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In the Cards: A Collection of Short Stories and Poetry

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IN THE CARDS:
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES AND POETRY

by

ALISE VICK

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in The Burnett Honors College
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Thesis Chair: Dr. Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés

ABSTRACT

“In the Cards” is a collection of five interrelated short stories with six related poems in between each piece. Each of the selections features a female protagonist with a focus on two main characters, Shelley and Caroline, half-sisters trying to regain their sisterhood after their father’s death. Themes explored in the fiction and poetry include faith and relationships, and how they can be connected.

Caroline and Shelley drive the primary storyline with the former, a self-described goody goody who has surrounded herself with superficial friends. Between the expectations of the community that surrounds her and the standards she has set for herself, she struggles to create a unique identity that is not influenced by some form of expectation. She is also haunted by guilt over her relationship with her younger sister Shelley, with whom she has had minimal contact ever since Caroline refused to attend their father’s funeral, though she keeps these feelings largely to herself.

Shelley’s mother, Caroline’s step-mother, has brought Shelley up in a household dominated by strict adherence to Catholicism, and conservative ideals. When the half-sisters’ father dies, Shelley becomes increasingly disillusioned by religious faith, and faith in the people she thought cared for her most, such as Caroline. Both sisters must look beyond their own perspectives of what has happened in their pasts in order to mature, understand, and maybe grow to forgive each other and themselves.

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CAROLINE

Caroline watched her roommate extinguish the last cigarette from her pack in the makeshift aluminum foil ashtray. Faye had a slight scowl on her face. Her dull gray eyes rested on a point in the darkness somewhere beyond their third floor balcony. Although she hadn't said anything to indicate that her mood had changed, Caroline found her easy to read after six years of friendship. Caroline's mood was on the decline too. She opened another girly drink—Smirnoff Ice, raspberry—and coughed slightly in an attempt to expel the chill from her lungs.

“You seemed interested,” said Faye.

Caroline spluttered. “What, because I laughed at him? You think that every man that makes me laugh is someone I'd go to bed with.”

Faye chuckled. “But isn't that true?”

“You're the one with all those notches in your belt, not me.” Caroline hated when Faye got like this, and she did practically every other weekend. Faye's frantic fingertips pressed the buttons on her phone. Caroline glared. She felt the familiar annoyance induced ache spread across her lower back. It was a tiresome pain, a weighty pain that slowly drained her enthusiasm, dumbed down her thought process. A scene flashed in her mind: Faye stands up, Caroline eases quietly behind her, lifts her up slightly—and before Faye can recover from her shock, Caroline throws her off of the third-floor balcony. Caroline didn't put too much thought into what would happen after Faye hit the ground. Probably just a few broken bones, anyway. They had plenty of bushes down there to break the fall.

This active and increasingly morbid imagination had begun in childhood. She couldn't help it, even when it was worse, even when it horrified her. Usually her guilt prodded her to

meditate on a more agreeable topic, but tonight it wasn't possible. All of her long friendships fit this pattern; eventually the camaraderie shifted to a sibling-like rivalry, sometimes even repulsion.

Anyway, if either of them were a slut, it certainly wasn't her. There had only been one man that Caroline had ever slept with and well, she didn't want to think about that tonight. There was no reason to brush off Ryan, just because Faye didn't care for him. Faye was too damn judgmental to like anyone anyway.

"I don't want a husband to order me around, you know that." Faye tossed her hair over one shoulder.

"Well you don't need to stop me from finding one."

Caroline watched Faye open a second pack of cigarettes. She struck a match, lit it, and then pulled off a piece of the empty pack and lit that too, watching the flame grow tall and weed-like before it dropped to the cement patio floor. It would make another burn mark, but the floor was so stained when they moved in that Caroline doubted the landlord would even notice.

"Sorry, Faye, I didn't even like Ryan that way." Caroline licked her lips. "He was nice that was all, and he knew what he was talking about." She eyed her roommate, waited for a reaction that she knew one simple line from her mouth wouldn't prompt. Her nails dug into her palms a little, just enough to see the light crescent indents. Always the first to cave in a fight, Caroline apologized even when she was certain she should be apologized to. She thought this even as her mouth opened, each word a domino pushing out the next pointless excuse, "I didn't like him but I could've. I wish I did, even." Caroline stared intently at Faye, tried to force her to acknowledge her opinion through intense eye contact. Faye looked the other way, towards the

men playing basketball on the court to the left of their building.

“It’s not often you find someone with kind eyes and strong arms like Ryan.” Caroline sighed, let her mouth twitch, “Well, who can still follow a conversation.”

“I could introduce you to a hundred. Ryan’s a pretentious ass. Acting all street smart.” Faye grabbed a beer out of the box, cracked the tab open too hard and it broke off. “Trying to tell me about drugs like he didn’t have on khaki pants. Like anyone who knows anything would have on khaki pants.” She snorted. “I know exactly what you do and don’t mix with cocaine to make what.”

Even though smoke made her sick, Caroline wished she had a cigarette too. Just to have something to occupy herself with. She had a couple more drinks left but was sick of running to the bathroom all the damn time. She reached up, massaged her temples. Faye looked so smug. It made her throat clench. “You both just wanted to look cool. He knew a lot about other things. And you’re the one that asked him in for a drink.”

Faye zipped her leather jacket. “Well, he was cute and he smoked. Besides, all our nights are boring and the same. Why don’t you ever invite anyone over here?”

Caroline laughed. “You act like you do all the time. I can’t seem to shake that lesson about not talking to strangers, I guess. Why do you think I waited two years before I invited you over the first time?”

“Shame, anyone who’s interesting is a stranger. You keep talking to people you already know, you get bored.”

Some truth to that at least.

They sat, silent while the wind rattled through the shingles and down the drain pipes. It

sounded like rain a little. Caroline wished that she had a pair of binoculars to look at the constellations even though they'd probably be washed out so close to the city. She wanted to find the constellation Scorpius because it was her sign and she'd always felt a deep connection to it. She didn't believe in any of that anymore but she had once and somehow couldn't shake her affection for it. Things were funny with her that way. She never read the Bible until she stopped believing in God.

“You have to stop being so afraid of everything, Caroline.”

Faye was always telling her what she “had” to do.

Caroline opened the sliding glass door to the living room and pretended to shuffle around in the kitchen. She was a bit hungry but really she just didn't want to look at Faye's face anymore, those falsely sympathetic eyes, the arched together brows. She was tired of her misplaced pity. The spiel Faye was about to plunge into rang in her ears before her roommate got out the first syllable.

“I feel sorry for you,” Faye half-shouted from behind the screen door. “You're too afraid to do anything you want to do, too cautious.”

She had heard it plenty of times before. Caroline picked some silverware out from the dishwasher and threw it into the drawer, she threw a pan into a cupboard, let the metal clang against metal, loudly.

Faye opened the screen a crack. “One day you'll be old and you'll look back over your life and be filled with regrets.”

“Yes, yes. I've heard it before. Clearly your suggestions haven't motivated me to make any changes in my life so why keep at it?” She looked straight at Faye but heard her voice quiet

without meaning it to. “To make me miserable?”

She'd just started to pour rice into a pot but now she carefully siphoned it back into the package, turning her face as Faye followed her into the kitchen. Proud Faye. Caroline almost laughed. In her element of superiority.

“I don't say it to try to get you to change, I already know what's going to happen.” Faye leaned against the counter. “There's no helping it.”

Caroline struggled to hold her tongue. And here, the exaggerated doe eyes as Faye says, “I just feel sorry for you. That's all.” Her sharp features softening.

Caroline felt her face get warm, her eyes well up but she took a breath and pushed the emotion down. She looked at Faye and said for the first time what she thought more than she cared to admit. Just two words. “Fuck you.”

This was the first true confrontation Caroline had ever had with Faye. She had a fear of angering her roommate that she hoped was irrational. But Caroline had seen her be malicious before. She had a temper, and sometimes played her anger out like a game for little reason. Usually, Caroline would rather let the tension in her head build up until she had to go out to her car in the middle of the night and drive with the windows up, just screaming.

But now, she was left with Faye, defenses engaged as if it were she, Caroline, who was in the wrong. As if *she* had been the one to cut down a friend without a thought, just for sport.

Faye gave her a look like she was nuts. She flipped her hair. “I don't understand why you're so upset about this.”

“I'm just done with hearing the same shit from you all the time.”

“Why? Is there anything *else* I say that bothers you?”

“Not that I can think of right now, but when you do, I’ll let you know.”

Caroline sat on the couch. She didn’t feel like eating anymore. Faye started emptying frozen home fries into a skillet.

As she sat, her thoughts sizzled like the oil in the pan. Their stove was awful, in just a few minutes half the room was hazy with smoke. Caroline searched for something to say but nothing came and the silliness of it made her laugh.

Faye gave her a stony sideways glance. “What’s so fucking hilarious?”

“Nothing,” said Caroline.

Faye’s movements had that stiff, jerky quality that people adopt when they’re irritated but pretending not to be. Caroline was sure that if she looked in the mirror, her neck too would seem stiff with tension, her green eyes hard.

Even in her agitated state she made an effort not to slam the door. “Don’t lock me out,” she said. She couldn’t stay in the apartment anymore. Caroline labeled herself as passive aggressive, but Faye often said that she was “just passive” and it was probably true.

She walked down the staircase, past the flickering hallway lights and the broken fire alarm that emitted a faint and steady buzz. The parking lot was full; a party raged in the building next door. She walked toward the entrance of the complex and saw a couple having sex through the first floor window of the building on the right. The blinds were closed but their lights were on and she could see all she needed to see. Caroline considered leaving a note on their door but didn’t. She wondered about her own windows and decided to look for curtains on eBay when she got home.

She walked around the corner onto the sidewalk of the typically busy street. At three in

the morning there weren't many cars, but there was still plenty of foot traffic. The darkness made everyone look shady. They all had their heads down, their oversized hoods up. Her mother would be horrified. Most of them, she thought, were fellow insomniacs, just wanting to be alone, to occupy some time, not bothering to change out of their bed clothes. This wasn't the best part of town, though it could have been worse. A couple of car break-ins, drug deals, that sort of thing. There'd been a house robbery before she moved in but so far she hadn't witnessed anything too dangerous first hand.

The street lights and bright store signs cast a slight haze across the sky that made the stars seem dull and even farther than the 4.2 light years it would take to reach Proxima Centauri. Astronomy had been one of her favorite subjects even though she never did above average on a test and had barely taken notice of the night sky before then. She still didn't look up that often, just when she was alone with her thoughts on restless nights like this. In the day to day she didn't care too much, but she loved stars and nature when they were animated by the poetry of some artiste more eloquent than herself. People, and what they'd created, were much more fascinating. She was easily struck by the presence and character of a dilapidated building or a billowing smokestack. When she had lived in a suburb she'd dreamed of moving to a city, and now that she lived in Orlando she dreamed of moving to a bigger one.

A slight shiver ran through Caroline and she wished she'd thought of bringing her own hoodie. She was in grey sweatpants and a blue tank top with no makeup. There was a time when she never would have gone out in public like that, even if it was three AM. She thought that was silly now, but then, she hadn't been too attractive in her teens. It had taken time to realize that she had one of those faces you just had to grow into. She sat on a bus stop bench and tried to be

angry at Faye again. It was still there but it had cooled, as it always did. She wasn't naturally hot-tempered. She got over things too quickly, a doormat, her friends said. It didn't matter which person was at fault, she always found a way to direct the anger inward instead.

Caroline stood up from the bench. Faye could make her want to strangle something but she was ultimately a true friend when you got right down to it. Maybe she should try to fight against Faye sometimes, but she feared causing a rift with one of the few who knew her best. God knows Faye had her faults, but she had been there when she needed to go to the hospital, when she had fights with her parents, after the breakup up with her first love. All of that had been genuine, no hint of the maple-syrup tone she'd used earlier that night, between sarcastic quips. And afterwards...when there had been no one else she could rely on, those few weeks afterward...Caroline shook her head. That part of her life was closed, she didn't like to remember.

She walked back to her complex. The scene of her accidental voyeurism had gone dark now. There were a few people left out on the porch of the apartment throwing the party, a few television screens that showed through the apartment-issued cheap blinds, but for the most part things were quiet. She sat on the trunk of her Corolla for a while, wanting to sleep and not, thinking and not thinking. It seemed to her she had two inner monologues running at the same time. Right now, though the primary voice had gone silent, faint whispers still brushed her consciousness. She tried to call to one of the stray cats that lived around her building but it was feral. She'd had cats growing up and missed having one to hold when she felt dull and down. One of the cop cars patrolling the area came by so she hopped off the trunk and ambled back up to the third floor. The cop wouldn't have bothered her, she just didn't care for being watched.

The door wasn't locked but all the lights were off. There was still a faint smell of smoke from the steaming frying pan that clung to the edges of the living room. She felt around on the walls, navigating the corners with her hands until she got to her room and fell on her bed without taking out her contact lenses or having another thought.

Days passed in polite tension. This was how they were. At times it felt as though their frustration could manifest into a corporeal being, but they strove to avoid each other. When that was impossible, each regarded the other with a cutting civility. Caroline nodded curtly to Faye as they passed in the living room. She felt a rush of hot irritation sweep through her. Not over yet, then.

Retail therapy was just what she needed. She hoped that she could find a new pair of pumps to go with her little red dress. She tried to ignore the niggle of guilt. It had been months since she quit her last job, she was still living on what was left of the money from her last short stint of employment, she should have saved everything she could. She was almost to her car when she heard a shout.

“Caroline!” She whipped around, surprised, and found Ryan.

“Hey, what's up?” he said.

She shrugged her shoulders. “You know, just hanging around.” She glanced back toward her building. “Going to see Faye?”

“Nah, just walking by.” Ryan kicked at a bottle cap in the road. “I don't think she cared for me much.”

Caroline tried to suppress a chuckle. She gave up on the lie that had been on the tip of her

tongue, knowing already that it was a lost cause. “Yeah. Sorry man. But, hey I think you’re alright.”

“Just alright?”

“Not my type, sorry.”

“Ouch.”

“Well, best to be upfront.” Caroline looked him up and down. “Why do you seem like such a bro today?” She hated his sideways baseball hat.

“A bro? No way,” he said, affronted. “I mean, you’re shitting me, right?” He lit a cigarette.

“Yeah, you’re a little bro-ish. The other night you seemed like more of an arty kid.”

“I’m multi-dimensional.”

“Apparently.”

Ryan threw his head back, ruffled the curls at the nape of his neck.

“Hey, if you’re not doing anything, want to come up to my apartment for a while?” He gave his best Disney prince smile though, Caroline noticed his jaw give a slight twitch. “I have drinks.”

Caroline hesitated. Ryan seemed harmless enough, definitely charming. For a second she felt her heartbeat and stepped back, embarrassed, as though he would be able to hear it. She turned her keys in her hands.

“Or we could go somewhere else. If you’d rather do that.” Ryan’s grin faltered a little. He adjusted the belt on his khakis.

Her wariness must have shown on her face. She was torn and hated how suspicious she

was, how nervous. She needed new friends, and here one was living in the building across from hers.

“Well, I was just on my way to get coffee,” she lied. “I could definitely use some caffeine. If you want to come.”

“Sure.”

She drove them to Bernie’s. Their variety was better than Starbucks. It was crowded today; they were lucky to get a table inside, away from the Florida heat. She had to wait a long time for her red rooibos tea freezer. There was a man on a bench nearby them talking loudly on his cell phone drinking a coffee from McDonalds. What an ass.

“They should kick him out,” Ryan said. He scraped his chair forward.

“Maybe they just haven’t noticed.”

“They notice, they just don’t want a confrontation.”

Caroline took a sip of her drink. “I wouldn’t either.”

They passed a couple of minutes in a silence that turned from comfortable to slightly awkward. She was always bad at these situations, uncomfortable making conversation with new people.

“You and Faye seemed kind of strained when I left. I really didn’t mean to start a fight or anything.”

