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SAVE THE DROWNING CHILD: STORIES

by

KAYLA CAYASSO
B.S. Florida A&M University, 2021

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
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ABSTRACT

Save the Drowning Child is a collection that explores place, power, and the way collective trauma trickles down through history and families. These stories bridge the author's African American Studies scholarship and love for language. Set against the North Florida landscape, the collection moves readers across time and begs one question again and again: how does one reconcile characters' deplorable choices with the horrific reality of their lives within the Diaspora.

On the outskirts of Nassau County, a pig farmer and his wife face addiction and starvation during the Great Depression, but the return of an estranged daughter might signal their end or a new beginning. In the backwoods of 1960 Alachua County, an ambitious paralegal bears witness to something impossible and terrifying. In the title story, set in 1901 Jacksonville, a young girl tries to prevent the worst after her sister throws her infant niece into the Saint Johns River.

This historical fiction collection draws on traditional elements of Southern Gothic, horror, and magical realism to explore the impacts of colonialism and the Maafa¹ on the North Florida region and its Black and Brown peoples.

¹ Swahili term for "Disaster", used to refer to the Black African Holocaust; this includes but is not limited to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the cultural and physical genocide of Black and African peoples, the historic and continued enslavement of Africans on the African Continent, and the diasporic and cultural fallout in the aftermath of these atrocities. The Maafa refers to the ongoing erasure of Blackness, the ongoing devaluing of Black peoples, and the psychological impact of this collective trauma on both the perpetrators and victims of anti-Black violence.

For my first teacher, the person who brought me the salvation of reading and my obsession with learning, my mom.

For my earliest beta-reader, confidant, friend, and little sister, Andrea.

For Aubrey. Even far away, our shared moments of chest-quaking laughter have carried me through the hardest parts of this journey.

For my dad, the first storyteller in my life.

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THE COST OF CROSSING

Jacksonville 1932

Dorothea was full of stones.

The first had materialized in the hours after her grandson had failed to return to her LaVilla home after his shift at the Dewitt house. In the day that followed, she grew tired of pacing the house and moved to keep vigil on her veranda. When Jeb still had not returned the following day, Dorothea took to driving the streets in her late-husband's old Pontiac, searching. That first stone multiplied, split then split again to make her gut a rocky riverbed. When she woke on the fourth day, she saw the news in the *Florida Star* — DEWITT FAMILY ACCUSES 'GANG OF NEGROS' IN DAUGHTER'S ATTACK.

Dorothea recognized the name and those stone grew craggy, harsh edges. On the fifth day, when news of a lynching rippled across the city, Dorothea thought those sharp stones might turn her to mince. She knew it then. Knew this truth more than she'd known anything before. Jeb wouldn't be coming home.

Dorothea thought this would be easier — coming to Whittington's, the city's only Black funeral home and mortuary — to finally put a name to the "unidentified man" if she told herself the hard, assumed certainty: that it *was* her grandson who had been lynched. She thought those stones would turn to sand, that she'd go foggy, as she had after her first child had died. But, looking across Mr. Whittington's desk at the contents of that brown paper bag, each item Dorothea recognized was another rock, sharper and heavier than the previous, pushing her apart from inside.

The blood-stained tatters of a dress shirt; the same kind, Dorothea thought, she'd bought for her grandson from Lindo's. A single leather arm garter, embossed with the letters *MRF*.

Malcolm Rudolfo Ford. They'd belonged to her husband once, then to Jeb. Now, she supposed, they belonged to no one. Folded on the desk, a pair of blue trousers. Dorothea grabbed them by the waistband, let them unravel, and caught her breath. The trouser legs looked as if they'd been eaten away by fire.

"He was found in these?" she asked, her voice a shuddering, quaking thing in the steady silence of the office. Mr. Whittington looked caught off guard and swallowed. "His injuries were," he stopped, rolled his tongue in his mouth nervously, considering what to say next, "extensive."

Dorothea released the burned fabric, moved to the unburned leg, and saw it. There, on the left side, behind where a boy's knee would fit, a small patch Dorothea had made in the trousers. She'd seen enough, dropped the pants to the desk. When she finally spoke, her voice didn't sound quite right, like she was speaking from inside a seashell, "These, all of these, are Jeb's."

Mr. Whittington placed a firm hand on Dorothea's arm. "My condolences, Mrs. Ford. We can take a break before discussing options."

"No," she said, "my grandson deserves rest." Dorothea took a shaky breath and pulled her arm back from the desk. Her shuddering, gloved hands sifted through her handbag and retrieved her checkbook. "We have a family plot at the Mount Herman Cemetery. He should be buried there, beside his aunt and grandfather. When can you do it?"

"I'm sure it's a lovely plot," Mr. Whittington said. "But you can take what time you need."

Dorothea swallowed around those rocks, piled up to her throat now.

"And what would we be waiting for? For him to turn to rot?" She took a shaky breath and, in a softer tone, said, "This is not the first time I've lost a child."

Though she was sure James Whittington had seen his share of tragedy, Dorothea was surprised by the ache in his eyes. “There’s no one you want to involve in the planning? His parents?”

Dorothea thought of the daughter that had lived, survived childhood to make the same stupid mistakes Dorothea had made once upon a time. Thought about how that girl had abandoned their family, crossed the river, and kept her grandson from her for fourteen years. Pictured her daughter as a fattened tick latched to the back of Jeb’s neck, draining his paychecks and peace. Pictured her shrinking and shriveling with hunger now that his weekly payments had stopped; now that Jeb was bled dry.

“No,” she said with a dry chuckle. “We only had each other.”

“Do you want...” Mr. Whittington hesitated, again, carefully selecting his words, “...to view him?”

Dorothea thought of those torn clothes, the burned trousers, and fought back the urge to retch. She thought of Lorelai, the *first* Lorelai, stock-still in her basinet; of the sight of her sister’s body, blue and blister-marked, through the window of Brewster Hospital’s quarantine wing. Thought of the morning, years later, when she’d woken beside her husband’s cold and stiff form, spittle smeared into the stubble of his beard. She’d seen enough bodies and lost enough children for one lifetime.

“No,” she said with a shiver. Dorothea grabbed a pen from Mr. Whittington’s desk and let the tip hover over the *to the order of* line. “Now, what options do you have in cherrywood?”

#

The Whittington Funeral Home sat two blocks east of the Stanton School, exactly where it had sat during Lorelai's youth, but she'd nearly missed both it and her old school on the walk from the docks. When she'd left this place with Cyrus fifteen years ago, Jeb still steeping in her belly, the school had been a wooden structure, built, burned down, and rebuilt several times since its inception. In the time since Lorelai left, the school had been rebuilt from brick. A proper-looking institute now, despite the boards that covered the first-floor windows — echoes of the lynching that had taken place in the overgrown baseball diamond across the street. Whittington's, though, looked unchanged from the sidewalk. The old, faded sign that swung gently above the door was the same one she recognized from childhood, the gilded doorknocker in the shape of a horned bull even still was the same, but the familiarity didn't bring Lorelai much comfort. Against her hip, the eviction notice felt hot and heavy, like a branding iron.

Across the street, in the baseball diamond a cut of dingy fabric tied to the steel skeleton of the dugout caught the afternoon breeze, and a chill sprinted down Lorelai's spine. She wondered if this was the stupidest thing she'd ever done; if she'd risked her home, the house where she'd birthed her son, on a baseless worry.

The War had made Lorelai a widow, the Crash had made her indigent, and now, the gossip of those Western Union clerks made her a woman that chased her own speculations like a serpent eating its own tail. If anyone knew about the unidentified lynched man, Lorelai figured Jimmy Whittington, her old schoolmate and newest director of the funeral home, was a good place to start. Lorelai bit her lip, raised the knocker, and let the golden bull fall.

A boy in a smart black suit, she figured no older than Jeb, cracked the door and squinted down at Lorelai from the sliver of inside. "Apologies, Miss," he said, glancing over his shoulder,

then dropped his voice to a whisper. “You’ll need to come by tomorrow, Mr. Whittington ain’t meeting with anyone else today.”

She hadn’t spent three dollars on that damned, overpriced Dames Point Ferry to cross the river back into this cursed city to be told to try again tomorrow. “I’m an old friend of Jimmy’s,” she said, hopeful, but the boy just stared at her, unimpressed.

“He’s expecting me,” she lied. She just needed to ask a few questions. To rule out this poor man, whoever he was.

He frowned. “I didn’t see nobody else in the appointment book. What’s your name?”

“Ford. Lorelai Ford.” She spit out the name like she was trying to spit sunflower hulls. It was a haunted name, and one she hadn’t spoken aloud since before she went across the river, before she’d married and become *Lorelai Batey*, but she hoped Jimmy would recognize it.

He ducked back inside and after a moment, Lorelai climbed the steps to follow behind. The parlor smelled of carnations and something else, something Lorelai tried not to linger on as she closed the door behind her. Squeezed between two other businesses on the block, little light crept in through the window beside the secretary’s desk, where the boy bent over an appointment book.

Lorelai’s hands went dewy, the scent of carnations thick and prickly in her nostrils. She watched his thin finger run down a short list of names that she knew he wouldn’t find her on. Lorelai wanted to say she’d lied about the appointment but that this was *important*. Wanted to say that she was looking for her son, that he’d missed a payment and he *never* missed a payment. She wanted to say how she’d heard about the lynching and just wanted to see. Just wanted to make sure it wasn’t her Jeb, even though she already knew it couldn’t be. Jeb was just a chip of a thing, who went to work and sent his payments on time. He never brought Lorelai any trouble when he

still lived with her in Arlington. Before he'd had to drop out to find work, she'd never heard a bad word from his teachers. And since, she'd never heard a complaint from the white family that housed and employed him. No, she'd been silly to come here. Jeb was probably tucked away at that rich family's house, too scared to venture out of Riverside and into the city to send the money. Even more than all that, at fourteen, Jeb was hardly a *man*, and that's what the clerks had said. That a *man* had been lynched. Wasn't that what they'd said?

"You're late," the boy huffed from behind the desk. "Follow me." He slipped around the desk to lead Lorelai up the narrow staircase beside the front door. "Quick. The rest of your party already arrived."

"There must be a misunderstanding," Lorelai began, and her stomach twisted.

"You said Ford, right?" he said without stopping his ascent.

Beyond that door, mourners, folks whose relatives had *actually* died, planned how to bury their loved one. The boy lifted his hand to the knob and Lorelai frantically reached out to grab him, pull him back, explain that it was a fib meant to get her in to see the undertaker, "Don't—"

The door swung open and, there, at the top of the stairs, backlit by the unnatural gleam of electric lights, stood a black-wrapped specter, a phantom whose movement, as it descended the first step, rattled something loose in Lorelai's memory. The boy stood aside, and as the phantom moved down the stairs, and into the light: recognition. Maybe it was her stiff back as she descended the stairs, or in the nearly-not-there smell of jasmine that plucked at Lorelai's scabbed-over childhood memories. Lorelai felt her gut grow heavy. She made to turn, to get out of this place, to leave the suffocating sent of florals and formaldehyde behind her and find her son, but a question rooted Lorelai's feet just long enough for the specter to speak.

“Color me surprised,” Dorothea said behind her. “I didn’t expect to see you so soon.”

Lorelai closed her eyes, her jaw locked against the rage scratching at the back of her tongue. Her mother still knew how to turn words to boiling water, how to throw them into Lorelai’s face so even if they slid down her body, even if Lorelai didn’t reply, it still burned like hell. She’d known, of course, that her mother still carried on with her life on this side of the river, known that it was within the realm of possibility that she might run into Dorothea. But here?

A question, the same question she’d been haunted by for days across the river, burrowed through Lorelai’s feet, through the floorboards and foundation, the silt and groundwater beneath, and when it finally reached limestone and could go no further, she turned. Faced Dorothea. Took in her mother’s black pencil skirt, her grey blouse peeking out from under her black jacket, her pinned black cap. She turned to the man behind her, Jimmy. His dour face, the drop of his mouth in the moment Lorelai saw him recognize her, and in the hardening of his jaw and the tilt of his fleeting gaze. Lorelai swallowed. Took a deep breath. Climbed the stairs.

#

Across the desk, Mr. Whittington explained to her daughter the situation, the truth that Dorothea had been telling herself — no forcing herself to accept, for the last five days; something *terrible* had happened to Jeb, something he could not come back from.

“Not my boy, you’re wrong,” Lorelai said, shaking her head. “Folks said it was a man. Jeb’s only fourteen.”

Dorothea snorted.

Lorelai turned and, in a soured tone, said, “Don’t start with that, Momma.”

Dorothea had decades-worth of practice sitting quiet while others talked of important things. Thirty years ago, she'd sat in this very office, watched her husband and this Mr. Whittington's father haggle over the price of her daughter's casket. Then, she'd held Lorelai's body, her *first* Lorelai, in her arms as the men spoke of the benefits of the oak over something softer, cheaper. She hadn't flinched when Malcolm called Mr. Whittington a crook, said nothing when Malcolm selected the tawdriest pine thing for their daughter's burial.

Dorothea hadn't even been able to conjure a grimace when, finally, the men turned to her, needing the date of birth. In the moment, from a haze that had clung to her for months after her first daughter's birth, she'd looked away and told them to put what they like.

LORELAI FORD
1901
BORN & DIED

The bleak engraving haunted her, seemed to scream the weakness, or maybe cruelty, of her sixteen-year-old-self. Her daughter had deserved better than that, better than the pine box Malcolm had decided on to save a few dollars they didn't need. Jeb would not get the same treatment.

"Let's not play this game," Dorothea said, rising and brushing her skirts, readying to leave. The office felt too small now, with Lorelai in it. "I've seen his things. Jeb's things. And I've already written Mr. Whittington a check for the burial, so there's not anything left to bother yourself with."

Lorelai's face went poppy-red. She turned to the undertaker and asked, "Is this true?"

"Mrs. Ford has," he paused, careful as ever, "offered to make the arrangements."

"*Arrangements?*" Lorelai said, bemused. "We don't even know if it's Jeb."

"Please," Dorothea said. "Go home. There's no need to trouble yourself with the finances or planning. The matter is settled. The funeral is scheduled for Sunday."

Lorelai stood, eyes dark, hands balled into heavy fists. She brought one down onto the desk and leaned toward Mr. Whittington. “This woman wouldn’t know the first thing about my son, and I’ll not have her making plans for him, for someone she claims to be him, as if she does.”

“Oh, and here come the dramatics.” Dorothea sighed. “Don’t pretend that you’d be here looking for him if your rent wasn’t due at the top of the month.”

“Ladies,” Mr. Whittington said, standing, his face tense. “Please, we need to decide how to proceed. Now is not the time for this...” His voice trailed off, replaced with a wave between the women.

While it was true that, even now, she couldn’t be sure of her first daughter’s birthday, the day that Jeb knocked on her door, wide-eyed and clutching Malcolm’s obituary, lived in the space between Dorothea’s teeth and tongue, between her inhale and coming exhale. He’d crossed the river looking for her, asking for nothing but to know who she was and learn about the people he’d come from. It brought Dorothea peace to sit with him, to watch him fill up on her cooking after his workday out in Riverside; to watch him fight sleep to listen stories from her youth and for her to learn about his life — one Dorothea had been kept from. When he got the job with the Dewitt family, on *this* side of the Saint Johns, it’d been an easy decision to move him into her home and save him the ferry fare. It had been Lorelai’s idea, or so Jeb had told her. Her grandson had been more like his momma than Dorothea thought.

“Agreed,” Dorothea said with a pointed look at her daughter. “We need to let him rest.”

“Mrs. Ford,” Mr. Whittington said, a drip of anger in his voice. “You lied to me when you said the deceased had no one else. It’s, of course, customary that the next of kin be consulted in decisions regarding the body.”

Dorothea flushed. “Well,” she stammered, opening and closing her hands, “it’s true, isn’t it? She didn’t even know he’s been staying in my house since last year.”

“He’s been *what?*” Lorelai said.

“She was supported by my grandson,” Dorothea continued, paying her daughter no mind. “She has no means of paying for a funeral, much less buying a plot.” She folded her arms across her chest, trying to hide their growing restlessness. “Show her his things, like you did me. She won’t recognize them.”

Mr. Whittington sat back, considering this. Dorothea shuffled, feeling suddenly nervous, and cast a look to Lorelai. When her first Lorelai passed, the doctor had called it *failure to thrive*. Claimed that she’d been too weak for this world and, back then, Dorothea had only nodded and carried on. Then, she’d thought it made sense, and she thought that her second Lorelai would be a new chance, a fresh start to avoid the mistakes she’d made with her first.

On this side of motherhood, the side where her second daughter survived infancy, excelled in school, had been given all the fineries Dorothea had wanted for in her girlhood, Dorothea understood it was *this* Lorelai who was the weak one. This Lorelai, the one she’d doted on as a baby, coddled through childhood, was the one who fled across the river the first time her life didn’t go precisely as she’d wanted, and the one who abandoned Dorothea in that loveless LaVilla house, and the one who sent her son across the river alone to save herself from eviction.

Dorothea took in Lorelai’s clenched jaw and indignant eyes and shook her head. This was the one who, despite Dorothea’s labors, had failed to thrive, and yet, this was the one who survived the others. Years ago, at the hands of her schoolteacher-turned-paramour-turned-husband,

Dorothea learned an important lesson that resurfaced now, in this new Mr. Whittington's office: that life was rarely fair and always cruel.

Dorothea watched Mr. Whittington retrieve the items she'd identified earlier — the burned trousers, the bloody tatters of a shirt, the arm garter — and felt the wound she'd been keeping closed begin to tear and bleed. She watched her daughter examine the items, no recognition in her eyes.

Grief hovered just out of reach of Lorelai, kept at bay by her daughter's selfishness and foolish idealism. Dorothea's grief had been chased away with Jeb's arrival, pulled from its usual place around her ankles. She could see it — *grief* — standing in the same corner where Dorothea had first seen it thirty years ago. Then, the apparition followed her home and never left. Grief became a stray, pawing at her legs, tripping her mid-step, and subsisting on the small scraps of joy Dorothea clung to before Jeb — clear skies, well-brewed coffees, and good books — and left only guilt in its wake. Grief waited for her daughter, for Lorelai's eyes to open and focus, waited to swallow both her big joys — seeing her child grow up, become a man, father his own children — and small joys alike.

She watched Lorelai's hands float over the fire-ruined items, horror pushing between her opened lips. Her mouth snapped closed, her chin turned up. "I don't recognize these."

"See?" Dorothea said. She could feel the quickening pulse at her temples, the heat trapped under her arms turning to sweat and making her silk blouse cling to her uncomfortably. That wound that had been torn open needed staunching. She started to speak, started to say how ridiculous this was, that she needed to get home, that this was a waste of time, but Mr. Whittington cut her off.

“If you’ve been,” he paused, and Dorothea could see him picking his next words. “If you’ve been away from Jeb for a year, you might not know his items. That doesn’t mean it’s not him.”

“Let me see him, then,” Lorelai said, standing. “I can put an end to this. Prove that ain’t him. I know my son.”

Dorothea steeled. Crossed the room. She was close enough to reach out and touch Lorelai, but her fidgety hand stopped short. She swallowed, her pride pawing at the back of her throat. “Don’t. Don’t do this. It’s him, and if you have a beating heart in your chest you won’t want to remember him this way.”

“The body is severely damaged,” Mr. Whittington said with a nod. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“While she throws checks this way and that, my son is missing. I came here to make sure it’s not Jeb, and I intend to do just that.”

