back down into my chest.

I didn't need your blood or a strand of your wavy hair. Those were your father's lips; thin on top, full on the bottom. Yours were painted grape-red. Those were his long limbs. You paused at the corner, looked up to the lit window on the second floor. A man opened the door of the brick building, snuck behind you and slid his hands around your waist. You tilted your chin upward and looked at him, long and demanding, the way I once looked at your father.

I saw the ring as he laced his right hand into your left. Inside my chest, that jolt again. Under the streetlight's yellow haze I saw your cheeks, rouged from the cold. I wondered who would walk you down the aisle, who'd hold your hand when you would learn that, inside your stomach, was life. I wanted to walk across the cobbled road, press your cheek against mine, take your hair in my hands and look into your eyes. Oh, those eyes.

ABANDONED LAURELS

Day after Mom's funeral. I stand outside Ray's house on the wooden deck, just ahead of the hole that gapes through the middle of the panels. The sun hangs behind the clouds, like a body curved into a hammock. I wrap my arms around my torso, let my hands crawl over my ribs, my fingers rising and falling as they drop over the end of one bone and rise up onto the next. I can't stop picturing her open eyes and still body, can't stop wondering what made Ray think she might've been scared. My mother was never scared. She had an answer for everything. Whether I believed her answers or not didn't matter.

I watch the waves in the harbor ahead of me rising and falling, breathing. The breeze whips my hair into my eyes, salt from the ocean mist burning them. The skin around my eyes feels swollen and raised. Scanning the harbor—the man swimming just offshore, the endless body of water dissolving into the Long Island Sound—I think, *if this was the last place Mom saw when she died, her eyes should've been closed, her expression peaceful*.

The man swims faster beneath the dark sky, his left arm shooting up from the murky water, curving over his body and toward his head, then slicing back under. I want to run from my place on the deck and spring into the water with the man, swim the way I used to everyday when I was a kid. Swim until my arms give out, the breath knocked out of me. We're parallel to one another, him swimming, me standing with my arms wrapped around my torso, trying to stay afloat. To the swimmer's right, a cluster of ash-colored rocks stands jagged and bold, like they're watching us, protecting something. And then they're racing, or so I think; the rocks moving out toward the Sound with the swimmer, but the man swims too far and the rocks escape my vision. I let the man go and look back toward the rocks.

I tiptoe across the wood, trying to avoid the splinters on Ray's deck, thinking about what might've been different if I'd just gone to see my mother. If I hadn't lied to Ray. I keep telling myself she's gone, as if repeating it will do me some sort of good. When I reach the door and step inside the house that looks more like a cabin—the only home for ten miles that isn't worth a million dollars and doesn't have four cars in the driveway—I notice Ray is standing there, too, staring out toward the Sound.

"You see that man?" I ask.

"What man?"

"That guy swimming out there," I say. "Don't you see him?"

"I don't see anything but the water," Ray says. "You okay, Joey?"

"Nobody really calls me that anymore," I say, pushing the damp hair out of my eyes.

It's been nearly ten years since I let anyone call me Joey, but I guess Ray is just as shaken as I am, maybe more, having seen Mom's eyes open. He was good enough to her, although I know she only settled with him. He's a stocky man from Milwaukee. Gentle, determined. He's mildly successful, too, works for a contracting company that builds homes up and down the east coast, but her being with him just never felt right. She was still waiting for my father to come running back to her. Even though she was already living with Ray and Dad already had a new wife and daughter, his real kids long gone, it took Mom years to acknowledge the divorce papers, to accept that Dad didn't want her.

From where Ray and I stand, I can see the drawer in the kitchen where Mom always threw her junk. It's still without a handle.

"The drawer?" Ray asks, looking from me to the kitchen, then back to me again.

"Yeah," I say. "Never fixed it?"

Ray shakes his head, his curly, chestnut-brown hair rustling like the leaves beneath the Red Maple trees outside. The hair that hangs across his left eye is peppered with gray. We look at one another and then back down to the floor, then to the drawer again. Estrangement creeps between us, climbs my legs and coils around my waist until I have to catch my breath and finally, the pressure gives, the silence so loud I cover my ears.

"The drawer," he says, letting the words spread out between us, linger. "Your mother wanted you to be the one to go through it. Maybe she'd planned on taking care of it before she was gone, but there just wasn't enough time."

"I'll take care of it," I say. "Can't be too hard. It's just a bunch of junk, right?"

"Who knows? She wouldn't let me sort through it. You know how she was," he says. "She talked about you all the time toward the end."

"Oh," I say, tracing the lines on my right palm with my left index finger.

“When she found out the cancer’d spread so quickly, she didn’t know what to do. I guess she thought she still had time to fix what she never got around to fixing.”

The words rub up against my shoulder, nudging me. There’s nothing I can say. *What did she expect? To erase the years? What would I have said if she tried?* It’s buried with her, that life she always wanted. And here I am, listening to one of the men of my mother’s life say she wanted to fix things.

What’s in that drawer anyway?

On the phone, the day before I got to the house, Ray told me Mom died with her eyes open. Not wide open, like the twenty-six-year-old Caucasian woman that was found eleven years ago in Laurel Hollow underneath the evergreen canopies, stuffed between two laurel bushes like a pile of unopened bills you shove in a drawer because you can’t bring yourself to address them. Can’t even bring yourself to look directly at your name printed in bold letters on the envelopes, so you hide them between two laurel bushes. For a while, you might even believe that they’re out of your life for good. But they’re not.

That girl’s eyes were wide open. Seventeen stabs to the stomach and chest. Her golden hair crimson with blood, melting into the dense layer of moss and leaves and twigs that sheeted the ground. The laurel bushes surrounding her in white blush blooms. *Jessica, was it?* Mom said she knew that girl’s mother from the country club—the club she paid dues for every year instead of paying for my brother, Ched, to go to a school where someone might’ve known what dyslexia was.

Yeah, Jessica.

My mother used to tell me—while drinking cabernet sauvignon out of the glass she and Dad bought together just before he split, a chip on its crystal rim—that when she died her face would be flawless, more beautiful than the way her face looked when she still had a soul inside of her narrow chest. Eyes closed like she was sleeping. She said she'd be wearing her azure nightgown, the one that swept the floor when she traipsed to the bathroom, drunk, the one with a tear above her knee from when she snagged it on the old wicker chair that sat in front of her mirror. She described the same flawless image for my father when she was five months pregnant with me. Said when she went into labor, she'd look just like the women on television—false eyelashes, rusty shadow illuminating her evergreen eyes, her auburn hair loosely curled.

Unlike the image she constructed of her face in death, Mom was right about the hospital. Her water broke in the middle of the biting night on November 22nd, and she waited to wake my father until she finished painting her toenails. When she walked out of the hospital she weighed 122 pounds—just ten pounds heavier than she was the day she learned she was pregnant.

These were the things she held onto, the things that made it easier for her to turn her head when Dad left, when Ched dropped out of Cold Spring Harbor High, when our neighbor Ted Yeomans raised a gun to his head. What a terrible accident, she'd said. That poor man.

Ray said Mom's eyes were open.

"Kinda like the droopy look she used to get after a couple glasses," he said over the phone. "But with a little hint of panic or something. Like, she didn't know what was coming, I guess."

Like she couldn't shove the girl between the laurels any longer, I thought, then got mad at myself for thinking something like that when I'd just found out my mother was dead, then surprised that I remembered the girl in the laurels, then angry that Ray told me her eyes were open in the first place.