Caroline was slightly taken aback by his observation. “No big deal, just the usual roomie frustration.” She was slightly embarrassed that they had displayed hostility in front of a stranger. “Although, I don’t know why you were going on about all that drug crap. I could tell both of you had never tried anything harder than weed.”

“You don’t know me,” he joked.

Caroline rolled her eyes but couldn’t help smiling.

“You’re right, you’re right,” he said. “I just wanted to push her buttons a bit.”

“Shit. You *did* like her, didn’t you?”

He drummed his fingers on the table. “Yeah, but it’s not a big deal. Other fish and all that.”

Caroline considered that for a minute. She decided that she’d have to keep Ryan around. If for nothing else, than to piss Faye off. “Faye’s abrasive, that’s all. And very independent. She judges quickly but that doesn’t mean she can’t change her mind, it just takes...work.”

“You make her sound like a catch.”

“No really, I shouldn’t—we have our problems. We’re completely different, fundamentally but she really is a good friend.” An image flicked through her mind of Faye comforting her a little over three years ago, when things were at their worst. “She’s someone you can depend on.”

She was getting close to topics too heavy for a new friendship. She went to the bathroom. Fixed a smudge in her eye shadow, wet down the part of her hair. When she got back Ryan was on his cell. His laughter resounded through the coffee shop; his head was bent slightly to one side, showcasing his strong neck. Faye really was missing out—those lightly muscled arms and feathery brown hair. He seemed like an extrovert too, Caroline could see herself becoming jealous of that.

Ryan snapped his phone shut. His grin could almost have been called goofy if it weren’t for his movie-star teeth.

“One of my friends just moved out to Chicago,” he said.

“What’s he doing out there?”

“Trying to make it in comedy. Second City. Dropped out of college to do it too, I’m happy for him. He was smart but he didn’t enjoy studying.”

“I wish I could do something like that,” Caroline said. She stirred the remains of slush in her cup, tried not to get too morose, tried to keep her lips tight and her eyes away from Ryan’s face.

“Why don’t you?”

“Well.” She paused. She didn’t want to say too much but she couldn’t help herself, once she got to talking. “Faye always wants me to do something reckless like that but…” She felt a flood of embarrassment fill her. This is the kind of thing she had been trying to avoid. “I wanted to be an actress once…but I don’t have that much money of my own. I know I have to finish school. Get a job. I can’t just run off to New York or L.A.”

“You’re gonna give it a shot once you graduate though, right?”

Caroline sighed, miserable. “I hope so.”

“Hey. Not everyone’s crazy like Joey is, don’t sweat it.” Ryan took a sip of his latte and cast a quick glance toward the man with the McDonald’s coffee. “It’s alright to play it safe just, as long as you don’t forget what you want and have some fun while you wait, you know?” He rapped his knuckles on the table. Flicked her arm “Hell, I’m not doing anything like that either.”

Caroline smiled at him and this time she did change the topic to something light-hearted. She looked him straight in the eyes.

When Caroline got home the light was on in Faye's bedroom and the door was open just a crack. She went out of her way to make a bit of a ruckus. She jangled her keys and threw her shoes across the floor, got out her phone and turned up the ringtone. She wanted to make sure Faye would have the opportunity to shut her out again, if she wanted to. Caroline turned on the TV and watched a group of orange-tanned teenagers drink and grind against each other in some dingy neon-lit club for about five minutes, then shut it off.

"Faye?" she called out.

"Sup?"

Some of the tension released from Caroline's chest. Usually when Faye left the door open it meant she was in an approachable mood, but it wasn't ever a sure thing. From her tone, Caroline could tell that she'd caught her volatile friend at a good time.

"What are you doing this weekend?"

"You can open the door."

Caroline pushed on the loose doorknob and leaned against the frame. Faye was lounged on her comforter with her lace up boots still on. A laptop was perched on her stomach and it took her several seconds to look up from the screen.

"I'm not doing anything. Where have you been all day?"

For a second Caroline had the impulse to tell a lie although she didn't have a rational reason. It occurred to her that maybe she was once again seeking Faye's approval.

"I ran into Ryan and we got some coffee," she spit out.

Faye raised an eyebrow. "Ryan. Got coffee, eh?"

Caroline crossed her arms. "You just ran into him the other night. He lives in the building

across from ours. It's not that hard to believe."

"Okay, I believe you, no need to get defensive."

"I'm not defensive."

"Never." Faye smirked and failed to stifle a laugh.

For a second Caroline started to get mad but then she realized that Faye really was teasing and soon she was laughing too. It felt good to get along, for the tension in the air to fade away after such a strained couple of days. Caroline walked into the living room and took a seat on their frayed brown and tan couch with the ugly asymmetrical patterns. Faye had added a new Halloween decoration to the wall that she'd gotten cheap in the off-season. The large pumpkin clashed horribly with the rest of the décor but they both thought the tackiness was nearly charming.

"Where will we be going this weekend anyway?" Faye said, following her out.

"I was thinking we would figure it out along the way this time."

"There is no way that you will be able to do that without freaking out about getting lost."

"Well, I'm taking my GPS. You can help me pick something from the nearby landmarks after we've driven far enough," said Caroline.

Faye snorted. "Your sense of adventure still needs a little work, but it's an improvement."

A twinge of annoyance struck her again. She was about to let it go, but changed her mind. She turned back to Faye, still smiling and said, "Well, that's fine then. If my plans aren't interesting enough for you I'll just ask Ryan... I could be wrong but I don't think he'd turn down my company."

Faye stared back for a second, eyebrows slightly raised and started to laugh.

Caroline exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd held in.

“I knew something was going on! I can't believe you'd actually hide something from me.”

Caroline smirked. “So, are you coming or not?”

LINGER ON

Stay a little while and let the dew drops
collect on your clothes.
Listen to the ghost of a dog's yowl
from behind the mossy oaks, the periodic slap
of a fish tail break through the murky surface
of the creek.

The night is long, dear
and with each hour more private.

Your car is safe on the dirt path beyond
the main road, I promise.
The sky is so close from the clearing, the stars
so bright.

Let my hand linger on your thigh,
let me breathe with you.
Quiet your lips this once and let your tongue lilt
into mine, let us sway and drift
across the green field and down the hill.
Let us be song.

Lift the wet leaves and sticky burs
from my curls, the back of my neck,
my sharp shoulder blades,
slowly.

Hear me hum and gasp in your ear
your name over a symphony of cicadas.

After the sun rises I will watch you
button your shirt, I will straighten the collar.
You can turn back to your bright world then,
with all of its promise,
and its noise.

IN THE CARDS

One by one Caroline's grandmother flipped the cards onto the table until all nine of them formed a circle around the self, the Queen of Hearts. Caroline's breathing became shallow. It didn't seem to matter how many times she repeated that thought, *I do not believe, not anymore*. Her body hummed with a foreign energy, an undercurrent of wonder or foreboding that settled at the bottom of her ribcage, that weighed down the air and kept her protests from coming out.

Her grandmother always spent several minutes in contemplation before she made her reveal. It was a shame that she refused to go into business as a psychic, she had the dramatics down to a T. Her long, brittle nails with their thin layer of clear polish would click gently on the cards that held the most intrigue, she would rap one fist on the table and a muttered German word would slip from between her nearly clenched lips.

"Pick three more."

Caroline closed her eyes and ran her fingers over the deck spread across the glass table. *Just pick them, it makes no difference*, but still she moved her right hand back and forth at least twice until she felt the pull like static electricity jolt beneath her index finger. Caroline tried to recall what some of the cards meant. As usual, she scanned for the nine and seven of clubs. Separate, they were harmless-- together they predicted death. Any fortune telling book published today would explain the meaning of the cards was symbolic, a death of the old self, a rebirth. The method passed down from her great grandmother, she'd been assured, was much more literal than that.

“Kreuz verdruss,” her grandma murmured. One of the worst cards, Ten of Clubs. Her voice, usually boisterous and upbeat was a low rumble, her tone contributed to the thickness of her Bavarian accent. “But it is behind you.”

Caroline relaxed.

Her grandmother raised her gaze from the cards and peered above her glasses, “Do you know what it means?”

Caroline nodded and sucked in a breath. This part of the reading was true. She’d been having a bad month. Caroline had felt worried and stressed, lacking motivation. She found herself hoping that the cards would lead her to a solution even as logic reminded her that this was all a coincidence, that the readings were vague so that everyone could find something in them to be true.

“A boy has entered your life.” She pointed to the Jack of Clubs. “One with dark hair.”

Immediately Caroline thought of Ryan, her newest friend, with his deep auburn curls. Her grandmother cast her a shrewd glance. Caroline’s mouth twitched. Grandma always craved gossip.

Six of diamonds. “He will be a help to you.”

“Anything else?” Caroline said.

“Yes.” She flipped over the three new cards. “Three sevens. A change.”

“That’s bullshit,” said Faye.

Caroline hung back and leaned against the trunk of a large oak tree, fallen in the last storm that had swept past the Florida coastline and into the heart of busy Orlando. A prime

example of nature's wonder, branches still sprouted from its moss-covered bark even with half of its roots pulled up from the ground. The ominous stare Faye was directing at Leif was great entertainment to the group but completely lost on him. He had a beer in one hand and a blunt in the other, his eyes were glazed. With his long black hair the texture of the torn halves of a cotton ball and drawling spaced out voice he seemed like a character straight out of *Dazed and Confused*. Three hours into the bonfire and Caroline was still waiting for a sign of some personality trait that didn't fit into a bad movie stereotype.

"I'm telling you it's true!" Leif said. "Go there. See for yourself. There's this one hill, a couple of feet after it there's a stop sign." He made a wide gesture with his hands and walked slowly around their circle. "When you get there put your car in neutral and dude, I'm telling you, you'll start rolling *backwards* up the hill."

Faye crossed her arms. "Okay. For the sake of the argument let's pretend that the car does roll back up the hill. What do you expect me to believe, that there are ghosts pushing it?"

From the log to her right Ryan gave Caroline a sly grin. Caroline and Faye had met Ryan by chance just a couple of months ago, but she already felt as though they shared a rare connection. While Faye and Ryan could get along well enough in social situations, they each had very strong opinions and it led to a tendency to butt heads. From the expression on his face, Caroline would bet that at least part of the reason Ryan invited Leif at the last minute was to see Faye's reaction to his hippy-grunge style and new age mentality. Faye was a stringent atheist. She didn't believe in God, ghosts, good luck or bad luck and had a tendency to make snap-judgments on the intelligence of others based on their beliefs. Leif had a medicine pouch around

his neck and he wasn't wearing any shoes. The rest of them had brought matches, food, drinks and a shovel to make the fire pit. Leif had brought a hookah.

"I don't know how it happens. But there is something out there in the universe man." He took a hit from the hookah. "I don't know what it is but there sure is something."

Caroline snapped the tab off a soda and gave Faye a warning glance. "What did you say this place was again?"

"Cassadaga. It's like, a town of psychics."

"Yeah, it's pretty awesome," Ryan said. He threw a couple of crisp brown palm fronds into the flames. They popped and curled as the fire belched a cloud of dark grey smoke. "It's a spiritualist camp. There's a church service on Sundays, if you show up one of the psychics might give you a message. Or you can sign up for a reading in the bookshop at any time. It's an experience."

"Jesus Christ, not you too," said Faye.

"Hey, I think I heard something rustling back there." Ryan did a quick scan with his flashlight. "Pick up a drum Leif?"

"You got it man."

Caroline flicked a marshmallow into her mouth and hummed softly to Leif's steady beat. Ryan distracted Faye from her simmering temper by pouring the remainder of the box of wine into her mouth. They all laughed as a good portion of it missed and dribbled down her chin and onto the front of her shirt. It felt right to be here, nestled in the center of the battlefield of the oaks and palms, imagining what stretched beyond the cloudless black sky. Even though these woods were in the middle of Orlando she swore she'd never seen stars this bright.

The stars made her remember her father. As a kid, he'd told her that the stars were God's many eyes watching over everyone while they slept. She couldn't find any fault in believing in something like that. It was organized religion that disillusioned Caroline. She'd been disgusted when her father had changed his views to suit those of Sue, her conservative stepmother. Caroline just couldn't follow a religion that would damn her family a dozen times over for all of the mysticism in their family line. She found the constellation Aquarius. The water bearer, her father's sun sign. She sighed. He'd died three years ago, but she hadn't quite dealt with it just yet. Their relationship had been complicated. Every relationship Caroline had, seemed to get complicated.

"I want to go," Caroline said. Several people seemed confused. She flushed. "To Cassadaga." She glanced at Faye; there was pure disdain on her face from the downward curve of her lips to the arch of her thin black eyebrows.

Caroline tapped her fingers on her jeans and glanced over at her.

"I thought you didn't believe in that crap anymore, Caroline."

"I don't. I just...I'd really like to see it, that's all."

Faye's gray-blue eyes focused firmly on Caroline. "You're still an atheist, right?"

Caroline was hit by a wave of nerves because for the first time she realized that she couldn't answer that question so confidently these days.

"Yes," she said. "I think so."

"You *think*."

Caroline looked to Ryan for help.

“The way I look at it is, it doesn’t really matter whether you believe in that stuff or not.” He walked closer to the fire and cracked his lightly muscled arms behind his back. “It’s like, if you get something out of what they say in a reading, does it matter if they can actually see your future? It’s more like, a really alternative counseling session. One with lots of candles. And some of them draw your auras, so then you even get an art lesson.”

Faye stared at Ryan for a second and then burst out with her jackal’s laugh. “That’s stupid.”

Ryan pouted. “You’re stupid.” He moved to sit next to Caroline and nudged her with his elbow.

Caroline smiled, relieved that she wouldn’t have to explain anymore and failed to stifle a yawn that quickly passed to Faye and Leif. She wasn’t about to explain her feelings on faith to an abrasive Faye when she was just re-thinking them herself. She felt like some kind of a poser. She’d caused a big stir in the family when she admitted to being an atheist, loaded with ammunition from all the books by Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens she could find. Now here she was changing her mind again, feeling that it took as much faith to be an atheist as it did to be anything else.

Ryan lit a cigarette by sticking it into the edge of a flame and Faye, delighted, followed suit. “It’s getting late,” he said. “Let’s wait for the fire to die down and then head out.”

Leif cast aside his drum. “You guys go ahead. My brother and some friends wanna come down. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure this baby’s squelched by sunrise.”

“Alright then Leif, thanks for hanging out.”

“Anytime man, anytime.”

Getting back out of the woods wasn't easy for a girl in heeled boots. They had seemed practical enough to Caroline when she'd tested them for hours on the pavement but they were no match for the gnarled tree roots, lush patches of weeds and tangled underbrush. She stumbled several times but Ryan always seemed to notice and caught her just before she landed with her nose in the mud. Faye wasn't wearing the most practical shoes either but her natural grace carried her through without much incident. As they reached the edge of the woods Caroline slammed into Ryan's back.

"What is it?"

"Just look," breathed Faye.

A thick fog hovered over the series of man-made lakes that divided the woods from the back of a quaint suburbia. It was as if the clouds had descended, the fish-bowl sky was still like diamonds and slate above them, faint smoky patches of yellow porch lights shimmered softly in the distance and even the grass had a soft glimmer from the morning dew.

They walked the rest of the way in silence until the houses came into focus and one of the pinprick twinkles became the headlights of a police car. As they cautiously crossed into the nearest backyard they heard the manic thump of the bass-heavy music still leaking from the door of the busted house party and joined the other glassy-eyed twenty something's wandering the street. Ryan wiped down the windows of his Buick and in fifteen minutes they were home, glad for the convenience of living in the same student housing complex.

"Want to come up to my place for a bit?" Ryan said as he parked the car. "I'm still kinda revved up."

Faye shook her head. “No way I’m beat.” She stretched her arms out, faked a yawn and, just as Ryan checked that his car’s back door was locked, winked at Caroline and sauntered toward their building.

“Got any drinks?” asked Caroline.

“Fridge is fully stocked.” Ryan elbowed her gently, “I wouldn’t be able to sleep yet either.”