“Lorelai,” the name fell out of Dorothea’s mouth like rocks. “I swear it on your sister’s grave, it’s Jeb down there. Trust me. You got a choice. A choice I didn’t have. You don’t have to do this.” A decade-and-a-half of bitterness spread in the inches between them like spilled ink. Dorothea inhaled, sharp, and reached across the gap. Her daughter couldn’t understand, couldn’t know the depth of this kind of pain. She couldn’t fathom what the sight would do to her, the way this memory could be stirred back into reality by the most innocuous of triggers: the soapy bubbles of her laundry could be the drizzle smeared across Malcolm’s dead lips, the bloom of blueberries in the spring could be the bubbled and ruined skin of her flu-ravaged sister, and, if she looked at her daughter long enough, Lorelai’s cupid’s bow and widow’s peak fogged over and left behind a

hazy image of who her sister, Dorothea's first Lorelai, might have become had she known then how to leave the clutches of that post-birth heaviness.

Dorothea thought of her daughter's body in the basinet, soiled and filthy. Of how, when Malcolm had told to hold their daughter's body, she'd begun sobbing and refused. Thought of his hard hand across the back of her head, of him standing over her, of the screaming. Thought of the shame she'd felt as she knelt, Malcolm standing over her, to wash her daughter's cold body in warm water. Thought of the clothes Malcolm laid out for her body, and how odd it felt to push her daughter's rigid arms into the sleeves.

At the brush of Dorothea's fingers against sleeve, Lorelai snatched her arm back, her lips pulled back like an angry, kicked dog. "Don't ever touch me."

The air left Dorothea's lungs. The room was filling with water. Or maybe she was underwater. Or maybe she was sinking. Lorelai spoke to Mr. Whittington, but she sounded far away, like she was somewhere floating on the surface. A burning in Dorothea's chest. *Breathe*, she told herself. Dorothea brought her hands to her chest, waited for the rise, the filling of lungs. Nothing. Burning.

Just inhale. Do it.

Somewhere in the water, Mr. Whittington garbled out that she could wait downstairs in the parlor. Dorothea nodded, a slow unnatural movement. Through the burbling brackish water, she could hear a door open. The squelchy sound of Mr. Whittington saying he'd give her a moment alone. Dorothea heard the muffled click of the door closing. The sound of their footsteps on the stairs, of grief skulking out behind them.

When she was sure she was finally alone, Dorothea took a desperate, gasping inhale, then another, then her breath turned to sobs. Quick as they came, Dorothea swallowed the sobs. Let them sink to the bottom of her, let them stack in her gut like a dam along a river. And, when the barely-there sloshing sounds of Mr. Whittington and Lorelai disappeared, faded into nothing, Dorothea stood and made her way to the parlor.

#

The hall to the mortuary was short and narrow, and Lorelai felt like she was slithering through a vein. Trailing behind Jimmy, she walked with both arms out, hoping that her fingertips were strong enough to keep the claustrophobic collapsing sensation at bay. As they came to the next door, marked *Staff Only Please*, Lorelai felt her skin go bumpy, felt something heavy on her back, something frothy in the folds of her brain pushing the flesh apart and feeding the pressure building between Lorelai's ears. Lorelai closed her eyes, leaned into the wall for support. She could hear Jimmy sifting through his key ring, a jingle of metal that made Lorelai's tongue swell in her mouth, then the click of the key into place.

"Just a moment. Please," she wheezed, clutching at the wall for support.

"Of course. We can take as long as you need."

Jimmy leaned back into the wall beside her, his hands pushed into his pockets so, to Lorelai, he looked like that grade eight boy that sat behind Cyrus all over again. Like that spindly boy from fifteen years ago who'd been a witness at her county courthouse wedding, all of them smiling with sincerity only children could muster.

"You know, your momma's right," Jimmy said, dropping the well-to-do tone he'd used with Dorothea. "You don't gotta do this. No one's gonna think your weak or nothing."

“Don’t you start, too, Jimmy.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry, Lori,” he said again, turning to face her.

“You don’t need to—”

“No,” he said. “Please, let me say this. When you and Cyrus left Jacksonville proper, we was only kids, all of us. But Cy was my friend, and I could’ve...I *should* have done more after he passed. I know you wasn’t but across the river. It felt like a world away.”

Lorelai bit the inside of her cheek. From the day her daddy tossed her out of their LaVilla house in broad daylight, for God and all the saints to see, her rage had been a thing with too many legs, too many hands. She remembered the way folks, families she’d known from birth, dripped into the street to watch the commotion, the tears and curses she’d thrown at her father as he pushed her down the steps of the home that she’d grown up in when she refused to take the trip to Live Oak to see a *good and inconspicuous* doctor.

I don’t house harlots or bastards her father had said from the veranda. She remembered looking up from the yard, remembered seeing Jimmy’s round, baby-face, along with his parents and brother, watching from their porch a few houses down. Her momma, inside their house, listening to her screams from the yard. Lorelai remembered seeing that steaming teacup in her mother’s hands, her eyes looking somewhere as she passed the opened door and then disappeared out of the frame. *Don’t you try to come back neither*, Malcolm had shouted behind her, *Ain’t nothing here for you anymore, girl*.

“You right,” Lorelai said. “It felt like a world away for me, too.”

Jimmy coughed his dewy tears away, and asked, “Does Jeb have any markings we should look for?”

Lorelai’s brows furrowed together, confused. “I’ll know by his face.”

Jimmy looked down. “Jeb, if it *is* Jeb,” he said, correcting himself, “don’t look how he did in life.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Does Jeb got any markings?”

Lorelai swallowed. “A birthmark on his hip. A patch of speckled skin.”

Beyond the door, the room spread out in varying shades of chrome and white. Two metal tables, bordered by metal dishes and instruments, glass pumps and jars holding solutions. Hoses, draped over old hospital IV stands, curled at the ends like snakes coiling to strike. On one of the tables, draped in white, a mound of something, of someone. Lorelai, despite the cold, felt the sweat gathering on her lip, felt the pounding of her heart, the rushing of blood in her neck and ears.

“When you’re ready.”

She looked down. Tried to concentrate, instead, on the tile floors. Lorelai caught sight of the drain in the center of the floor. In the bright electric lights of the embalming room, the brass bars of the drain shone like freshly pressed pennies. The screws holding the drain in place were dirty and bloodstained, and the sight made Lorelai’s stomach tumble. Lorelai closed her eyes. Opened. She took a breath, nodded, and Jimmy pulled back the sheet, letting the fabric rest just below the navel.

Lorelai had grown up hearing stories about the Great Fire. Heard how the adults around her had divided their lives into *before* and *after*, even her mother. Especially her mother. In school,

Dr. Johnson would have them look at old newspaper clippings, and she remembered the feeling that washed over her every May when those clippings went around. The photos had been labeled with familiar streets and buildings, but the miles and miles of flattened city felt alien and impossible. A scar that stretched out across the city for miles and then up into the air in photos taken during the burn, where thick billows of smoke poured into the sky and blotted out the sun. Those photographs never looked like Jacksonville to Lorelai, yet each caption and article mentioned places she recognized — *Broad Street, Union Avenue, Fairfield*. Though she saw the photos every year until she dropped out of school and left the city proper, it always unsettled her — seeing something familiar look so foreign, wrong, almost unidentifiable. This same *unsettling* sensation gripped Lorelai now, as she took in the sight of the boy on the table.

His face was bloated, too swollen and bruised to recognize the bone structure or spread of a nose, his jaw not quite in line with the smashed set of his skull. Lorelai let out a sound, something like a cry and closed her eyes. She felt Jimmy’s hands on her, the buzz of his voice, as he asked if she needed a moment, but she shook her head. Opened her eyes. No, she’d asked for this. He was a blur of bruises and welts and dried blood. A small, slight body made up of wounds. This was, indeed, a boy, but her boy? Lorelai felt a cold wash of shame and panic as she understood, finally, what Jimmy had meant about his face.

“Which side?”

“What?” Lorelai said without looking up from the table.

“Which side has the mark?”

“His right.”

Jimmy reached over to the boy's right hip, closest to Lorelai, and rolled the sheet down, revealing the boy's bony hip and the beginnings of a scorched thigh. There, the size of her pinky, Lorelai saw it, perched right where she remembered — where his hip curved back into his buttocks. A small run of speckled skin.

She stumbled, felt her knees quake, and give out. This wasn't Jeb. It wasn't. It couldn't be. Lorelai couldn't see his round cheeks, his eyes. The soft curve of his boyish jaw, not yet done sharpening into manhood. Those things were gone, hiding somewhere else, maybe under this body's ruined face. But no, that couldn't be. Because this *wasn't* Jeb. It *wasn't*.

Jimmy's hands were on her again, she felt them, but they felt far away. Like feeling through several blankets, reaching for something hidden among the folds of fabric.

“Lori, I'm sorry.”

“No, no.”

“He's got the birthmark.”

“I know, I know. But—” Lorelai tried to say it, but the words, all the words that pooled at the back of her tongue, slipped down her throat and stuck there like a wad of dry cotton. She wanted to say how it couldn't be Jeb, not because she was sure it wasn't but because she wanted, with everything in her, for that to be the truth. But even thinking that, she felt stupid. Angry. But she needed it to be true because she loved her son. And she needed it to be true because she needed to be a better mother than she'd grown up with.

Jimmy stayed with her there, at the table's edge, crouched down onto his haunches and holding her, for several minutes. And when Lorelai finally spoke, she said, “Don't let her take him from me.”

“Don’t worry about that right now,” Jimmy said.

“She’s right,” Lorelai said, finally rising. “I don’t have a plot or money for a funeral. But I got a spade back home and two working arms and legs. I’m asking you, Jimmy, don’t let her take him from me.” She folded her arms around herself, started to turn away from the table, but stopped herself. She owed it to Jeb to look.

“I can’t just hand over a body to you. There are rules, regulations my business got to follow.”

“Yes, you can,” Lorelai said. “When the funeral comes, just let my momma bury the empty box. Throw some logs in and tell her she can’t do an open casket. She’s not gonna want to see, anyhow.” She watched Jimmy playing out the repercussions, watched him mulling over how to tell her no.

“You’re asking me to defile a body, to defraud Mrs. Ford,” Jimmy said, standing.

“I know.”

“You know the kind of trouble you’re asking me to get into? If I’m caught and lose my license, how colored folks in town gone bury their kin?”

“Cyrus would want his son with me, with his momma. You know it.”

Jimmy began to pace, running his hands along the back of his neck.

“You said you wished you’d done more then.” Lorelai said, her hands shaking, her throat going gravelly. “We were kids then. But, we ain’t children anymore, Jimmy.”

As he turned and passed Lorelai, she grabbed Jimmy’s arm, and said, “You the only person who can help me.”

Jimmy bit his lip, his brows pushed together in contemplation. Lorelai held her breath and, for the first time in years, said a silent prayer. *Please.*

He shook her from his arm and crossed the room to a second door marked *Storage Only* and stepped inside. Then, the soft *tink* of glass, the shuffling of something against the tile floor.

“Jimmy?” she called. His brown face poked from out of the door frame.

“I’ll help you,” he said, a weight to his voice as he dragged an open trunk behind him out of the closet. “It just ain’t gonna be pretty.”

#

The gunmetal gray of her house came into focus as Dorothea rolled the Pontiac down Beaver, but she still wasn’t ready to pull in. So, she cruised past 425 Beaver, through LaVilla, turned onto Rushing Street, and, for the third time, took that all the way down to Kings Run — the main thoroughfare west out of Jacksonville. The roads were quiet, the crash and subsequent repossessions having gobbled up most of the city’s motorcars, so Dorothea let herself idle there at the end of Rushing, remembering the last time she’d rode west on Kings Run — with Jeb, nervous but boiling with boyish excitement behind the wheel. On a Sunday — Jeb didn’t work Sundays — a few weeks after Jeb moved in, they’d taken this road west, passed LaVilla, passed Glendale, to the Mount Herman Cemetery to show her grandson where their family rested.

She hadn’t expected Lorelai to lie down, to let her do this the right way. Her daughter had emerged from that door, that hallway, wearing Grief like a veil. Dorothea knew that feeling. Suffocated under that feeling. She’d been relieved at her daughter’s acquiescence, stunned when Lorelai told her to *do what you will*. But, then again, this Lorelai had always been soft, had always been a runner rather than a fighter.

Jeb had asked her that day, seeing his aunt's headstone for the first time, why she'd named his mother Lorelai. Dorothea had told him *Lorelai was your great-grandmother's name, Malcolm's momma*, but Jeb had frowned and asked again; *but why did you name her after her dead sister?*

Dorothea had nodded, her grandson was not a runner, not a fighter, but a boy full of good questions. She'd shrugged and told him the closest version of the truth Dorothea could — that this way, her first Lorelai still felt close. That *this* way, her time with her first Lorelai, even gone so long, felt real. Jeb had run his thin, ruddy fingers along the flat headstone, the imprecise inscription detailing his aunt's brief life. Dorothea had nudged him, asked him to say what was on his mind. *Dizzy*, he'd said softly, *that's so sad, don't you think? To have to carry around ghosts like that?*

A tinny honking made Dorothea jump, and the Pontiac stalled. A black Lincoln had pulled up behind her and laid on the horn. As Dorothea tried to restart the Pontiac, the Lincoln swerved around her and a thick red face leaned out the passenger side, shouting, "Get outta the road, nigger!" The car peeled off, heading west. When she was sure the Lincoln was too far down the road to bother turning around to follow behind her, Dorothea pulled off. To the right, toward home.

Dorothea turned right down Kinsman Road, then another right onto Beaver. That blur of gray was coming into focus, that house where she'd raised her second daughter, where Jeb had come to find her. That quiet, empty place, where Jeb's pillows and blanket still sat, folded and waiting for him, on the sofa.

She knew the silence of a house where children once lived. Knew the hollowness of a heart that used to be a mother, now no longer. She'd known it when she lost her first. Had seen the indiscriminate nature of death when her sister and thousands of others took ill and learned the cruelty of it — death — when she watched Millie wither away behind a glass window. Learned

the depths of that silence when her second child left — a kind of small death. She had wrapped herself in seclusion when Malcolm finally died. Dorothea *knew* loss. Knew grief like one knew the pills and fibers of their favorite sweater. What happened to Jeb would never be made right, but Dorothea *knew* how to navigate solitude, and, because of that, she *knew* she would be fine.

The blur was close, turning to hard lines and coming into focus.

She'd be *fine*.

Dorothea wondered, as the house grew closer, what her daughter was doing in that moment. True to brand, Lorelai had refused Dorothea's offer to come home for dinner, refused, even, her offer to drive Lorelai back to the docks, opting to bum a ride from Mr. Whittington instead. Just as well. Dorothea preferred this anyway. The silence and solitude she'd grown used to. After all, Dorothea had tried to cross that gap, had done everything she could.

She slowed, readying to pull into the driveway of her old LaVilla house, but her foot felt heavy. The solitude of the car, Dorothea thought, felt different than the feeling that leaked out of 425 Beaver Street. She wasn't used to *that* feeling.

She'd be fine. Had to be.

Dorothea just needed more time to clear her head, more time alone before walking up the porch steps. Dorothea upshifted and let the Pontiac roll to the end of the street, then turned, again, onto Rushing.

#

From her perch on the gifted Seward trunk, Lorelai watched the water turn from murky to midnight against the Dames Point Ferry's hull. When she had last crossed the river in this direction, she was swollen with puppy-love and pregnancy. Then, she would've sworn the Saint Johns was

a thing made from liquid gold. Then, the river might as well have been the air in her lungs, the thing carrying her to the next moment, the next breath. She'd squeezed Cyrus's hand as he whispered about the new life they'd start in the wilds of Arlington and old Fort Caroline. Jeb had kicked excitedly inside her, just as ready for this new adventure: life.

Lorelai felt tears, hot and biting against the back of her eyes. After all these years, her daddy had been right about her and Cyrus: they'd been young, and dumb, and fucked from the start. Now, as she made this voyage alone, the dark waters slapping against the ferry were a cackling mouth, a pointed finger, mocking her stupidity. But she had her boy, and that was *something*.

Wasn't it?

"Ticket," a porter, younger than Lorelai, said, sticking a gloved arm out. The recent hard times meant White porters. Lorelai wiped her nose, didn't look up as she passed over her ticket.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you, girl. What about the cargo?"

Lorelai's head snapped up. "Sorry?"

"You deaf? This ticket's only good for you," he said impatiently. "You need a cargo ticket for the trunk."

"Uh...how much is the cargo ticket?"

"Two dollars."

Lorelai knew the folds of her skirts carried no money, but still she patted herself down, searching, hoping. But she knew. The three dollars she'd spent on this ferry were the last dollars she had to her name.

"Ain't got all day."

"I'm sorry, I-I-I know I have a bill somewhere. Give me a moment."

“You either got it or you don’t, girl.”

“I got it. I do. I got it. I just need a moment,” Lorelai said, her voice breathy and panicked. The furrowing in the boy-porter’s brow made her spit out a quick, “Please sir.”

He dropped his gloved hand. “Have it when I come back around. If you ain’t paid by the time we dock, you forfeit the trunk.”

Lorelai’s throat felt stripped. Her grip on the trunk tightened. “What happens with my things in that case?”

“Best just worry about paying your fare, girl,” he said with a click of his tongue, and moved on down the deck to bully the next passenger. The water against the hull turned to a drum that made her ears ring.

She’d lied to Jimmy. She had no spade at home, no land she could turn to even plant potatoes, and, in days, she would have no house at all. Lorelai thought this was the right thing, to keep her son close to her, close to the place her and Cyrus had called theirs and away from the mother who’d let her be expelled from her home, and away from the plot that held ghosts Lorelai had spent years trying to forget.

The porter disappeared to the starboard side as the ferry banked right, turning into Dames Point Harbor. Lorelai looked over the railing to the churning waters. The sloshing river, the creaking of metal, the ferry’s horn as the boat pulled into the harbor, all turned to a slurry between her ears. Lorelai took in a sweep of the surrounding deck — a couple too enamored in giggly, whispered conversation to pay her any mind sat near on the far end of the deck. A weary mother held an infant in one arm and the hand of a finnickier toddler in the other stood on the far end of the colored section, speaking in hushed, frustrated commands. To them, she might have been invisible,

another unoccupied bench. An empty, abandoned Seward trunk. From here, the foam kissing the ferry's hull made the river look warm and inviting, like a mother readying to take her tired child in her arms.

Years ago, when Lorelai was still small and her aunt was still alive, she'd crawled into her Aunty Milcah's lap. While her aunt plaited her hair, Lorelai listened to a story about a girl and her baby and the fire. Her aunt told her that, to escape the flames, the girl threw her baby into these very waters.

What happened to the baby, Aunty?

What do you think happened?

Lorelai, caught off guard by her aunt's question, had thought hard before finally saying, *Moses got floated down the river and became a prince.*

That's right, Milcah had said, grinning at her.

I bet he's a king somewhere.

Where?

I don't know. Someplace better than this.

Milcah laughed, a tired, sad sound.

But am I right, Aunty?

Milcah had nodded slow, not saying yes but letting the question roll around in her skull. *Maybe you are, silly girl.*

A strange story, but Lorelai thought of it now. Of the baby floating downriver like Moses. Of the water carrying the baby to some place brighter and more beautiful in the river's brackish

embrace. Thought of Jeb wrapped in her Aunty Milcah's arms, of the sister Lorelai had never known pulling him close to her chest.

Ahead, the docks came into focus. Arlington grew close. Below, the frothy waters called Jeb's name.