The wind picks up outside, the branches of the Red Maple scratching against the backdoor, a relentless back and forth sweeping and scraping, like the branches are trying to get our attention, distract us.

“I’ll leave you to yourself,” Ray says. “Gonna head down to Marty’s to pick up some dinner. If you need anything, I’ll just be up the road.”

For a moment, I forgot he was there. I peel myself away from the tree branches.

“I’ll be fine,” I say, remembering the red swelling around my eyes. “Take your time.”

I hear the door close and wait for the screech of his brakes before I move. When I’m sure he’s gone, I inch toward the drawer, past the pile of *New York Times* that lays on the countertop. I know they’re my mother’s. She read the *Times* every morning, went straight to the obituaries in search of a name she might’ve recognized. If she found one, she’d run to the phone to gossip with one of the women from the club. It was an obsession of hers I’ve found myself flipping the pages to, the only inheritance I seem to have received from my mother.

I remember the day she found Ted Yeomans’ name in the paper. I was standing in the kitchen, browsing the empty refrigerator and hoping it would somehow fill itself, when I heard her gasp. I looked up and saw her reach across the kitchen table for the phone, her hand pressed hard against her chest. She pulled the phone as close to her as the cord allowed and read the news to the person on the other end of the phone.

“Can you believe it?” she said, tugging at her earlobe with her free hand. “Shot himself in the head. Just like that.” She let her hand drop, exhaled. Something changed in her face. It was in her expression—I thought she might’ve been smiling, just a bit. But then I thought that had to be crazy. *She was just shocked that he was dead, wasn’t she?*

I glance at the phone that still hangs on the wall, remembering my mother’s voice. I yank the drawer open from the bottom, stick my hand in the pile and pull out an envelope with her name on it: Elyse Green. I’m not surprised she still used my father’s name. I set it down and grab a handful of seemingly innocuous bills—bank statements, water bills, collection notices. I spend nearly an hour reading. Unpaid credit card bills that Ray will have to deal with. Banks looking for money. Bloomingdale’s account closed. *Why did my mother want me to do this? Why not Ray?*

Then my hands stumble upon a letter from Ted Yeomans, that neighbor of ours who shot himself, that man my mother read about in the paper. I remember him well: single, always in a white shirt with oil stains on the front, topaz-brown hair dangling just above his squinted eyes, his stomach hanging over his black belt.

When I was in ninth grade, Ted took my brother and me to the Cold Spring Harbor Whaling Museum just outside Laurel Hollow. Ted worked at the museum, my mother told us, knew all about the history of the town. The museum was built in 1942 as a way for the town to conserve the whaling history that clung to the harbor, nestled itself beneath the jagged rocks.

“Wait ‘til you see the old whaleboat,” Ted said as he drove, eyes locked on the winding road ahead of us. “One of the scrimshaw collections. A real beauty.”

I smiled at him from the back seat, glancing at his dark eyes in the rearview mirror of his Dodge pickup. As we pulled up to the museum, it started to rain. From the outside, it looked like an old, renovated house. Blue-grey shingles fell from the left side of the roof. We ran inside with our hands over our heads, slipping on the wet driveway. The museum was closed that day. We had the place to ourselves. Ted walked us through the history, explained the whaling that thrived in the Cold Spring Harbor port in the mid-1800s—a history of murder, really—named each part of the whaleboat and the 700 items of the museum's scrimshaw collection. He said that when the whalers made it out of the Sound and into the ocean, the men threw a harpoon that was attached to a heavy rope into a whale. Killed it. Ted was most fixated with the next step, a process called "cutting in."

"You cut into the skin and blubber and peal it back in long strips. Then you boil it all down to whale oil," he said, his hands extended out, motioning the process with a certainty that reminded me we were alone in the museum. Then he took us into a room in the very back. It was too small to be an exhibit room, but too dark for an office. He closed the door behind us, then pulled a black sheet off the table that sat in the middle of the room.

"Ever seen a ship in a bottle?"

He reached for the smallest one, a hand-blown, glass bottle with a flat bottom and a tiny ship inside that looked just like the scrimshaw we'd seen in the exhibit room. A cork was stuck through the opening of the bottle, the ship trapped inside. Red masts thin as toothpicks supported black and white sails. The ship sat atop a circular, blue plate. Two more long tables took up the entire room, their surfaces covered in bottles. There must've been close to a thousand.

“It’s a very difficult process, making these guys. Gotta have nimble fingers. Your hand shakes, and boom, it’s all over.”

When we got home I asked my mother about it. She said he spent nearly every night in that room working on the ships. Insomnia.

I stand in front of a pile of my mother’s mail more than ten years later, clutching Ted’s letter in my hand, surprised at how vivid his hands are in my mind, how strong the smell of Rhino glue is. The letter was opened, the seal folded into the back of the envelope. Inside, a note written on a lined piece of yellow paper.

Elyse,

I know you saw me in the woods last night and I know you saw the girl. We have to make this go away. I’m coming over tomorrow.

-Ted

Hands shaking, I rummage through the letters, looking for more from Ted. Three more and they all say one thing: if you say a word, I’ll go after Joey and Ched.

I drop the letter, walk back outside. The dock creaks beneath my bare feet as I walk away from the house. I’m a fool for not wearing shoes; splinters consume the old, unfinished wood. *How could I forget?*

Three years ago, before the phone call from Ray and the man swimming in the Sound, during the two weeks I crashed at my mother’s house when I was twenty-one, I walked the deck at night and woke to find splinters dug into the bottoms of my feet. It was the first time I visited her since she moved in with Ray. She was anxious having me at her house during those two weeks, like she didn't want me to find something. Like she was hiding something.

"So, when'd you finally sign the papers?" I asked.

"What papers?" she said, her focus on the obituaries that laid on the table in front of her.

"The divorce papers. Dad wouldn't stop hassling me about them. Wanted me to remind you. As if he thought we still lived together or something."

"Oh," she said. "That."

"Yeah. That."

"I don't remember," she said, looking over her shoulder at Ray. He was asleep on the couch. "And I don't care."

That night, I dug through the papers in the far left drawer in the kitchen. The wide chrome handle was hanging off, I remember, because when I pulled it open to look for Dad's letters, the ones he'd called me and Mom a hundred times about, it came off in my hand. There they were, the unsigned papers. I wondered why Dad had stopped calling me about it. I assumed Mom had finally gotten it over with. Maybe Dad just gave up—on everything. I didn't see any letters from Ted Yeomans that night.

If it hadn't been for my needing to crash somewhere—anywhere away from Denver—I might not have seen my mother again. I'd left my boyfriend Jess—a thirty-two-year-old tattoo artist who, in the eight months we lived together, didn't want to do anything but have sex and smoke weed—and my bartending job at Scotty's in Denver. At first, Jess was a welcome relief from the tension with my mother. My mother and I were hardly speaking, the two of us on either ends of a rope that wouldn't give. And then Jess began to whisper my name in his sleep, started holding my hand in public. I walked into his apartment one night to find a bouquet of coral-orange lilies.

"Thought of you when I saw these on my way home," he said.

"Oh," I said, looking down at the floor. "That's nice."