Caroline followed Ryan up the familiar three stories to his apartment. They’d been hanging together a lot more over the last few weeks. In the warm still air she became very aware of the strong scent of burnt wood and barbecue that clung to her and Ryan’s dirt streaked clothing. Caroline poured herself a glass of cranberry juice, mixed it with vodka, and joined Ryan on his yard-sale porch chairs.

“You want a smoke?” he said.

“I don’t smoke. Just Faye.”

“Sorry, I knew that. You look like you should smoke.”

“And that means...what?”

“Damned if I know.”

Ryan took a gulp of his High Life and looked out past the balcony. Caroline could tell he had something on his mind from the quick side glances and the way he tapped his fingers on the bottom of the can. She fidgeted with a bracelet on her left wrist, spinning it back and forth and then leaned her head against the back of the chair.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“How come you seem so interested in Cassadaga, when you don’t really believe in anything.”

“Look at you thinking inside the box,” she said and laughed. “And after what you said to Faye.”

“I got the feeling that you needed the distraction.”

Caroline hesitated and recalled her grandmother’s card reading from a few weeks ago. She studied Ryan’s face. His hazel eyes seemed earnest. He was one of the most immature men she knew most of the time, but he could transition into deep territory much more easily than many she’d gotten to know. Her stomach gave a disconcerting flip. Ten of clubs, six of diamonds.

“I’ve been angst-ridden about faith since the sixth grade for some reason. Weird kid I guess.”

“Weird adult too,” Ryan said.

Caroline gave him a light slap on his shoulder. In response he squeezed her arm with his calloused hand. His face became more focused. Caroline shivered.

“Anyway,” she said. “We’re Roman Catholic but, that was never something I got into. My mom’s side’s alright but my dad’s...” She shook her head. “I never had any interest in church or my religious classes. In fact, I was angry. I didn’t like all their rules. I didn’t believe a quarter of what they said were facts from the Bible. Even now it makes me angry, teaching little kids about this judgmental God who loves everyone but would send half of them to hell. Who’re they kidding?”

Ryan chuckled. “Southern Baptist. My parents were pretty tough, I had to go to church all the time but I never connected with it, never agreed. Trust me I know what you mean.”

“You must.” She took a sip of her drink and cleared her throat. “I went through a lot of religious phases that ended up getting me nowhere. It’s the occult stuff that keeps tripping me up. I’ve read all the books. I’ve been charading as this logical atheist for more than a year now but the truth is....” Caroline clenched and unclenched her fists. She didn’t know why it was so difficult to get the words out right. There was so much to say that she didn’t know how to give an overview, to sum it up for Ryan with just the important parts. Ryan was so patient, but part of her wished that he would lighten the mood and call her out on how dramatic she was being.

“I grew up listening to my grandmother tell me about ghosts. She’s from Germany and she has all of these crazy, passed down stories.” A laugh burst from her throat. “I know it’s not rational, not possible, but even if I could say that anyone else was pulling a hoax, what my grandmother says just always seems so....right.”

Ryan was staring at her but his lips were shut tight, considering.

She shifted in her seat and the cheap metal screeched. “You think I’m mental, don’t you?”

“No way, I’m just, you know, surprised.” He stared intently at her. “I feel like, I didn’t know any of this shit about you before.”

He did look intrigued, even with his eyes shaded by the hair that he shook into his face.

“Look, you’ve got this whole cool history and heritage and, why throw it away just because you think everything has to make sense. If something feels right to you, does logic really matter all that much?”

“Faye would say yes.”

“Fuck what Faye would say. Caroline, what do you say?”

She got up and leaned over the balcony railing, voice stuck somewhere behind her tonsils. Startled, she felt Ryan’s hand on her shoulder and she jerked back.

“I didn’t expect you to get so passionate about this.”

“Yeah, well.” Ryan reached one hand up to scratch at the hair behind his ears. “I guess it’s just something that happens when you’re concerned.”

After a beat, Caroline laughed. It dissolved into a laughing fit, something she was prone to when she’d spent too many hours awake. The alcohol didn’t hurt. “You’re fucking hilarious.”

“No I’m serious.”

Caroline tucked a few strands of hair behind her left ear, one nervous habit followed by another, the slow grind of her teeth. She’d tried to repress her attraction to Ryan for a while and now, on this night of self-revelation here was something she couldn’t deny again, as much as she wanted to.

She swallowed. “You told me you liked Faye the day after we met. That was just a few weeks ago.”

“A month.”

“Not a month. A few weeks.”

He rolled his eyes. “I *don’t* like Faye anymore.”

Caroline crossed her arms. “Great, so that makes you fickle.”

“I thought I had a type and I thought she was it. I didn’t know either of you that well, now I do. You’re my type, not Faye.”

Ryan pulled on a couple of the curls at the nape of his neck just above the collar of his secondhand brown leather jacket. Caroline's thoughts swam in so many different directions that she had trouble keeping track except to wonder if Ryan was also trapped in an overlapping cacophony of conflicting inner monologues.

"I think—ugh," Caroline pushed a breath through her teeth. "You're just too good of a friend to lose over something like this."

"What makes you think you're gonna lose me. I'll be right here."

"If things don't work out then—" Caroline's face heated. She figured he must think that she's really silly by now, she supposed she was.

"This isn't middle school. We'll work it out." Ryan scuffed the ground with his shoe. One hand fidgeted with the hem of his shirt. "I know that's what they always say Caroline, but I mean it. You just need faith that we'll figure something out."

"But that's what we were just talking about before." Caroline gave him a wry half smile. "I'm not sure whether or not I do have faith."

Ryan opened his mouth and then closed it again. He picked up his empty High Life and crushed the can between his palms.

"Look I don't know, I'm just—" She had started to turn away but Ryan grabbed her by the arm. She stared at him for a half a beat and she wasn't sure who leaned in first but they kissed. She started to step back from him but Ryan grasped her elbow and pulled her closer. She rested her face in the crook of his neck. He started to say something, as he wove the fingers of his right hand through the back layer of her hair but then she really did push him away. She felt too warm all over, like she hadn't since three years ago when *it* had happened and she'd given up

on all this. Ryan licked his lips that tasted like smoke. Quickly she turned her back on him, opened the sliding glass door and stepped into the living room.

Somehow even though they'd been in the open air she hadn't registered the gray morning light until she saw the shadows cast on Ryan's long white walls. Ryan followed. Caroline could feel his presence a foot away from her back even before she turned around. His brow was knitted. "Caroline..."

She almost wanted him to move toward her again, but he didn't. "I'm not saying anything just yet." She fidgeted with her shirt. "Look, I'll see you later."

Alone in her bed Caroline thought about Ryan. Part of her was glad that this had happened after such a long night. Normally she would have been emotional, now she was far too tired to commit to a single train of thought. He liked her, she liked him, it was all too simple. She reached up an arm and pulled on the chain to the ceiling fan. The light wafting breeze against her face was a relief to the heat that bubbled up just thinking about the last hour or so. The thing that she was most afraid of. Caroline replayed the image of her grandmother's wrinkled hands placing those last three cards face up on the table. Change.

Caroline slowed the Corolla so she could gaze through the window at a cute old two story house. Quaint, painted a pale blue with a cheery white porch and wicker furniture, it didn't look the least bit foreboding in the bright mid-day sunlight. Two palm trees waved cheerily in the breeze and flowering bushes in tropical pinks and reds lined the perimeter. This was the Ann Stevens House, one of the two hotels that served the area. Situated near the entrance to the

Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp, a typical night's stay included a séance, tarot reading and a spirit orb tour. Even one of the spookiest places in Florida looked like the definition of paradise. She kept driving, hit Root Street, then took a right through the old cemetery until she saw a dirt road that curved behind a clump of trees.

It had been three days since the bonfire and she still hadn't spoken to Ryan. Every time she'd thought of coming to a decision, a hungry wildfire of doubt would ruin the mental bridges of progress she'd made. Like Ryan had said, it all came down to faith. After she turned the corner the path began to ascend into a mound that could only be called a hill by Florida's standards. On the other side, Caroline took a deep breath. Her car ambled forward until it came to a careful rest at the base of the stop sign. Three sevens, she thought—change, faith. Caroline double checked her rearview mirror and then pressed on the brake. She closed her eyes and shifted her car into neutral.

THE LAST TIME I HEARD YOUR VOICE

In the wooded haven of our backyard,
I heard your voice.

It could have been the wind tunneling through
the rusty drain pipes, or the flitting
yellow songbirds that hopped from branch to branch.
I knew your mother was at the corner store, your father
would be out with the boys playing poker again.

In the cool October twilight we searched,
climbed up the knotted oaks and spread out
our small fingers through the leaves.
We lay on our backs, mulch clinging
to our tangled tresses, our pastel play clothes.
We scanned the clouds. We called to that sly
Man in the Moon. His pock-marked face just
beamed down.

When I'd grown almost old,
I went back to that place.
Our childhood home was for sale again.
The blue shutters were a peeling meringue,
tufts of brown weeds crept
up the mailbox and between the front steps.

I sat cradled in a low lying branch,
shoes dangling off the sides,
coiffed hair against the mossy bark,
limbs slack like a lost doll.

For a beat I felt I could hear your voice.
There was just the light whir and tick
from my analog watch, the rustle and skitter,
snap and crunch of a squirrel through the brush.

RECONCILIATION

Caroline had spent the time since she'd boarded the 98 Silver Meteor in DC picking up novels and putting them down again. It was day two and train two of her travel from Orlando, Florida to Newark, New Jersey. Even after the first couple of hours, the steady vibration beneath her sneakers and the scenery that chugged past hadn't lost its thrill.

The *Thomas the Tank Engine* series had taught her to read. She'd always felt jealous of the boys in her class who'd brag after Christmas about the train sets that would chug merrily around their tree until it had to be taken down. She'd wanted one of those shiny red steam engines more than any of the princess dolls and plush toy cats that her mother had bought. Back then she was too timid to ask for anything, too wary of possible offense.

She had dreamt for a long time that she would travel the country by train.

Her suitcase was old and inelegant. Once she'd tried to decorate it with stickers but they wouldn't hold to the rough, frayed deep green fabric. She'd rescued the thing from her grandmother's attic several years ago. The thin leather strap was barely more effective for pulling it along than carrying it by hand would have been. Caroline had to be careful not to knock the left side where the zipper had gotten stuck, or clothes would push against the layers of packaging tape and spill out onto the ground.

It was a relief to be able to scratch one thing off the bucket list she kept in her head, but it wasn't quite the carefree road trip she'd envisioned. After she was done with her family visit in New Jersey, she doubted that she would have the stamina to continue on to another state. For now though, in the peeling seat, it felt good to get away. To leave Faye behind and even Ryan

and channel her energy into something else. This trip wasn't for her, it was for her sister, Shelley.

She'd started to think about this ever since she'd gone to Cassadaga. She felt like she was making progress, becoming an adult. Ryan had agreed to take it slow but they were steady. She'd gotten a job as a receptionist for a retirement community. Part of her wanted to leave it at that, but every time they went out into the woods and she looked up at the stars, the guilt she'd suppressed for so long rose through her like thick tendrils of smoke.

Caroline slouched and stretched her legs. She gripped the arm rests and pressed the back of her head hard into the cushioned seat. She yawned. *Not much longer now.* The man in the window seat across the aisle was still asleep. Had been for hours. He was somewhere on that fine line between old and middle-aged. Wrinkles had started to set into his face. He had on a floppy fisherman's hat and a thick sweater. His face was pressed against the window, his pillow drooped over one shoe on the floor. They'd talked once or twice. Nothing important and yet he'd made such an impression.

"Visiting anyone?" he'd asked.

"Yes, my sister."

"Nice, nice." He had a gentle smile, grandfatherly. He pulled a stick of gum from his pocket and began to chew. "I had a sister once. Died a long time ago."

"I'm sorry..." Caroline started but her voice cracked and she didn't think he'd heard her. She never knew what the right thing was to say.

The man cleared his throat. His eyes had that distant look even as they bore straight into hers.

“Not many people take trains anymore.”

He'd gotten up then, walked around maybe to use the bathroom or just to pass the time. They exchanged nods, but she didn't speak to him again, even though he seemed lonely.

Caroline checked the time, 2:30. She took out her phone from her pocket and scrolled down the contacts to her sister's name. Her finger hesitated over the call button. She shut the phone off and put it away again.

They were five years apart in age. When they'd last met, Shelley had been 16, in the thick of teenage angst and disillusionment. She didn't know what she'd be like now at 21. They were both terrible at sending photos, and Shelley's mother had banned her from using any type of social network. Caroline's only hint at the changes in her sister's appearance was imagined through the subtle transformation of her voice over time, the increase in vocabulary and decrease in the frequency of her calls. For the first few years they'd kept in touch. Sometimes she'd still scroll through the long list of old text messages. Read through the “omg!” and “lol” and “this boy, he is so cute” texts with a stinging nostalgia.

Their father had died just three years ago. It was at once a shock and entirely expected. She remembered that morning with the startling clarity that only tragedy can impose. Pressing the decline call button on her cell phone during a lecture on the sonnet tradition, stepping outside into the blinding Florida sun to check her messages, the tight rope that seemed to coil around her chest as she stepped onto the sidewalk, her red lips frozen into a silent “no.”

Caroline had sat at the top of her bed for hours, legs crossed, back straightened against the light green walls. She had her phone on speaker on the pillow beside her; mostly the slight static of a weak signal interrupted by a choked “I'm sorry” or “Oh my god.” Every few minutes,

or seconds or maybe even hours she'd say, "Shelley please, let's talk. Just say something," but Shelley would just mutter and she could almost hear her shake her head or say "No...no," quivering and hesitant, in a voice like a dripping faucet. Caroline didn't ask to talk to her stepmother or ask how she was.

The train car jolted. Some of the coke from the open bottle Caroline held in her right hand spit out onto her arms and her paperback copy of *Tender is the Night*. She wiped them both off on her jeans. Out the large, cloudy window the trees were starting to thin. There were dirty cement buildings, spray-painted and billowing with smoke in the distance. She'd always expected her father to die of lung cancer, but it had been a heart attack. Her stomach roiled with nerves and guilt.

She reminded herself that it wasn't her fault that she'd missed the funeral. She didn't have the money. She was in her last year of college. There was barely enough to cover the rent and her groceries. With her father gone, Sue, her stepmother, had lost her only reason to pretend she took an interest in Caroline. She probably didn't have the money either, anyway. Though her father had made a hefty salary, what he hadn't already thrown away on a specially designed two story home and an overpriced hybrid car was squandered in Atlantic City casinos.

The train rumbled to a stop. She crossed the aisle and put a hand on the shoulder of the man who was still asleep with his face pressed into the window. He shuddered awake and smiled gently.

"Thanks," he said. He started to gather his things.

"Not a problem."

"You have a nice visit, with your sister."

Caroline wanted to reply, but couldn't find the words so she just nodded and dragged her suitcase down to the front of the train and onto the platform. She realized she had never even asked his name.

Caroline put down her bags in the corner of the beige room. The bedspread was a mess of geometric patterns in a dull gray-blue. The curtains on the window that directly faced a bedroom in the neighboring building only a few feet away seemed too sheer. It wasn't one of the worst or best hotels. She pulled down the covers and inspected the mattress for bed bugs but didn't see anything. You could find pests in even the nicest hotels these days.

She fell back into the pillows and told herself that she wasn't stalling, that she didn't know what time Shelley's classes let out. She ordered room service that she couldn't really afford. Not that she could really afford most of this trip, when she got to thinking of it. She reasoned that no one could afford much of anything anymore, and that's why they all had plastic. Until now, Caroline had never run up much of a bill, so at least there was that to be grateful for.

After she ate and took her time unpacking her toiletries she picked up her rental car and started the drive through the winding hilly back roads lined with pine. She flipped through the unfamiliar stations on the radio. She worried and remembered and just thought.

To be at the house again was surreal. Her dad's beaten down work truck was absent from the driveway, but other than that the house looked almost the same. The cream colored paint on the panels peeled a little more than it had before. The lawn seemed a bit less tended to. She walked up the five stone steps to the front door, stepping through the overgrown weeds creeping

from the adjacent flowerbeds. They had been tidy before. She looked up at the wide center window on the third floor, Shelley's room. She knocked on the robins-egg blue door and almost immediately, Sue answered. She was clearly not who she'd been expecting. Her eyes were wide, her hands fluttered to rest on her hips.