ORULA ON THE WATERSIDE

1960

The headlights of Gina's old Hudson Wasp opened the night like a wound. Born and raised in Gainesville, she'd driven down US-441 a thousand and a half times, but never like this — in the dark. When Gina was still small and the grand lie was still intact, Gina and Lottie would ride down to Micanopy for Sunday service with the windows down; let the Hudson fill up with swamp smells — the earthy aroma of rotting vegetation. Now, though, as Gina sliced the dark open on this old familiar road, the windows were decidedly rolled up.

Gina had heard from her roommate, Lily, that twice-a-failure Victor McNamara only passed his bar exam because he'd been to see a root-woman that, Lily said, roamed the swamps between Alachua, Putnam, and Clay counties. Cooper Matlow, one of their classmates, a drunk and known degenerate, won two large at the bolita house after meeting a *voodoo woman* in Payne's Prarie. Gina had rolled her eyes. If Victor's daddy could afford a new Plymoth, he could afford to buy his boy onto the bar association. And Coop? Folks who gambled were bound to win eventually. Gina was ready to dismiss it all as snake oil, but then Lily walked into the apartment with a cocker spaniel wriggling in her arms.

First, Gina thought Lily had gotten a replacement. A *very* good copy. As the days passed, the dog picked up Winnie's old ritual of scratching at Gina's door to go out when Lily slept passed her alarm. Preferred Winnie's favorite sniffing spots when they went for a walk. She'd found Winnie's favorite toys, a disgusting old rope that Lily still hadn't tossed and a gnawed-on tennis ball. The new dog's coat, that salt and pepper brindle pattern, was *too* identical to Winnie, and

when Gina finally asked, Lily hadn't been shy. *I went to her*; Lily'd said as she washed the dog in their bathtub. *I saw the root-woman*.

Winnie was why Gina had gone to the swamp prairie, like Lily and Verne and Coop. Why she'd asked after the root-woman with the strange name. Why she now drove this road to Micanopy.

Gina nearly sailed by the street that led to the lake. Her muscle-memory was trying to take her back to the Church of the Mediator, back to that lichen-caked headstone she hadn't seen since the funeral. She banked right onto a narrow county road, the canopy of trees donned in Spanish moss and darkness. The prairie folks had told her to come to Tuscawilla Lake. Told her that Orula the root-woman would meet Gina at the water, and that she preferred cash to personal check. A *witnessing*. That's what Lily called it.

Gina had pushed her, begged to know what her roommate had witnessed, but Lily wouldn't give an inch. *I'm sworn to secrecy, I don't wanna undo the magic*. She didn't bother asking if that was something the root worker had told her or something Lily had created in her own imagination. All of this sounded beyond possibility. But Winnie was right there, shaking the loose water from her fur and sending wet across Gina's stockinged legs. Besides, why risk it? Gina didn't want to go back to the sight of Winnie caught under that truck, spread across 9th street like jam on toast.

Fifty dollars and serving as witness was what Lily paid for calling on Orula. Prayer, on the other hand, was free and Gina had been praying for months. She'd prayed for Mr. Lawson to ask her thoughts on his cases instead of asking Gina to make copies, refill the office coffee pot, or take incoming calls like a simple secretary. Prayed that Mr. Juniper would keep his hands and eyes on the desk when they spoke rather than massaging her shoulders or peering down Gina's blouse. On

her worst days, she had even prayed for a sinkhole to open under *Lawson, Juniper & Associates*, and for the building to fall into the earth like a dull coin tossed down a well. Lot of good prayer had done her.

The road ended at an unpaved empty lot, and she stepped out onto the uneven sandy soil. The night sang, and the muted crunch of Gina's old saddle shoes on fallen twigs and leaves were an out-of-time metronome. She looked, trying to find the silhouette of this root-woman who was meant to meet her — Gina imagined sharp shoulders, body draped in oriental fabrics, a turban-topped head. Instead, knee deep in the lake, rising from the water like a mangrove, was a wide-set woman, her face still round with youth, dressed in waders. Her hair — Gina had been wrong about the turban — bloomed out and up from her scalp in a wide gravity-flouting halo.

“You the lawyer lady?”

“Paralegal,” Gina said. “You’re the Root Worker?”

The woman in the water propped her fists on her hips and snorted. “Is that what they’re calling me? In the land of milk and honey?”

Gina tried to kill the grin on the corner of her mouth. Gainesville was the land of malt liquor and mosquitos at best. She breathed in the familiar sappy smell of the trees, the water. Years ago, Gina and Lottie would come to this place after service to watch the water, kick in the sand, and pretend they were some other people; folks who didn’t need to drive to the county edge to go to church, folks whose rent was always paid on time, and folks who didn’t make their earnings by the dip and rise of Lottie’s waist and hips. She looked across the lake and held her breath. Gina had never been this close.

“Enough yap,” Orula said. “Roll them pants up and kick them shoes off.”

“You want me to get in?” In all her childhood trips, Gina had never stepped into the waters of Tuscawilla. Back then, Lottie never let Gina swim, and as a girl Gina couldn’t figure out why. She’d sat from the shore, sweating in her Sunday-best, watching crayfish-colored children splash about. *You don’t wanna get in there with them. Get your clothes all dirty.* Years later, when the lie was undone and her hair was chemical-straight, Gina learned the lake was Whites Only and wondered if this was why she’d spent all those Sunday afternoons watching with her Ma from the shore.

Gina swallowed and said, “I thought I was just the witness.”

“And just what you think witnessing means? You ain’t gone witness shit from the shore, Lawyer Lady.” The woman bent, her hands disappearing into the shallow water, searching for something. Then, she looked up, her obsidian halo bouncing at the edges, and said, “Or do you got a problem getting in the same water as a negro?”

Gina went hot and kicked off her shoes. “No. I’m voting for Kennedy.”

The icy water stung at her ankles as Gina waded through the dark to where Orula still shuffled through the water like a crab.

“What are you looking for?” Gina asked.

“I buried supplies out here a while back. Should be somewhere about here,” Orula said, gesturing vaguely, first in one direction then the opposite.

“What sort of supplies?”

“Start searching along the shore. It’ll feel like a vase, with a handle on either side.”

“How do you know it’s still here?” Gina said, and moved to mirror Orula’s bent, hands-in-the-water posture.

“It’s here. Keep looking.”

A pile of rotten branches and abandoned Coca-Cola bottles sat at the edge of the water, growing with each tossed piece of refuse Gina pulled from the silt.

“Do you think someone found it?” she said, standing and stretching her back. “Maybe it drifted deeper?”

“No. It’s here.”

“Will your supplies have survived the water?”

“You gotta lot of questions,” Orula called from several feet away. “Makes for a good lawyer.”

“I’m just a paralegal,” Gina said again. Her fingers looped around something in the water. Excited, she yanked up and scowled when she saw it was an old, mud-caked pair of Levi’s, her fingers looped where a belt might go.

“What’s that? A lawyer’s secretary?”

Gina felt a tightening in her jaw. She tossed the sopping denim onto the shore with the rest of the trash she’d pulled from the lake. “Not exactly.”

“You always wanted to be a *pair-uh-legal*?” Orula asked. She lifted a twisted branch from the water and cast it onto the shore with Gina’s collection.

“No,” Gina said with a dry laugh. “I wanted to be a bonified lawyer. Put bad guys away.”

“So, how come you ain’t?”

Gina’s fingers met something curved and heavy in the water. She pulled, and a sand-filled milk jug rose from the lake, then she tossed it onto the shore.

“Juries don’t take *skirts* seriously,” Gina sighed. “Old school lawyers think women are too *weak* to be prosecutors, to see the evidence. And no one wants a hysterical woman to muck up their case.”

“And is that what you are?” Orula asked. “Hysterical?”

“Doesn’t matter if I am or not,” Gina said, sweeping a bare foot across the lakebed for something *vase shaped*. “All that matters is if the jury thinks I am.” Those weren’t Gina’s words. Those words had been whispered to her by *the boys* of Lawson & Juniper when she asked to be placed on a case or look over the discovery. Beneath the water, she hooked onto something weighty. Gina brought her other hand down to the mass under the water’s surface, followed the curve of the thing up to a second fist-sized handle.

“And you figure a promotion’s supposed to change what they think of you? Make you struggle less?” Orula laughed. “You’d better cook up a better petition than that.”

Gina’s cheeks went hot. She hadn’t mentioned her ask — her petition. Not to Orula, and not to the swamp folk. Gina squatted for more leverage and pulled; when the mass wouldn’t budge Orula waddled over with a toothy grin — one that said *told ya*. When the container finally broke free of the muck and shot from the water, one woman on each handle, Gina thought it looked like a mighty clay catfish leaping from the water into hungry, waiting hands.

#

Twin beams, headlights, shot through the tree-lined lot and cast the shore in a grimy yellow. The petitioner was actually *petitioners* — a man Orula called Nate and his wife, Bernie. Nate barreled down the shore like a locomotive; shoulders bouncing with each step like pistons; his

face, steely and wide like a cowcatcher. Bernie trailed him, clutching something the size of a holiday turkey in her arms.

Gina shifted nervously and watched the two out-of-sync petitioners' approach. If Nate was the train, Gina thought that Bernie was the coalsmoke, cloaked in something heavy and dawdling on the air her husband left behind. Beside her, Orula smacked on sticky caramel, seemingly without a care.

The *supplies* they'd plucked from the river were more mundane than Gina had expected, or maybe hoped; from inside the sealed clay jar, Orula had recovered, triple-bagged, a firestarter, a spool of fishing line, a fist-full of sinkers, a miniature E&J, and five tumbleweed-looking plants the size of Gina's fists. Most underwhelming from the jar: a Baby Ruth bar that Orula peeled open with the efficiency of a trapper shucking a rabbit free from its tiny pelt.

"What's up with the white girl?" Nate asked when he made it to the water's edge. Gina's blood went molasses-thick. The words — *white girl* — floated on the muggy air and wrapped around Gina like a wet coat. The words were true, Gina supposed. *That* was the character she was playing, and some mornings in the mirror when she thought she saw Lottie in the aging corners of her mouth, she thought *that* was who she really was. That if she tried hard enough, *that* could be all of her. But then Gina's relaxers would start to go, and her roots would begin to crimp, and she would find herself wrapped in scarves and hiding behind sunglasses, on the city bus — her Hudson was too recognizable to be seen going to Tanya's Afro Beauty Supply. Then, Gina would stare in the mirror, her scalp ablaze with lye, and be forced to swallow the reality that *that* was, and always would be, only half-true.

Gina was eight when the lie ended, and the performance began. One of her Ma's boyfriends, a man whose last name she couldn't remember, slapped her across the face in their trailer and called Gina a *dumb nigger* for spilling a glass of sweet tea.

In Gainesville, the angles of her face, the coil of Gina's bronze curls, the girth of her nose and mouth, were the fodder for rumors and gossip that, until that moment, Gina had been ignorant of. When she'd asked Lottie if it was true, her Ma had burst into tears; told Gina that everything they had could go away like that — *Snap!* — if anyone found out. Once she knew, Gina saw the stares everywhere, heard the rumors and questions rising from the earth like tremors.

To a young Gina, everyone seemed like an enemy then, no place safe. Not in the streets, where folks might solve the mystery of Gina's parentage by gawking long enough. As she got older, she learned she wasn't safe at school either. Bad enough they whispered about her Ma, now taunts and stares from her classmates hacked at her like a machete: *is it true your daddy's one of them? You know. A colored. Well, how come your hair looks like that then? Like that! All cotton-headed and nappy.* Knowing it was true, her daddy *was* what they said, made her curl inward, recede back into the darkest corner of herself. By middle school, her and Lottie started relaxing her hair.

Nate folded his arms, thick as pecan trees, across his chest and gave Gina a hard stare. Gina was used to stares but this was something else. He didn't stare at the width of her nose, the bulge and wide spread of her lips and mouth. This wasn't like the leers she'd gotten used to at the office; ones that felt like being backed into a corner by a bigger, stronger animal. Gina had watched Lottie be cornered like that over and over and had sworn never to let it happen to her. Girl-Gina hadn't known then what she knew now: that the world women walked was a labyrinth with infinite corners

and, when she was done with this world, someone would stuff her with woodchips and slide her into a box; enclose her in corners forever.

No, this was a stare Gina remembered wearing herself, after the lie ended but before she started relaxing her hair. A stare to know when the strikes were coming, like an animal watching its predator stalk them. Nate's watchful eyes that said *I know what you're capable of, I know your kind of claws.*

"You know how it goes," Orula said around a mouth full of peanuts and nougat. "She's your witness."

"It's nice to meet you both," Gina said as Bernie finally made it down to the shore to hover behind her husband.

"This ain't no wishing for a good hand of cards or the right bolita numbers," he said, ignoring Gina. "Get her out of here."

"You *know* how it goes," Orula said.

"You didn't say nothing about white folks being here."

Again, that strange heavy feeling crawled up Gina's back. Wrapped around her middle and squeezed. She pulled her lips in, biting down on both. He was right, but Gina's face still felt hot, her hands still nervously fidgeted.

"Then bury your boy and be done bothering me," Orula said with a dismissive wave of her hand. Gina's chest felt tight, she chanced a look past Nate to Bernie and their bundle. Orula walked from the water past Nate and his demure wife, Orula's boots caking with soft sand, and made to undo her waders. Nate grabbed her roughly by the arm, the force knocking the candy bar from Orula's grasp and into the sand, and said "Where you think you're going?"

“Nate, let’s just get out of here,” Bernie said in a small, pleading voice behind him, clutching her turkey-sized bundle close to her chest.

“And who the fuck is talking to you,” he said, half turning to look at his wife.

Orula looked down at the fallen candy, her eyes lazily pulled back up to Nate, and she nodded toward the lot. “You better have another Baby Ruth in that lemon y’all drove here.”

“This some kind of joke to you?”

“So, you *don’t* got another,” Orula said with a heavy sigh and shook his hand from her arm. “You already paid, so I’m going to do you this one. But if you can’t replace my Baby Ruth, you’re staying on the shore. Consider it mercy.”

“*Mercy* my ass,” Nate said, pulling Bernie to his side, one big hand resting on the bundle in her arms. “We’re paying customers and I want to see the services I’m paying for.”

“Look around. Where you think you at, boy?” Orula said, gesticulating wildly. The sudden movement made Nate flinch and, in that half step backward, Gina saw fear. Gina recognized it, had felt that same fear toward Ma’s boyfriends-turned husbands. She’d asked Lottie why they didn’t leave, why they didn’t pack up their things and creep away in the dark. *I do all this for you, Lottie had slurred angrily. So you got some place to sleep, food to eat.*

This was the kind of fear felt in the moment after a dish clattered to the floor, in the silence on the ride home before she and her Ma got behind closed doors and out of sight of neighbors. The fear she’d run from, that she’d left her Ma to rot in after Gina finished high school, and that was the fear that Lottie chose over and over, man after man, until one with a particularly short temper and loaded gun ended that cycle.

“You think this is Woolworths?” Orula said. “The Winn-Dixie? Ain’t no *customer service* out here, fool. Ain’t no *manager* to talk to. We dealing in the land of the Spirits. God’s country. *My* country. You hear me?”

Nate’s jaw clenched; his eyes buried in the sand. Gina’s skin rippled with goosebumps as Orula stepped toward him.

“Do you hear me?”

Orula spit into the sand at his feet. Gina reached for her shoes, but Orula clicked her tongue and held up her finger, like a mother telling her child *I don’t think so*. “The lawyer lady stays,” she said, her eyes flicking to Gina and back to Nate. “And *you* either wait on the shore, or you gather up your wife and head home to start planning a funeral.”

Nate’s mouth unfurled into a hard line. “I’ll be in the car.” He turned to his wife and Gina thought she saw Bernie wince, and in that quick furrowed brow she thought she saw a little bit of Lottie. In a voice that rose from deep in his belly and slithered from between his teeth, Nate said, “I swear to God, Bern. Don’t fuck this up like you do everything else.”

“I won’t,” Bernie said, biting her lip.

“Won’t what?”

She closed her eyes. Gina felt her face go hot; her jaw clenched tight. Bernie shifted on her feet. Gina watched the gathering of her brows, the roll of her tongue over her gums. Finally, Bernie swallowed, and said, “I won’t fuck this up.”

When Nate raised his eyebrow, his wife took a shaky breath and continued, “Like I do everything else.”

Something in Gina curdled. She had seen this performance before with different actors. Had seen this, acted out by her Ma and multiple men, multiple husbands. Gina knew the patience of this kind of violence; she couldn't know how many years might pass before that viciousness rushed out of its steel barrel, but Gina knew that the day would come. Gina knew what happened in the third act of this play and knew the chaos of being a child watching it unfold. Gina watched Nate chug through the sand to his car and wondered if this was Bernie's opportunity to run, start over someplace new. Wondered if this was *more* than just her child's opportunity to grow up. Maybe this was the chance to know a life outside the heavy gaze of their father's patient violence, the kind of violence Gina had known. A chance of a lifetime. A chance that, until Lily bounced through the door with a very-much alive Winnie, Gina had thought was impossible.

As the sound of the car door slamming shut bounced about the trees in the dark, Gina wondered if she'd been wrong about her Ma; if it was true that Lottie chose those men over Gina time and time again, or if her Ma was just unlucky; out of reach of a chance like this.

#

The night was loud, full of cicada screams and toad croaks. Gina shivered, tossing ripples across the water while Orula finished anchoring the last tumbleweed — *Rose of Jericho* she'd said, correcting Gina — and arranged them in a circle where the water rose to their waists. When the last weed was placed, Orula brought Bernie into the center, bundle in tow.

Bernie unwrapped her parcel and the boy's fingers emerged first, curled like the legs of a dead spider. Gina followed the gradually emerging line of his small arm, around his shoulder to his small face that peeked at Gina in profile. He could have been sleeping if not for his dull skin and the whisper of blue Gina thought she saw around the boy's nose and mouth. Outside the rose

circle, Gina's face tightened, her hands clenched around the spool of fishing wire and small brandy bottle.

At Lottie's sparsely attended funeral, Gina hadn't been able to look away from her mother's body. Something had been off about the way Lottie looked, but Gina smiled through the minimal compliments and condolences — *she looks lovely; what a horrible way to go*. She'd asked if the gaping chest wound would make an open casket difficult. The mortician had assured her that everything would be fine, but something about her Ma's body had her fixated. Gina remembered Lottie being slimmer than she looked.

Gina had stood beside the casket, staring down at her over-stuffed mother, taking in her pallid skin, the poorly covered bruises on her arms and neck, and wondered why things had to be this way. Things *didn't* have to be like that for Bernie and her boy and as Gina watched Bernie peel back the last corner of the blue blanket that held her son, it dawned on her that things didn't have to stay this way for Gina either. She thought of her office — *Lawson, Juniper & Associates* — and of the snide remarks and patronizing chuckles of men that buzzed across the room when she spoke. That was something Gina could survive, could block out and muffle her ears to, if that meant she could have another chance, another life with her Ma. One that wasn't dictated by the temper of some man Gina hardly knew, one not spent fearing waiting for the eruption of that patient violence.

But Bernie's trembling, breathy voice, her arms clutching her son interrupted this realization. "Don't make me do this," she said, "It's not right. Please, don't make me."

Gina recoiled. Bernie's words upended Gina's thoughts, derailed their momentum, and ripped away something that Gina hadn't realized was so precious until tonight in the Tuscawilla

water, until she stood at the precipice of the miracle. She couldn't stop the words that tumbled out of her mouth, "What do you mean?"

"I don't wanna do this," Bernie said, her voice quaking, tears threatening to come. "It's my husband. He wants this. But it's wrong. Wrong. You hear me? I'm not trying to upset nobody, Miss Orula," she said, her frantic words rushing out. "I'm a God-fearing woman. And I know this ain't right, bringing my boy back to this world after the Lord called him up."