Then there was the card he slipped into my purse two days after that, the phone calls that wouldn't stop. It was as if that rope had wrapped itself around my neck, hoisted me onto a chair and tied my hands behind my back, pulling tighter as each day passed, Jess's hands around my waist, on my breasts, in my hair. I was seconds from slipping off the edge. I left. I'd slipped many times before but this time I could feel it, feel myself placing one foot in front of the other. Walking away. Unlike the times when my body moved without my consent, when I left people behind without even knowing, I meant to leave Jess. To leave Denver.

It was the time I heard my mother talking on the phone about my father's new girlfriend and his new baby—saying he was getting re-married, saying maybe this kid would be better, maybe this kid would be raised right unlike her own—that I slipped away without even knowing. Maybe they'll turn out to be worth something, she said. I was fourteen, hiding in her closet with my eyes shut, listening to her count the number of ways she could amount her only daughter to nothing. It wasn't so hard to believe. I dashed out of the closet and ran down the street to the water's edge. Swam until my lungs gave out.

When I left Jess in Denver though, I had nowhere to go, no Sound to swim. I drove the 1,780 miles across the I-80 and wound up in Laurel Hollow. I hadn't been back since the night of high school prom, since the night I decided I was through with my mother, too. It started out promising.

“So who’s taking you?” she asked.

“What are you talking about?” I said without turning my head away from the book I was reading—*The White Album*.

“Josephine,” she said. “The prom.”

“You don’t really think I’m going, do you?”

“We’re going shopping tomorrow,” she said. “Find a date.”

I dog-eared my place in the book, closed the cardinal-red cover and stared at her. She sighed.

“What? Did you think I would let your prom come and go without saying a word?”

Of course, I thought, *why wouldn’t you? Why would this year, this month—today—be any different than the last?*

“Elyse,” I said, searching her eyes. “I’m not going.”

“I think you’ll look great in purple.”

It was clear she would persist. She wasn’t even looking at me as she listed the things we needed to get; she was cramming her plum Estée Lauder lipstick into her suede purse and walking toward the door. She must’ve heard the women at the club talking about shopping for dresses and suits, who was going with who.

“See you tomorrow,” she said. “Don’t wait up.”

I heard her come in late that night as I sat up in bed, glued to the last chapter of the book. The pages had started to yellow. Years of sitting on the oak shelf in our apartment made the pages smell of my father's cigarette ash. Before we moved, Mom and Dad had a huge book collection. I took the book the day my father said he was leaving Mom for her old friend from high school. They met at Mom's twentieth reunion. Mom introduced them. I snagged Dad's tobacco pipe, too, ripped up boxes and boxes of their old photographs until I realized there were too many to rip them all by hand. I tossed the rest into the dumpster below my window and watched a cat traipse across the alley and jump in after them.

I'd already read that book three times, so when I heard Mom's keys as she tried to get the right one in the door, I looked up, finished the sentence in my head. She still had the key from our old apartment, and every time she came home like this, hair frazzled, makeup smeared, it took her five minutes of standing in front of the house to realize she was trying the wrong key. Our neighbor, Ted, must have seen her. I heard his loud footsteps crossing our path, then his voice as he helped her in the door. I wondered why he was up so late.

I figured she'd blow me off the next day. I didn't set my alarm. I wouldn't go to prom—I'd be right. But when she knocked on my door the next morning, yelling for me to get out of bed, we're going shopping, I thought for the first time I might've been wrong.

We jumped in her BMW Sedan—the one she bought after Dad left, the one that practically emptied Dad's bank account—and drove down the winding road to a boutique across the street from the whaling museum in Cold Spring Harbor. Through the open window I grabbed the edges of the laurel bushes that grazed the car, squeezed until a handful of white flowers gave way, detaching from their green mass. I opened my fist one finger at a time, let the flowers float from my hand one by one, stuck my head out the window and watched them drift behind us.

We spent the whole afternoon trying on dresses—a pink, strapless knee-length, a lavender open-back, a floor-length fuchsia. I pulled at the synching around my waist, cringed at the pinks. What I wanted—what I loved—was the one my mother hated. The turquoise mermaid one that sat in the corner of the dressing room, draped over the black, velvet chair beside the mirror—forgotten.

"That one's nice," I said, pointing toward the chair.

"That thing?" she said. "Atrocious."

I looked at the dress, then to myself in the mirror, then back to the dress again. I looked at my mother. She was fiddling with her phone, tapping her foot. I tried the fuchsia dress on, just to make sure it fit. I slid back into my jeans and handed her the dress. I knew Mom was only going to buy something she liked. We bought pearl-white heels with straps that wrapped twice around my ankles, chandelier earrings, jeweled hairpins. She paid, drove home. That was that.

I threw everything in my closet as soon as we got home, stared at the heap of things I hated and Mom loved. I told my friend who had, until I offered, planned to hide out on prom night, that I would go with him. We would meet there, avoid the photos and corsages and all the things that would make the night worse than it already would've been. My mother was going to drop me off.

Friday night, six o'clock. Mom wasn't home. When she left, she told me she'd just be gone an hour, not to worry, she'd be back in time to do my makeup. An hour later, thirty minutes left to get dressed and do my hair and makeup, I began to think she wasn't coming back. *It's her money anyway*, I thought, *she'll feel the loss*. But then I realized she wouldn't, she wouldn't care that she spent the money for a prom I wasn't going to. She would say I had new things in my closet; she bought me such nice clothes. I should be thankful. I didn't want to go anyway, right?

I slipped on the dress, applied the smoky eye shadow, rosy blush and toffee lipstick, and waited in the living room for an hour. I stood in front of the long mirror that hung beside my mother's leather sofa, stared into the eyes of the girl that stared back at me. I felt something harden inside of me, beneath my ribcage and lungs. By ten o'clock that was gone. I grabbed Blue Moon after Blue Moon from the refrigerator, sat on the dirty chairs in the backyard, still in my dress, freezing. I grabbed her cigarettes and lighter from the top of the freezer when I went back for a fifth beer. I didn't even choke when the smoke hit the back of my throat. I let it seep into my esophagus, creep down into my lungs and make its way back out through my dry lips, join the dirt in soiling my dress. I sat in the dirty chair, muscles relaxed, feeling the strain on my forehead disappear. She found me hours later, still outside, smelling of cigarettes and beer, her supply of the two long gone. I craned my head around when she swung the backdoor open and grabbed my shoulder. It was right about then that we started to become strangers, stopped recognizing each other, unable to distinguish what the other was becoming. I stood up and walked back into the house, never letting my eyes meet hers. I was gone before she woke up the next day. I only called on her birthday every year, hoping I'd get the answering machine and not to have speak to her at all.

So I had no reason to visit my mom after I moved to Denver. She'd never tried to visit me and she made it clear after my father left that she wanted her life back, even though my brother and I were hardly teenagers. Even if that meant I would spend years trying to figure out what was wrong with *me*. Even if that meant she'd never see my brother again, that he'd leave us to become a fisherman, gone for months to risk his life catching Alaskan king crab in the Bering

Sea. Witness men die to the waters everyday. In the off-months, off the ship, he spent his checks in the bars around Dutch Harbor, rented a room just outside the port, alone. Every month, he sent me a letter. Just to let me know he was alive.

Of the few things my mother taught us, one stuck with us the most: when you can't deal with something, forget about it, and do it alone.

The day I got the call that my mother was dead, it'd been sixty-seven days since I heard from my brother. Sixty-seven days of thinking he was dead.