Caroline swallowed. Sue had always been an imposing woman but was more so after so long without contact. "Shelley home?"

Sue was oddly silent for a moment and Caroline was concerned. She'd always been a bit off. Obsessed with her religion, she saw everything in black and white. They'd never cared for each other because of that. Sue had a lot of other odd habits too that made her suspect her of more than just devotion to a cause. She wore a cross around her neck, and an oversized t-shirt with a pink apron. The faint lines that she remembered on her face had become hard grooves with time or with grief, Caroline didn't want to know which.

"Shelley isn't home. Shelley doesn't live with me anymore."

Caroline stared, open-mouthed and still as a store dummy.

"Where'd she go?"

Sue sneered. "It must be on your father's side, this trend to desert your family."

She turned around, and for a second Caroline thought she was going to shut the door, but she left it open and walked down the hall to where Caroline knew the kitchen would be and came back with a scrap of paper. She handed it to her.

"Oak Circle Apartments. Number 314."

Caroline nodded and started to turn away.

"Tell her I said--"

She stopped. “Yes?”

“Never mind.” Sue said. Her voice sounded strong but Caroline could see a shadow of doubt flicker across her face.

Caroline thought she heard Sue call out a name, “Mary!” before she shut the door. She didn’t remember that name from the old family friends she’d known. Of course, after all that time, it would be expected, but something about the unfamiliarity struck her more than even the dying grass had.

Caroline parked in front of an apartment complex that was cleaner and more cheery than she had envisioned. The paint job was a bright yellow stucco. There were large-leaved shady northern trees around the perimeter that she couldn’t name. Blue flowering bushes—sky blue, Shelley’s favorite, or at least it used to be—crept up each side of the stairwell. She glanced at the ripped sheet of paper in her hand although she’d memorized the address as it had dropped from Sue’s lips. She climbed the three flights to number 314, trying not to flinch when the occasional daddy long legs sneaked into her peripheral vision. When she knocked it was with authority. Her lips were set in a line, not hard but smooth, unfaltering. An anxious heat rose like steam from her stomach and settled heavy in her chest. She thought she heard something shuffle behind the door but no one came. She knocked again. If Shelley wasn’t home she would stuff her guilt into her travel case. Maybe she’d get back on the train and keep going. She’d leave this day, this year under the seat of an overnight compartment and not come looking for it again, at least not for a long time. She pulled a strand of her straw hair from her tight ponytail, then Shelley opened the door.

It was strange to see her sister's same wide blue-green eyes staring out of that self-assured oval face, all of the familiar baby fat gone, silver hoop earrings dangling against her mid-length deep brown hair. Caroline opened and closed her mouth.

"Might as well come in," Shelley said.

They walked down a narrow hallway with blotchy linoleum floors. The decorations were reminiscent of her own apartment; mismatched dollar store holiday decorations and magazine fold-out posters ripped around the edges speckled the walls. There were more paper lanterns hanging from threads stuck to the ceiling with yellow tack than at a Chinese New Year celebration. All the curtain rods were entwined with Christmas lights. A jack-o-lantern wore a Santa hat in the center of a table so chipped and shabby it could have been handed down by Tiny Tim himself.

Shelley gestured and Caroline sat down. Her sister walked to the stove and set about making coffee in a French press the way their father had taught her to.

"Wondered when you might show up."

Caroline traced a silver nail over a groove in the table.

"I was busy," she said, before her brain had time to catch up.

"Too busy to call or text. To send a damn e-mail."

The light curse took Caroline by surprise. It was startling to be forced to think of Shelley as her age, or to meet her outside of Sue's puritanical sight.

"You're the one who stopped the calls." The words dropped out before she could catch them. "You think you're independent, but you're still so immature."

Her sister opened a cabinet. Her voice dropped. "You've always been a selfish bitch."

Caroline just looked down. Practiced avoiding eye-contact.

“What’re you doing here Caroline?” her sister asked. Finally she turned, stiff jointed, face mechanical. “What’s going on?”

She ignored the question. “You’ve still got on those converse,” she said. A hard metal clink sounded from the kitchen counter.

Shelley rifled through her drawers and cabinets. More to keep her hands busy than to look for anything in particular, Caroline guessed.

“Do you still like sky blue?” She knew her voice sounded too controlled, too casual. “Is your room still that color?”

“Yeah.” Shelley snorted. Rolled her eyes. “I still like sky blue.”

“I thought you would. Those flowers—the ones by the staircase? They made me think of you.”

Shelley set two plain white cups on the table.

“At least something does.”

Caroline took a small sip from her coffee and jolted back as it scalded her tongue, leaving it rough and furry feeling. Shelley giggled, and she was glad even if it was at her expense. Her sister got up and dropped a star-shaped ice cube into both of their cups.

“You know, you’re right.” Caroline drummed her fingers on the table. Her heart raced. “About me being selfish?”

Shelley laughed. “Yeah, I’m pretty familiar with that.”

“I took the train here. You remember how I always liked trains?” Caroline’s lips twitched. She tapped her foot against the leg of her chair.

“There was this man.” She cleared her throat. “We talked a couple of times. I told him about you.”

One raised eyebrow.

“He said he had a sister once but she died. I didn’t say anything. I never even asked him his name.”

Caroline watched her sister’s face but it was plaster. Focused on her right hand, stirring the coffee into a tiny whirlpool.

“I know you’re thinking mom kicked me out.” One of her mouth twitched upward. “But she didn’t, I left.”

Caroline pursed her lips. “I thought you and Sue had a good relationship.”

Shelley poured in milk. Stirred. “We did for the most part. You were right though, about it being too much. About having to be a little bit... off to be that zealous.”

Caroline pictured the crosses on the wall, the country signs- “In God We Trust!” the bumper sticker with the smiling children—“Choose Life!”

“It’d already gotten bad before Dad. Wouldn’t let me go on dates. Took me out of school for fucking anti-abortion march.” Shelley took a sip and fixed Caroline with a hard gaze.

She swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

“Only got worse after dad died, you might be able to imagine.” The spoon clanged against the cup. “Barely let me leave the house except to go to church and to school. I turned 18 and I left.” She leaned back, faux relaxed. “You should be bragging, you told me so.”

Caroline took her second tentative sip of her coffee. Twisted a lock of her hair. “You never mentioned it on the phone.”

Shelley turned her head slightly. Caroline clenched her jaw. Shelley'd always been a tough girl. Caroline hadn't understood how she could be so stoic until she'd started to force herself to. Now she couldn't seem to stop feeling so guarded. She wanted to reach out and hold Shelley's hand but she couldn't even though her sister's eyes were moist.

"Well I didn't want you to be right, did I?"

"I didn't tell you anything because I wanted to be right." Caroline inched to the edge of her chair. She tried to force her face into an earnest expression. She didn't know why she felt so fake. "I told you because I wanted you to know you had someone to go to."

"But I didn't have you to go to. You just said the words like playing the role of a big sister in one of your silly plays."

"I didn't—"

"You're off in Florida with the beach and Disney and palm trees. You never had time for me. I wonder if you even cared that dad died."

The air in Caroline's lungs felt as though it had been vacuumed out. Her face crumpled out of its cool expression of concern.

"Don't you remember that day on the phone?" Her voice cracked and jumped pitch like a thirteen year old boy's. "Those were real tears on the phone. We were crying together for hours. Of course I loved dad. Of course I cared—just—I"

"Didn't have the money. Didn't have the time," she mocked. "You thought—Shelley's got her mom, she can handle herself." Shelley's lips thinned.

"That's not what I thought-." Caroline took out her ponytail. "I wasn't thinking. Grief- it hits me harder than you. I don't know how to deal with it."

Shelley shot up from the table.

“I just mean—” Caroline pulled at her t-shirt. She got up too. She tried to reach out to Shelley but she turned away. “I might be older than you, but you’re stronger. I couldn’t take the funeral. I couldn’t.” Her eyes moistened, her forehead felt clammy. No tears fell. They hadn’t in a long time.

They both paused and listened to the walls creak. There were people having a party next door. Heavy bass made the walls tremble.

Shelley shuddered. “Let’s get some air.”

They walked down the steps, a heavy chain between them. The air outside seemed denser than it had before and she didn’t know if it had gotten more humid or if it was the intensity of the moment between them. They walked down the steps and out of the parking lot. Shelley led them around the edge of the complex down a street lined with quaint cottage-style houses. The sky was clear and still streaked with color but they couldn’t see the sun. It was starting to get dark.

“When I was really young, dad and I would sit on the front steps, lean back on our elbows and count the stars,” Caroline said.

She waited for some acknowledgment but none came. They stared straight ahead to where the sky was slowly shifting from lavender to its deep twilight blue.

“He always traced out Scorpio for me and Leo for you. You were still a baby then.”

Shelley snorted. “Astrology? Dad would never have an interest in that.”

“No,” Caroline sighed. “Not the one you knew. I think he was one of those chameleon people. Adapted to whoever was around him. Maybe when you were younger he hadn’t shaken all of my mom’s influence yet.”

“You act like he was so much better before.”

“No. Not better. We had more in common but in a lot of ways he didn’t know how to be a father until you came into the picture. I was jealous for a while, all the toys you got on your birthdays.”

A muscle in Shelley’s neck twitched. Her piano fingers were clenched tight around her abdomen.

“Did you resent me?” Shelley asked. She was looking straight at Caroline in a way she hadn’t the whole night, hadn’t in a long time. “Is that why you didn’t come to the funeral?”

“Never Shelley.” Caroline coughed lightly, throat thick from the allergies that she had every season. “I’d been trying to say though. What I tried to say...”

“Yeah?” They turned around and walked back toward the complex on the opposite side of the street.

Caroline licked her lips, breathed in deep. “He used to tell me that a sister was the most important thing I’d have in this world. He’d say, never call her your half-sister.”

“He told me that, too.”

They rounded a corner. One of the houses had a decrepit brown fence around the perimeter with a sign that read: Beware of Dog. Caroline ran a hand over it.

“That dog really will bite your head off,” Shelley said.

The leaves rustled above them and crunched under their feet. It was a perfect night with a perfect breeze. The rest of the walk back to the parking lot was silent. Caroline watched a couple stumble through the backyard of one of the houses. The man had a beer bottle in one hand, the

woman wrapped her arms around his neck as they walked. They kissed and red lipstick smeared his chin. They both laughed.

“Seems like a college party.”

“Well, we are near a college,” Shelley said. “My college.”

Caroline started, “I thought you had a year of high school left.”

“I graduated early. My school had a special program, remember?”

Caroline nodded. She didn’t.

In front of building 8, she leaned on her rental car and pretended not to notice when Shelley stole a quick glance at her watch and then looked towards the stairs.

“Do you want to come back with me to my hotel? Order room service, watch bad movies?” She jangled her keys. “We missed out on a lot of sleepovers.”

Shelley smiled and Caroline smiled back. When her sister laughed it was rough and low like the sound of crushed gravel on the drive beneath their feet.

“No Caroline. It’s too late for that now. Besides we’re too old for slumber parties.”

“We’re never too old...you’re still a kid.”

Shelley shook her head. They embraced, but it was stiff.

“I can’t forgive you. Not yet.” Shelley blinked. Caroline thought she heard her snuffle but she wasn’t sure. She started to lift her hand out toward her but brought it back to herself, clasped it around her long key necklace.

“Not all the way.”

Caroline nodded. Forced herself to choke down any comment that would crack the rift between them further open.

“You could come back with me. To Florida. You always wanted to go. I have plenty of room. I could start to make it up to you.”

Shelley rolled her shoulders back, she looked away. “I’ve got my own life now, just like you.”

Caroline inclined her head. She unlocked the car door. “Goodbye,” she said. “Good luck. With school and everything. Maybe visit your mom. She’s mad but I could tell— she still misses you.”

She closed the door and started the ignition. The headlights went on, Shelley waved at her from the steps, and Caroline backed out of the parking space feeling like there was still something else she was meant to say.

At the hotel, she stretched cat-like on the sheets. She picked up her novel again but had even less success with it than on the train. She turned on the TV. She flipped through the channels until she realized she didn’t care and left it on some stand-up comic pretending to be a red-neck. She flipped over and wrapped herself around the large fluffy white pillow. Once, when they’d all gone on a trip to Washington DC, Shelley had snuck one like this out of the hotel. Put it in her backpack. They’d thought dad would be furious, but he’d laughed and laughed. She could hear the magnetic boom of it, before it trailed off into his smoky wheeze.

Caroline hated when she remembered dad. Couldn’t separate the love she had from him from the guilt. She hated that she still felt anger toward him. Maybe she believed Sue and the church when they said that sins were wiped clean after death. She didn’t want to think about Shelley with a life of her own at 18 or about Sue alone in that three story house except for her bibles and her vegetable garden. She didn’t want to think of the nameless man on the train, and

whether he was still traveling alone. A spider crawled across the white popcorn ceiling above the bed the loud hotel clock, counted click-tick, click-tick.

She bent down and pulled her laptop case up from the side of her bed. She closed out of the window that read Amtrak: Train Schedules and checked for the lowest fare on Spirit Airlines. She'd done what she came to do, something she should have done a long time ago. A part of her wanted to stay and try to talk to Shelley some more but she could always feel a true goodbye,. She didn't blame her for needing time but it was too overwhelming to be back in this town now, so alone.

Caroline sent Shelley a text—*I love you*—and waited for a reply. After an hour she booked the earliest available flight for the following morning. She fell asleep just as her phone lit up.

EARLY MORNING CONFESSIONAL

Every Saturday,
she sits in the plush chair with the clawed
feet, she lifts the lever and leans deep back,
she tries to be absorbed.

She turns on TCM to be comforted
by the gray scale. She has seen this one, again,
but she doesn't mind
too much.

Her husband is sleeping in the Queen sized bed
upstairs, his stuttering snores
resounding.

She knows that in a couple of hours
she will shuffle toward the kitchen to stir
hot cocoa powder into her Folgers coffee
just like she knows

her daughter is only pretending
to be asleep, watching science fiction programs
that she wouldn't approve of, making a tent
out of her bed covers.

She is at peace.
At 3 AM she will pull up her creaking body.
She will go to her bedroom without trying
to be quiet and release her gray-brown hair
from its long, limp ponytail.

She will brush it out slowly, counting the strokes.
She'll take off her plush, bargain-store bathrobe
and put on a simple black skirt and top with
her sterling silver crucifix.

There'd been a time when she'd try to wake
her children but they sleep
so soundly, and she is too tired
to fight with them now.

She takes the winding back roads to the old church on her own.

In the morning she will be bright-eyed.
She will have a cup of coffee and fresh
squeezed orange juice at each table setting.

She will load the family into the van
for 9 o'clock mass and they will pretend
she hadn't left the night before, and she
will pretend that they are listening.

SUNDAY SCHOOL

The dim glimmer of the gray tiles
and the whiteboard
their hands linked,
the *hush* “hail mary, hail mary
full of grace” the teachers say
she has a connection with God.
Isn't she lucky?

At the age of fourteen and blessed
with this saint-like silence, this
stillness
you can hardly see her breathing
deep in the meditation of inhale
exhale, the lord is with thee

child,
who walks home from the church alone.

SHELLEY

Shelley closed her eyes and touched her forehead to the cool glass in her hand before taking a sip. The feeling of relief as the water seemed to immediately flood through her—plumping her parched, cracked lips and drawn, dusty skin with the accompanying nauseous swirl in her stomach—had become all too familiar. She set the glass on the table and lowered herself to the brown shag carpet, and lay there splayed. Too many mornings like this, and for what? At least she had been alone. They always said that it was a bad sign if you drank alone but Shelley preferred it that way. There wasn't any fear of saying or crying or screaming too much with only Bell, her gray tabby, as witness. That didn't mean that this morning she woke up without regret. Already she dreaded picking up her cellphone from where it lay shoved beneath her pillow. A bolt of frustration shot through her.