Gina swallowed. She could feel the phantom weight of her Ma's hand slipping away from her reach. The untethered sensation that slipped under her feet. Fear had pulled Lottie back from right choices when Gina was a girl. Fear was the thing settling into Bernie's hands now, into her throat, pulling her back from what she knew was right, the thing keeping her from the chance to give her baby something better. But Gina couldn't let this woman's fear take her own chance with Lottie.

"You don't have to be afraid of your husband," Gina said, flicking her eyes to the lot and approaching the circle. Bernie's eyes —unreadable — peered from under her side-swept bangs and high bouffant that lifted her hair off her neck and from Gina's spot in the water, she could make out the speckled purple of new bruises curving around the back of her neck. Cautiously, Gina reached toward her. Bernie flinched, tried to angle away. Orula held up a hand, a silent command to not butt in, but Gina placed her hand on Bernie's shoulder. "You don't have to bring him back to *that* world. You can resurrect him and leave this place and never look back. Show him a new kind of living."

Bernie's mouth twisted, her eyes narrowed, and she stepped out of Gina's reach. "What are you talking about? I'm not leaving my husband."

“But you can,” Gina said trying again to rest her hand on the woman’s arm, but Bernie took another half step back. “You can show him a life that isn’t *this*. A home where you don’t get bruises on your neck, on his face.”

“What do you know about my life?” Bernie said, her temples pulsing, nostrils flaring, grip tightening on the cold skin of her boy. “What do you know what kind of home he had? You don’t know me or my family. You don’t even know my son’s name.”

“I just want to help,” Gina said, trying to keep her voice even.

“You think you’re better than me?” Bernie asked, straightening her back, standing up taller than Gina thought possible. “She might be the one with the black magic,” she said, nodding to Orula. “But you? You the Devil. I see you, you know. You think I’m stupid. I see it in your face. How you pity me. How you think you could do my life better than I do. *Don’t* talk over me. You only saying all this so you can get your own ask. You and all your white friends from town, running to the root woman to pass a test. Win the lotto. Raise a damn dog from the dead. What you need, White Girl? Hmm? Is your car broke down? Your man running around on you? Your fancy office job not *exactly* what you want? Well? Don’t get all quiet now. You got so much to say? Say it now.”

Gina flushed and bit down til she thought her jaw might snap apart at the hinge. She wondered if Lottie would have fought sense, if she would have dug her heels in, even at the cost of Gina’s life. If Lottie’s imagination, like Gina imagined was the case with Bernie, was too smothered under years of this poisoned kind of living.

“I don’t need his name to know he’s better off alive than dead,” Gina said through her teeth. A shudder rippled across her chest, Gina thought she sounded almost — just a little — like Nate. But she wasn’t. She didn’t beat babies or women. Didn’t bully her way about the world. “Better

off away from your husband than he is with him. And if you can't see that, you never deserved that baby.”

“Hey, Lawyer Lady,” Orula said, and Gina turned. The back of Orula’s hand caught Gina off guard and she stumbled back, dropped the fishing line and the E&J, and sent small quakes across the water. The sting of the root worker’s slap made Gina’s face buzz with heat as her throat swelled with remembered panic, a spilled tea, a backhand, a grand lie. Orula raised a pointed finger to Gina’s face, like she was reading a book, and said, “You got one job here: hold my shit.” Orula lifted her hand, palm up, like she was waiting for Gina to put something in her grasp. “Where’s my shit, Gina?”

Beneath the water, Gina thought she felt the shape of the fishing line spool bump against her toe. Gina swallowed, tried to will the angry tears welling at the corners of her eye away. Why couldn’t Orula see? Bernie was kissing the gun in her mouth. Willing to throw away this chance, willing to risk herself to make the wrong choice. Bernie was willing to pay the cost of staying beside that beastly man with her own son’s life. In Gina’s book, Bernie’s refusal might as well have been her son’s second death, and Gina couldn’t be the one who killed her mother a second time. She wouldn’t.

She turned to Bernie, and said, “I don’t do refunds. And I’m not the one who’s got to deal with Nate. You sure you want to do this?”

Bernie nodded, the boy’s hands bouncing with the ferocity of her movement.

Gina opened her mouth, but Orula’s quick hand, that damned finger, held up stopped her. “Ah-ah-ah. Hear that?” Orula asked. “You can head on home.”

“I’m not leaving,” Gina said. “I came to witness. I got a petition to ask.”

“What? Your little promotion?” Orula said with a chuckle. “Or, no, you changed your mind. You wanna ask about Lottie.”

Gina hadn’t heard her Ma’s name said aloud in years, since before the funeral when they were still estranged by choice and not death. The sound of it on Orula’s tongue rang out in Gina’s ears, like she’d stuck her head inside a ringing bell.

“Well,” Orula continued. “Let me put it to rest. I’m not bringing her back and I won’t fix up that promotion for you.”

“What? Why not?”

“Cuz I don’t want to. Consider it a *lesson*.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Gina said, trying to sound assured. “I’m not afraid of you, root worker.”

“You keep calling me that,” Orula said, and walked past the floating Roses of Jericho to wear Gina stood. “I don’t know who told you that’s what I am. Or if that’s the rumor floating about that swamp-town. But, you way off. Ain’t no *magic* or *root work* can do what I do.”

She came close enough that Gina could smell the patchouli wafting from her hair, the lingering smell of something, jasmine maybe. Gina had that feeling again, that feeling of being in a corner, of being stalked by something more dangerous than her, but she fixed her jaw, squared her shoulders, and said, “What *can* you do? I haven’t seen you do nothing but send a man time out. Is that why you won’t? Because you can’t?”

Orula laughed, a hearty, wheezy sound, and when she caught her breath, said, “You wanna see something I can do?”

Orula's eyes rolled back, her pupils vanishing so her eyes looked like twin moons in their sockets. Gina gasped and stepped back. As her foot hit the sandy lake bottom, something beneath the water grabbed hold, yanked her foot down so she stumbled. That hold pulled again, wrenched Gina down so that her right leg was buried up to the knee and the water rose to her collarbones. Gina tried to cry out, to push off with her other foot, but when she opened her mouth, another hard tug down and her head disappeared below the water, buried in the lakebed to her hips.

Gina tried to free her leg, tried to pry her way back to the surface. Her arms could reach the surface and she reached for an Orula, or maybe Bernie's, outstretched hand. But her hands found nothing, and only clawed at the air. Another tug down and Gina screamed, water filling her mouth, sand gripping around her waist.

Only when Orula's hand reached under the water, hooked under Gina's armpit, and pulled her up did the sand finally release her. When she broke through the water, Gina gasped wildly, her breath turning to rough, wet coughs.

"Go home, Gina," Orula said, her voice flat and unamused.

Gina bit back her tears as she walked, dripping, up shore to the lot. She chanced a glance back down to the water but saw only silhouettes. One, she couldn't tell this far away if it was Orula or Bernie, held that boy.

She passed Nate and Bernie's car first. A beige Lincoln Continental. Easy enough to remember. Gina wondered how many silent car-rides that Lincoln had seen. Wondered if that gun in Bernie's mouth would go off when Nate found out she hadn't gone through with it. Stupid girl. Nate was slumped, snoring and open-mouthed behind in the drivers' seat and Gina took the

opportunity to linger. To memorize that license plate. To put to memory Nate's physical description, the sight of that bruise around the baby's face. Those cops who wore suits might be interested. The *boys* of Lawson, Juniper & Associates hadn't yet gotten to try a murder case.

Gina bit her lip. Climbed into her car. Shut the door. If she brought them this, the case was sure to be an easy win. And if they couldn't get him on this? Well, Gina thought as she cranked up the Hudson, men like that? People like this? They always had something they were hiding; always had *something* you could pin them down for. A man like that? He had it coming anyway. And Bernie? Well. One day, Gina was sure, Bernie would thank her.

Gina rolled the car slow over the dirt road, still feeling the phantom grip of that thing, that force, around her leg. Pulling her down, into the earth. She held her breath. Gripped the wheel tight. Turned onto US-441.

OFFAL

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US-17 turned from dirt to paved road at the southern edge of Yulee where Four Creeks Forest began. The morning sun cut low between the pines, throwing shades of almost blue through the trees. Eustis knew that Florida days ran long well into autumn, but, once the sun set, night would drop across the First Coast like a guillotine. By sundown, Yulee would be a disembodied head rolling about in the dark and Jacksonville a writhing, dancing, glowing thing in the distance. Then, at dawn, the two would be reconnected by daylight.

This was one reason Eustis had wanted to make an early start. But he'd woken up late, still had some rock left and the runs to make, and so for two days, he and Pauline shot up between runs and raked in near-about sixty dollars. For ten dollars and a pint of liquor, Eustis was able to pick up two more rocks off Norm Humphries when he went in to have the drive shaft jerry-rigged, yet again. Norm's stuff wasn't as good as what Eustis could pick up in the city, but that was true of everything in Yulee. When Eustis and Pauline's spoons were both boiled dry, the day before the arrival of Bea's train, Eustis finally started up the truck and turned onto the road that led out of town with their last barrow in the truck bed, snorting and wide-eyed, and a scheme brewing between his ears. One that would save the pig farm, and Eustis and his wife from starving on the homestead after the coming repeal went into effect.

Another reason he'd wanted to travel early was that Jacksonville after nightfall was nearly unrecognizable to Eustis. He couldn't reconcile the urban sprawl, lit up like a whole farm of decorated Christmas trees, with the dusty roads and wooden buildings of his world. The streetlights that lined Jacksonville's Main Street worked on electricity and lit up every night at eight o'clock

sharp. Where A1A cut through the center of Yulee was lined with oil lamps that were only lit when old Mr. Babcock remembered or felt inclined to getting up on his old ladder. Where Yulee was a town of north Florida reliquaries, Jacksonville was a city of transplants—folks from up north, out west, down south, what came to find cheaper lands, cheaper rents, and claim the town for their own. Those folks didn't care if the lobbed head of Yulee reconnected to civilization with the sun or not. If they woke and found it never existed at all, found that the tiny township was some collective fever dream, then all the better. Jacksonville was full of thousands of folks just like the ones out on Amelia Island, who denied Eustis's crazy grandmother, the woman who'd raised him and his brother, proper burial. Full of folks who would spit on the Montgomerys unless one was on fire, or unless it was his little brother, Judge Montgomery.

The barrow squealed from the truck bed and Eustis tried to quiet it with a fast rap of his knuckles on the rear window. Back when the pen was full of pigs and Bea still went to Jacksonville in the summers, his stepdaughter would ride in the bed with the animals. Something about her — maybe her soft small hands, or her cooing voice — quieted the beasts, settled their incessant squealing and snorting. When he would arrive to Jacksonville and drop the livestock, Bea included, Eustis imagined it was these things that made her such a commodity in the city.

Those were the good days, back when Eustis was loaded. The pig haul put at least three hundred dollars in his pocket, and when the summers ended and he ventured back into town to pick up Bea from Judge's, he'd pocket near a thousand dollars profit. Then there was the liquor that Eustis would run all over Yulee and up past the Georgia line. At least until he had the falling out with Nate Bauer and his sons. Those summers made Eustis rich as royals.

Repeal prohibition? Eustis snorted. He had never heard something so asinine.

From here, Eustis could make out the tallest steeples of the city's many cathedrals peeking out from behind endless faces of high-rise buildings that made up Jacksonville's skyline. If Eustis squinted, he could see the faint line of the Acosta to the southeast, the newer cement bridge that connected the bustling city center to the old money neighborhood of San Marco, where little stone cherubs danced around carved lions and spit crystal clear water into the air in a triptych of arches. Eustis tightened his grip on the wheel as his tires hit pavement on the bridge's other side. He'd be to Judge's soon enough. That meant he'd be part owner soon enough. After all, he had a plan.

His little brother had always had an eye for that girl, even mentioned to Eustis that he could see why his Johns liked her so. "I like me a girl what does what she's told the first time," he'd said after her first summer in Jacksonville. When Eustis would travel into the city outside of the summer harvest, Judge always asked after Bea. His brother would send Eustis back with little trinkets for her, a doll he'd seen in the window of Crowley's Toy Co., or a bonnet to match the one nice dress the girl had. Up until the day Bea walked off the Montgomery homestead at sixteen, claiming she was going to some Negro school in Tallahassee, Judge kept after her. Sure, in the time Bea had been gone, his brother had found a little wife, started up a little family, but Eustis was hoping—counting on it, actually—that Judge still had an appetite for the girl.

Eustis would pull up the truck. He'd compliment the shop's new lights, remark on how they lit up the street even in daylight; Eustis would probably get some grief over the pig, he had been too high over the last three days to think to telegram ahead. But Judge would do the slaughter for him. Brothers looked out for brothers. Judge would ask Eustis what finally brought him around to butcher the last pig. Maybe Judge would ask how Eustis and Pauline expected to eat a whole

hog before rot got to it. Or Judge would grin and ask, *what's the occasion?* Eustis would laugh and off-handedly mention Bea's return. Drop the name and watch for his brother's reaction.

Eustis would say something about family, invite his brother and the wife back to the homestead for the pickin tomorrow night. He'd say something about how nice it would be to all be together again. Talk about the importance of sticking together. Eustis had already paid for the most recent liquor haul, but he had a case of plum whiskey on the passenger side floor and forty dollars to put in Judge's hand. A buy-in. Eustis would say, *What with the end of prohibition, I figured we could turn 'Judge's Meat Mart' into 'Montgomery's Meat Mart'.* That rolled off the tongue better anyhow.

He would reassure Judge he was good for partner. That he was mostly clean. Eustis just needed fifteen percent. Hell, Eustis was willing to settle for twelve. And an initial loan to buy a few new sows and a good breeding boar. The loan would be repaid in a season, for sure. By April, he'd have pigs a plenty to bring to Judge. Folks would like the family business. They'd like knowing exactly where their meat had come from. Like old times. With the end of prohibition, Eustis and Judge could go straight. Together. Make the *Montgomery* name mean something. Make Eustis into somebody.

#

The Lincoln turned, jerking and sputtering, onto Beaver Street and rolled to a stop in front of the shop. When Judge had first talked about renting out the ground floor storefront at the corner of Beaver and Broad, Eustis had mocked him. "Those white folks in the city will eat your country ass alive," he'd said with a grin, half believing his younger brother was just blowing smoke. But fifteen years later, the crudely painted *Butcher* sign that had hung in the window had long been

replaced with the commissioned yellow and red filigreed *Judge's Meat Mart* sign that swung gently above the door. Judge now rented the other three floors above it too. The new lights—electric—glinted against the shimmering hams, the twine tied pork loins, and sausage links that hung in the front window.

Through the glass, past the dangling pork cuts, Eustis could see Judge's back, wide but tense with repetitive movement. He was flanked by two boys that barely reached his shoulder but who leaned in toward whatever cut of meat sat before his brother's practiced hands. Then the pig squealed and when the three inside turned to see the source Eustis smiled and threw up a meek wave. The half grin Judge wore as he turned and wiped his hands on his blood-spotted apron melted into the beginnings of a scowl. For a moment, Eustis thought maybe he should've telegraphed ahead. The door opened with a jingle, and Judge stepped into the sun, his scowl hiding somewhere under his toothy smile, "What's all this now?"

Eustis fished a cigarette from his coat pocket and offered one to Judge, who declined, "Your wired lights look mighty fine."

"Did you drive all the way into the city to show your hog electric lights? They don't got that back home, huh?"

"Hell will freeze over first, I think."

Judge laughed first, loud and brassy like a saxophone, fighting and winning against the bustling sounds of city-life. Then the pig joined, snorting and squealing as if it were in on the joke. Eustis only smiled and, when Judge finally broke his laugh to breathe, Eustis continued, "I brought some work for you, figured the boss-man needed some work to do too."

"Oh? What's the occasion? You finally knock up Pauline?"

Eustis clenched his fists, only just realizing they were slick with sweat. “No. It’s Bea actually,” he said. “She’s coming home.” He didn’t see no need to mention it would only be for one night.

“Really?” Judge said with a promising bob of his head, “And you were talking about Hell freezing over? You should double check your lamps when you head home, might find ‘em wired up.”

Judge’s laugh started up again, a grating croon against Eustis’s skin. Eustis pulled his lips tight into a grin and took a long drag of his cigarette. “We’re having a pickin for her homecoming,” he said, holding in a drag. “I don’t know of a better butcher this side of the Saint Johns.”

“Ain’t you have to cross the river to get here?” Judge said, a small break at the corner of his smile.

“Can you do the slaughter or not?”

His brother’s smirk dissolved. Eustis recognized the twitching around his nose, the one wrinkle slipping between Judge’s eyebrows. He’d seen those same twitches and wrinkles in the face of those Amelia Island coons, in the faces of Nate Bauer and his boys when they grew tired of Eustis’s drunken, belligerent appearances on their property with claims of being shortchanged.

Then, a jingle at the storefront door and a round brown face poked out from behind the glass. “Mr. Monty,” the boy called, “we’re finished up.”

“We got another, Bo. Grab your brother and y’all get to it.”

Eustis could see his little brother’s gears turning. Over his shoulder, Judge said, “I’ve got some business to take care of.”

His brother led Eustis back through the shop. Past the glass case counter where he could see pigs' feet and chitterlings and lines of shoat livers. Out through the back courtyard, where the bricks and metal drains were stained with blood and another boy, this one older than the two at the front, sorted a table of entrails into labeled metal tubs.

"You've got new help, I see," he said, following Judge up the narrow metal stairway to the second story that Judge had converted into an office. His brother said nothing, didn't even look back.

Eustis hadn't been back here since Bea still came out for the summers. He dawdled by the bin of pig hearts and watched the boy's thin, girlish hands sort intestines from stomach linings. When the boy noticed Eustis's stare, he stilled, met Eustis's eyes with a hard look—too hard a look if you asked Eustis. One that said *you don't get to watch me work*.

The boy's expression turned something in Eustis's stomach. He looked away first, flicked his cigarette butt between two steps. In the third-floor window, two sets of eyes looked down at him. Girls, wide-eyed and waiting with their small hands pressed to the window. He was a beast in a zoo to them. Something *other*, from some *other* place.

Eustis had hoped the tension that hung in the air would be cut off, would be smothered, with their entry to the second floor, or with the shutting of Judge's office door, or with his settling into the wooden chair opposite his brother's deep-stained mahogany desk. Judge perched himself on the desk's corner, arms crossed, looking down at Eustis.

"What's going on? Really." Judge finally said.

Eustis's grin and reply were automatic. "I told you. We're doing a pickin for Bea, you should bring Virgie and the baby."

“You been holding onto that pig for too long. It’s only so small because y’all aren’t feeding it but table scraps, I’m betting.”

Eustis bit his bottom lip. It was warm, too warm, in his brother’s office. Sweat slicked the back of his neck. What had Eustis planned to say next? Right. “It’ll be nice to have the family, all of us, together again, won’t it? To see Bea again?”

“Eustis,” Judge said his name like a curse. “What the hell is this? You show up with no word expecting me to *what?* Give you a free butchering? You need a front on the next liquor run? Is that what this nonsense is?”

“No,” Eustis laughed the word out, tried to keep his hands still but they fidgeted in his lap, “I figured you like seeing the girl is all, I know how you like her.”

Judge snorted, ambled around his desk, and sat in the smooth leather upholstered chair opposite Eustis, “What do you want?”

“You could have her.”

“What do you want?” Judge said.