The first night Mom, Ched, and I spent in the new house on Bungtown Road in Long Island was the only night we spent together in that house. I was twelve years old. We didn't know anyone yet except our new neighbor Ted who'd suggested Italiano's for dinner. The three bedrooms of our new home were littered with cardboard boxes. Our beds hadn't been assembled yet. Exhausted from the move, we ordered pizza and Mom rented her favorite movie, *The Shining*. Twenty minutes in, and Mom was out.

"Be right back," she said. "I have to make a quick call."

"Want us to pause it?" I asked, looking up at her from my seat on the wood floor.

"Don't wait for me," she said. "Really, go ahead. I'll just be a minute."

I stared at her for a moment, then turned back to the television that sat atop two large boxes. When she came back a half-hour later, I smelled the smoke on her maroon blouse, the vodka on her lips. My brother looked at me, shrugged his shoulders. We knew she'd be gone again soon. She wasn't even watching the movie, the one she rented without asking my brother or me what we wanted. She disappeared into the woods behind the house almost every night after that. For a quick call.

Our time together was no different during those two weeks I spent at her house after I left Jess in Denver. I avoided her. She avoided me. She never asked me why I was back. I didn't tell. I stood barefoot on the deck with Blue Moons and a pack of Salems, ended up with splinters in both feet. She didn't invite me to go with her and Ray to the club for dinner on the weekend, like she was afraid to be seen with me.

"Want us to grab you something?" she asked, as if I should have assumed I wouldn't be going along.

"No," I said. "I'll be fine."

This was before we knew how sick she really was, before I realized that we were going to lose her, that maybe I hadn't been completely right about my mother after all. By the time I found out about the cancer, I'd already moved in with an old friend in Queens. Had a new job. At least that's what I told Ray when he asked me to come back and see her.

I pace on the deck outside Ray's house, trying to remember something good about my mother. Anything. I walk back inside, my fingers grazing the leaves of the maple tree.

I approach the drawer again. I just can't believe it; the words on Ted's yellowed letters just don't make sense. *Had I lived next door to the man who killed the girl in the laurel bushes? The man who was obsessed with the whaling and the peeling and the bottles? The man with the nimble fingers who killed himself stabbed a girl seventeen times?* I stick my hand into the pile again, looking for a letter I might've missed. The maple claws at the door. I walk over to it and stare back out at the Sound and the rocks, searching for the man in the water.

I tear myself from the harbor and dart back to the drawer. This time I yank it from its place on the left side of the countertop, dump its contents onto the table and leave it next to a newspaper that's been turned to the obituaries. I thumb through the heap and find another, this one dated just a month before Ted's suicide. Unlike the others, this one has no form. No "Dear Elyse" on the top left, no name signed on the bottom, the once-precise handwriting scribbled in and out of the lines.

The letter says that Jessica went into the museum one day and asked for a tour, wanted to learn more about the scrimshaws and bottles Ted was working on. She told him she heard the collection was worth a fortune. He took her into the same dark room he took me, let her examine his work, offered her free lessons. He noticed how closely she examined the artifacts. He admired what he believed was her honest interest.

Two weeks later, Ted wrote, someone broke in and stole almost half of his ship models and maritime art, leaving only the heaviest items and broken models that'd been dropped on the way out. The bottles he'd been working on were destroyed. The museum was just an old, historic home, the wooden doors easily broken. The alarm had been deactivated.

It was my whole life, the letter reads, it was all I had. At the bottom of the page, the letters merging into one another, Ted wrote: I had to do it.

Everything was taken from him, just like Dad took everything from Mom, both of them unable to escape what they thought was betrayal. There's no apology. If my mother told me, we could've gone to the police. That poor girl's mother is still without an answer to her daughter's murder, and my mother sat next to her every Saturday at the club for years. I suppose she was protecting me—something I thought her incapable of. *It was herself that she'd always been worried about, wasn't it? Her perfect clothes, perfect men, perfect life. Or have I been wrong all along?*

Just as I read Ted's last words, I hear Ray's car pull up. I hear his gravelly voice; he must be talking to the neighbors. I shove Ted's letters into my pocket, unsure of what to do with them—unsure of what this means about my mother. I throw the rest of the mail back into the drawer and slide it into place. I glance out the backdoor, toward the water. The rocks stare back at me, but still no sign of life in the waves. I run to the front door, take a deep breath and open it. As I walk down the steps, Ray strolls toward me with a man and a woman I don't recognize.

"Joey, have you met Hugh and Laura from next door?"

"No," I say, shaking their hands. "Nice to meet you."

I look down at my feet and spot a pile of newspapers. They must've been here all week. Ray probably forgot to bring them inside. I pick one up and turn to the obituaries. Holding the paper in my left hand, I slide my right index finger down the page and find my mother's name, thirteenth from the top. They've included a picture of her. Long, dark lashes, high cheekbones, full lips. Flawless. I twist around, look behind me through the open door, searching the Sound again. There he is, the swimmer, peeling his arm out of the water and slicing it back down. There are the rocks, racing that man again, the maple clawing at the back door, calling me back.

"Well, I'd better get back inside," I say, realizing Ray and the neighbors still stand before me. "Nice meeting you again."

I walk back into the house. Run out onto the deck, then down to the shoreline. Above me the sky is gray, gray, the sun hiding. I wade into the water until it reaches my chest. Then I swim, looking for the man and the rocks as I come up for breath. I remember the letters are still shoved in my pocket. I imagine the water soaking into Ted's words, the scribbled letters smudging away, my mother's name dissolving into the Sound as I swim and swim, away. I imagine my mother's eyes—closed. I can see the man to my right now, the rocks racing us both, and I wonder how he's been swimming for so long. Above us the sun tiptoes out of its hiding place, the clouds evaporating into the warm sky. The words in my soaked pocket disappear.

TOMATOES

Sasha's mother hovered over the sink, her arms elbow-deep in suds. Sasha stared past her, through the kitchen window. The tomato tree she'd been growing for three months had just one bud on it still, a pale-pink ball she could close up in her little palm. Covered with black, rotten spots. Sasha sighed. Her mother craned around, examining the chestnut-brown curls coiled around Sasha's neck. Sasha knew what she thought—how much she looked like her Aunt Maria.

"Plant something else, Sash," her mother said, water splashing her leg.

"Mom, stop."

"Just trying to help."

"Don't." She pushed her chair back; it skid across the wood floor, loud, black lines tracing the chair's path.

"Sunflowers?"

"I don't need your help."

Sasha faded into the back of the house, passing photos of her mother and aunt, Maria, of herself when she was two, nestled in Maria's arms. She approached her drawing board, used the pastels her aunt bought for her last November to draw a tomato tree.

Green number four for the base, number six for thin branches and leaves.

Firebrick red for the tomatoes.

She drew one and then two and then there were five, each one bigger and redder than the rest. Soon there were fifteen, their skins rubbing against one another, consuming the page.

Seventeen.

Twenty-two.

"Sash," her mother called. "You take out the trash yet?"

She opened her mouth to yell back at her mother no, no and I'm not going to, but she saw the box: pictures of her first lesson with Aunt Maria, tickets to the Met, her aunt's hospital band, three months old. She continued drawing, forgetting the canvas she began with, covering the entire drafting board that her aunt bought her for her eleventh birthday with tomatoes. None of these had black spots.

A CRIMSON TRAIL

The past is not static, or ever truly complete; as we age we see from new positions, shifting angles. A therapist friend of mine likes to use the metaphor of the kind of spiral stair that winds up inside a lighthouse. As one moves up that stair, the core at the center doesn't change, but one continually sees it from another vantage point; if the past is a core of who we are, then our movement in time always brings us into a new relation to that core.