The night before she had been paid a rather unexpected visit by her sister, Caroline. Shelley's stomach still knotted when she remembered how close they once had been despite her sister living with her mother in Florida and Shelley staying with their father in New York. Growing up, Shelley had looked to her sister as a role model: she was teased by their father for hanging on her every word. Caroline was the reason that she began piano lessons, and became involved with the school's theater. Eventually these activities had waned or led to the development of new interests but there was no doubt about the amount of influence her sister had contributed to the shaping of Shelley's life and personality. And then their father had died, suddenly and Shelley was left alone. Caroline had listened to her cry on the phone but had not offered any words of comfort, or advice, or empathy. She had not come to the funeral. At first she'd wanted to forgive her sister, but Shelley's bitterness became too much. Her words on the

phone became shorter, and more curt until one day, she didn't answer the phone at all. After only a few weeks, the calls stopped. She still received a Birthday card, or Christmas present from time to time, most of which she threw away, unopened, and finally Caroline had not tried to win her back.

Last night, after nearly four years of little to no correspondence, Caroline had shown up at her front door, expecting forgiveness. And despite her resolve to stay stalwart in her feelings she had been unable to keep herself from showing vulnerability and worse, in a drunken optimism right before passing out had texted her sister some message of apology, or acceptance. One she didn't deserve.

Shelley pulled herself to her feet, gingerly. She picked up the glass of water one more time and scanned the kitchen counters for her keys. She felt that she could keep food down now and would go for her typical hangover cure, a double hamburger dripping with grease from her favorite fast-food restaurant. She went to her bedroom and retrieved her phone from beneath her pillow. Two new messages it said, both from Caroline. She briefly went to the message screen to turn off the notification but she didn't look at them.

One week later Shelley decided to visit her mother for the first time since she had moved out the year before. Her childhood home did not look much different than it always had. The blue curtains she'd picked out for her bedroom window were still there, visible from the street though her room was on the second floor. The yard was overgrown and the white paint peeled in strips down the panels. Even her father's truck had been left in the driveway, though it was clear from the faded blue and patches of orange rust that there was no one to drive it now

Her family never had been much for routine home maintenance, believing life was too meaningful to waste time on such trivialities—much to the displeasure of their neat freak neighbors. Only the welcome mat, she noticed, was new. She read it and sighed as she rapped on the door, “As for me and my house we will serve the lord! (Joshua 24:15).” The old one had simply read, “Welcome.”

Shelley heard shuffling from behind the door and her body became rigid. As she envisioned her mother’s face—drawn, a strained expression of shock, relief and an ever-present self righteousness—her body went rigid. But the door opened to the polite smile of a stranger.

For a moment, Shelley wondered if her mother, frustrated by an empty home that held the muted impressions of those who were no longer with her, had moved without bothering to let her know. It would, she supposed, have been unsurprising.

“Excuse me...” she asked, dry throat tapering into a slight cough, “but is Susan here?”

The woman gave her a look that she found difficult to read. Smile still in place, but the space between her eyebrows crinkled somewhat, she answered,

“Of course dear, may I ask your name?”

Before she could think better of it Shelley bit back, “I should be asking who you are *I’m* her daughter.” Then, cheeks heating somewhat, she muttered “sorry.”

“Quite alright. You must forgive me, I should have introduced myself. My name is Mary. I’m a close friend of your mother’s. From the church?” she paused but Shelley didn’t respond. Of course from the church. She doubted her mother knew a single person who wasn’t from the church.

“Please, come inside, I had a feeling it might be you. Shelley, is it?”

She nodded and followed Mary cautiously inside. As she scanned the front hall, Shelley noticed that all of the family portraits had been taken down. When had she done that? Perhaps already the day that Shelley had left, or, was it later—when she'd realized that her daughter really wouldn't be moving back into her home? Mary led her into the sitting room, which in itself was peculiar. Growing up, this room had been mostly storage—a playroom when she was small and extra space for her dozens of novels in later years. The out of tune piano was still against the right side wall and a sheet of music was on the stand, “Silent Night,” her mother's favorite Christmas carol. She had expected Mary to lead her to her mother but the armchair and love seat were unoccupied. Shelley tried to peer around the corner to see if she was in the kitchen. The house seemed dim, empty.

It was only now that Shelley got the sense that something might be wrong. How unusual it was for the lights to be off and for the house not to smell of cinnamon scones or pasta sauce. She couldn't hear the echo of the television set to TCM, or her mother's favorite Christian pop station. Mary seemed to notice her apprehension and gave a deep sigh, Shelley tensed further at the look of pity on her face.

“Why are you at my mom's house, where is she?” Shelley said, voice rising.

Mary started to speak but her words faltered.

Shelley pushed past her. She walked around the corner, into the living room. She opened the door to the basement, and peered down, then seeing that it too was empty slammed the door shut hard. “Mom!” she shouted.

Mary shuffled behind her. She reached a hand out and brushed Shelley's shoulder. “Please,” she said.

Shelley shrugged it off. She ran to the steps, taking them two at a time. “Mom!” she yelled again. She was almost to the landing. Her mother's door was closed. This time Mary's clammy hand wrapped around her forearm and wouldn't let go when Shelley tugged.

“This isn't the first time it's happened, you know,” Mary yelled.

Carefully Shelley stopped, shaking. The hardness, the insistence in the stranger's voice shocked her, she had come across as so passive. She eyed her mother's door again, tried to move forward, but Mary gave her arm another pull.

Everything about the woman annoyed Shelley. The constant nervous flutter of her hands, the plain blue button down dress.

“You were very young the first time, of course.” A muscle in Mary's neck twinged. “It's not that I blame you for not being able to recall.”

The strained half-smile, her watery wide-set eyes.

“It wasn't necessary that I stay here then. But I met with her. I and the rest of the core members of the congregation. We helped her through.”

“I don't even know what you're talking about.” She touched her forehead, it seemed like her heartbeat was being played on surround sound speakers. “Is my mother here? If she's here I have a right to see her.” Shelley's voice cracked. Her eyes moistened and she shut them for a second, looked away from Mary but then she could see the closed door again and this time she thought she could see a flicker of shifting light through the crack beneath the door.

“Just let me explain the situation.” Her tone reminded Shelley of the doctors on the medical dramas she watched, when they had to break bad news to the families of the patients.

“It wouldn't do your mother any good at all, having you burst in so angry.”

Shelley nodded tightly but let Mary lead her by the arm down the steps and back into the sitting room. Mary cleared her throat. Asked if she wanted water—no. Excused herself. Shelley's body was wired. She was aware of all of her muscles, pictured ship's knots bulging from the skin in the back of her neck.

Mary returned with two glasses of water anyway. Shelley accepted. It wasn't just Mary's eyes that were watery, it was everything, her essence. Shelley wondered when she'd begun to interpret kindness as weak.

She took a sip from her glass. “Tell me why my mother didn't open the door. Tell me why you wouldn't let me see her, tell me something before I change my mind and run back up there, just...shit.” She bit the inside of her lip until it bled, still better than letting herself cry, or worse, tackle Mary to the ground.

Perhaps the bad language had lost her some of Mary's sympathy. The kindly face seemed to smooth out into neutrality, the brittle voice lost its cautiousness, its attempted sweetness.

“Your mother has suffered from some severe...emotional issues...for quite sometime, Shelley. You were young then, but surely you remember something being off when you were an elementary schooler?” Mary drummed her fingers on the piano bench. “The summer that your sister from Florida visited, perhaps?”

And Shelley went cold. She did remember. Something. Not in detail. She remembered being upset because her sister wouldn't play with her as much as she'd liked. Remembered Caroline being alone in her room too long, remembered herself being tugged unwillingly into her mother's car with the promise of ice cream, an image of her father, red-faced as he stood in the driveway, shouting ugly words, her mother shouting them back before speeding halfway down

the street still in reverse. Her father had threatened to call the police if they weren't back by midnight but they came home at 11:59 to an empty house. Her mother had snapped at her and pushed her into bed without a story or even the Our Father and when she woke up her father was back home but her sister was gone. She hadn't gotten to say goodbye or give her the drawing she'd made the day before, of Caroline's favorite flower. The memory seemed so striking now, too peculiar and muddled to have been pushed to the back of her mind for so long. Then, she'd been not quite six years old at the time.

“Yes,” she replied.

“I know you'd probably like me to give you some type of diagnosis, but I'm afraid that I can't.” Mary made a nervous “hmm, hmm” sound, coughed and took a sip of water.

Diagnosis? Shelley thought. Her mind wasn't processing Mary's words fast enough. Still all she could think of was the closed bedroom door and the dim flickering light under the door.

“Nothing beyond my hunches anyway. I wasn't trained to be that sort of nurse, only what I've been taught by others in the church. Your father tried terribly hard to convince her to see a professional but she just wouldn't have it. It's quite common you'll find, to fear the diagnosis so badly you'd prefer not to be treated. But back then she'd always had someone to watch out for her. Your father really cared for Sue, whatever his flaws. May the Lord grant him forgiveness.”

Shelley's throat tightened, “Don't talk about my father.”

Mary frowned. “It was a very good thing that Sue found our little chapel, I think. She trusts us, as you know, and we will always do whatever we can to take care of her. Why, just last Sunday we held a drive for her. Afraid she doesn't come much to join us these days, just watches the tapes. It runs in families you know, these types of frailties. You never met your grandmother,

did you? Now you see why.” She leaned forward in her seat. “It’ll be best to watch out for yourself, in years to come.”

“She needs to see a doctor.” Shelley’s voice cracked, “she needs medication.”

Mary was stern now, plump face struggling to press into a line. She had her hands on her wide hips. Again, Shelley was struck by her sudden change in demeanor.

“She needs a daughter.”

Shelley looked down. She put her hair behind her ears. Tried to listen for creaking in the floorboards from upstairs, the pat-a-pat of her mother’s plush slippers. Mary looked out the window and Shelley followed her gaze. There were two boys, probably around ten years old, using the neighbor’s basketball hoop. She remembered running around, tomboy wild-child in her preteen glory days.

Mary walked to the couch and sat next to Shelley. Grasped her forearm with her cool, chubby hand. “It’s a big house to be in all by yourself. I’m glad you’ve come back home. Do you want to see her now?”

Shelley looked into Mary’s eyes. They seemed more watery, again. “I have to go.”

Shelley was restless. She drove her car to the train station and took the first one into New York City. Her primary method of dealing with any difficult situation was distraction. Shopping or drinking usually, and since she had spent most of the last week hungover, she decided on going with the former. Usually the ride to city relaxed Shelley but this time she couldn’t seem to keep from fidgeting. It took so long to her that she nearly wondered if even trains had rush-hour traffic.

She plunged into the crowd, barely watched where she walked. A mother gave her an ugly glare after Shelley nearly tripped the young boy she was pulling behind her. Shelley was reminded of her own trips into the city with her mother when she was young. How exciting it had been! How much she had looked up to her mother then, wishing she too could have a pair of shiny heeled shoes and a matching grown up purse. How quickly that had changed. The sadness must have shown on her face because as she passed the strangers by, the woman apologized.

She walked a few blocks, tried to block out her thoughts with the noise of the city. A man in a newsboy cap with a stack of fliers stepped out in front of her. “Comedy show! Tonight at 8 o'clock! Free with purchase of two drinks! But I'll buy those for you, pretty lady.”

“I think I'll pass.”

“C'mon, just take a flier. You don't know what you're missing.”

She rolled her eyes but took one. “I probably do.” She stepped back into the jostling crowd.

He whistled behind her. “It's alright, I like a girl with a little fire!”

She laughed. Catcalls. One of the best and worst things about NYC.

Instead of going to one of the usual tourist areas she walked aimlessly, observing. She grabbed a hot-dog from a stand. Gave a dollar to a man playing an accordion, his hat on the ground only covered with a light sprinkling of change. She watched as a group of about five girls in sequined gowns posed for pictures. An old man wobbled past with a cane that looked hand carved. She almost asked if he had made it himself before she remembered that you don't approach strangers in the city.

Eventually, she came across a small boutique and stopped inside. It was one of those

types that tried too hard to look “vintage” and “unique.” There were plenty of cute gifts; handmade up-cycled wallets and jewelry, steam-punk inspired knickknacks, sarcastic note-cards and to-do lists.

She thought about buying something for her mom but she didn't know what she would like. It seemed like she had no interest in anything that didn't have a picture of an angel or a bible verse on it these days. She supposed now, that part of it at least had to do with her illness. She'd never been this way when Shelley was a child. They had gone to church every Sunday, like most people in their community, but that had been all. They weren't devoted to it. Back then, her mother had always loved to garden, and to dance. Had a collection of Degas dancer pins and necklaces, the porcelain ballerina figurines that had lined the wardrobe in Shelley's bedroom.

Shelley spotted a pendant with the dried petals of a sunflower inlaid in the glass. Sunflowers had always been her favorite part of her mother's garden. They must be long withered, by now. She bought the necklace and put it in her pocket. The distraction wasn't working. Nothing could relieve the heavy weight of *knowing*. Part of her wished she had never returned to the house on Fern Drive. Part of her regretted ever leaving it.

She exited the shop. Stepped back out from the side street and back into the busy hub of stereotypical New York, pulled her leather jacket tighter. The lights here really were so bright. She walked a couple more blocks, thinking and then dispelling what she'd just thought. Her phone vibrated in her pocket. The name on the screen read, “Caroline.” She considered answering. Her finger hovered over the green “Accept Call” button but she did nothing and it stopped. She looked up. The twilight sky was darkening quickly into dusk. She checked the time. The comedy show was about to begin.

Walking through the dented wood double doors of Ha! Comedy Club, Shelley wondered if she had been here before. Many of these places in the city were almost the same. Her ankle boots clung to the floor as she walked and the smell of booze and cigarettes was nearly heady. She chose a two-seater closest to the right wall of the comedy club, nearer to the back. She wondered if the man who gave her the tickets would really be there, or buy her a drink. She wasn't sure whether or not she hoped that he would be. He hadn't been bad. Not good, but not bad. Decent. Her friends told her that was her style. She didn't go for sexy, she went for characters. They'd say he was her type. It had something to do with the hat maybe, or his thin, slightly crooked nose. Really, it was probably only that he'd spoken to her. She'd been ignored by men in her teen years and now she'd willingly take any attention that she'd got and give out even more. If he offered her a drink she'd take it, she did love to flirt. She loved to play. She loved the feeling of release and oh, did she need it tonight.

The room wasn't pretty, but it had character. Small, painted black. Peeling a little bit. There were black lights. She wondered if those would be turned off when the comics started. There was a zany, purple-fonted laser tag sign above the small stage. That's what the building had been before, and the venue hadn't changed much. She liked to think it had to do just as much with ambiance as it did with price. Her waiter came and the man from the street corner was still missing. She ordered herself a whiskey sour. A man came up and asked if she had a lighter. She said she'd give him a light if he gave her a smoke, and he did. Then, he walked away. Couldn't catch them tonight. She took a drag. She'd been trying to quit but, what the hell. Her father smoked, her mother smoked, and now she smoked. She smoked and she'd probably end up bed-ridden from some unknown brain disease with a child who hated her and a dead husband in

another decade. Wasn't that how the circle of life went?

She watched the show without watching. Still disappointed. She ordered more drinks. Mid-way through the second set, she threw some bills on the table and got up, head feeling hazy. A man held her arm but she ripped it away and picked up her pace, someone who worked at the club, she thought. She stumbled onto the dark sidewalk and hailed a cab. This would use up the last of her cash. Her car was still parked at the train station. She didn't know when she would be able to get it back. She tried to think of a friend to call but all she could think of were hookups and acquaintances. When had that happened? She'd been popular once. Had tons of girlfriends. Their names were still in her phone. Why couldn't she think of one who'd give enough of a shit to pick her up? And now she was crying in the back of this cab not caring that her skirt was too far up, and her hand was probably smearing her makeup all over her, not a few loose tears but so much that it hurt her chest to take in a breath. She cried all the fucking time, didn't know why Caroline thought of her as the "tough one." But this was different, this was *guilt*. Her entire body was just exhausted, she felt powerless in a way she hadn't since her father's funeral.