Eustis reached into his pocket and pulled out the crumpled forty dollars. He set them on the desk slowly, carefully, as if they might shatter. His little brother’s eyes moved between Eustis and the bills. Eyes narrowed. “You’re paid up for the last haul. What is this?”

“I’ve been thinking,” Eustis started, testing his words like steppingstones.

Judge cut him off, “No you ain’t.”

A gunshot somewhere below made Eustis jump in his chair and a menacing grin budded across Judge’s chiseled mouth. Down in the slaughter yard, that boy with the girlish hands held a smoking pistol, and Eustis’s last hog lay on the bricks bleeding out. Finally silent.

Eustis felt pebbles in his throat, phlegm on his tongue. He took in a shaky, unsteady breath. Heat was rising in his chest, creeping up his neck. "I figured with the end of prohibition coming, wouldn't it be nice to go into business together? Like back in the day."

"Go into? I got my business, and it's been doing just fine without your underfed hogs."

"The runs are the only thing keeping food on our table and come next month none will have that. And that's all I've got, Judge."

His brother was shaking his head before Eustis finished, and said, "Wouldn't have been all you had if you hadn't of traded near all your herd for rocks."

"Let me buy in," Eustis said in a rush. "I got forty dollars here, a case of your whiskey down in the truck, and Bea is yours."

Judge's grin bloomed into a tired smile, "I know you're not talking about buying into my business with your crinkled lunch money, whiskey I sold you, and your old maid of a stepdaughter. You forget I'm a married man?"

Judge stood and made his way to the office door. "I'm going to do this slaughter for you because you're my brother. But once the pig's ready, you should get to clearing your lemon out the street and get on back to the homestead."

"Brother? You could have fooled me," Eustis spat. Judge's sneer stunk up the tiny office, "You damn me and Pauline to starve. That land will be our grave."

"It was good enough for Granny. And I'm sorry about Pauline, honest," Judge shrugged, opening the door for his brother, who did not move to follow. "She's a fine woman. Her only misstep was marrying a man what can't provide for his house."

Eustis stood, grabbed the wooden chair, and threw it back against the wall. He was shouting the words before he could stop himself, “I seen them girls upstairs. You let me buy in to the business or I’m going to the papers and telling how their Golden Negro is running a whorehouse above his meat shop. I’ll tell how he likes his girls young and green.”

They stared at one another for a moment, Judge’s smile unfading. Then, slowly, he closed the door. Waited for the click of the latch before he spoke in a hushed voice that made Eustis lean in.

“Tell them then,” Judge whispered, “but know that if Nate Bauer don’t send someone across the state line to take you out first, the sheriff will come out to your little dust farm and fill you with bullets himself and finally release me from the burden of being your brother. I got friends in higher places than you know.”

His little brother always had things work out for him, always acted like his shit didn’t stink like the rest of the Mad Montgomerys. Judge was one of them, whether he liked to think of himself that way or not. A fancy ninth-grade education be damned. His wired lights be damned. His friends in high places be damned. He would squeeze those burdens out of Judge, if his brother wanted to be free of them so desperately.

Judge saw the tensing of his brother’s hands, the weight shifting in his legs. He carried a small six-shooter in his pocket and was faster than Eustis. But a soft knock at the door stilled them. Another knock, and Judge answered. Virgie was on the other side, wide-eyed and holding her baby on her slender girl-hip. “Oh!” she said when she saw Eustis, “Mr. Montgomery, I didn’t know you were coming today.”

She peered around the room, her eyes landing on the toppled chair against the wall, “The girls heard a racket, I told ‘em not to worry but they asked that I check anyway.”

Judge softened his smile and laced a thick arm around his wife’s waist. “My savior,” he joked, and plopped a quick kiss on her cheek. “Just a lively conversation between brothers, in fact,” Judge said, peering passed Eustis like a piece of furniture. “He’s got to be getting on before his hog cooks in the sun.”

The pig was split, wrapped, and both halves waiting in the bed of Eustis’s truck when he made it back to the store’s front, escorted by Judge and his girl-wife. As he pulled off, head throbbing, throat dry and full of fury, he checked his side mirror. Virgie waved the baby’s fat arm, both grinning. Judge stood stoic, arm around his girl, not waving.

Eustis looked back to the road, his mouth filling with venom, his breath coming quick. He let out a bellow that bounced across the cab of the truck and made his bones ache. Then, Eustis’s eye fell on *something*. He shook his head, willing his eyes to focus. There, on his dashboard, the butt of a cigarette. The white of the papers were marred by two bloody, girlish fingerprints.

#

Pauline thought the silence in the truck once she hit the paved part of US-17 would bring her some peace. But she could feel her blood boiling under her blistered hands as the truck sailed smooth over the road beneath. Or maybe that was because the sighing sun, only just beginning to descend, was still high enough to leap through the pine trees and beat down on her. Pauline couldn’t know the time, but she knew it would be six soon. That meant Bea’s train from Tallahassee would be pulling in soon. It had taken weeks of convincing through letters to get her daughter to postpone catching the connecting train for a last night on the Montgomery homestead.

At the thought of her daughter looking around the station and thinking no one had come to meet her, Pauline upshifted to third and pressed the gas to the floor.

She'd told Eustis that Mr. Humphries was no mechanic, the old man still used a mule and buggy for Christ's sake. She'd asked to look at the truck herself if they couldn't afford a professional in the city. At least she'd grown up using mechanical reapers. Useless-Eustis would hear nothing of it, and Pauline suspected it was because Norm had that dirty homecooked heroin that always left her head pounding and her hands shaking. Pauline blinked away the coming migraine, gripped the wheel tight to keep the shakes at bay.

Pauline didn't know what had been said between Eustis and his brother, but whatever it was had left her husband with a spoiled attitude and readied hands. He'd snapped, struck her with the back of his hand when she asked when Judge and Virgie would be by for the pickin. She ran her tongue over her swollen, freshly split lip and could still taste the whisper of iron.

When Pauline first heard the stories about the Montgomery women, they'd been only murmurs floating between the well-dressed church ladies of Amelia Island's New Macedonia AME. Rumors about a girl from the family who left her two boys on her parents' pig farm. Some said she woke before the sun and took off into the low-hanging mist between Yulee and Jacksonville. Never seen again. Where she went or why she left, no one could say.

Every time one of those Montgomery boys got into some trouble the talk would start up again — some said she ran off to be with the father of her sons; others said she'd hopped on a train north and folded herself into the mass of people migrating that way; and still others said the fog itself had picked her up and carried her away from the horrible place she came from, where her daddy drank like a fish and her insane momma would whip her senseless with azalea switches,

even when she was pregnant. Abbie Montgomery's name became a warning from women to their daughters: *Don't be out there running in them streets, you'll wind up like that Abbie Montgomery.*

She remembered the local legends about Abbie as she'd grown up, and that was why Pauline went about securing her first husband the right way. Sure, she'd gotten pregnant before they were really married, but she'd always been ready to be a wife, even if Wilmer Bowman's temper boiled too hot sometimes. But marriage, and surely fatherhood, changed a man. And it had. Where arguments used to end in screaming matches, they now ended with Wilmer dragging her by her hair to their room where he'd beat her until her vision turned blurry. Marriage changed her too. Pauline learned to avoid arguments.

While pregnant, Pauline would think about the fabled Abbie Montgomery and wonder if the fog that hung across Amelia Island in the early mornings could take her someplace far away too. Away from the baby she was cooking up that would tie her to Wilmer forever. But when she gave birth to Bea, perfect perfect Bea, Pauline did away with that idea.

To leave like Abbie Montgomery? No. A mother did not leave her children. Ever.

Even if some babies never took a breath. If their eyes never opened. If all there was to prove they'd ever existed were the three smoothed stones on the west side of Little Lee Creek, basking under the magnolias beside their mad great-grandmother, Ada Mae Montgomery.

She believed, even now, that it'd been a miracle, truly divine intervention, when that drunk white woman mowed Wilmer down in broad daylight and turned him into another smear across the fender of her Mercedes. Sure, Eustis could get bad when he was deep in the drink. But Wilmer? He would beat her stone sober or shitfaced. And with Eustis, things had been good for a long time.

Pauline had worried that Yulee would hold nothing for her but marrying into the so-called *Mad Montgomerys* had brought her land — something to leave her daughter. Eustis had made her laugh, once upon a time. Had squeezed her hand and kissed her fingers when she talked about how she would work beside him on the farm, tending the cattle while he readied the pigs for market. Pauline had almost loved him then. And with Bea? He treated her as his own at first. Things were different by the second miscarriage, the year Bea turned ten. Pauline was in pieces, having been ripped apart by each hopeful start and following failure. By then, all her husband had for her daughter was contempt, and arguments became more frequent. Pauline picked up her old habit of ignoring and avoiding.

He insisted that sending her off for the summers to Judge's would bring him some relief. Eustis could be free of Bea, and she would learn a trade at the butchery and Judge was happy to pay. Pauline fought it at first, a slaughterhouse, even a small operation like Judge's, was no place for a little lady. But Eustis insisted. To avoid the fight that threatened to boil over between them, Pauline conceded. Eustis had bristled with excitement at the wad of cash he pulled from his pocket upon Bea's return. Nearly a thousand dollars. She'd asked him, "What kind of work can a little girl do for that kind of pay?"

Eustis spat, "We look out for our own in this family. If you don't like it, take your girl and walk back to Amelia."

That put an end to Pauline's questions. Bea would say little of the summers, quiet as ever. Eustis's bootlegging and Bea's summer job put food on their table year-round, making the profits from the pig farm a nice extra cushion for them.

Then Pauline's last miscarriage. A boy.

Eustis took to drinking heavy after that and that made him slower in the head and quicker in the lip than usual. He mucked things up with Mr. Bauer, and that had cost them. Word got around that you didn't want to work with Eustis Montgomery, *mad like his mammy and grammy*, and made its way back to Judge. When he learned about how Eustis had rolled onto Mr. Bauer's property and accused the man and his sons of robbing him blind, Judge stopped buying pigs from them. Only for Bea's work at Judge's — he still allowed her daughter to come for summers — did their family survive those years at all.

Then Bea left.

Pauline hadn't known she'd applied for a school in Tallahassee, that she was going to study medicine, even though Eustis swore she'd been covering for the girl. They started using after Bea left; Eustis to dull the reality of the failing pig farm and his crushed ego, and Pauline to forget how things had gotten this bad.

In the four years Bea had been gone, she'd gotten a degree and was headed for another in D.C. In those same four years, Eustis and Pauline had traded away every head of cattle, their donkey, the pigs, and then finally Pauline, humiliated, began trading away her dishes for food at the open market. Her second marriage was supposed to be an investment into some future that now, with the finale of prohibition, still felt so far away.

Pauline looked across Trout Creek and could see where the fresh water went brackish, where creek met the great Saint Johns River. The sun was sinking, churning the sky from blue to a rich, stewed orange. Over the pattering of the truck, she could make out the distant clanging of bells, the city's main Post Office clocktower, singing six. She could make out the steeples of

Jacksonville's endless churches. She pushed the truck faster, maxing out the odometer somewhere passed sixty.

She'd make it up to Bea when they got back to the homestead. The hog would be ready when they made it back. She'd whip up some of those sweetened johnnycakes her daughter had liked when she was little, though they wouldn't be as good without cream.

Still, Pauline told herself, tonight would be perfect because that's what Bea deserved. And after four years without her girl, four years with only her dull, dumb husband for company, concocting any plan she could think to keep them from starving, Pauline figured she deserved it too.

Even if only for one night.

#

The clock at the station entrance was coming up on six-thirty when Pauline pulled the truck into the gravel lot and took off on foot, just shy of running. After some back and forth with a short-tempered porter, Pauline was making her way through the station to Terminal 6, looking for a daughter she worried she wouldn't recognize. But her worries were wasted. The terminal was grave quiet. The six o'clock passengers had already dispersed and were on to their next destination. Pauline felt her temperature rising, a pressure in her chest and throat. That pressure had bones. The sting of sharp elbows and knees, stretching, twisting, somersaulting between her ribs. *Where was Bea?*

Her eyes settled on a locomotive across the station, on the departing side, where a few uniformed porters loaded an oversized steamer trunk onto one of the cars, and where, through a

window in the last train car — the segregated car — a woman watched Pauline with unblinking eyes. Pauline watched her back. Then, recognition.

The curve of her cheeks, the slope and spread of the woman's nose. She must have seen it in Pauline's face. She leaned out of the window frame, but Pauline was already moving, jogging to the segregated car, hands trembling, reaching.

Pauline tapped her palm against the cloudy window, her words breathy and rushed, a litany of her daughter's name turning to fog on the glass. Through it, Pauline could see the woman with Bea's face pressing herself back into the bare wooden bench looking away. Time had reshaped her girl. The round face Pauline remembered had been stretched back across a woman's jaw, pulled into the beginnings of a diamond. Her hands clenched and unclenched, making wrinkles in the folds of her powder blue dress. Pauline tapped again. She needed to see her eyes. Needed to see her smile, the telltale gap in her teeth. But when woman-Bea finally turned, there was no smile. The gathering of the woman's brows, the narrowing of her eyes, these things made Pauline's hands slick and restless.

“Honey Bea, what are you doing in there? We got a feast waiting for us at home.”

When Woman-Bea said nothing, Pauline's feet grew restless, her throat dry as one of Yulee's dusty roads. She swallowed. Tried again.

“I know I'm late. Your daddy's old truck was giving me trouble.”

Bea stood from the bench and pried up the ill-fitted window. Pauline's heart shook in her chest. There she was. Close enough to reach out and touch. Bea's hands peaked out from the end of periwinkle sleeves, and Pauline wondered if they were still soft like she remembered. When Bea was still toddling about in the room of the Yulee Boarding House, Pauline would make a game

of oiling the baby's skin after her baths, sneaking tickles here and there to watch Bea's gummy grin bloom big across her tiny face before igniting into giggles.

Pauline was sweating through her old farm dress. She desperately wanted to reach out and hold her hand, see if Tallahassee had roughened her, if she was ready for a big, unforgiving city like D.C. Wanted to feel the texture of her daughter's hair between her shaking fingers. Wanted to hear Bea's laugh, something she hadn't heard since those long-ago games of tickles. Wanted to reach in and pull her daughter off the train and hold her tight to her chest. Wanted to push her back to the place inside Pauline she'd come from and not let go. Pauline reached through the window and Bea snatched her hands back.

Bea tapped a finger against her bottom lip and, in a voice like running water, asked, "Did your husband give you that?"

"Come on, Honey Bea." Pauline's voice was a shuddering, misfiring engine. "We got a whole hog waiting for us."

"Momma, did Eustis give you that?"

Pauline ran her fingers over the split lip. That pressure, the one pushing and kicking in her chest, was back. Resolute, Pauline dropped her hand and said, "Get on down from there, we can make it back before the sun goes down."

"I'm not going back there," Bea said. Her words were heavy, like they'd been carved out of stone then pushed down Pauline's throat.

There was a burning beginning behind Pauline's eyes. She blinked it away. "I'm sorry I was late, I understand if you're mad but—"

“Momma,” Bea said, shaking her head, “I was never going to go back to the homestead.”

Up at the locomotive, plumes of grey smoke rose from the chimney. Pauline’s breaths came in short gulps. Her head was filling with water, her vision going woolly.

“Stop this,” she said, her voice finally cracking. “Let’s just talk about it on the way back.”

Bea’s hand on her own made Pauline hold her breath, afraid that if she exhaled Bea and the train and the whole city would turn to vapor and she’d be left alone, in a void where it was only her and Eustis and the empty farm, waiting for hunger or loneliness or else the creek to take her.

“We aren’t safe there,” Bea said. “We can’t go back.”

Pauline shook her head, trying to erase the words from her mind. But Bea squeezed her hand and told her momma to look at her. When Pauline finally did, Bea said, “Get on the train.”

“What?”

“Get on.” Bea’s hands disappeared into a fold of blue fabric and reappeared clutching an unpunched train ticket. Pauline’s ticket. “We can leave this place,” Bea said, her hands trembling. “We can find our own way in Washington.”

Pauline shook her head. “What is this? Are you mad, girl?”

Bea squeezed her mother’s hand again. “There’s nothing for neither of us here. Come on. Please.”

“No, no, no, no, Eustis is about to go straight with Judge and—”

“The Montgomery men,” Bea spat, “are no better than the swine they work with. There ain’t no going straight for the likes of Judge.” Her daughter’s cheeks were going red, her chest heaving with quickening breath. At the front, the conductor hollered for all to board. Bea raised

her voice to be heard over the loudening train preparing to depart, preparing to take her away, “Stay here, and I promise you, Momma, they will eat you alive. Bones and all.”

Pauline didn’t understand. Judge had been their only saving grace when things had started to fall apart. She took in her daughter’s reddening face, the tension in her neck, her chest’s rapid rise and fall, the disgust on her lips when she spoke the Montgomery name. She thought of that wad of cash, and the image brought with it an itching behind Pauline’s eyes. One thousand dollars. A lot to pay a little girl. Too much. She’d thought so when she saw it. Said so too. What could a little girl do to earn money like that? Pauline’s tongue was thick and heavy in her mouth. Those elbows and knees had worked their way up to her throat, and they now clawed at the back of her tongue.

The smoke rising from the train’s chimney grew thick. Murky. No time. Bea pressed again, pushing the ticket toward Pauline, her voice cracking, and pled, “Come *on*, Momma.”

Pauline thought of Eustis on the land alone, shooting up and forgetting the lamp. Of him letting the house go up in flames. Thought of him starving to death out in the empty pigpen, searching the trough for old apple cores or fallen millet after their half-eaten, last hog was teeming with maggots. Thought of the three stones at the creek-side, her three babies buried under the magnolias, who’d never gotten to open their eyes, never gotten to feel the sun on their face, and never gotten to meet their sister. Thought of her babies being built over with houses for white folks who owned boats and worked jobs they never broke a sweat for.

She thought of having to look her Bea in the eye after this, knowing she’d failed to be her protector. She thought of Abbie Montgomery, riding the mist to some other place while her sons rotted into the men they’d become. No. A mother did not leave her children.

“Woman!” a porter called from behind Pauline. “Get on if you’re going. The train’s pulling off.”

She looked at her girl, brought her daughter’s calloused fingers to her lips, “You are going to make one fine doctor, Honey Bea.”

Pauline stepped back and for a beat, they stared at one another. Each holding back a thousand things writhing in their throats. The train whistle sounded, loud and shrill, and made Pauline jump and release her daughter’s hand. The train lurched forward, and Pauline made to walk alongside as it pulled away. Bea let the ticket catch the breeze and slammed the window down and disappeared out of frame.

Pauline stood at the terminal, watching the train roll away until she was only staring at empty tracks in an empty station, and the sun had finally dipped below the horizon. Waited until all there was left to do was drive back up US-17, back to Yulee, back to the hollow homestead, and back to Eustis.

Alone.

#

When Pauline pulled the truck onto the homestead, the night was spread across Yulee like a sheet over a birdcage. As she parked the truck, she could see the still-lit fire pit, glowing. The smell of ash, overcooked fat, and burned flesh clung to the homestead, digging deep into the soil and Pauline’s lungs. The spatchcocked hog, laid ribs-down across the grating, was ruined. The fine hairs, burned into tight, angry coils, left behind a pattern that reminded Pauline of cigarette burns across the pig’s, uncooked topsides. She followed the markings up to the head. The ears, in the heat of the fire pit, had shriveled to look like dead leaves. The snout had tightened like dry leather,

pulling the pig's lips back in a sneer. By the light of the embers, Pauline could see the circle of small blisters, the torn and burned skin where the bullet had torn through the pig's skull. Their last pig, their last hope, a blackened mess.