-Mark Doty

Nothing good can come of this, I think. I run my shaky hands back and forth over my seatbelt as we near the casino, my fingers lingering over tiny ripples in the black stitching. The dark of the night is too thick to make out the lines on the street just a quarter mile ahead. A truck passes and my boyfriend clamps the steering wheel tighter. Swerves to the right, then back into the narrow lane again. He can't see well at night, he shouldn't be driving. The trees to our right fly past us as the speedometer hits sixty, the two-lane road falling backward beneath the worn tires. My hands clutch the seatbelt.

A symphony of crickets and mosquitoes leaks in through the window. We are, after all, on the cusp of the Everglades, traveling north on Krome Avenue, one of the westernmost roadways in Miami and the road I traveled several times with my family on the way to Naples for a summer vacation. But tonight we're out here for a different reason and the road is hardly the same in the dark. In fact, it doesn't look familiar at all. At night the road feels longer, stretched out in front of us like a rubber band, ready to snap. At night the sawgrass seems so close; I want to reach out and grab it. Close enough for a rattler to reveal itself from the 'Glades, to slither out onto the road and let us know, *I'm here*. But the teeth-like blades of the grass that shelters the animals behind it would surely cut my hands if I tried. Any closer and we'd be right out there in the mangroves with the gators and the cranes. Fifteen more miles and we'd be smack in the middle of it all: Alligator Alley, Shark Valley, Miccosukee land.

"Do we really have to go," I say, still grasping the seatbelt. "I just don't feel right."

"We'll only be there a few minutes," my boyfriend says. "I'm just meeting this guy and then we're leaving."

I sink back in my seat and ingest the sounds from outside, the wind clinging so tightly to the sides of the car it feels as if the car is hovering just above the road, the wind like a vacuum holding us in an airtight seal, a humming emerging from the space between the outside of the car and the gripping wind.

I wonder if you're watching me as I venture to the very place you were when you killed yourself. I wonder if you're here, hovering just above the black convertible top of my mustang as we drive down this dark road, tapping on the window and telling me to turn back?

I don't listen.

We're buying pot like you did so many times and I wonder if you know why we are here. I feel death lurking around us but I don't turn back. It's like a magnet, that death, pulling me toward you, your death. The thing is, what killed you—what might've killed you—is what's pulling me toward you now. Weed, alcohol, gambling: addiction. It's in my veins, swimming in my blood, even if I don't indulge in it all. That addiction, in me—your niece—in you, my mother, my Grandma, isn't it what killed you? Or maybe it wasn't that addiction that killed you at all; maybe the addiction was all you had. For forty years you just got by, dropped out of high school, moved to Florida, skimmed across jobs and women.

A snake makes it way across Krome and my boyfriend swerves again.

"Watch the road," I say, twisting around, trying to catch a glimpse of the creature. It's far behind us now, but I imagine it's a copperhead or a pygmy. I imagine its taupe patterns, the light and dark browns blending into one another like puzzle pieces. Soon it will shed that layer—its new skin an exact replica of the old—unable to shed the patterns it has always had.

The road brightens as we near Miccosukee Resort & Gaming. My chest tightens, my heart pounding hard against my ribcage, trapped. Five minutes later and we've maneuvered into a spot in the parking lot where you committed suicide nine years ago. The place is huge; your car could've been anywhere. I wonder if we are parked where you were parked that night, just a few spots away. There's no way, I think, scanning the parking lot for a car I know isn't there.

Gunshots sound in my ears. I shut my eyes and lace my hands together, running my thumb against the inside of my clammy palm. I shake my head, what am I thinking? You're dead, long gone. You cannot be here.

I walk toward the casino entrance, not holding my boyfriend's hand, still thumbing that same line on my palm. I realize this is the first time I've reacquainted myself with these memories—the first time I've really thought about your death—in a very long time. The days and the months and the years spill into one another. Inside, bright lights mimic Vegas-style casinos and the carpet beneath my shoes is soft and red. I float through a room where a racecar stands in the middle. Did you walk through this same room? Am I stepping where you stepped, where you pondered what you'd do when you walked out of those doors? I think I see you, my uncle, standing in the room for a second, a faint image.

And then you're gone.

The next room is too noisy, filled with buzzing gamblers and slot machines. I stand next to one of the blackjack machines, palms sweaty, wondering if you ever sat here. I scramble away from the machine and stand in the corner of the room, trying not to inhale the stale scent of cigarettes and beer that you must've been so accustomed to after working at Grandpa's bar for fifteen years. I feel you here, filling the room with an overbearing weight that sinks me down to my knees. Like the smoke that will billow from my lips later tonight—the cloud of it faint-white, nearly invisible but choking. Suffocating.

The group of men to my right plays cards, ravenous and greedy for a win. Cigarettes hang from their lips. Long, uncut hair hides their eyes. Their stained teeth show through their chapped, brown lips with each dollar they win. Anger washes over their faces as they lose the little money they had when they arrived. They need a drink. It's a game, I think, just as everyone always says. But when you're in it, standing right there in front of these men these machines these coins, it's inescapable. The roar of winning players to my left and the relentless clinking of slot machines echo in my ears. You'd been right here—heart beating, mind racing, blood pumping through your veins, your heart, your brain. A man across the room jingles quarters in his hand, the coins clashing against one another like the coins in the piggy bank you gave me on Christmas years ago.

Every year, your gifts were a surprise. One year it was that Barbie-pink, ceramic piggy bank, the next year a handmade, indigo jewelry box decorated with lilies. I still have them all: Guess Who? sits in the garage, the piggy bank in my closet, the jewelry box on my dresser at home, its wide, green base lining my shelf. On that Christmas morning eleven years ago, I peered through the window and watched you pull up in a chalk-colored car, open the trunk, and glide up to the front door of our house. I rushed you in, grabbed the gifts from your arms and placed them under the tree, then showed you to your place at the table. I couldn't wait to unwrap gifts.

Andrea Bocelli's music—likely his Christmas album, Mom's favorite—played from the black speakers that sat on the wooden armoire in our living room. It was the last Christmas that you were there. We sat around the oak table, beneath the chandelier that'd hung in the dining room since Mom and Dad were married in '83, laughing at Grandma's outrageous stories (one of which I heard long after you were gone—the one about the weed brownies she made for her neighbor when she lived in Boca Raton) and Dad's awful corny jokes. Grandma and Dad sat on either side of Mom, and I sat on the very edge of my seat, right next to you. Mom's hunter green tablecloth draped down over the edge of the table and hung above our knees. She obsessed over that tablecloth. Everything had to match perfectly even though it was just the family. The edge of that tablecloth barely reached my short, nine-year-old legs. My new puppy rushed back and forth below the table, weaving around our ankles and tickling my leg with his velvet coat.

"Charlie!" I yelled, yanking his furry tail as he grazed me.

"Don't tease him," you said.

Mom told me about you and your dog, JoJo. You trained him so well that every time you threw a rock into the woods behind the house in Long Island, he came back with that same rock every time. Mom said you loved dogs the way I do—that even when you knew you were pushing JoJo's buttons, even when you knew he was going to bite you, you'd keep on anyway. That's probably why you warned me as I teased Charlie. Because you knew I felt the same and would probably get bitten, too.

Pumpernickel, onion, garlic, sesame—the doughy scent of bagels slid beneath my nose, diverting my attention away from Charlie and forcing my eyes upon the everything bagel that lay in front of me.