Her mother was sitting in that room, all alone in the two story house that had been built new for them just a few years after Shelley'd been born. Or maybe Mary was sitting there with her, reading the scripture or showing her tapes of church services. The lawn was browning, the flowers had long shriveled up, the leaves on the trees were parched and her father's old car was still sitting there, rusting in the driveway. She picked up her phone and texted Caroline, "I'm fucked."

Caroline had called three times that day and Mary had called once. She didn't think that

her mother had her new cell phone number. Perhaps Caroline had given it to her during her last visit. Shelley's stomach roiled and burned, and she wasn't sure if it was still from the alcohol or from emotion. She knew her sister loved her, she knew she must be distressed. But, bitterness was a home for Shelley. She relied on it like others did trust or comfort. It had always been there, even as a young child when there wasn't all that much to be bitter about. She considered the flaw to be so vital to her perception of self that in the short periods of her life that she had gone without it she felt, somehow, less than.

Shelley shifted. She was in her bed and had been all day. After the headache had passed she lit incense and pine-scented candles. Earlier, she had tried to read a new Bret Easton Ellis novel but only after a few pages felt her head turn leaden, again. Once, she had loved to read. Especially biographies. It had been a life-long dream of hers to become a history teacher, maybe even a professor. Her friends and family had always told her that she was lucky, because not many that she knew had dreams that would actually be achievable. Now, she found herself settling into her retail job. It didn't pay well and it wasn't challenging, but it was easy. It allowed her to continue her lifestyle. Allowed her to spend money on booze, and cigarettes, cabs from parties at houses of people she didn't even know. She felt she'd lost the energy recently, to do anything else.

She'd graduated high school with honors and even been able to start University early, but her grades were shit now. It was only her second semester and she'd dropped down to part time. Everyone told her she'd have a shit degree anyway; Art History, what a laugh. She didn't know if she would go back when Spring was over. These days, she felt too tired for aspirations. Often she considered running away a second time, not just from her mother and her hometown but out of

the state, across the country. But really she knew she was one of those people who would never really leave. Poor, drunk townie was her destiny. Though she hated to admit it even short trips made her homesick.

Her mother was ill and though they hadn't gotten along in recent years, had surely always loved her. It killed her that she hadn't realized anything was wrong with her. That she'd left her and now she needed to be attended to by a stranger. Had Caroline felt this same unshiftable weight when she didn't go to their father's funeral? Shelley picked up her phone, and dialed.

"Mary?" she said. "I'd like to come by next week." She swallowed, mouth dry. "Would you mind leaving us alone?"

She hung up, rolled over and went to sleep again.

This time, when Shelley walked up the path to the front door she didn't knock. She lifted the corner of the door mat, removed the key from the underneath, and walked inside. Mary had told her that if she knocked, her mother wouldn't answer. She had tried to tell her mother that Shelley was coming home to see her, but she hadn't believed her. Sue would stay in bed, the way she did most days. Shelley wondered whether she would be watching Turner Classic Movies. It was a fond memory she had, staying up far past her bedtime to watch the old black and whites in the living room while her father's snores resounded from the bedroom above them. Shelley couldn't resist taking a better look around the house. She wanted to say it was only curiosity but it was mostly nerves, she was stalling.

The kitchen was the most awful. Her mother was very proud of her Italian heritage, and

loved to cook. It was strange not to smell anything from the oven, or see bags of groceries stacked on the large wooden table. She opened the pantry. The food she had was simple, and Shelley wondered if Mary or someone else made her meals too. She wondered, without her father and without a job herself, how she was even able to afford this much. Her father hadn't had much to leave her, hadn't had much to leave anyone. He'd been compulsive in almost everything he did. He spent all of his money on cigarettes or gambling, or even on home improvement projects that they did not need and that would become abandoned before they were finished. It was sore spot, she knew, for Caroline, who had seen the ridiculous playground once in their backyard, the newest toys. He had never sent her much. The yard was how she had envisioned it. The flowers were long gone even before her father's death. The grass was overgrown and browning. The half finished deck looked like it was beginning to rot. The house would need repairs before it sold. It startled her that she had that thought, but it would need to be done, eventually. What good would one bedridden woman living here alone be? She wondered why her mother had taken all of the family photos down from the walls. Was it too painful, to see the three of them standing next to each other, smiling—a dead husband and a lost daughter? Or had she done it out of rage, as Shelley suspected. Disgusted that her daughter was not willing to “follow God's path” as she had put it? Imagine if she had actually told her that she'd decided that she was an atheist.

Slowly, Shelley turned and ascended the stairs. She heard the television from her mother's room, saw the distant flicker of light. Not TCM then, too bright. Before she went in she couldn't resist looking into her own room. She creaked open the door. It looked the same, but dusty. Her mother had always been obsessed with cleaning, but she had noticed even in the rest

of the house that it wasn't up to her usual standards. The Doctor Who posters were still up on her wall beneath the ship's netting. There was the tacky, blue fluorescent dolphin-shaped lamp that her sister had sent once from Florida. She hadn't taken much when she'd left, other than clothes and other essentials. Had wanted to leave as fast as she could. Part of her thought she would never come back.

She walked into the hall and stood outside her mother's bedroom, just breathing, deeply. She knocked.

"Mary...?" her mother said. Her voice sounded thinner than she remembered it to be.

Shelley swallowed. "No, mom. It's Shelley."

She walked in. The room looked bare, sterile. Most of her father's possessions had been removed. Her mother looked too small in the center of the king-sized bed, too drawn. Her face had aged. There were wrinkles around her eyes and mouth that hadn't been there before. Her hair seemed limp and dull from being pressed too often on the pillows. Her eyes were widened, and dry. Her entire body, it looked somehow parched. Her mother stared up at her, frozen. She supposed she was in shock. Shelley sat down on the bed. She put one hand on her mother's arm and without thinking about it started to cry.

"Mary told me that you were coming but I knew that you would never come home."

"I'm here. I'm right here. I'm sorry and I'm here."

Her mother's forehead creased. Her expression, pained. Suddenly she reached out and drew her into an iron grasp. She didn't look strong enough to hold her this tight. Shelley almost choked and didn't know whether to be relieved or even more saddened, even more guilt stricken than she had become at the sight of this room where she had once listened to bedtime stories.

Her fingertips combed through her hair almost frantically. “I only wanted you to be saved, Shelley.” Her voice seemed so high, so anxious. “I didn’t want you to be taken from me unforgiven like your father was. I needed to know that you were safe. I needed to keep you safe with me.”

Shelley started to bite her inner lip, but gave up. This time she let the tears fall down her nose, watched one drip onto her mother's cheek. “But I am safe, mom. Those people aren’t good for you. You’ve taken this too far. I am safe and I’m right here, and I just needed to move on with my life.” She took her mother's right hand in hers and kissed it. “I need to find my own way just like you did, and dad did. You didn’t have someone telling you how to go. You figured it out on your own. Just like Caroline is doing now.”

“She’s a good girl, Caroline. I didn’t give her enough credit before. She gave me a call. Let me know how you were doing as soon as she found you.”

Shelley panicked. Thinking for a second that Caroline had known about this and held the information from her. It was the type of selfish thing she would do. But that wasn’t true. She could be selfish but not malicious. She couldn’t have known.

“Then why didn’t you come? Why didn’t you call me yourself? Mom, what do you need Mary for; if you needed help you could have told me, I’d find you help. I’d help you.”

Her mother’s face seemed to change, it twisted in a way that made her stomach turn. Her hands withdrew.

“Because we both know it isn’t true. You’re cold and vengeful like your father was and I’d had enough of it marrying him. I’d had enough of not being listened to. I’m glad he’s gone. I’m glad I’m free of him.” Her mother’s eyes went blank and wide again “He’s been poisoned

by this world and so have you.” She slumped back into the pillow and started to cry, deeply, loudly like the women in the old movies they watched.

Shelley’s voice quivered. Her whole body felt weak. She wondered if her mom would have been like this if she’d stayed on. She wondered if she’d been able to stay on, at all.

“I thought you loved dad,” Shelley said.

“Oh God, I did. Oh God, I do.”

Shelley held her, just like when she was a little girl. She heard the front door creak open and then slam. Heard Mary clod up the stairs, heavily. She creaked the door open, just a crack. They made eye contact. Mary’s face was full of pity. Her body heated but she told herself to calm down. She had her father’s temper. She looked her mother straight in the eyes.

“Please see a doctor,” she said. “For me. If you do I’ll...” her voice faltered. She considered whether she truly meant what she was going to say. She thought, however reluctantly, that she did. “If you do I’ll come home.”

Her mother pulled the blanket tight against her. Shook her head.

“I can’t.” She closed her eyes.

Mary cleared her throat. Shelley wasn’t sure what she wanted but she didn’t care, she walked past her. She half expected her mother to call out for her but she didn’t. Shelley was free to walk out of the house and drive back to her apartment.

She spent a few days working, coming home, sleeping. She’d gone a week without drinking or flirting with men, or visiting her mom. Mary called her often, and Shelley began to answer the phone again. She spent hours on the internet searching for the symptoms that she had

witnessed and the others that Mary had described, but of course it was no use. There were too many similarities between disorders, too much ambiguity. She'd thought already that she had depression, bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia, even a brain tumor. She considered talking to someone at her college, asking if she would be able to have a doctor visit her mother even though Sue hadn't given her consent. The stress of what she did do and what she didn't do was becoming too much. Only a few weeks ago she had considered herself strong, immune to the emotional tropes she had always viewed as weak. Now it seemed she couldn't go more than a few hours without crying.

When Caroline had visited she had brought a postcard with her from Florida. It had a cheesy plastic pink flamingo standing next to a group of posing tourists with palm tree shaped sunglasses. As a teenager, Shelley had rather adored Florida kitsch. Perhaps it was leftover from her adoration of Caroline growing up. When Caroline gave it to her, Shelley had barely looked at it. She'd put it face down in her desk drawer, had almost thrown it away.

When her father had died, Shelley had been so bitter, so isolated. It had been a turning point, that day Caroline hadn't shown up at the funeral. Every other irritation in her life seemed to increase ten-fold. Now though, she wondered if she had been too hard on her. If, hurt as she was by her sister's decision, Shelley was the selfish one for throwing such an important relationship away, for giving her forgiveness only to take it back the next day.

The guilt that she felt over leaving her mother in such a difficult time, of never checking in on her, of not realizing anything was wrong...it was, she knew too much to carry alone anymore. It seemed that blood was as strong as they said it was, because she couldn't think of anyone who could understand it better than Caroline could. Shelley picked up the phone.

UNCONFIRMED

“Sshh” the catechist says. She stands
beneath the mural of St. Peter and St. Paul,
their hands extended to the dove-like figure
with arms lifted to either side, draped in white,
His face both peaceful and expressionless.

She lights a candle and cues the chant,
fifty voices raised in monotonic exaltation,
Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be
all except mine, barely above a breath.

In the hush of the post-prayer meditation
only my eyes are open to observe
the stained glass stations of the cross,
the obedient hands folded together,
arched toward Heaven.

Forward steps the first simple soul,
my childhood Sunday compatriot.
His solemn face is betrayed by the spark of
anticipation in his eyes, and I can feel
the tension as he offers up his crumpled slip of paper.

At last, stomach wound in coils,
I am called by my saint’s name,
and I hear the soft prompt from my instructor,
and I feed my sin into the flame.

It is the folklore of the congregation that
wherever we go in that chapel Jesus’ oil paint eyes will follow.
When I meet his gaze I see only a blank stare
pin-pointed straight through the center of the church.
I am more enthralled by the background, the texture
given to the dirt and the trees
and the gaping mouth of the dark stone tomb.

A PRAYER

When I drive late at night,
taking the back way home from work alone,
I think about God.

I am speeding without the fear of being caught.
No one takes these roads,
flanked by stretches of cows and wooden fences.
There is a small house every mile or so,
and the occasional patch of trees,
their leaves a dusty shade of green.

In this dark calm, I can understand
how others believe in Him.
I can picture a small family,
hands folded over their supper,
speaking kind words in gentle tones
and kneeling in front of their beds for a nightly prayer,
good health and good harvest.

My wandering thoughts omit those
distasteful details of the day to day.
A picture frame family,
a sister without a cell phone hidden
beneath the tablecloth,
a brother not distracted by the bright
flickers of the television screen
in the adjacent living room,
a father who isn't slouched on a cheap metal
barstool with a peeling cushion
too many miles away.

I think of my grandmother's God
with his list of names and angels guarding the gate,
and the God of my mother,
emanating love and offering redemption,

And though I think the universe is empty I look up
at the stars distorted by my windshield,
blurred into an expansive halo of light, and
I imagine them as His many eyes,
watching over his creations as they sleep.

CAROLINE & SHELLEY

Caroline tossed the bag that Dale gave her earlier back and forth between her hands. Maybe this was a gag. Maybe these were mushrooms from some old crusty Papa John's box in her friend's living room. She certainly wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Ryan was inside playing beer pong. He might not have noticed her absence yet. She opened the box of Fantasia's Rainbow Cigarettes that Faye had given her for her birthday a month ago. It was empty. Not because she'd smoked them all, but because she'd given them away. The last one, blue, had gone to Dale earlier in the night, and maybe that's why he tossed her the shrooms to try. He was a new friend of Ryan's that she always went out of her way to treat nicely because she didn't like him. The more repulsive she found a person in her circle, the harder she would try to impress them. Caroline always hoped that when they liked *her* well enough, her opinion would suddenly change to match theirs. So far it hadn't worked out that way.

Caroline had never bought a pack of cigarettes. Her lungs had always been weak. When she visited her father as a child, sometimes he'd notice her stifle a cough as he smoked out the car window and roll it all the way up. He'd known she would be frail even at a young age, and would do anything to at least try to make her tough. He blamed himself for letting Caroline live with her mother. Caroline didn't believe it was anyone's fault; she was just inherently fragile. Often on the phone her father would mention how proud he was of Shelley.

"Your sister saw a daddy long legs on the playground today," he'd say. "The other girls were scared but she just hovered her index finger over the spider for a second and then, splat! Pushed it straight down."

Later he would worry that perhaps she was too tough, too much like him. Just a few days after her first driving lesson, Shelley had stolen her father's truck, picked up a couple of girls from school and driven them all to a concert across the New York border. Caroline pretended to be appalled, but really she'd been awed. Somewhat offended that she'd had to hear the story from their father. It was her first realization that her "little sister" was becoming a real person.

Shelley would probably know all about shrooms, she could ask her if just one would be alright to take, if it would do much of anything. If she'd even reply. But she didn't want to think about Shelley. Or her father. Just thinking about *not* thinking about him was enough for her to feel heavy with guilt, and she couldn't handle that now. She wanted to lose herself in the sand and the waves. She wanted to go back up to the beach house, walk up to Dale and give him his bag of shrooms half empty, or maybe they could each put one in their mouths at the same time, like a toast. "Liberty Caps," Dale had called them earlier, and it would be liberating not to worry about having a fatal allergic reaction, or an overdose, or even a really bad trip. To be completely irresponsible, like her friends were and deal with the consequences in the morning.

Ryan didn't know that Dale had given them to her. If he found out, he wouldn't like it. He was always over-protective. Part of her wanted to take them, just to see what he would do. Maybe a bad trip would force him to take care of her, to give her more than a second's worth of attention in a room full of his friends. But she wasn't being fair really. Their mutual friends had moved away to start their new "adult" lives and so he'd had to find new ones as quickly as possible. She supposed being an extrovert had its own challenges.