Curses gathered under Pauline's tongue like saliva. She turned and made her way to the barn. For this, Pauline would loosen those motor mounts, let Eustis keep rattling about Yulee until the truck fell apart. Let him waste their last few dollars getting Mr. Humphries to fiddle with the drive shaft.

The barn's galvanized door creaked open, and dim moonlight traipsed in and laid across Eustis like a shroud. He was slumped forward, his chin pressed to his chest, legs kicked out wide in front of him. His left arm, still tourniqueted, was turning blue.

"Eustis," she said.

No reply, so Pauline tried again, this time nudging his thigh with the toe of her boot. Pauline crouched, tried to look for the shallow rise and fall of Eustis's breath. She released the tightened belt around his arm and tried a third time. When, still, Eustis did not stir, Pauline lifted her fingers to his wrist, held her breath, and waited for the faint *thump* of his pulse.

Outside, the autumn night was dense with dark and alive with sound—the cooing of tired warblers, the symphony of cicadas, the small shrieks of bats zipping between the trees. These things, and the unbreakable strings that connected mother to child, pulled Pauline through the woods until her eyes tried to adjust to the night, even as one north-bound string threatened to rip her in half. And if it did, then all the better.

How had she buried her head so deep in the sand? How had she not seen the truth in her daughter's silence? These questions turned to a slurry with every crunching twig under Pauline's

feet, every scratch to her face of branches she couldn't see. She welcomed the scratches, the fumbling of her feet when she stepped on fallen pinecones. Pauline walked into a clutch of low-hanging Spanish Moss and, for a moment, hoped the wiry tendrils would animate. Would wrap around her throat like hands and squeeze until her head popped off. Until Pauline's skull was a thing rolling around on the ground that she could kick along the path like an empty can. A thick branch under her heel brought her down to the forest floor. She spit out the curses that had been spoiling in her mouth, unlaced her boots, and stripped off her stockings.

When she was still part of New Macedonia's congregation, Pauline had learned about flagellation. Cooky Catholic monks in the old-old days would whip themselves, tear open their own backs to atone for the sin of being born imperfect. It brought them closer to God, put them in His favor, supposedly. Pauline didn't know about all that, being closer to God through pain. Surely, all those summers in Jacksonville was enough for Bea to have earned God's favor. If that were true, certainly He would have struck Judge down with a pox or raining frogs or the death of his baby boy. God had certainly done as much to Eustis; the empty farm, the dried-up runs, the buried babies. Burrs and pinecones and dried twigs pierced the soles of her feet as she walked, but this didn't feel like atonement, and they didn't feel *Divine*.

They only hurt.

Pauline could smell the water now, sweet, rich, and full of life. Close. She could hear the water, and in it she heard Bea's voice, begging her to board the train.

There. She could see the creek's edge, where the thicket of trees opened into a clearing, lined by magnolias. The smoothed bark of the magnolias was familiar. Pauline liked coming here

in the summer when the trees bloomed and showered the graves in flowers and fragrance. Through the dark, she could make out the carved and staked cross that marked Ada Mae's grave.

She'd heard about Ada Mae from the church ladies too, all those years ago. How she'd gone mad after Abbie left, or disappeared, or was taken somewhere between the two. When she'd first met Eustis, he would tell her stories about his grandmother, about how she would sit on the porch to watch the sunrise, calling out Abbie's name. How Ada Mae could swing a machete and switches with the strength of two men. He'd told her that the stumps along the dirt part of US-17, just outside the homestead, were because Ada Mae had chopped down the thin azalea trees herself, making whipping branches of every tree. What a nightmare. To wake every day and see the proof your child had existed but was nowhere to be found. To wake and hope that maybe today or tomorrow or the next day, or the day after that, she'd hold her baby again. At least three of hers were here. *Right here*. She could feel them there, could hear them in the burbling creek water, like she'd heard Bea.

The three stones beside Ada Mae were cool to the touch. Three of those unbreakable strings were taut now, pulling Pauline down, first to her knees, where the cold earth soaked into her skirts, then onto her hands. She dug, first with sticks. When those snapped, opening the skin on her palms, she used rocks. When her blood slicked those so she couldn't get a grip, she used her hands.

LA MANCHITA

Spanish Florida

When New Amistad and its people were only fledglings in this land, still wiping the veil and the Atlantic from their eyes, La Manchita was already a name whispered in the night. Bruno had first heard the story in the dark and wet bowels of *La Abundancia* on the long voyage across. The sinkhole had been a well once, long ago, on the property of one of the founding virreys — some noble nobody called De La Mancha. Bruno had heard the story told different ways. In one telling, the virrey's viejita found letters between her husband and another woman and, in her heartbreak, threw herself down the well. In another, De La Mancha helped his wife to the bottom. Both versions, though, agreed; once Lady De La Mancha reached the well's bottom, the earth in Her sorrow opened like an angry and screaming throat, swallowing the virrey's wooden house with De La Mancha inside.

That's how She got her name, a half-joke that people only laughed at when spoken through droughts of ale and cups of wine, a safe distance from La Manchita's hungry jaws. Folks warned their children not to venture out to La Manchita, lest the lady reach the depths of Hell to pull them down. When the seasons changed, parents told their little once that the wind through the pines were the calls of Lady De La Mancha, screaming for a rescuer. The handful of women in Amistad warned their sons and husbands to do right by their wives — La Manchita was willing to do the bidding of angry, scorned women. Townspeople cautioned would-be adventurers against following the Lady's cries into the woods, out to the Old Amistad Township. *It's a trick*, they'd say, *Lady Isabela will cry for a rescuer, then rip the ground out from under you when you get too close.*

Behind Bruno and past the tree line, New Amistad was a softly glowing ember basking in the light of the quarter moon. On this night, Bruno had not heeded those old founders' stories. He'd followed those wails through the woods, through the remnants of Old Amistad Township, to La Manchita. Huffing, Bruno peered into Her silty mouth, that deep corridor of dark, and wondered how he'd ever been frightened by those old ghost stories.

Squeezed between the San Sébastien and the Matanzas, the summer night-air was tacky and humid. Bruno, boiling under his thick uniform breeches and an issue vest, sat on his trunk to catch his breath and wipe the sweat from his eyes. He hadn't imagined that the night-walk to La Manchita would be so difficult, even considering his cargo. His years in service to the king, his years in this backwater place, had made him strong, but his shoulders ached, and his hands, speckled with scratches and freshly broken scabs, burned. He'd given up carrying the trunk after a while, instead dragging the trunk along the forest floor for the latter half of the walk. He lifted his head, his eyes following the divots in the earth where he'd dragged the trunk into the clearing to where he now sat. Bruno would have to remember to destroy the tracks on his way to town.

Bruno could see the faint outline of the church steeple. He could hear the rowdy shouts and laughs of drunken men at the town tavern, the hoots of them when, Bruno imagined, ladies of the night traipsed by with swishing skirts and lying mouths. Always with their lying mouths.

Some poor bastard was falling for their lines: *Drink with me, guapito, I have been wanting for good and good-looking company. Have you heard the story of our Manchita? You must navigate through the woods to arrive at Her great opening. You look like you know the way.*

At the memory, Bruno's brows gathered like fabric on thread and a bitter taste crept under his tongue.

Sofia had been a flurry of powder blue skirts, smiles, and lies the night they'd met. The ladies ambled by the tavern in laps after sunset, usually in twos or threes. He'd seen Sofia from the tavern's wooden stoop, walking like, Bruno imagined, the dirt road was the Spanish court — head high, eyes down. Not in the condescending way *actual* ladies walked the street, but in the way a princess might, humble but aware of her own beauty, her own power over mere men. Her dress showed her bare arms, and Bruno had followed the lines of her brown fingers to her wrist to her elbow and up to her gently rounded shoulders like a map. For a second, just a second, those brown eyes flicked up and looked straight into Bruno. Arrested his mind and body.

Her shawl, a lovely thing of green silk and embroidered with red carnations, was tied around her waist and cinched her sinfully at the center. She'd nodded at him and kept walking, without hesitation. That nod, that flicker of eyes, they'd called him down the steps of the tavern porch, out into the street. Sofia was a good drinking companion and a better lover, and as the weeks passed and Bruno's pockets grew empty, Tomás tried to appeal to him. *Try someone new if you must. A man who patronizes whores was a lover of women, Tomás had said, but a man who favors a one whore over the next is a fool in the making.*

Bruno had waved him off. Tomás didn't know Sofia like he did. Didn't know of the plans they speak about as Bruno mapped out each dip and rise of her body; land and a house he'd build them with his own hands somewhere south, where he wouldn't have to worry about Huguenots or English pirates — men who wanted to steal Spanish souls and Spanish land. Past the city gates, Bruno and Sofia could build a world for their own. They could've lived off the land. Sofia knew this place. Her mother, Sofia had told him, was Seminole and taught her how to survive the swamps south of Spanish territory. Past the gates, in a land they'd make their own, she could be only

Bruno's. Sofia had sworn herself to him, told him that he was the sole thing occupying her thoughts, her heart, even her prayers. For Bruno, an oath was an oath, even if not made in the church, even if not sealed by God, and even if spoken from the lips of a prostitute.

Tomás had been right. Sofia *had* made him a fool, a man to whisper and snicker about during guard changes.

Seminole mother. Promises of forever. She'd been laughing at him the entire time.

A sound like shifting sand brought Bruno to his feet. The trees watched him, still and quiet, and he stepped around his trunk to scan the tree line. Nothing. Then the whistling of wind. But, no, that was wrong. The trees were stationary as obelisks, towering and dark in the night. His sweat clung to him, not whisked away by any night breezes. Someone was out there.

"¡Ay!" Bruno called. "Show yourself."

He shouldn't have stopped for a breath. He should have tossed the damned trunk and turned back for town. Should've been back at the tavern by now, drowning his residual thoughts of Sofia's raven-wing hair, her strawberry lips, her wicked and deceitful tongue.

"Who's in here?"

The voice was a nail, splitting Bruno's nerves. He turned, nearly stumbling over his own feet. A woman was crouched like a pissing man near the sinkhole's edge. Her cream-colored fingers fiddled with the leather straps of Bruno's trunk, but she looked at him, through him. Bruno's controlled anger was a slap across his cheeks making them turn dusty pink and hot, his jaw tightening with the anxiety of her searching hands and accusing voice.

He didn't recognize this woman from New Amistad, certainly not one of the ladies who lapped the town after dark, and not one of the town's women of repute. Her dark hair was pulled

back in a black braid that disappeared behind her shoulder and into the night. In her squatted stance, her dirty white nightgown pooled at her feet, but he could see the peak of bare toes under the hem.

“Back away from there,” Bruno said in a rush before tacking on slower, “please.”

The woman passed her hands over the old, dried leather of the closed lid. “That’s an exquisite shawl around her neck. I quite like the carnations.”

A chill crawled up Bruno’s spine. The scratches across his hands ached as he flexed them open and closed, trying to shake off a creeping nervousness. The sweat on his neck found the nicks there and set his skin on fire. Bruno swallowed hard. If he let his mind wander, he could still hear Sofia. Could still see her; her bulging eyes, red like the fabric’s flowers. Could feel the silk, wrapped around his closed fists, the crushing tension against his fingers. These things haunted him crawled behind his eyelids and into the space between his skull and brain.

With focused eyes, she set about undoing one strap and when her hands moved to unbuckle the other, Bruno reached down with fingers like steel to wrench her to her feet and away from the trunk by her arm. Spit through clenched teeth, Bruno said, “You don’t know what you say, and it is rude to touch things that are not yours, woman.”

“I should say so,” she said, straightening herself. “Only a poor-quality man drags a woman about the woods like a bag of feed.”

“I—...Apologies,” Bruno said. He released her, his fingers cool to the touch. “I think we are both out of sorts,” he tried. “Please, let me escort you to town. Our tavern may not have good ale, but it has a warm fire.”

“I will go nowhere with you. I want that shawl,” she pressed.

“You are unwell. It is only the body of some...” Bruno searched for some lie, “some diseased stray.” Bruno’s mouth was dry. He swallowed. Steadier than before, assuming his soldier stance, Bruno said, “Virrey Sandoval himself ordered its disposal.”

“A diseased dog? Is that right? Where did you get those?” she asked with interest, nodding toward the scars on Bruno’s neck and hands.

“These?” Bruno asked, his voice pitched too high. “She was a *very* bad dog.”

“Bad dogs do need to be put down, I suppose.”

“Exactly.” Bruno extended his hand to her. “Let me toss this thing and I will take you to town.”

Her bladed hands were quick, stronger, and sharper than Bruno imagined, than was possible. A blossom of red turned to a smock across Bruno’s chest and linen shirt.

His hands moved to his neck, trying to push the red back inside, trying to staunch the bleeding, but he felt the warm crawling down his waist, down his legs, being chased away by a cold he’d never known until now. Bruno tried to step forward, tried to reach out with one hand for this wild, barefooted woman, but the trunk. Bruno stumbled over the trunk, cracking his head against La Manchita’s craggy ledge. His legs tumbled over him and into the cavern, their momentum dragging the rest of him, still alive and reaching for the woman, down Her throat.

The woman, hands bloody, unlatched the remaining strap on the trunk, shaking her head. “Oh, *mija*, men are terrible liars, aren’t they?”

SAVE THE DROWNING CHILD

May 1901

Millie held her small hand over the steaming basin of water and quickly dissolving Epsom salt. She dipped a finger in. Still too hot for Lorelai. Behind Millie, her niece gurgled happily on her back in the shade of the porch, staring up at the sky, oblivious to the world beneath her line of sight. Outside the four walls of 27 Hogan Street, the world was only just starting to reemerge from grayscale. Ash and soot hung in the air like criminals at the end of a short rope. The world beyond the Lincoln's porch was one haunted by a lingering heat and the gnawed wooden skeletons of over two thousand buildings. Millie could hear the trilling of the street car's bell that drifted over Hogan's Creek, the clapping of hooves and the rolling of wheels over cobblestone streets fading toward downtown. The world was going on with its reconstruction, trying to move forward out of ashes and into a future more solidly built.

For Millie, the last fortnight since the fire had been entirely occupied by the soft, pudgy rolls of baby legs and arms. Today though, that little world was going up in flames, like the near hundred and fifty blocks of Jacksonville that had turned to char with the help of errant embers and a pile of poorly placed Spanish moss. Today, her sister Dizzy would be coming to take Lorelai home to the freshly built two-room house Millie's brother-in-law, along with some men from the neighborhood, had erected in the days since the fire.

The steam over the basin had thinned out in the afternoon air and Millie chanced another dip of her finger. Perfect. As she came to where Lorelai laid on her back on Clotilda's hand-stitched quilt, the baby squealed with recognition, reaching her chunky brown arms up to where her aunt hovered just out of reach. Millie didn't know many babies, but she was sure, absolutely sure, that

Lorelai both in temperament and intelligence outshone them all. There were thousands of thoughts, thousands of conversations, behind those alert brown eyes.

“Hello, lovely girl,” Millie cooed as she peeled the linen gown and cloth diaper from the infant and lifted her from the quilt. “Are you ready for your bath?”

Lorelai’s legs kicked before she hit the water, and as Millie lowered her niece into the tepid bath, she wondered if Lorelai had kicked like this when Dizzy jumped from the Market Street dock into the Saint Johns with her baby in tow. With an old tin cup, Millie lazily poured water down Lorelai’s back, and she wriggled with delight at the sensation. Lorelai liked the water. Maybe that was why she’d been able to survive the jump, the plunge, and bobbed back to the surface like a freshly picked apple. Millie tried to smile, but she felt something at the back of her mind, something like chewing.

Someone had seen her clothes becoming waterlogged, struggling to float, and pulled Lorelai from the murky waters. Dizzy, though, had sunken like a stone, like the river had been a starving thing with a taste for girls with loose morals. Water caught in Dizzy’s lungs had led to a minor fit of pneumonia. Her sister had regaled Millie and their mother with the story from her hospital bed, claiming a wall of fire had chased her and Lorelai during their morning walk, pushing them down to the docks. Clotilda had raised her hands, claimed it a miracle that they both survived mostly unscathed. Millie, though, who knew the Market Street dock was nearly two miles from LaVilla where Dizzy lived, wasn’t so sure.

Something itched deep at the place where Millie’s spine disappeared into her skull. She poured another lukewarm cup over her niece’s back as the baby tried to suckle her forearm, and Millie tried to shake off this creeping feeling of unease. Dizzy’s despondence had not begun when

Millie had noticed the way Mr. Ford's eyes hovered a bit too long on her sister during class. No, Dizzy, silly Dizzy, had shivered under his eyes and stared back shamelessly. Millie had seen it herself. Seen them standing too close after class, seen Dizzy's hands crawling like spiders across Mr. Ford's as they spoke in whispers. Millie had seen the bounce in her sister's step as she came home with the six-fifteen streetcar after her extra tutoring with Mr. Ford.

When Dizzy's nose began to swell, when Millie found Dizzy making sick off the porch in the early mornings, when her sister began to leave the bottom eyelets of her bodice uncinched, still her joy was palpable, a thing radiating off her like a torch creating light.

Somewhere between those vows and the arrival of Lorelai, only three months later, Millie noticed the change in her sister that had hung over her like a too-heavy cloak. It wasn't the business of children to ask after the business of women, but Millie had seen the bow of her sister's smile turn to a hollow line at their monthly Sunday dinners. Had seen her empty eyes, even after Lorelai was born. Had watched Dizzy sit motionless and staring off to some other place around their table while Lorelai cried to be changed or burped or fed. Had seen the angry red rashes across Lorelai's bottom and legs as she changed the girl.

A question had been grinding at Millie since the fire, and now, as she poured another cupful over her niece's head, as she watched the water trail down Lorelai's face, watched her small brown eyes squeeze closed, her little lips pop open with shock, her impossibly small nostrils flare with a wild, desperate inhale, the question rattled about in her head like a single marble in an empty can. Why had Dizzy, who'd never so much as learned to tread water, leapt into the river holding Lorelai? She claimed the fire pushed her, that she jumped to save themselves, but Millie wasn't so sure, and in that doubt, this question became a hydra. Why did she let Lorelai, who never cried

with Millie, cry for hours through Sunday dinners without moving to check her? Why did Dizzy never want to hold Lorelai, preferring to leave the baby to her own devices, forgotten somewhere on the floor like a fallen cushion? All these felt like they existed on the periphery of something more singular, something whose jaw was locked on Millie's skull: how could Millie let her niece go back to that?

“Millie! Do you mean for the baby to catch her death?” Her mother's winded voice was an axe, hacking the thought off at the neck. Clotilda clutched a handkerchief in her hand that she used to dab away the fat beads of sweat falling down her neck. In her other, a parchment-wrapped package clutched between Clotilda's tired fingers and ribs.

“Did you walk home? The streetcar's still running,” Millie said, taking in her momma's cranberry-flushed face and the halo of black frizz that escaped her small, well-weathered hat and hairpins.

“Streetcar filled up with white folk down near the Normal School, they kicked us off there. Did you even heat this water, girl?” Clotilda said, dipping her hands in the basin. “It's too cold to have her outside in this ice bath.”

Millie used the back of her hand to swipe away the dewy sweat gathering there. She thought her momma looked warm enough. “She likes it, Momma, see?”

Clotilda didn't turn back to see the baby's gummy smile as Millie poured another cup over her back. “She don't know up from down,” Clotilda said over her shoulder as she disappeared behind Millie into the house. “Get that girl out of that water and into some clothes, we gotta start fixing dinner and get her ready for Dorothea.”