You teased me, "Looks like someone's got their eye on something," and I pouted as Mom continued what you started.

"Her eyes are much bigger than her tummy, though. Look at all the food on her plate," she said.

You spread cream cheese on your warm onion bagel, adding the light pink nova across the top. After your funeral, at Grandma's apartment, I learned that the entire Jewish side of our family loved nova and gefilte fish like you did. I remember the light pink polo shirt you wore and how perfectly the coral color of the smoked salmon matched it. As you sat quietly, sweat trickled down the slope of your scruffy face, the liquid clinging to the thick, dark hair beside your ears. You and Grandma were always so warm. Mom was too, still is, and she always looked at you like any sister watches over her little brother. Or so I think. Trusting that memory only gets harder; your death soaks everything up in a deep red haze, and when I finally wash it all down and start to see through the murk of it all, I'm never quite sure of what's real.

Do you know how hard Mom is on herself? All those years of watching over you and assuming the role of your mother when Grandma wasn't around made her feel morally bound to you, like she should've harbored you, like she should've been there to ease your pain. Just driven to your apartment, walked upstairs and asked you what was going on. The two of you trying to climb that rope, hanging on to it until blood spilled from your hands and you had to let go. Let it take you. You and Mom had the same curly, jet-black hair, pointed noses, and topaz eyes—just like Grandpa—and each time you locked eyes another story unleashed itself.

A mystery lingered, some untold story of your lonely childhoods dwelled between you two, tugging you apart and yanking you back together like a sailboat caught in thrashing waves on a stormy night, its sails spiraling into whispering winds. Those mysteries began to unwind for me after you passed. I grew older. Mom grew dependent on alcohol again after ten sober years, and eventually the stories of your adolescence unfolded. Prompted by questions about why we had "two" grandmas—one that was our "real" grandma and the other Grandpa's new wife, Vivian—and why you only came to visit on holidays, your stories began to trickle from Mom's lips.

Grandpa wanted a divorce, Mom said. Wanted nothing to do with Grandma, wanted you and Mom in bed by the time he got home so he didn't even have to see you. So Grandma moved on. She moved on to more husbands—first Steve in Long Island, then Ed in Florida, many more insignificant boyfriends littered in between—and left you with nothing to cling to. Grandma and Grandpa had never taken you to temple. You called it quits in high school, everyone moved on. Even Mom moved on to college—though she eventually dropped out, too.

You picked up your first pack of cigarettes in sixth grade at the gas station a few blocks away from your school. Mom had her first drink at eleven at a friend's house whose parents were drunk, too, endured her first acid trip at a psychedelic light show when she was fourteen, and the both of you found yourselves alone at nearly all hours of the day, every day.

What stirred in your mind as we sat around the table eating brunch that Christmas? Did you want to run from the table and escape your broken life and Mom's newly turned-around one? After breakfast, we put on a show. My favorite turquoise dress fluttered and swayed as I dashed to the piano or, pian-e-o, as I butchered it. The black and white keys surrendered to my pale fingers. I watched my sister attempt to play the drum she and Dad made as her curls bounced around her chubby cheeks. I sped through the show, anxious to open the gifts you brought. I continued playing "Auld Lang Syne" on the old piano, eying you from my seat behind the piano in the corner of the room.

With everyone gathered around the table again—this time it was full of gifts—I ripped off the green wrapping paper and red bow. I yanked at the top of the shoebox, violently enough for you to warn me: "Careful, it'll break." I slowed my body, directing my attention toward the heavy object inside. You lit up as I lifted the lighthouse out of the box. I held the bottom in my right hand and steadied the pointed top with my left, the jagged rocks barely fitting in my hand. I eyed the long body of the tower, gazed into the window that was as small as my smallest fingernail, and spotted the staircase inside. Tracing my pointer finger across the delicate window frame and up the spine to the sturdy cusp, I imagined how light might project through the window, illuminating the staircase inside and warning ships against violent winds. In my little hands, the lighthouse could withstand any storm. I looked forward to bedtime for the rest of the day, eager to lie in my bed and fall asleep with the dim light shining from the delicate lighthouse.

That same Christmas, after the day was over and family gone, I lay in my bed watching it glow from the corner of my white dresser, its jagged exterior softened by the yellow cloud of light encircling it. It was the best present you gave me, but it wasn’t something I could play with like the other treasures you’d delivered. It was as if a piece of you were nestled in the hollow of the model lighthouse. My eyes grew tired and my mind teetered into my dreams. I felt a wind lift my hair off my shoulder. I heard the undulating waves as if they were crashing down right next to me, the slush of the water echoing in my ears. You dwelled beneath the gray exterior of the little lighthouse, illuminating my room as I slept every night.

I stand inside the casino, imagining you in the car the police found you in, your fingers trembling as they wrapped around the neck of the gun. Were you thinking of me as you placed the gun against your temple? About Mom and Grandma and the mess of bills and foreclosed properties you were leaving for them? Did you think about how much you’d miss them—how much we’d miss you?

I remember the story of the man who hung himself over twenty years ago at the Krome Detention Center, just a mile and a half south of the casino. Daniel Rodriguez-Lopez's body was found by security guards in the middle of the night, his body hanging in his cell. His was the first suicide in the facility, the facility that was built in response to the 1980 "Freedom Boatlift," a movement in which over 120,000 Cubans left the port of Mariel and entered South Florida, seeking freedom. The facility was built to detain criminal and mentally ill refugees. Many Cubans who'd fled oppression in their homeland were locked up and processed like herds of animals, pushed down the assembly line. I wonder where this man's family was when he killed himself, if they ever got the news. Did they even know he arrived safely in the first place? They might not have heard of Daniel's passing at all, and maybe that was for the better. If they didn't know he committed suicide—if they didn't know he was dead at all—they couldn't be angry with him in death.

I wonder what this place was like before the casino was built, what creatures' homes were trampled and destroyed, replaced with slot machines and bars. The Miccosukee Indians—nicknamed the "Trail" Indians after Florida's east-west roadway, Tamiami Trail, the road that blocks the flow of water into Everglades National Park—hadn't always been here. Weren't they once part of a larger nation? One that was driven out of their original homes by foreign conquerors, slaughtered, and forced to become something they could not? Assimilated, de-cultured, de-voiced? Years after they were forced out of their own homes, they built a casino right in the middle of the Everglades, doing to their animals what had been done to them. A sick cycle. They likely didn't have a choice. And you were not the first to kill yourself around here. Not the first to wish you were anywhere but here, to wish you were understood, accepted, given the attention you deserved. *Free*. And yet, there they were building the casino on their land and there you were putting a gun to your head, Daniel placing the rope around his neck, and here I am buying pot.

Mom still receives mail with your name on it every now and then. You'd think someone would've alerted the senders by now that you're dead, gone, buried in the mausoleum next to Grandpa. You've been gone for nearly a decade, yet each time the mail comes she prays she won't have to see your name on another horse-betting magazine or have to call the lawyer, Mr. Fitzgerald, about another property in your name that may or may not be worth looking into. I wonder how many other families have dealt with this—seeing their loved one's names sloppily written on envelopes everyday as they sort through the mail, as they attempt to recover from this loss. Since it's been so long, so much time passed, the lawyer says the debt collectors can't even take whatever money Mom might get out of the properties anymore, but for years Mom's just pretended that it's not worth the try even though we needed the money more than you probably would've imagined we'd ever need the money.