Caroline threw the empty cigarette box into the sand behind her, took a few steps toward the path and then went back to pick it up. She put it in the back pocket of her shorts. It wasn't a

path really, just a place in the tall sawgrass that had been trampled over too many times. The stiff tips of the blades brushed against her thighs and she stopped every couple of minutes to flick a sticky burr off the sides of her feet. As the shouts and the music got louder she almost turned back again. Walking through the unlocked door, the contrast in temperature hit her hard. The air felt moist and heavy. It wasn't a beach house as much as a beach studio apartment. There were about 20 people crammed into the room—most standing, dancing, making out with their significant others or with some of the chicks they'd picked up at the bar earlier in the night. She saw Dale in the corner, about to suck face with a girl who, in her pink plastic heels looked almost twice his height. Caroline threw the bag he'd given her earlier and it hit him in the chest, though she'd wanted to aim for his face. His chapped lips cracked into a grin.

"Take some?" he asked. She didn't say anything just walked past him, to the cooler.

"Come on!" he said. He flung out one arm and grabbed her by the waist. "Live a little."

Caroline pushed him off. "Fuck you."

He laughed.

The cooler was getting pretty low. She grabbed a Natty Light because it was all that was left but there was still plenty of liquor on the counter. She wondered how many of them would be sleeping in this room tonight or if they would sleep at all. Maybe if they all drank steadily enough they would never get hung over. Maybe it would make a good experiment. She wondered how long she'd be able to keep it up. Ryan came by and put his arm around her in a way she found to similar to Dale so she shrugged him off. He pulled her back again.

"Where you been babe?"

His eyes were cloudy.

"You noticed I was gone," she said. She hated how that sounded. Hated her voice, lilting and half breathless like a 1930s screen vixen. She fluffed her hair.

"How could I not?"

He put a hand in her right back pocket and squeezed. Someone in the background whistled. She didn't care for it but she took the opportunity to lean into him like she'd wanted to all night. He smelled like salt, cheap beer and the Axe that she hated. She kissed his neck.

"Shots!" A man Caroline didn't recognize clapped Ryan on the back, and he pulled away from her. Her stomach soured. Ryan tugged her wrist and she resisted for only a second before falling into stride with him, hoping he hadn't noticed. He looked back at her, eyes soft but questioning through the haze... a party wasn't the time for her to be like this. She smiled. Faye was in the small kitchenette, pouring shots of tequila into red solo cups while the new guy she'd just started sleeping with, Mike, handed out salt and limes. When she saw Caroline she squealed.

"Is Caroline *actually* going to do a shot with us?"

She'd been about to decline but Ryan handed her a cup and grinned and Faye looked so pleased... and was in such an uncharacteristically amiable mood that she accepted. She must have already been a little drunk and sloshed more than a standard shot into her cup but if Caroline wasn't going to do shrooms, she could at least get trashed this once. They counted backwards from three and with the salt and the lime, the tequila almost went down easy.

When she woke up in the morning she couldn't remember the details of the night before. It had been a long time since she let that happen. Another five people were sprawled on the thin brown carpet with her. It was as though an ice cube dropped into the pit of her stomach when she

realized Ryan wasn't among them. Quickly, she sat up, too quickly, and her head spun. She raked her fingers through her hair, nails scraping at the grease. She leaned forward, collapsed into herself. Already her throat clenched. She'd fucked it up. She didn't know how but she had to have, or Ryan would be beside her. A wild urge shot through her to run until she'd found him, wrap her arms around him and tell him that she loved him for the first time. Then, before he could recover or push her away, she'd jump in her car and drive, maybe back to New Jersey again to see her sister. She wouldn't return to Orlando, or talk to Ryan, or to Faye, or to admit to being Caroline at all anymore.

She crawled her hands out slowly in front of her, reached out to the wall and walked them upwards to steady herself. Her caution was unnecessary, the hangover wasn't too bad, after all. She looked around for a new cup but they'd all been used, so she rinsed one out at random. Even with its sulfuric tinge the tap water tasted sweet against her thick, dry tongue. She needed to use the bathroom but didn't want to move Faye who was sprawled across the tile floor. The front door was left open a crack, very safe, and she walked out, turning her face from the sudden burst of sunlight. Beer cans were everywhere, and someone's half-dried vomit. She wrinkled her nose, walked back down the path toward the shoreline. She wasn't sure if she felt relieved or even more nervous to find Ryan sitting with his feet in the froth.

“Hey,” she said, sitting beside him.

“Hey.”

Caroline put her hand down next to his, almost touching and he moved it a few inches away. “Something happened...didn't it?”

“Not really,” his tone didn’t give her anything to go off of, other than that something, even if it was minor, must have caused this distance. But then, they’d been like this more often lately. He didn’t hold her as tightly, or as long as he had only a couple of months ago. Ryan tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. It was almost past his chin now.

“You were pretty drunk,” he said.

“I hadn’t been in a long time.”

“I don’t know. Something’s up. You’re worrying me.”

“You don’t have anything to worry about.” Caroline tugged his hand. She gripped it tight so that he would have to keep it there. He kissed her cheek. Maybe this was how he preferred her. Possessive.

She pressed her face against his, like a cat, he used to tease, and finally he gave her the long kiss she’d wanted from him for the past few days. This was the first time in almost a week that they had been together in private.

His expression still didn’t look right. Unnatural. His brows were too close together. When she puts her hand between his shoulder blades, she could feel the tense ripple of his muscles. The hard knots that wouldn’t rub out.

He let out a heavy breath that still smelled like booze and weed. “Do you remember what Faye said last night?” he asked.

Caroline tensed. She knew something had happened but she could only grasp at stray words and images. She wondered if Dale slipped something into one of her drinks. It didn’t seem natural to remember so little without the heavy head, the feeling of pushing her limbs through one of those plastic ball play pens she’d went to as a kid. Typically after a night like that she’d

wake thinking she spent the night chugging poison...then, she guessed that's pretty much what alcohol was. Caroline had blacked out before, but it wasn't typical. Maybe it had been from less, she couldn't be sure.

Ryan drummed his fingers on her knee. "I didn't think you would remember, anyway. Have you noticed that we're off lately?"

Caroline nearly choked. "You've been off. What's this got to do with Faye," Caroline said. Her voice rose, body quivered. "What did she tell you?"

"Nothing. It's—she didn't say too much. Just, more of something she didn't..." He bit his lip. "You can't say you haven't been...more reserved lately. Except, last night but then—"

Then she did remember. She'd half stumbled, half dragged him to a corner of the room, as though it were even possible to feign privacy. He'd laughed, she'd leaned heavily into him, the room a merry-go-round whirl.

"Don't move so much, I can't keep you steady," he'd said and that had made her drift into the most euphoric mood. She'd cackled and snorted and doubled over. He'd almost been alarmed that it was some sort of panic attack. And then, she'd lowered herself to the ground and pulled him with her, so he straddled her. No one in the room noticed when she undid his belt buckle, and at first she didn't think he cared but then he lifted her up. She loved it that he did that. Felt like she weighed nothing. Felt so good. He carried her out onto the fenced in patio, and she'd *wanted* him like she hadn't wanted in such a long time. And she didn't know when her shirt had come off but she liked the feeling of his sweat on her sweat.

Caroline shook her head. Scooted back, the tide was coming in. "It's too much," she said. She looked at the waves. More choppy today. She clenched her fist in the sand.

Ryan made a faint noise in the back of his throat. Hesitant. Didn't seem to know whether to touch her or to give her space.

"Fuck Faye, fuck you," she yelled. The pressure in her chest released. She'd actually started to cry and she was dumbstruck by it. It had been so long, and she knew that now, in this moment, her reaction didn't make sense.

"Fuck you—I haven't cried since my father died. I didn't cry when I talked to Shelley, just shut up. Fuck you."

Ryan's eyes were wide, frozen. He stood up. Caroline shot one arm up, clenched his leg. "Don't go."

He got loose of her, turned his back. He didn't walk back to the beach house, just ambled slowly along the shoreline. He would come back. Caroline gave into herself. She fell back into the thick sand, let the sun bake her, let it dry the water on her face into salt. She took her phone out of her pocket. She wanted to call Shelley and apologize and curse, and fucking sob like she just had. She wanted to fucking mean it, now.

Shelley had sent her a text at some point during the night, it read: I'm fucked. Maybe they did have a lot in common. She let the phone slip into the sand. Piece of shit, really. Complicated everything. Drained, Caroline went limp. Thought of how her mother had told her never to sleep on the beach, not with her fair skin. Everything was too bright. She squinted, saw Ryan's figure getting smaller. She closed her eyes.

The speed limit was only 35 and Shelley was almost hitting 70 but she wasn't concerned. These roads were nearly always empty. You knew exactly what kind of area you were in just

from the street names. This one was Red Bug Lake Road. There wasn't much to see, it was all pasture. Cows, dilapidated fences. A ramshackle house or two along the way, with pickups in the dirt driveway like the one she was driving now. This was the one remnant of her father that didn't choke her up just by looking at it, but it was somehow the most meaningful. She'd come back for it a couple weeks ago after visiting her mother. She didn't know why she hadn't taken it when she left. It looked pretty bad, but at least she knew a guy who didn't mind doing repairs for cheap.

It was an old truck. She was surprised it had still been able to run. Her father had fixed it up for a friend of the family's when she was in 3rd grade. For a while, whenever she had imagined her father his skin was slick with sweat and black grease stains. Her mother had been so tired of him spending every weekend out in the garage. When he'd finished up the owner'd already decided to invest in a newer model anyway. Her mother had complained about his "sinful gambling habit" but her dad said it was only a sin when you lost. Daddy was quite the sinner. The man let him have it for dirt cheap. Her mother didn't know how she'd managed to marry a New Jersey red neck.

Shelley was driving to her mother's church. She had gotten back to see her in weeks. Every time she thought of her drawn face, that broken wisp of a voice that had always been so steady, commanding...it hurt too much. She slowed her speed, took a cigarette from the carton in the cup holder and lit it, puffing the smoke out the window like her father used to. She was so much like him. How he must've hated it.

She called Mary on a regular basis now, for updates. She worried her mother would never recover, that she'd have to force her into some kind of home. Shelley wondered how she would

afford it. Every time Shelley was about to hang up the phone Mary would ask two things-- whether she'd like to speak to her mother and if she'd try, just once, to go to their church. Finally she had decided, what the hell, and now she was on her way down this back country road. Everything was bottoming out now. The booze and the drugs and the men weren't enough anymore. She'd quit school and been fired from the promising job she had as an exhibit designer at the New Jersey State Historical Society. It didn't seem likely that Jesus would show up and open up his arms but she was just desperate enough to give it a try.

She wondered what life was like for the people in these farm houses. She could envision Mary growing up on this road. Maybe a simpler life made a better person. The church was in the near-distance. She could see its outline. Shelley sped up again, she was going to be late. It was so dark on this side of town. The stars would have been clear if not for the dirt streaking her windshield. They blurred and haloed, seemed round almost like headlights. She had been here before of course, but it had been years. Her chest tightened. She slammed on the breaks. She didn't know how she'd almost missed the entrance. She parked and took a moment to collect herself. Over fifteen minutes late now. She walked inside.

When she opened the door she was surprised how many people were there. She'd gone to the midnight mass because it was her mother's favorite. The choir was in the middle of one of the standard hymns. It didn't seem quite right that she had entered during "O Come All Ye Faithful." Shelley took a seat in the closest pew to the door. It really was beautiful, with the well-trained choir and the decades old stained glass windows. A few rows in front of her two young girls stood close together. They reminded Shelley of her and Caroline. Both girls wore proper dresses, one velvet, one with a lace overlay. The one on the left couldn't stop fidgeting with her

hair bow and was starting to create a tangle. She wasn't following along in the hymnal. Several times she turned around to see what was going on behind her, and then an older woman, maybe her grandmother, would clasp her forearm and spin her back again. They'd made eye contact once. The old woman glared at Shelley as though somehow she'd caused the girl's distraction. Or maybe she just disapproved of her casual clothing.

The second girl had perfect posture and held the book in front of her, head bent slightly, focused. Even though when they were younger Caroline had already been skeptical of religion, she'd always taken so much interest in the mass. Besides, Caroline had loved to sing and didn't care how saccharine the songs were. People would turn around to seek out the voice and give her compliments while Shelley rolled her eyes. It had taken herself much longer to question the Gospel but by then, she hadn't cared that much either. Church was just a monotonous part of her everyday life, and when her mother had switched her to Catholic school, the repetition had only made her drown out the teachings even more.

The congregation sat down and the priest began his sermon. He looked much kinder than the one she remembered from her teen years. Though he was clearly getting on in years his face didn't hold many wrinkles. His face might have looked younger than her mother's did now. He was reading from Corinthians 1 and she flipped to the page.

"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth." he said.

Suddenly she was in tears again. Her head always ached when she cried, like all the water in her body had rushed to her head but her eyes weren't quite suited to strain it out. Shelley

wasn't sure what would be more rude—to stay here and sniffle for the remainder of the service or to run to the bathroom. She stayed. A mural behind the pulpit depicted Jesus's resurrection. He stood, white-robed and basked in light at the foreground while Saints Peter and Paul kneeled on either side, praising him. So much detail had been worked into the background. Tiny fishermen bringing their catch to market, groups of women frozen mid-gossip. She was always amazed at the textured detail of the dirt pathways and the puffs of clouds, the carefully drawn leaves on the trees and, all the way in the background, subtle but eye-catching in its dark contrast to the vibrancy of the rest of picture, the open mouth of Jesus's tomb, stone pushed to the side.

If only she too, could be resurrected. If only they could all be.

A cool hand touched her shoulder and she started. It was Mary. She had tears in her eyes, too.

“You should go up for communion,” she said, and Shelley noticed that they'd already begun the processional towards the altar.

Shelley inhaled and exhaled deeply, steadied herself. “I don't know if I can.”

Mary squeezed her shoulder.

“Am I even allowed?” Her voice cracked.

“It will help God lead you to his path.”

Shelley's stomach twinged. She didn't know yet, if she was interested in finding God's path again.

Mary hesitated, “It would mean so much to your mother.”

In her head, Caroline's voice echoed, "It's just a stale, tasteless cracker. It doesn't actually *mean* anything." But then maybe it did. Shelley made the sign of the cross and cupped her hands, right over left as she'd been taught to do.

"The body of Christ," the Priest said.

"Amen."

It still came out automatically, she didn't even register that she'd said it until afterwards, even with such a prolonged absence from the church. She considered returning on Sunday to go to Confession. For what? For leaving the church? For her lifestyle? For abandoning her mother.

The mass had enthralled her more than it ever had before. She hung back, not sure why she wasn't leaving, trying to quiet the voice in her head that said when she got back to her apartment she would definitely need to take a shot, or maybe something more mellow, maybe she should smoke a joint. Even at this late hour, dozens of people stayed behind. Two middle-aged women embraced, then started to laugh. A man was shaking hands with the priest. Mary was in the corner, laughing with a group of other women. Shelley hadn't seen her laugh before. There was peace here.

When she got to her truck she checked her phone. Caroline had called and this time Shelley called back. No answer, but then, it was late. Shelley almost felt like curling up in the seat. She felt more exhausted than she should have felt. 1:30 AM wasn't all that late for her. She turned on the radio, revved the engine and started for home.

"We've never even fought before," Caroline shouted. She picked a book up from the coffee table just to slam it down again. "I told you this was going to be hard for me. What happened to your whole 'make it work' speech after that first kiss, huh?"

Ryan huffed, crossed his arms. "Yeah, but you aren't giving me anything. How can we make it work if you won't even let me talk to you?" He closed his eyes. "I've been trying, Caroline."

Caroline's body quivered. She couldn't fight well. Couldn't get her point across. She hated him for doing this to her now, when she needed the support.

"So what, are we breaking up?" She walked closer to him. She'd sensed that it might happen today and so she'd worn one of her most flattering outfits. The lace of her favorite push-up bra peeked out the top of her low-cut black dress. She touched his arm and he looked down at her, pained.

"I don't know," he said. He walked past her, sat on the couch.

Caroline's heart slowed a bit, a good sign.

"You know how hard it's been for me since I visited Shelley. She'll still barely fucking talk to me."

"Yeah, I get that, but—"

"You don't." Ryan put his head back against the couch, looked toward the ceiling, maybe so he didn't have to look at her. "You don't have any family problems."

"I'm sorry the timing is inconvenient for you." He got up again. Paced. "But this isn't about you and Shelley, this is about us. It's like you've been...removed."