Clotilda was crouched by the woodburning stove, when Millie finally followed her inside with Lorelai on her hip, still dripping. She watched Clotilda adjust two fuel logs, prep the stove to take in the yams and okra they'd broil to perfection later in the evening. The package sat on the table and, curious, Millie peeled back the wrapping and frowned. Three plump and glistening turkey necks. In a few hours, the pot would be simmering with a concoction of mustard greens and turkey necks that would fill 27 Hogan Street with the smell of pepper, gristle, and bones. At the stove, the sound of a striking match, then the snapping of catching tinder. This wasn't how the Lincoln ladies normally ate. No, this was all special, just for Dizzy.

"Momma," Millie said, "don't you think Dizzy needs some more time to settle in?"

Clotilda stood, back to her youngest daughter, and set about preparing the raw necks on her small countertop, rubbing in various manners of spices that didn't quite reach Millie's nose.

"What you say?"

Millie moved to the table where she'd laid out a clean cloth to dry Lorelai and set about wiping the droplets of water that hid in the rolls of her niece's neck. "Dizzy should rest for another week or so, don't you think?"

"Dorothea is fine," Clotilda said. "Doctor said she's fully recovered. If she weren't, they'd keep her in the hospital. You think you know better than a doctor, silly girl?"

Silly girl was a cut behind Millie's ears, a clock running backward stealing years from her and reminding her that her chemises still bore no blood stains. That made her a *girl*, and *girls* were *silly*. Lorelai blinked lazily in her lap, mouth opening in a small yawn. Clotilda's back still to her, she watched her momma's movements as she dropped the necks into the pot, the hiss of searing

meat filling the room. “No, Momma, I just thought Dizzy’d like some time at home before taking Lorelai back. I don’t mind looking after her longer.”

“Doctor say Dorothea’s fine, all healed up,” Clotilda said as she began roughly chopping an onion, the sound of the knife’s blade against the wooden cutting board turning into white noise with the sizzling necks. Finally she turned back to Millie, “A mother what’s fine got no reason not to have her baby.”

Seeing Lorelai still naked and yawning with coming sleep, Clotilda added, “Get her dressed.”

“But don’t you think—”

“Did you hear anyone ask you what you think, girl?”

Millie’s throat tensed, her grip on Lorelai tightening. “I... No, Momma,” she stammered.

“You know what I think?” Clotilda continued, turning back to the onions. “I think I finished raising babies a long time ago.”

“I just worry about Dizzy’s melancholy acting up, is all. You seen how she lets Lorelai sit in her own mess, how she don’t hold her?”

Clotilda snorted, shook her head. “And I reckon you’re some expert on mothering now? Let me tell you something you might not know,” she continued. “Babies make messes and cry to be held. She keeps coddling Lorelai, like you been, and Dorothea’s gonna end up with a spoilt and gossiping girl who only knows how to talk back to her momma.”

Millie’s face flushed hot; grip tightened. Lorelai’s whining, the wriggling of her little chunky limbs, pulled Millie from her seat and she left the room to dress the girl without a word.

#

In her room, the one she'd shared with Dizzy until her sister became *Dorothea*, Millie bit her lip and silently cursed her mother. Then, as if in response, she heard her momma's gravelly voice shouting from the kitchen, "Change yourself while you're at it, Millie." Now that her sister was a wife and mother, and much to Millie's distain, Clotilda insisted on calling Dizzy by her Christian name. Nicknames were for children, and this, she thought, was why she was still called *Millie* instead of *Milcah*. Clotilda and Dizzy were connected on some level Millie could not see by the experience of marriage, or childbirth, or even by the pangs of irritability and bloated bellies and cramps that cut through their core during their monthlies.

No, *women* talk of wifely things. The children sit silent and do as they're told. This is the difference a smear of red makes in the life of a girl.

Lorelai's eyelids drooped as Millie laid her, belly-down, on the bed and went about retrieving a small shift dress the color of stewed peaches from a carpetbag that used to be Millie's. Millie had made the dress herself in the first days after it was decided Lorelai would stay with them at Hogan Street, using an old pillowcase and several clutches of eucalyptus from their back garden. The color hadn't turned out as vibrant as Millie'd hoped, but as she slipped it over Lorelai's lolling head, her tired arms through the asymmetrical holes, and shimmied the fabric down her body, she thought it fitted her niece's complexion. Millie thought she looked like a small, not-quite-ready rose bud.

It was Millie who wasn't ready. Wasn't ready to sit across the table from her teacher and sister, now man and wife, and play nice. Wasn't ready to put Lorelai back in her sister's arms, watch them disappear out of this small world toward downtown. No, no, it was Dizzy who really wasn't ready. As *silly* as their momma took Millie, it wasn't she who'd played the dangerous game

of drawn-out glances and brushing of hands and clandestine meetings. It wasn't Millie who'd shamed herself, her family, and her school with near scandal. It wasn't Millie who'd thrown her infant, not even able to sit up yet, into the rough waters of the Saint Johns.

Their momma wasn't ready to see what Millie saw, that Dizzy was no woman, was no mother. She wasn't ready to see that *Dizzy* was the silly girl, playing games she wasn't suited for. Millie didn't know if it was pride or selfishness that blotted out her momma's sight, but she seemed blind where Dizzy was concerned. Millie had the sinking feeling in her gut that if she sent Lorelai back there, to the shiny new house that awaited the Ford family across Hogan's Creek, that she'd wilt like a bouquet parched for water and sunlight.

Millie was buttoning a fresh shirtwaist when she heard a muffled whining that sounded too far away to be Lorelai. She dismissed it, the sound of children playing outside, but when it persisted, Millie turned. There, among the blankets, Lorelai writhed like a dying insect. Her arms squirmed, struggling for traction in the fabrics, her face was pressed to the mattress and smothered by the thick, wool blanket. Lorelai was trying to save herself like she had in the river that day. Millie watched.

What would become of a baby with a mother like Dizzy? Some painful and slow withering end? An infection from the rash sores? An empty stomach, those chunky limbs faded to skeletal echoes. Or worse, a life with a momma who didn't care when you hurt. Didn't come when you cried. Didn't care what you thought or if you thought at all.

Millie watched.

Lorelai's movements turn from frantic to sluggish. Watched her head nod into the fabric of the blanket, searching. She sputtered to stillness. A beat passed and Millie felt the bile rising in her

throat. She rushed the bed, hands to her niece's back, and rolled her but her eyes were closed, her lips darker than Millie thought she remembered. Millie sat her up, rubbed her back as if she was scrubbing laundry. When Lorelai still did not cry out, Millie tried her front. Rubbing and pressing against her tiny chest, praying for movement, for sound. The room felt as though it were shrinking, like the walls were leaning in over Millie's shoulder, watching her hands work to undo their inaction. The hanged air from outside Hogan Street seemed to have slipped inside. And the heat. Millie felt her fresh shirtwaist beginning to cling to her, sweat slicking her underarms.

Then, life. A small, quivering gasp that grew to a howl. Lorelai wailed, her whole body a single flexing muscle, but no tears came. Millie pulled her into her lap, pressing her forehead against her niece's. She fought against Millie, throwing her arms in stiff angry lines, twisting with fury, as if she'd never known betrayal until now.

"You silly girl," Millie said, panting, trying to catch the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding.

#

At dinner, Millie thought that her sister was a sad effigy of the things she was supposed to be — a *happy wife*, a *glowing mother*. The only hint of a glow was the yellow of her skirt, a soft butter yellow that made Dizzy a beacon, a singular lit candle in a dark room.

Normally, yellow would be too garish, too audacious for the girl just barely saved from the indignity of her sin, too cheerful for the miles of scorched earth that lied just beyond Hogan's Creek. Beauty, however, let Dizzy get away with much. Beauty was why Dizzy's faults and shortcomings became wedding bells, softly gurgling blessings, and new houses, and why Millie's relegated her to girlhood and all the curses that came with it.

Their small table was crowded by mismatched dishes bearing okra and yams, cooked just how Dizzy liked: thrown between the burning logs of the stove and left to blister and split open. On the table, between the roasted turkey necks and the cast iron of cornbread, the vibrant orange meat of the yams burst through the charred skin like lightning in the night. The *tinks* of cutlery on the good porcelain dishes hit Millie's ears like thunder.

She cast another glance around Mr. Ford to the spread-out quilt where Lorelai laid, belly-down, on the floor of the sitting room. Her head faced away from Millie so she couldn't see Lorelai's face. The slow—too slow, maybe?—rise and fall of Lorelai's torso with each breath told of sleep, but every few minutes Millie found herself sitting up straighter in her chair, arching her neck to see around Mr. Ford and catch the rise of her small body.

Then the slow, shaky fall.

Muffled in Millie's ears, Mr. Ford and Clotilda spoke of the Normal School, of the new wooden building she would be returning to in a few weeks' time. Where Millie would sit in class and watch Mr. Ford walk the class and talk of Homer and Virgil, dragging his eyes over all the *silly girls* in class, waiting for one to stare back.

"You lost something, Millie?" he said across the table, a fork of meat and yam hanging above his plate, a coy grin on his lips. Millie had seen that grin before. Not like this though, looking down the barrel. Millie leaned back, suddenly feeling shy, as if caught doing something she had no business doing.

"No, sir." She still hadn't been able to shake the classroom habit yet and felt her brown cheeks going hot. If Dizzy was a candle in her yellow skirt, Mr. Ford was the swallowing night pressing against the flame's hips. The black of his breeches was just off the black of his coat, but

the effect, Millie thought, was the same as seeing something in the corner of the eye. Something lurking, just inside her blind spot. That's how she'd felt in class, his dark form skulking the rows of desks, looking for daydreamers, doodlers, and note-passers, as he lectured on Milton.

“Thank you, by the way,” he said, shifting his body toward Millie. “Lorelai seems to have picked up some quieter habits for once. You must come by the new house for dinner.”

Millie opened her mouth, readying some half-molded excuse, but Dizzy's gangly hands crawled up the table to grip Mr. Ford's arm. “Let us have some time to break in the house first,” she said, half-laughing but too loud and too hollow.

“No, please,” he said, waving a hand over his shoulder at Dizzy. Millie watched the twitch in her sister's brow, the tensing of her shoulders. Mr. Ford continued, “You deserve it, Millie. We can make something special. What do you think?”

Dizzy's voice was a dying ember, “It's a little soon, don't you think, dear?”

Mr. Ford finally turned from Millie, and she let out an exhale, her shoulders sinking at the relief from his stare. “What?” he said, an edge in his voice.

Dizzy looked like something wilting in the night. Millie watched her sister look to her with an expression like anger, then her eyes flicked back to her husband. “I just mean... Well, don't you think it would be nice to just—”

Mr. Ford chuckled, and when he spoke, his voice was pitched high like he was making fun. “Did anyone ask you what you think, girl? Millie worked real hard to take care of our girl for us. I worked real hard building that house for us. What did you do?”

He chuckled, pulled his arm from Dizzy's hand, instead gripping her slight fingers in his builders' hands.

“You know what I think?” Mr. Ford started in a playful tone. “I think we should hire Millie as a nanny, you could come to the house and tend to Lorelai during the weekends. For pay, of course.”

Millie’s hands were busy making wrinkles in her lilac skirt. “Oh,” Dizzy gasped, straining back something more colorful. “I don’t know that’s necessary, Dear. Not yet.”

“Don’t be silly, Dizzy,” he said, even toned. “You need the help, and Millie has proven she’s quite helpful.”

Clotilda perked up, asking after what the rate might look like and that was a conversation for adults. Millie sat silent but she buzzed inside. While she bounced her legs beneath the table in excitement to see Lorelai, to know she’d be able to see her regularly, her skin felt rubbed raw from Mr. Ford’s intense stare. She shook away the feeling though, Millie didn’t revel under his eyes like some of the girls at school, like her sister.

Disinterest, Millie thought, would be her armor.

Dizzy’s nervous laugh cut through again, interrupting Mr. Ford and their momma’s friendly negotiations, “Dear, don’t you think—”

But she stopped. Millie and Clotilda waited, staring at Dizzy, but she didn’t finish. Her mouth hung open for a moment, the ghost of something on her tongue, then her jaw snapped closed. Mr. Ford lifted his hand from Dizzy’s, done waiting for whatever sat inside her mouth. Millie watched her sister, watched her hand slide from the table to rest, like an injured animal, in the clutch of her other. Watched Dizzy rub her red fingers until their regular color returned. For a moment, Millie met her big sister’s eye, but her Dizzy dropped her stare. Millie watched her mouth pull together in so tight a line, she thought Dizzy might shatter right there at the table.

#

Millie had not bothered to try to hide her joy as she boarded the Main Street trolley. Clotilda and Mr. Ford had agreed on three dollars a month, *very generous* for a domestic work her momma had assured her. That didn't matter to Millie, though, the idea of spending more days blowing raspberries into her niece's stomach, of brushing her bouncy curls, made Millie swing her legs like an excited child.

Even when the car filled with white folks and the conductor kicked her and the few other colored folk off at Beaver Street and began to walk the last sixteen blocks, the bounce of Millie's step, the swing in the arm that carried her lunch pail, all told of a girl eager to get where she was going.

She was still some ten blocks east when Millie crossed into the colored neighborhood of LaVilla and spotted her sister's new house, rising from the flat of the razed earth like a single tooth in an infant's gummy mouth. Coming down Main Street, Millie had seen evidence of the fire. Black soot still stained the sidewalks and while many buildings had been destroyed, their replacements were sprouting, strong new growth.

LaVilla, though, showed no such progress. Foundations with no houses stretched across city blocks like mausoleums. Here and there, groups of men drove wooden beams into the ground, the start, Millie guessed, to something new. The handful of beams, though, were nowhere close to being called a house. The bounce in her step began to flatten, the swing in her arm weighed down. Millie had read about the devastation in downtown, heard about the so-called *Great Conflagration* from the paper and, she supposed, from Dizzy — if she could believe her story of flames chasing her down Market Street to the docks and into the water.

Across Hogan's Creek, she and Clotilda had seen the flames, the smoke blotting the sky and tinging everything orange, but they'd been spared the destruction that had gobbled up downtown. The single house that lifted from the earth, and indeed Millie herself, felt like a travesty, a stuck-out tongue to the burned frames and foundations that loomed over Millie like haints. As she closed in, climbed the steps up to the Ford's front door, Millie had the sensation of being back in her small room at 27 Hogan Street; the walls leaning in over her as she frantically prayed for Lorelai to inhale.

She knocked, softly, but the sound was a hammer striking iron in the quiet desolation of the flattened neighborhood. When no answer came, she knocked harder, flinching at the far-reaching echo, the distant heads turning in her direction. Still nothing, so Millie opened the door and stepped inside.

It was dark inside the only house on Beaver Street, free of scorch marks and soot but full of some other heaviness that nestled itself between the walls. The one window in the sitting room was shuttered, making the air stagnant and stale. A bucket of laundry on the floor in the kitchen seemed forgotten, the water still and without suds. Millie tested it and frowned: cold. The sitting room was empty, both of life and furniture. They only had two chairs and a small table squeezed against the wall. Millie set down her things and threw open the shutter and the light swarmed inside, starving.

"Dizzy?" she called through the quiet.

A cry cut through in reply, shrill and desperate. Lorelai. Millie followed the sobs to the small hallway and opened the first door. The smell hit her first and Millie felt her stomach roll.

There, in the dark, she could make out the shape of a basinet. Millie unshuttered the small window on the far wall and finally could see her niece, naked, wailing, and rolling in her own waste.

Millie's tongue felt like leather. She called out for her sister again, and when no answer came, she pulled Lorelai out of the basinet, holding her shuddering body at arm's length, "Where's your momma, sweet girl?"

She brought Lorelai to the kitchen and pulled the forgotten clothes from the bucket, letting them slosh against the floor. Lorelai wailed louder at the contact with the cold water, or maybe at the roughness of Millie's hands, scrubbing her legs and back. Her tiny voice sounded husky, tired from crying, and Millie wondered how long she'd screamed before going silent. She boiled. Was this a normal morning in the Ford house?

Satisfied that the grime had been washed away, Millie dried her with her own apron before taking off down the short hall to find some clothes or a diaper. Finding nothing in Lorelai's barren room, Millie hesitated in front of the door she knew had to belong to her sister and teacher. She felt suddenly shy, embarrassed to be in Mr. Ford's home, where he washed and shaved. Embarrassed to enter the place he slept beside her sister. Lorelai's whining from the kitchen washed that away, replaced the embarrassment with indignation.

Her niece had been left to wail in the dark like an orphaned cub while Dizzy was off doing who-knew-what. Millie threw open the door, and nearly screamed when she saw Dizzy in the bed, twisted among the sheets with her eyes squeezed shut and hands pulling her loose hair down over her ears.

"You've been here the whole time?"

“You got her started again with that crying,” Dizzy whined. Millie opened the shutter, not a bit of hesitation even as Dizzy hissed at her to keep it closed. By the light, Dizzy looked like a wild woman, her hair half plaited, half loose. Her body looked weak, smaller than Millie remembered with only her milk-stained chemise hanging on her body.

“Close the shutter,” Dizzy said from the sheets.

“Do it yourself,” Millie spat, her neck hot, her breath coming fast. “Lorelai was covered in her own filth. And you lay here, sleeping?”

“Get out.”

“I won’t. Lorelai needs something clean. Where do you keep her things?”

“Go away, Millie.”

“You ought to be ashamed,” Millie said, trying the trunk at the foot of her sister’s bed.

“Oh yes,” Dizzy said, finally sitting up, and tossed the sheets back as she climbed out of bed. “Because you know everything, don’t you Millie.”

“I know Mr. Ford wouldn’t want—”

Dizzy cut her off, her hand became a vice clamping down around Millie’s Jaw to hold her mouth open. When Millie tried to turn, tried to push her sister’s hands away, she felt Dizzy’s grip tighten, her nails dig into the soft skin of her cheeks. Dizzy pushed Millie to the wall, until her shoulders were flush with the wooden panels then leaned in until their foreheads touched.

“You,” Dizzy whispered, her nostrils flaring like a bull. “You don’t know the first thing about what Malcolm wants. You want to talk about shame? You’re a plaything to him, to us. You are my punishment, and you are too stupid to see it. Skipping down here like a schoolgirl, taking pay for being used. *You* should be ashamed. You’re a stupid little girl. Halfway to harlot, and you

don't even see it." Dizzy paused, took a breath and, almost like an afterthought, added, "Stay clear of him."

Millie's eyes narrowed and, best she could around the clamp of her sister's hand, said, "I have no want for your husband. I'm only here to help with Lorelai."

Dizzy snorted, dropped her hand from Millie's jaw. "Oh please," she said, leaning past Millie to close the shutter and cast the room again in dark. "As if what you want matters at all."

#

Millie found a few cuts of pork belly, salted and packed between jars of rice and dried fruit in the kitchen. Fried up nice, Millie thought they'd pair well with the bread and cheese she'd packed for her lunch. With Dizzy still locked away in the dark of her room, Millie had seen to stripping Lorelai's small cot and redressing it, fetching fresh water, had seen to rinsing and hanging the half-done laundry, to fetching *more* fresh water, and had taken up a spot on the porch rinsing and scrubbing the layers of salt from the meat until her shoulders ached and her cuticles threatened to split down the middle. Strapped to her back, Lorelai dozed, the steady breathing against her neck a comfort to Millie as she let Dizzy's warning roll between her ears.

Stay clear of him.

Stupid Dizzy, screaming just to hear her own voice. Stupid Dizzy, fermenting in her bed while Lorelai cried. Stupid Dizzy, telling Millie what she'd already knew: what she wanted *didn't* matter. Clotilda had reminded her as much time and time again.

