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MOVING WATER

by

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B.A. University of Arkansas, 2015

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
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ABSTRACT

Moving Water is a novella in which the characters must reckon with grief, time, the divine, and the mysterious bonds forged and broken with each other. Phoebe and her family come to terms with the death of Jason, Phoebe's older brother, and with themselves. Around them, the universe moves in ambivalent splendor, dying and being born anew.

To Chris, for everything.

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Thank you, Terry Thaxton, for your unending enthusiasm and compassion as a mentor, program director, and friend. We are all better for your guidance and advocacy, and my work is better for your belief in its possibility.

Thank you to the readers who encountered this story in its various stages and didn't mind reaching into the murk to discover what lay below.

Thank you to those who have loved and supported me without condition: Ryan, ray of Florida sunshine; Kelsey, my sister; Daltrey, my oldest and kindest friend; Chris, and, of course, Connor, who bring endless joy to my life.

To my mom and dad, for your care and support, material and otherwise, and to the rest of my family and friends, thank you.

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If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith, without doubting, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

James 1:5-8

“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

Julian of Norwich

PART ONE

###

A cold little swoosh, a quiet breath, an infinity pocketed within another and the multiverse blooms like a violent flower. In our infinity: nothing until something so hot and so small and more one thing than the two flesh that become or the reason you keep living or the way you picture your own mind. More one thing than you are, than your own soul is one thing. That one thing, held in the palm of nothing, gets hotter and strong and more one, like the hot scream of a nerve ready to ripple oxytocin. Who touched the nerve or palmed the one thing?

Searing, unified, minuscule.

Such a love affair can't last for long. Gravity wrenches away from the one thing and the universe falls in its power, heaviness precedes everything. Who knows? Maybe the heaviness tends the universe, its first independent force, a caregiver, holding us down and bringing us toward each other in movements we don't see or notice. Gravity tearing through the nothing. Down and together, down and together and in forever; we cannot escape or undo it.

Yes, a big bang. A flower in exponential bloom. It is and is and is, is more every second, and the stockbrokers will think back with longing and the scientists will be the only ones who remember that at the edge of the flower, the nothing remains. But those edges push and push and memory of anything like a void beyond reality's firm borders disintegrates from all who prefer not to think of such things.

Expanding like love in a parent's heart at the first glance of their child. The primary explosion.

In a tiny fraction of a second, the universe is so much of what it is now, the one we know. Almost as big. Mass manifests. Radiation and the spiraling, throbbing darting particles fill,

become. The universe cools to a nice 10 quadrillion degrees. And finally, matter. Neurons and electrons and photons scream across hot, dark space. Heavy sound waves lengthen for light years. You'd never live long enough or listen low enough to recognize their music. A secret song, a long song, one fit only for the most patient of listeners.

###

No one else in Goshen, Arkansas was up at seven on Sunday. The sun's milky blood spread up the morning sky as Phoebe crossed the yard. Lawns patched brown and green by a reluctant winter circled warm houses humming to their still-sleeping inhabitants. She hid her face in the collar of her jacket, cheeks already pinked by the wind. The collar didn't block the dew and cow dung and day-old campfire hanging in the air, or the absence of her brother. Wasn't it a few years ago they set twigs alight, scaled the live oaks, and ran down neighborhood cats on this very street? Four feet slapping pavement, crashing through grass till their mother called them home.

Today marked three months since Jason's passing. Phoebe had made a habit since the funeral of escaping the house to walk. Being around her parents, her father withdrawing into his mind and staying late at work, her mother offering platitudes gleaned in her newfound spiritual fervor, ratcheted Phoebe's anxiety. Even before they woke up, the house felt too small.

She headed down the street to a small wood behind an undeveloped plot of land. In the middle of the wood Phoebe had discovered a huge bowl-shaped depression like a meteor crater. The surrounding trees tipped toward its center, where a patch of dead grass expanded like a ripple. Phoebe perched on a thick stump just outside the circle. Eventually her secret wood would slump into the shallow basin, brittle and dried of life.

She couldn't blame her parents for their behaviors, but the pain on her mother's face when her father left early or returned late from work chipped away at Phoebe. She hated that she understood him, that escaping the emotion that perforated every room of the house was a relief.

Birth and death were the same to the breeze that rolled up the tree branches and the soft earth that pulled grass and trees down by the root.

Her mother had been hearing voices in the house. She went to church on Sundays with her family, then to a ladies group that spoke in tongues on Thursday. Phoebe had spotted a CD box whose back description promised healing from spiritual injuries and freedom from dark forces. More than once Phoebe had peered between the door and frame to her brother's room and seen her mother on her knees, arms rested on Jason's bed, asking aloud, "Are you here?" Phoebe didn't know if she was addressing Jason or God or some dark spirit, and she sure as hell wasn't going to ask.