Caroline's eyes moistened. "So this is about sex."

“What? Look—*no*.”

“Like you even give me reason to want to have any. You’re with your friends more often than you are with me. I don’t even like them.” She took an elastic band off her wrist and tied her hair back. Looked out toward her balcony. “You’re making me want a cigarette.”

“Will you stop trying to mimic Faye and your sister, you hate cigarettes. You always gag after you smoke them.”

“Faye is right, they calm you down. Don’t change the subject.”

Caroline went up to Ryan, took him in for a minute. She wrapped her arms around him. He didn’t push her away but he didn’t give in either. She held him tighter.

“Look, I’m sorry about that day on the beach. I was just...really stressed and, I missed you. And I did get too drunk...you get drunk all the time.”

“I don’t act the way you do.”

Caroline sniffed. “All I wanted was your attention.”

“Yeah, until you didn’t.”

Caroline stepped back. Her head spun. “But you said it wasn’t about sex.”

“You’re always teasing me!” He raised his voice, made it high and breathy like a school girl, “Oh Ryan, I want you so bad! No, get off me! I’m a good girl.”

Caroline was just about to argue but she heard a laugh from behind her. It was Faye. They had thought she wasn’t home, but she must have been in her room, listening the whole time.

Caroline whipped around. “What did you tell him that night at the beach?”

Faye came out further from the hallway, leaned on the corner wall. “Honestly, sweetie, you need to calm down and give some to your boyfriend.”

She smiled sweetly, as though she were giving actual compassionate advice. Caroline bristled, opened her mouth but Faye cut her off.

“I didn’t give up your secret.” She flipped her hair over one shoulder. “I just thought he should know you’re not as naïve and virginal as you make yourself out to be.”

Ryan stepped forward, “Look Faye, I know you’re trying to help me out and all, but I really think you should stay out of this one.”

“Trying to help you out? I’m just sick of always being the ‘rebellious’ one. Caroline is always acting like she’s so much more morally righteous than everyone else. I’m tired of it. All I’ve ever done is try to get her to loosen up, join us in the fun.”

“I don’t think I’m ‘morally righteous,’ Faye.” Caroline said. “I just do things differently than you do, okay?”

Faye’s voice lowered. “Then why don’t you show that to me, to us.” Her face was arranged into a plastic earnest expression, as if she had studied it from a textbook, “By accepting yourself.”

Caroline wondered if she was supposed to take that seriously. It sounded like the moral of an essay in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. She turned and fled the apartment and Ryan followed.

“You can’t just run away from this,” he said.

“I can’t stay in that apartment.” She shook her head. “Oh no, I’m not putting up with this anymore.”

He walked past her and stood in front of the stairs to force her to slow her pace. “Come over to my place.”

Caroline eyed him, flicked a twig from the railing. “Fine.”

They walked in silence down the dirty steps and through the yard behind her building, across the basketball court which was empty. Mostly college kids lived here, and school was on break. She could see through the wire gate that the pool was covered with leaves and dead June bugs. Maybe the staff was on break too, it seemed almost abandoned.

Ryan stepped out of the way to let her take the stairs first but she wouldn't budge. This wasn't the time for chivalry. When they walked in, Ryan went directly to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a scotch.

“You want anything?” he asked.

“No.”

“Might make things easier, calm the nerves.”

She shook her head. Took a seat in the leather armchair instead of her usual place on the couch so that he couldn't sit next to her, if he'd even want to.

“You really wanna know what's going on with me, Ryan?” A clock ticked somewhere in the apartment; once, twice, three times—

He nodded.

“Faye's right. I'm a fuck up. I used to try so hard to be perfect.” She ran her fingernails up and down her leg. “I had fantastic grades, I had drive, I was so excited to be finally starting my own life, and then I met this guy.” She looked away. There was a new picture on Ryan's wall. A group of mustachioed men. She tried to calm herself by seeing if she recognized any of

them, like that trick for hiccups with the bald men. “And I fell in love, and I adored everything,” she swallowed. “Every shitty thing about him, like in those preteen romance novels I never could stand. And I let everyone else go from my life until Faye ...she was the only friend I had left. You know? Because she fucking lives with me, I guess.”

A songbird tapped the window. A Cardinal, her grandmother’s favorite. “And then he stopped calling, no explanation, no fights, nothing just...” She closed her fist in the air, then opened it, “poof. So a few weeks later, I just—one day I was so tired I couldn’t finish my walk back from class to the bus. Had to call Faye to pick me up. And I started to feel nauseous, and my food didn’t taste right. Faye said I should take a pregnancy test...” Caroline, sniffed, closed her eyes, head pounding, “and it was positive.” She leaned back and massaged her right temple. “Oh shit, I could actually use that drink about now.”

Ryan jumped up, barely took his eyes off her on his way to the kitchen. Took out a glass and his shaker. “What did you do?” he asked.

Caroline laughed, “Got an abortion of course.” A short bitter burst that didn’t sound like herself. “I was in school, had just got an internship; what would people have *said* about me? That I was a waste. Faye was the only person who knew about it until now.”

Ryan didn’t seem to know how to respond, not that Caroline blamed him. She was disgusted just thinking about herself. He put two shots of vodka into his shaker with ice, and filled the rest up with the cranberry juice he kept there just for her. He shook it hard and strained it neatly into her glass.

“Thanks,” she said. “Are you ashamed of me?”

“No. But I still don’t know what to do. It’s a big secret for you to keep. I thought we trusted each other.”

“Excuse me for wanting to wait until I knew things were serious before telling you embarrassing details about myself.”

“If you had told me from the start but...I mean how long will it take you before you’ve cooled down your neuroticism enough to have sex with someone? What the hell else might you reveal a few months down the road, years?” He threw back the rest of his scotch.

Caroline gaped at him. The muscles in her neck tensed into a hard, painful lump. She imagined hitting him, but she couldn’t do it really. Besides, wasn’t this what she’d always expected, what she thought she deserved? “It isn’t just something I can wake up one morning and be over. I *warned* you, and you convinced me to take a chance. For what?”

She got up, stood in front of him. “The week after I found out I was pregnant, my father died. My life went from nearly perfect to complete shit. Don’t you see that?”

Ryan stretched his arms over his head, rested his feet on the coffee table, “You’re so over dramatic.”

Caroline threw down her glass, still half full of vodka cranberry, right at his white shirt.

“Hey!” Ryan shouted, but Caroline was already to the door. She slammed it hard behind her. He wore too many neutrals anyway. He could use some color. Halfway down the steps Ryan opened it up again. “Caroline!” he shouted, but it was no use. She was closed off from everyone now, one hand searching her big red purse for her keys. She walked straight to her car and didn’t bother to look back.

Caroline sipped a pink lemonade through a blue straw at a café on the along the Gulf of Mexico. She hated ocean beaches, and so she wanted to take a final visit here before she left the state. Above her table, seagulls cawed, circling. She'd always found them to be annoying, like pests or rodents but she'd felt compelled to feed them French fries earlier. It was a cloudy day, but she didn't mind. Cloudy days suited her, and there were less men to gape at her red bikini. Not to say she completely hated the attention. She didn't feel as self-conscious anymore. A fog had cleared.

After the last time she saw Ryan she had gotten in her car and drove around the city for nearly two hours. Some jerk had cut in front of her as she passed a shopping plaza and that was all it took. She'd slammed her fist on the horn and repeatedly stomped one foot on the break so the car shook, screaming curses at the top of her lungs. The car that had been behind her when it happened slowed to a crawl until traffic was light enough for him to switch into the adjacent lane. She hadn't stopped for nearly the whole two hours. She screamed her throat raw. Several times she almost veered off the side of the road, or into another car but she always stopped at the last second, not sure whether it had been an accident or if she had been aiming. She didn't know what the criteria were for a mental breakdown, but this had to be pretty close. When she made it back to her apartment complex she stayed in the car, rolled up the windows. Finally she would let her sister know everything. It might not have been enough to excuse any of her behavior, but at least Caroline wouldn't have any secrets anymore. After the fifth ring Shelley's voice came on the line and Caroline's heart jumped but it was only voicemail. She put her finger on the 'end call' button but didn't press down. "Shit," she said. Part of her still wanted to hang up the phone

but it was too late for that, it was years too late but she had to say it now, at least as much as she could fit in before the machine cut her off.

“Shelley...” she started, “I know this comes far too late, but I just...” Caroline swallowed. Wiped away the fast-falling tears even though there was no one to see her this time, even the parking lot was empty. “I need to tell you about what happened before dad died.”

Maybe it was the breakdown in the car that cleared Caroline’s head, or maybe it was finally admitting the truth, but suddenly she didn’t blame herself anymore. Shelley still hadn’t returned her call.

A few days ago she’d gone to visit her grandmother. They’d spent the day together, and while Caroline would never tell her about the abortion, she’d opened up to her more easily than she’d had in the past. They did more than just play scrabble or canasta, they talked. Caroline was about to leave, had already exchanged hugs and picked up her jacket when she asked for another card reading. Three sevens again. Change. The first time she had thought it meant her trip to Cassadaga, or Ryan, or seeing Shelley again but maybe none of that was enough.

Ryan had tried to call her almost every day. She blocked his number. It was so foreign to her not to miss him, to crave his attention or his touch. She thought she’d loved him, that he was her turning point; maybe not. Faye had slipped a note of apology under her door. Caroline crumpled it up, and ignored her as much as she could. Slowly she’d packed her most important items and put them in the trunk of her car. She sold or gave away the rest. Three weeks later, she taped an envelope with the month’s rent and her key to Faye’s bedroom door, and left.

It wasn’t as hard to find a place to go as she’d always expected it to be. Caroline still exchanged e-mails with one of the directors from her community theater days. He kept up with

several of his former actors to create a network of sorts. He knew a woman who could use a roommate for her apartment not far from Boston's theater district. She had finished school, she had just enough money saved to get her through the trip and a month's rent, but then what? She didn't know. This was what she had always dreamed of doing but been too afraid to. She could leave and no one would know who she'd been before. She had no one's friendship or expectations to keep her here anymore.

Caroline crumpled the Styrofoam cup in her hand and threw it away. Her beach towel was still set up, and she wanted to get back to it before the start of her last Florida sunset. Her phone rang and it was Shelley, but fuck her. It had been weeks since she'd called spilling her fucking heart out. She'd taken all the blame for every messed up thing that had happened in Shelley's life since the funeral. She shut off her phone. She was done with that. Done being a doormat.

The sun was still mostly hidden behind the clouds when it started to set. She liked to watch it peek out from the crevices, glowing rust orange and sinking lower into the waves. The grey clouds seemed sponged by lavender and rimmed with gold. She stayed and watched until the last color faded into its vast, deep indigo blue.

Shelley was at the church again and she was nervous. This time, Mary was bringing her mother. Ever since her first visit to St. Cecilia's Chapel, she'd been going to see her mom at least once a week. At first, Mary had supervised and it frustrated Shelley, but now all of their visits were alone. Sue still had good days and bad days, but overall she seemed to be improving.

Shelley went to the local nursery and bought several new hydrangea bushes in her favorite shade of baby blue. She'd also gotten several varieties of seed packets to plant in the backyard. Her mother had sat and watched and made them her favorite drink from childhood, half homemade unsweetened iced tea, the other half very sugary lemonade. So far it didn't seem like she'd inherited her mother's green thumb, but it felt good to at least try and fix the place up again, to help out where she could. Shelley was considering moving back in, but hadn't decided whether she could do that just yet. If she did though, she might not have to worry about her mother keeping the house. Between the help from the church and the money that had been going toward Shelley's rent, they might just be able to scratch by down the line.

At first she had been pleased with herself for helping her mother to improve so much, but then it set in that if she hadn't left in the first place, perhaps things wouldn't be as bleak. This would be the first time in months that Sue would be back in the world again, even if it was just the world of her congregation. Shelley took a seat in one of the front pews and saved two seats, one with her purse and the other with the ivory sweater that she'd borrowed from her mother.

The man in front of her, Mr. Blanchard, turned and smiled at her. "I hear Sue will be joining us today," he said.

Shelley nodded and gave her own small, timid smile in return. "She's glad to be back."

"Well," he clicked his tongue. "We certainly are glad to have her."

Shelley knew most of the regular church-goers by name now, she'd been coming almost every week. It wasn't as bad as she'd always thought. She disagreed with some of the ideas but there was something to be said for community. Then, Shelley had realized that it wasn't her place to judge people, at least it wasn't anymore.

The pews starting to fill. She checked her watch, the 10 AM mass would begin soon. She'd expected them to be here earlier. She scanned the room in case she had somehow missed them. The organ player began his welcome piece and the notes reverberated, almost too loud for the small space. Perhaps something had happened and her mother wasn't fit to come to mass after all. The static from her stockings made her skirt cling uncomfortably. Sometimes she wished she hadn't gained respect for the people here, just so she could show up in a tank and sweatpants again.

A low rumble of conversation erupted from the back right corner of the room. It was her mother. Even with the service about to begin a small group had gathered to welcome her. Shelley stood up and waved. Mary caught her eye and led Sue behind her. Her mother sat on her left side and clasped her hand. Shelley was taken aback by how good she looked. She didn't know if it was possible for skin to lose its wrinkles but it seemed as though her mother had done it. She'd been looking healthier but now she looked almost like she remembered her before her father had passed. She wore a black pencil skirt with an eggplant colored button-up top with ruffles, and she had on Oxford heels. Her brown and silver hair was uncharacteristically sleek in the long ponytail that trailed down to her mid-back. She had the sunflower petal necklace Shelley had bought for her during her disastrous trip to New York City.

"You look beautiful," she whispered. Her mother smiled.

After the mass was over they had a Sunday brunch. She couldn't remember ever seeing her mother so social but then, when Shelley was young she had begged her father to drive her home as soon as mass was over.

They went out to the parking lot and Shelley embraced her mother tightly, then gave a small hug to Mary.

“You don’t know how much it means, that you gave this place a second chance Shelley.”

Shelley blinked, willed her eyes to stay dry. “I didn’t do anything.”

Her mom brushed her cheek, “Promise you won’t be gone too long this time,” she said.

“That you’re coming back.”

“It’ll only be a couple of weeks.” Shelley kissed her on the cheek and hoisted herself into her father’s old truck.

There was something she had to do. For the past several weeks Caroline had called her regularly but Shelley ignored her. The last call she’d gotten was about three weeks ago. She had left a voicemail, but Shelley had just finished visiting with her mother on a particularly bad day. She went to a bar, got trashed and blamed it on Caroline, just as she always had. She deleted the message without ever listening to it.

When Shelley started going to the church more of her anger turned inward. It still confused her, how much she enjoyed the atmosphere now, the community who had taken in her mother. They weren’t to blame for Sue’s extremism. Maybe it was just a passion taken too far, maybe it distracted her from knowing that she was unhappy. Shelley found herself wishing that she could believe. She had thought that if she attended church regularly, read the bible, went to confession that one day God really would “reveal” himself, as Mary often encouraged he would. But even after all of it, she knew she could only want to believe. Once Caroline had told her that she was agnostic, but that she wished she could believe in reincarnation. Shelley hadn’t

understood then, wanting something that couldn't possibly be true. Now she'd give anything for that reassurance.

She didn't know the details of why Caroline hadn't come to the funeral, but now she knew that guilt was a slow poison. It was time to forgive. Shelley had already tried to call her sister several times with no answer. Cleaning her apartment, she'd found the last postcard she had sent and mapped out the address. Shelley would surprise her, then. Maybe after they'd made up they'd go to Disney World, just to live out the nostalgia of her wish as a kid. They would come full circle.

After several layovers and delays Shelley was exhausted, but she didn't want to postpone any longer. She took a cab straight from the airport to Caroline's apartment, without even stopping at the hotel to check her bags. She hadn't been to Florida since she was a kid, probably around 8 years old. It was the Sunshine State alright, even in her jeans and t-shirt she was sweating. When she got to Caroline's apartment she called one more time. No answer. She ran up the steps to the third floor, double checked the number on the postcard, and knocked on the door.