Millie raked her fingers across the pork meat and felt the snap of her nail breaking, the burn of the salty water, and cursed her rotten luck. Silently, she added a curse for her rotten sister and her own bloodless womb.

“Language, Millie.”

Millie blushed as Mr. Ford rounded the corner of the porch with a toothy grin and climbed the steps. “Sorry,” she said, biting her lip. “I didn’t see you.”

“No apologies. In my home, you’re always welcome to speak your mind, even when it’s less than proper,” he said. Spotting Lorelai snoozing on Millie’s back, he added, “Where’s Dizzy?”

Millie flubbed, trying to figure something more decent to say than the truth.

“Still in bed?” Mr. Ford asked, his voice dropping its teasing tone.

“She’s not feeling well,” Millie said in a rush.

“That’s kind of you, to lie for your sister. What do you say to some help? You mind the baby, and I can finish this,” he said, lifting the pail of water and salt-crusted pork belly from Millie’s lap. “Come on, let’s go inside.” Millie watched Mr. Ford look across the leveled, ashen neighborhood, watched the tendons in his neck straining against his collar, a hint of a smirk hanging on the corner of his mouth. “It’s too gloomy out here for two lovely ladies,” he said, offering Millie a hand.

Millie reached for his hand but hesitated. She watched Mr. Ford’s empty hand float before her. She’d never touched a man before. Never had to, aside from innocuous brushing of bodies in a full streetcar or crowded general store. This was different, deliberate. Those hands had touched Dizzy; Millie carried the evidence on her back. She didn’t know how she felt about touching those same hands.

Mr. Ford made the decision for her. Grabbed her hand, pulled Millie to her feet, out of her thoughts, and guided her inside ahead of him.

The house felt smaller now, sitting across the table from Mr. Ford. Too small for Millie now that the space was filled with Mr. Ford's voice, talking of the new wooden schoolhouse he and the other Stanton men were erecting. At Mr. Ford's insistence, Millie let Lorelai continue her nap in her room, laying the baby on her back in the bare basinet. As she left Lorelai's room, Millie hovered in the hall, staring at the door to Dizzy's room.

Stupid Dizzy.

"You're good with Lorelai," he said when Millie returned. "Clotilda taught you well. A few more calluses and you wouldn't have even needed me for this." At the small table, his big hands disappeared into the water pail, scraping, scrubbing until the lumps of salt broke free from the meat. The praise made Millie's heart jump in her chest. In the Lincoln house, cleaning and fixing dinners wasn't something that received praise, the work was expected and necessary. Clotilda, as well as she might have taught Millie, had no thanks for her daughter's efforts, no praise for the things expected of her.

"Thanks, Mr. Ford," Millie said, looking away. That shyness from before nestled around her shoulders, tensing, settled into her hands that gripped her apron.

His brows furrowed in mock anger. "Come on now. None of this *Mr. Ford* at home. Call me Malcolm." Millie bit her lip and he stared, waiting. "Go on. Say it."

"Alright...*Malcolm*." His name was round and smooth in her mouth like a jawbreaker.

"Fabulous," he beamed and pulled the pork belly from the water pail, clean and free of the dry brine. They looked shriveled and ugly, like dripping, dead flower petals, but Millie figured they'd taste good enough. He moved over to the woodstove and lit the fresh logs Millie had placed earlier, then continued, "In exchange, I'll call you Milcah."

Millie's ears burned and her chest went hot. "I should wake Dizzy," she said, rising from the table.

"Don't. I know it sounds awful, but I'm enjoying the peace," he said with a sheepish smile. "Besides, we're family now, and it feels like we've hardly spoken outside of class. Dizzy can be... *difficult* when she's in one of her moods." He tapped a finger against his whiskery jaw, and continued, "But, seems you know that already."

Millie mirrored Malcolm's movements and her fingers found welts along the curve of her chin, where Dizzy's nails had dug in. At the woodstove, metal clattered against metal as Malcolm placed a cast iron pan on the burner.

"You should dry them first," Millie coughed, her throat feeling parched.

"Oh?"

"That's how you get a good color on them."

Malcolm raised his eyebrows, impressed. "Alright. Let's give it a shot. Would you fetch me a clean cloth?"

The sound of hissing meat soon filled the Beaver Street house. As Millie sliced the small cheese block, Malcolm lifted one cut to peek at the caramel sear and whistled. At the crisp sound, Millie bit her lips, trying to hide her smile.

"With your skills, you'll find yourself a fine husband one day. Won't have to settle for a scoundrel like Dizzy did," he said with a wink.

A tried to stifle her giggles with her fingers. When she caught Malcolm's eye she looked away, grinning, and apologized.

“Now, Milcah, I already said no apologies,” Malcolm chuckled and nudged Millie’s arm, and goosebumps, hidden under Millie’s sleeves, rippled out across her skin. She watched him flip the pork belly, his hands swallowing the fork handle.

At school, Mr. Ford used those big hands to strike desks of students who dared to snooze or chat with a classmate, the sound like the cracking of a whip. But watching Malcolm now, Millie felt like she was seeing a different man. The way he settled his weight onto one hip, the bounce in his wrist, felt foreign to the teacher she’d seen. *Malcolm* spoke to Millie as an equal, not a *girl*.

“Can I ask you something? It may be rude.” Malcolm said. Millie felt a jolt of anxiety, swallowed, and nodded. He motioned with the fat-streaked fork at Millie’s apron dress. “Why do you still wear those?”

Millie blushed, fanned her fingers across the wrinkled white apron that laid over her nearly too-short green dress. “They’re passed down. Momma says she won’t get me a proper dress yet.”

“Surely, it’s time,” he said, plating the meat and bringing it to the table, and Millie followed. “You and Clotilda will start planning your debut in no time.”

Millie snorted. Her *debut* was still some four years away. “I don’t think that’s on Momma’s mind.”

“Would you like one?” Malcolm asked, as he pulled Millie’s chair out for her.

“One what?”

“A dress, silly lady. A proper one. I’ll buy you one if you like. We can head down to Lindo’s for measurements next weekend when you come by.” Malcolm’s hand rose to clutch Millie’s waist, and she froze. His hand shuffled around her center, and then he patted one hip, then the other, as

if he were memorizing her measurements by touch. He grabbed the apron and lifted it to get a look at the dress, and when he seemed satisfied, he reached for her skirt.

Millie scrambled backward, and her feet knocked against the table's leg and making the plates and forks sing. Her middle felt tight where he'd touched, like she was in a too-tight bodice. She looked past him to the door. Out the window, she could see the sky turning to lilac. "I should head home," she stammered and stepped back from the table.

"Already?" Malcolm asked, pointing to their uneaten meal.

"Momma wanted me back before the sun went down, and the streetcar's been hard to find a spot on." That tightness crawled into Millie's chest, sat on her lungs so she couldn't catch a big enough breath.

"I'll walk you back," he said, scooting back from the table, but Millie put a hand to his shoulder and pushed him back into his chair. Malcolm let her. He sat back in the chair, covered her hand with his engulfing one. Millie tried to speak but her voice crackled and fizzled out. Malcolm's grin opened, the edge of his teeth peeking from behind his lips.

Millie tried again. "I can walk myself."

"I suppose that's true," he said, and squeezed her trapped hand. "You're no babe anymore."

Millie tried to pull her hand back, but Malcolm's held her there until she met his gaze. "I'll see you next weekend?" he asked.

"I don't know," Millie said, more honest than she'd meant to sound.

"I will," Malcolm said. "I've already paid Clotilda for the month." Finally, he loosened his grip so Millie could slide her hand free. That tightness was turning to a mound in her throat.

“I’m going to say good night to Dizzy and Lorelai,” she croaked, and scurried down the hall.

Millie knocked softly on Dizzy’s door, looking over her shoulder as she did; waiting to see Malcolm’s bearded face appear around the corner, even though she could hear the *tink* of cutlery against tin dishes. She tried again. Waited. Millie’s hands wormed up to the welts along her chin.

“Dizzy, it’s me,” Millie said softly, her voice shaking as she heard the *tink* of fork on plate stop. When still no answer came, Millie made for Lorelai’s room.

Behind her niece’s door, Millie’s breath came in gasps and harmonized with Lorelai’s weak snores. The room was dim, the sky outside the window dulling to a dusty lavender. Where Malcolm had touched her felt heavy. Even his name as it passed through her mind made her hands go sticky.

Lorelai cried out, a sleepy, husky sound, and Millie approached the basinet. She thought of how she’d found Lorelai when she arrived, thought of the sight of her niece caked in her own filth, of the sound of her hoarse little voice. Thought of Dizzy, hiding away in her room even still, and Millie knew if she stopped coming to care for her, what Lorelai’s life would look like. Millie put her hand on Lorelai’s chest, felt the rise and fall, the small *thump-thump* of her heart. But the memory of Malcolm’s hand on hers, holding Millie in place, made her jaw tense, her shoulders tighten. Dizzy’s words rang her ears like a tambourine. *As if what you want matters at all.*

Lorelai needed her here, in this place where Malcolm — no, Mr. Ford — could palm at her and try to rifle through her skirts. Millie swallowed. She leaned over the basinet, one hand on Lorelai’s chest and one on her back. In one quick motion, she flipped her niece onto her stomach.

Lorelai whined, but quickly settled, and once Millie was sure Lorelai was still sleeping, she slipped out the bedroom door, down the hall, and out the front door. Over her shoulder, Millie called out a curt *Goodnight Mr. Ford*.

Outside, the first slivers of indigo were staining the horizon. Maybe for the darkening sky, or maybe for the things she left behind in the only house on Beaver Street, Millie started to run, her feet kicking up ash and dust behind her and marking her trail back to the unburned land across Hogan's creek.

ANGRY EXALTATIONS TO WOMEN REIMAGINED AS GODDESSES

[Cleopatra: Asps and Tongues]

Measure out the weight of Man's greed in sapphire scarabs, celestial feathers, homebrewed poisons, and pillow talk. Scientist, scholar, goddess among emperors, You have been metamorphosed into a scheming seductress, Taylor-made for the American Silver Screen. Call to me in any tongue, I will weave You a tapestry from their lies that You might coil yourself inside and strike at the vein.

[Billie Holiday: Song and Gardenias]

Part the haze and approach the altar draped in sweet satin. There, strange fruit rots, drawing bugs and flies on the wall. Speak in rasps and croons so they might not hear. They slipped heroin into Your hands to make Your body a walking prison then picked You clean. Damn the suits who defile Your shrine! For You stand among Counts and Presidents, a Divine Lady of the Day.

[Tituba: Little Children and Vengeance]

Blessed Soothsayer, You are both the film and viscous parts spinning like dancers suspended in water. See the future in its shapes. The well-fed yokes forget amniotic origins, and now You are fingers reaching for yellow. You are the heavy water sinking down. You cannot rage. You cannot drown. There is power in Your pointed finger, in Your girl-game of cracking eggs.

[Matoaka: Girls and Joy]

You were a bare footed little one, doing cartwheels and digging Your toes into Powhatan soil when You were made a piece in an expanding puzzle. Your girlhood was left in the densely populated land of Your father, and You were taken like a bag of grain. Stolen in scoops by hungry bearded men, used to negotiate the extermination of Your people. Forced into dresses, false names, baptismal fonts, and Disney franchises.

[Rosetta Tharpe: Rock and Roll]

The Church is too small a temple to hold Your grand distortions, Your cosmic resonations. Grab Your girl and we will follow to Your sanctuary, raise up Her ebony crown covered in kisses, a sacrilegious steeple. Let us shout, Sister! Shout to the trembling rafters, lift our Devil's Horns, bow before Your splendor. Shout to the children, who writhe to Your stolen sermons performed by a white man.

[Nancy Green: Breakfast and Activism]

Tell me, Aunty Goddess, what's the world look like from the front of a box? Tell me Aunty Goddess, what do You hear round their tables? The most recognized Black woman in the world, put in that prison by the American Marketing Machine. Caricaturized to sell hotcakes and racist iconography. Remove that gingham scarf, bare your crown. Your hands that once beat batter now wield picket signs. A mouth once smiling, no more.

[Dinah Black: Sanctuary and the Courts]

Someone's in the kitchen with the divinity and multitudes of You. Sound Your trumpet, reap the justice owed. There will be hosts of Dinahs after You, after You have secured Your liberty with Your own two legs, for there are no murderous brothers coming to avenge You. The thieves will make Dinahs of all Black women, a slur, a name, an insult. Unaware they invoke a goddess who broke Her own chains.

[Sobekneferu: Men and Reeds]

The teeth in Your beard gnash the frailer things drifting down river. You are the Waterway to the Field of Reeds and the ancient beasts torqued and twisting in the marshes. Devour, oh Pharaoh! Oh Goddess King! For the refuse will see to Your death in the afterlife. A name scoured by hands, not time. Your Nubian nose ripped from stone that bled honey. Make me a spile and we will drown them in Your ichor.

[La Malinche: Survival and the Peninsula]

In the opposite direction the waters turn to whirlpools and rot where starving Spanish terrors hold You by the throat of Your baby while the Yucatan becomes a colonized Xibalba. Your predecessors fell in the tens of thousands and in the face of annihilation You fixed Your jaw, clutched Your sons tight, cried *not my children*, for it, Your progenies call You *traitor* and transmute You from survivor to conspirator.

[Peggy Garner: Mothers and Emancipation]

When they printed Your name, they called You the *Modern Medea*. But for You there was no Jason, no Argo. You bore the journey in Your joints, cut through lands like an iron sided ship. There was no waiting dragon or little king. Still, You steeled Your blade. Released Your children. Drowned the Ohio River in Your name. America clutched her looted pearls, gasped from her houses built on stolen land, *thief!*

[Sojourner Truth: Oration and Letters]

You stilled chaos with Your voice, but time has stuffed Your mouth with the words of white women. Sweet Speaker, let us pluck these lies like splinters from Your lips.

Drop them, bloody, into a dish, *Ain't I a Woman*. She is a blasphemer, toying with Your Holy words, molding them around her mortal thumbs. Words You never spoke in an accent You never had, lies forced down the throat of a goddess named Truth.

[Las Hermanas Mirabal: Revolution and Butterflies]

Speak softly as You approach the Fates—the Sisters Mirabal—for they are keepers of secrets and their shared eye is trained on the dictator's carrion throne. Neither clubs nor machismo break this stare, for it has steel fingers and sees through broken windshields, passed a cliff's edge, and the grave itself. Their three-fold stare is a braided rope around fascism's throat pulling tighter. Tighter. Tighter.

[Boudica: Daughters and Warfare]

Hold the men who desecrated Your daughters by the shorthairs, make them know Your people can summon death without a short sword. Paint Your face! Loose Your burning hair! Mount Your chariot, oh Warrior Goddess! With Your infantry rides one thousand black hungry hounds. Hang Your garland of Roman heads from Your hips to remind them You are both Creator and Destroyer.

[Ruby McCollum: Wealth and Executioners]

Extolled is the woman who shoots straight between the eyes of rapists! Extolled is she who aims with two eyes open! Place your bets, name your numbers, my money rests in the hands of a woman burned by a thousand needle pricks. Now the doctor's evils are spikes driven through fleshy temples. Bite down on their gag order and claims of *paramour*. Grind the word to grit. Put on Your finest clothes, dress in yellow. We go to a funeral today.

[Timoclea: Wells and Stones]

What sound does a skull make against the bottom of a well? Let me whisper to the boulders You lift to Your breast, I will tell them where to strike. This war-man has made battleground of your skin and now you are a Divine David, making pebbles against the ribcage of this tiny Goliath. What a giant You must seem from so far below. Bend an ear, listen for the breaking of rocks and the following silence.

[Celia: Fire and the Hearth]

The crack of bones are cathedral bells singing the time in the dark, marking the Holy convocation of sticks and stones. Your adolescent hands are smelted to hair-triggers. Robert Newsom goes in pieces, and now You are between a rock and a burning place. Break his largest pieces under Your girl-heel, turn him to dust. The flames form a stepladder reaching up to an ethereal plane and now, to touch You is to combust.

[Bathsheba: Widows and Kings]

How thin our gossamer peace to be torn by Man-Eyes. How delicate our skin to break under the hands of weak men. How Holy our womb to birth nations. How Glorious, how powerful Your name for Leonard Cohen to invoke the baffled king and only call You Her. How strong our hands to hold so much fury, the small bodies of babes, and murdered husbands.

[Saartji Baartman: Curves and the Exploited]

I gasped when I saw You, not with the erotic disgust of Euro-eyes, but recognition. A familiarity in our shapes. They molded You into a sideshow so they could lust after You with no shame. When death took You, they bisected Your parts and sold Your favored ones in jars. Commodified, even in death. Let me venerate You, sweet Venus. Stand before me, a mirror, and I will speak love into us both.

[Sappho: Poets and Love]

Recite to me verses dressed up in iambics, make me Your acolyte for I too rejoice in the curvatures and brilliance of women. You are the silver-haired Aphrodite aged like ambrosia, dawned in ancient pearls, performing poems with a voice like caresses. Let us sing the glory of growing old and I shall wash Your feet, dry them with my hair. Great Teacher and Lover of Ladies grant us your wit, your fervor for a Woman's World in the face senile men.

[Henrietta Lacks: Time and Medicine]

Look through the eons and see the many justifications for Your eternal violation, recited by white men in white coats. You are a clock with no face, and we cannot tell from where Your tears flow. Let me retrieve these precious things, arrange them on Your altar, for You hold miracles in Your matter. You are the ever multiplying and immortal Madonna, imparting vitality from beyond the veil, constantly creating. Close Your eyes. Breathe. Rest.

READING LIST

Fiction:

1. Adams, Erin — Jackal
2. Allison, Dorothy — Bastard Out of Carolina
3. Arimah, Lesley Nneka — What it Means When a Man Falls from the Sky
4. Atwood, Margaret — The Handmaid's Tale
5. Benz, Chanelle — The Man Who Shot Out My Eye is Dead
6. Bondurant, Matt — Wettest County in the World
7. Chesnutt, Charles — The Conjure Woman & Other Tales
8. Croley, Michael — Any Other Place
9. Diamont, Anita — The Red Tent
10. Dunn, Steven — Potted Meat
11. Goddard Jones, Holly — Antipodes
12. Groff, Lauren — Florida
13. Hampton, Leah — Fuckface
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16. Hurston, Zora Neale — Their Eyes Were Watching God
17. Jones, Edward P. — The Known World
18. Kirby, Carolyn — The Conviction of Cora Burns
19. Machado, Carmen Maria — Her Body & Other Parties
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21. Mantel, Hillary — Wolf Hall
22. Moniz, Dantiel — Milk Blood Heat
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24. Mosely, Walter — Devil in a Blue Dress
25. Naylor, Gloria — The Women of Brewster Place
26. Nguyen, Phong — Bronze Drum

27. O'Brien, Tim — The Things They Carried
28. O'Connor, Flannery — The Complete Stories of...
29. Orlev, Uri — Lydia, Queen of Palestine
30. Orange, Tommy — There There
31. Rash, Ron — Burning Bright
32. Ray, Shann — American Masculine
33. Riggs, Ransom — Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children
34. Ruffin, Maurice Carlos — Those Who Don't Say They Love You
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42. Whitehead, Colson — The Underground Railroad
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44. Yuknavitch, Lidia — On the Small Backs of Children

Nonfiction

45. Chang, Victoria — Dear Memory
46. Hochschild, Adam — King Leopold's Ghost
47. Hurston, Zora Neale — Barracoon
48. Hurston, Zora Neale — Mules and Men
49. Jacobs, Harriet — Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl
50. Williams, Heather Andrea — Help Me to Find My People