Because she doesn't want you to really be gone, like the money and the gun and your warm presence. She wants you back in your apartment with your beer and your weed and your girlfriend, coming to visit us every Christmas. She wants you alive so she can ask you what she never did, help you the way you needed to be helped since you were kids—the way Dad helped her gain the confidence to go back to college and rebuild her life, to become a mother—and so she can rip that raging guilt from her mind, ball it up, throw it in the corner and feed it to the dogs. But like the unreliable images I construct in my head of your shaky hand around the gun and the gun pressed to your temple and the blood streaming from your brain, Mom never had the answers when I asked.

Grandma never made it to your kindergarten graduation or noticed you smoking pot outside the Long Island house, hiding from the bitter cold, clutching your black leather jacket to your chest. *I know*. Yes, Mom told me she felt guilty for not knowing what was really going on with you—for not asking. She knew about your gambling and your inability to deny people loans when you didn't even have money for yourself. If you were selfless enough to do that for others, how did you have it in you to leave us behind? You took the gun and the money from Grandpa's bar and pulled the trigger that night.

Eight months after that Christmas, when you were working at Grandpa's bar like you did every day after he died, Grandma Viv asked you to run to the bank to deposit a ten-thousand-dollar check from the bar's safe. Was that when you got the idea? It was probably the middle of the day, and when you turned the knob of the safe, plucking the combination from your memory and opening the door, something shifted. Did you think about it for a long time, peering over your shoulder toward the back of the bar? Did you worry that if you stood there too long someone might notice, or did you just grab the gun in your sweaty palm and escape the second the thought hit you? Either way, you took it. And the money.

Mom received a call in the early afternoon from Grandma Viv. When she learned you were missing, she didn't tell us—her way of letting the problem dig deep into her skin until the blood gave her away and she couldn't hide it anymore. I'm pretty sure she didn't even tell Grandma right away, knowing she'd panic. She paced around the house, hands tucked into the pockets of her Levis, eyes wide with worry. Didn't you know what it would do to her? Mom had to deal with the sting of losing her little brother; she had to handle your funeral, the family, my sister and me. And Grandma, she still doesn't talk about it. She's the most skilled of us all, hiding that pain so well that when she goes to look for it she can't even remember where she's put it. But she buried her own son.

Didn't you think about how young we were, how little we would understand about what you'd done? Maybe you didn't. Maybe you couldn't. Maybe, psychologically, you couldn't see anything past ending your worries. Like Mom with the back pain and the migraines and the pills—she sees no end. You let that rope twist around you, a weight latched onto your feet, sinking you deep into the water where no light would find you. Maybe what seemed to me like the most selfish act was the only answer you were capable of unearthing.

You would've cringed at the sight of her, attempting to keep her composure, her face washed over with pain. But after you died, Mom told me about the indescribable feeling that kicked at the bottom of her stomach while she waited by the phone. When the police showed up in the middle of the night, Mom said she expected it. I never heard the doorbell. When I woke early the next morning to the glow of the lighthouse, knowing it was too early to be getting up and ready for school, I wondered why I was awake. I heard Dad's voice and dashed to their room. Did you think this was how I'd find out? A knot pinned to the floor of my stomach, the dark outside my window telling me something was wrong? Charlie following behind me?

You were already gone, a part of me receding with the tide.

Mom lay in her bed, her entire body concealed by the soft, tawny comforter. My eyes searched hers.

"What do I tell them?" Mom asked.

“The truth,” Dad said. “That’s all you can say.” Tears clouded Mom’s eyes. And then a pause.

“Uncle Neil passed away.”

The wind that once lifted the hair off my shoulders in my dreams was still; it clung to the walls of the room. I can’t imagine how she managed to tell me that you shot yourself in the head. Did you imagine what those words would sound like out loud, how it’d sound to hear your own death announced?

Uncle Neil is dead.

I planted myself on Mom’s bed for what felt like hours. I watched the tears fall from her eyes and roll over her cheekbones. All I wanted was to go to school the way I was supposed to everyday. If I went to school, it meant everything was normal. I felt Charlie’s tail graze my arm as I sat on the bed in silence.

The morning crawled by. I sat in the dining room waiting for Mom. My navy backpack rested next to me on the oak table where we ate breakfast on Christmas. I forced images of you and the lighthouse and the ocean out of my head. I needed that wall I’d built and every layer of cement in between like you needed the money and the gun.

“Mom, I’m gonna be late!” I yelled.

The doorbell rang and I trudged over to the door and let our cousin Rachel in. Following our informal Jewish tradition, she rushed in with dinner for the week: brisket, potatoes, challah. I hugged her as she fussed with my hair and asked me how I was doing over and over again until I plodded away to put my sneakers on. You probably thought Rachel was too pretentious like I did, with her big diamond ring and designer purses. You probably thought what Mom thought: that you didn't belong in a family like that.

Mom stumbled out of her room to greet Rachel. As she walked into the kitchen with the tray of food, Mom lost her footing, our week's worth of homemade dinner spilling all over the white tile. Brown sauce ran in streams down the grout and between the tiles as Mom rushed to salvage whatever was left of the food, her eyes filling with tears again. She bent to her knees, using her petite arms and the little energy she had left to clean up the mess. You certainly wouldn't have wanted to see it.

And you were so far gone, a rock buried deep beneath the sand of the Atlantic. Your way out was simple. I walked out of the kitchen and slumped back down on the table to wait. Mom and Rachel discussed your funeral arrangements. I mostly heard Mom's silence. I huffed each time Rachel started another one of her monopolizing conversations and finally stomped into the kitchen to hurry her out.

"I'm so sorry. Please call me if there's anything I can do," she repeated.

As soon as she left, Mom drove me to school. Her hands must've been unsteady and her body in no condition to drive, but school was the only destination I could see ahead. As we drove the five minutes to school, the sun beamed down on the windshield of Mom's charcoal-black Volvo station wagon and warmed the inside of the already-warm car. The late summer heat was nauseating. I didn't speak to Mom. I didn't even ask her if she was okay. You probably hoped I would've led her up a spiral staircase. I didn't hear the slush of the waves you brought to me on Christmas, nor did I see the glow from the lighthouse that sat atop my dresser at home.

At school, I sat down at the circular desk next to my friend Lydian. From behind her magnifying, oval glasses and frizzy brown hair she looked at me and asked, “Why are you late?” I felt the sun gleam in from the window across the room. I was warm, and growing sweaty.

I giggled and said, “Do you really want to know?” I felt my body move with laughter and wondered how my stomach and chest moved without my consent. “My uncle killed himself.”

Lydian’s smile disappeared. Confusion swept across her chubby face. I told her I didn’t know why I was laughing. A silence lingered between us as your death drifted into a life apart from mine and into a mind you never even knew.

“Oh,” she said. “Are you okay?” She tried as hard as any ten-year-old could to appease my grief.

“I’m okay, thanks!” I managed. Lydian turned her frizzy head back to her book and snuck glances at me from the corner of her glasses for the rest of the morning. I just smiled like I would on any other day.

The morning of your funeral came after several blurry days, and I was still waiting for the current of tears I’d expected. As we walked toward the cemetery where you were buried, the sun beat down on my neck, a bead of sweat melting into the shoulder of my black dress. Mom walked ahead with Grandma by her side. I followed. When we approached the rabbi he pointed us to the “immediate family” seating. I hadn’t realized we’d be sitting front row. After a speech that I can’t remember and after I locked sympathetic eyes with every relative around me, we each stood up, one by one, to spread soil from the “holy land” over your coffin. It made me uncomfortable, spreading holy soil from a land I knew nothing about like it was supposed to mean something to me. It didn’t feel natural. It was like I was temporarily stealing something that wasn't mine, wearing someone else's clothes that were all the wrong sizes. It didn't feel like something you would've wanted. In a way it gave me something to hold on to. I'm not sure if I forced the tears or if they just came when I told myself to think about the fact that you were gone, but they streamed down my face as I looked at the dark brown coffin in front of me.

We walked over to the mausoleum where your coffin would go—right next to Grandpa's. Did you know Mom and Grandma would choose to bury you there? It was the obvious choice, since Grandpa had purchased both slots years before his death for reasons I can't be sure of. It's an odd thing, to buy your own burial plot. But it eases the burden felt by loved ones left behind. It's the action of a levelheaded person, I suppose. Maybe you knew we'd bury you there though, and maybe that gave you some sort of peace as you pulled the trigger. You knew you'd be close to Grandpa, if nothing or no one else. Mom, Dad, and Grandma watched two coffins slide into that vault.

Wanda and her kids were there, too. I recognized her from the year you brought her to Thanksgiving dinner. Seeing her standing by the mausoleum with her children forced my mind to trudge past barriers of my childish thoughts, to shed its own skin: I'd never thought about your life with her before, or even about your life apart from our sporadic visits. I realized that you'd lived in an entirely separate world from mine. All I'd known you to be was an uncle—my uncle—not a boyfriend or a male figure in those kids' lives. Her daughter looked just as disturbed as I did. I remember searching their eyes, wondering if they knew more than we did. Did they know what was going on in your life? Wanda told Mom that you began to speak in terms of an "end" and that it scared her. So why didn't she call Mom? Why didn't you call Mom? You were more distant from our family than my youthful eyes saw. Still, I searched your girlfriend’s eyes for clues to your death, hoping there’d be a guilty expression in return and an answer to our loss. Wanda’s eyes were only empty like ours.

When Mom spoke to the detective again in the days following your funeral, he told her that Wanda came into his office after you died with shaking hands, greasy, dirty-blonde hair, and unreliable answers. She’d probably been on drugs for some time, Mom told me, but we never knew that until you were gone. Mom said she’d never even seen the inside of your apartment.

The detective asked Mom if she knew you spent time in jail. He told her that several months before your death, you’d been drinking and driving and pulled over on the side of the turnpike. A cop pulled up behind you, saw that you were intoxicated and searched the car. He found a bag of pot and arrested you. The detective said you had a court date scheduled, but you died before it ever came. Mom felt like she knew nothing, but she never blamed you. She later found out that you had life insurance. You probably figured it would take care of everything: the bills, the debt collectors. You probably thought it would solve every lingering problem. That you’d pull the trigger and be gone, and the clean up would be quick. Easy. But you were wrong. Your life insurance didn’t go into affect until three days after you died. Would you have done it if you’d known that killing yourself wouldn’t have solved a thing? If you knew how much of a waste it was all going to be, giving up your life and causing sorrow to sweep across so many lives?

I lay in my bed with the lighthouse on, listening. As I lay on my right side, my arm tucked under the blue pillow, my legs curled up into my chest, I thought about you and realized for the first time that I’d never see you again. There’d be no soft voice on the phone asking if

Mom was around, no strong arms to lift me up toward the gray living room fan, no tags on Christmas gifts that read, “Love, Uncle Neil.”

Our lives went on without you just as you hoped they would. I was a child and transitioned back into my life of school and friends with an ease that makes me ask myself if I’m becoming Grandma, pushing feelings aside, hiding behind the sawgrass.

I wait for my boyfriend in the corner of the bustling casino, attempting to balance myself against the heavy memories that flood my mind. The rattling of coins tosses the lighthouse, Mom’s tears, my laughter, and the day of your funeral, replaying as if the nightmare is stuck on repeat. I watch them over and over as the man across the room jingles the coins back and forth in his hands. I close my eyes and try to remember what my yoga instructor said last week. *Relax your eyes, your ears, your nose. Imagine you’re standing beneath a waterfall. Let go of your thoughts. Let go of your mind.*

Then I remember what my boyfriend’s mother told me about meditation, something her own mother taught her when she was young, in Venezuela.

“Cuidado,” she said. Be careful. “Evil finds it way in when your mind is blank. It snakes its way through the eyes,” she said, waving her caramel hands over my face. “The spirit is sensitive to the nose and the mouth and the lips.” I think that she is right, that I mustn’t let the evils of this place destroy whatever’s left of me, and then I wonder if I am crazy for listening to any of this meditation crap at all. What waterfall? What evils? My boyfriend walks up to the back of the room where I stand. He’s ready to go.

I grab his hand, still uncertain of whether I will make it out of the casino. The humid air hugs my clothes as I walk through the sliding doors and back into the parking lot. I spot the car—mine, not yours, I remind myself—jump in, and slow my breathing.

"Let's go home, please," I say, my voice more steady than I expect. My boyfriend says nothing, knowing he shouldn't have taken me here even though I'd lied and said, "Don't worry, I'll be fine."

We're back on Krome again and it's so dark I can't trust my own eyes. But to my right I can see the sawgrass again, yes, I must be seeing clearly now. This patch ahead is burnt and cindered and I know I am seeing this right, because that brush fire that burned out here for nearly a week straight died out only two days ago. I saw the fires on television—over 7,000 acres burned and burned and burned, right up into the reservation. I see the land now, ashy and injured. But the Everglades will rebuild itself now, just as it always has. The sawgrass and the snakes and the gators know this is their land, their right. They won't surrender to the fires and the pain; they continue the cycle. They continue the life.

I spend the rest of the dark ride home thinking about what has just happened, if it's wrong that I don't think about you enough, if I will ever know the real reason for your death. Twenty minutes later and I'm home. I inch toward the front door where you stood and waited with gifts in hand every Christmas morning. Sweat crawls down my spine, clinging to the center of my teal shirt. I slide the silver key into the lock, tiptoe inside, and close the door.

As I walk into my room and pull my shirt over my head, I smell the stale cigarettes that you were so accustomed to and throw my clothes off and into the corner of the room. The white carpet is soft under my bare feet. I crawl into bed, pull the sheets up to my neck, and feel my muscles relax with the clean, familiar smell. Cool air blows from the air conditioning vent. I hear my door creak open and see Charlie sneak in, jump into my bed as he has since he was a puppy, and settle into the sheets, right next to me. His velvet coat grazes the side of my leg, his breath slowing as he falls asleep. I hear him wheezing. The red of the carpet on the casino floors evaporates from my mind.

I close my eyes and imagine you walking out the backdoor of the Long Island house, Grandpa's bar, and the casino, wearing your black leather jacket, strolling through time, the sawgrass cutting deep into your knees, rattlers slithering alongside your feet. I imagine you ascending to a version of yourself that you might've actually come to accept—seeing yourself in a light you might've felt proud of. In the light I always saw you in. Scattering into grains like black and white static on a television set that's lost all signal, you drift in my mind as the person you couldn't become until you left: hands folded across your muscular chest, smile rippling across the black stubbles of your warm cheeks, placing one foot in front of the other until you move with such ethereality that you don't need your feet at all. Following the crimson trail of footsteps we've all left for one another. Another layer shed.

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