The wind carried the scent of drying concrete from construction sites, sweet like a wet pebble. Phoebe hugged her knees to her chest for a few deep breaths, then left the circle behind for the rest of the day. When Phoebe returned to the house, the sun had fully risen, white-bright in the cold.

Her mother met her in the living room.

"We're leaving for church in fifteen minutes."

Her father spooned oatmeal and scrolled through emails on his phone at the kitchen table.

Phoebe addressed them both. "Is it all right if I stay back this week? My head hurts. I think the weather change is giving me a cold."

Her mother glanced at her father. He looked up, shrugged, then returned to his phone.

"Fine, but you have to go next week. This is the third week you've missed."

"Okay," Phoebe said. She laid on the couch and half-closed her eyes. Through her lids, her parents were two dark shapes waving back and forth until they gathered their things and surveyed her one last time. Her father used to enforce her mother's desires with even authority,

but lately he had grown lax and distant. He didn't even entreat her to spend the time resting in her bed.

The front door slammed and the lock clicked into place. A slice of light broke through the blinds and slid over Phoebe's eye. She sat up. The quiet whirs and empty rooms surrounding pressed in on her ears and body. Phoebe imagined the ghosts her mother called on watching her. Her parents would be back in a little under three hours. She could leave and be back by the end of the service if she hurried.

Jason's car sat in the garage, unused since his death. She remembered his sixteenth birthday, how her father had driven up in the little Civic like it was a Lamborghini. Jason's grin had plastered itself on his face for the rest of the day. Shuttling Phoebe around was a service he magnanimously offered her, not a chore. He called himself her chauffeur and embarrassed her when he dropped her off, yelling out her curfew and telling her to be safe. The past few months Phoebe had walked to school and rode with her best friend Delia everywhere else. Now the key hung tantalizing on the rack. Phoebe grabbed the chunk of metal, cool and solid in her palm.

Inside the Civic, a small wave of grief rushed over her pumping heart. The car smelled just like him, light sweat and dirt and detergent. How many times had she sat in the adjacent seat, complaining about the country music her brother played or groaning at his endless ability to pun? The feeling slid back like it always did, and the excitement crept back into her pulse. She backed the car into the road.

Goshen was a long drive down a side road from Fayetteville. Fayetteville was a typical college town set in bundles of colorful trees and hills flowing out from the nearby Ozarks. Goshenites exported all their big events to Fayetteville. Seniors bragged about graduating in the college basketball arena. Goshen had only a few main streets, and Phoebe did her best to avoid

them as she headed away from the town's center. Halfway down the stretch to Fayetteville, she turned into an unfinished neighborhood and parked in front of a small house, brown siding and brick, varied from the houses around it in barely detectable details. These sorts of half-formed neighborhoods dotted Northwest Arkansas, begun in the housing boom and left to be claimed at cheaper prices by incoming lower-tier Walmart executives. Phoebe sighed and leaned back in her seat.

Evan exited his house a few minutes later.

"Sorry for showing up like this," Phoebe said.

Evan ducked into the passenger seat. "You're perfect. We just ran out of coffee."

Evan had been one of Jason's best friends, one of the few people Phoebe allowed in her life after the funeral. He and Jason went back to the third grade when the Roland family first moved to Goshen. They sat next to each other in homeroom: Jason Roland and Evan Richardson. He had been there when Jason died, too, but they didn't talk about that.

Phoebe drove them into Fayetteville. On Dickson Street, dead trees hung over the road while college students stuffed in puffy coats and boots moved in merry groups and pushed their lips together against the cold. Unopened bars and craft breweries huddled between book stores, waiting for cover of night to open their warm centers to the public. Next year, Evan would be going to school here. Phoebe imagined him walking through the campus buildings like a fresh wind, all smiles and beginnings. Her brother had applied to the university, and soon she would do the same.

Usually, Phoebe and Evan met for coffee in Goshen before heading to their next destination, a small well-lit shop that was more of a pit stop than a place to sit and drink. They didn't mind the lack of tables or one employee working behind the counter, but Phoebe didn't

want to risk being seen by anyone on their way to or from the church. Today's trip was an adventure.

"You're in a good mood today," Evan said.

"I'm just glad to be out of the house."

They had only met a few times since Jason died. Evan would text Phoebe asking if she wanted to come along on a hike or coffee trip. Phoebe guessed he felt an obligation to fill the older brother role, especially since he had been so close when hers had departed. But Phoebe was easy with Evan, and on the third invitation she guessed he enjoyed her company, too. They had a shared plane of existence. Phoebe and her best friend Delia had hung out with Jason and his friends plenty before. They had tagged along on hikes and kayak trips and loitered with them at the mall. Goshen was too small to exclude anyone.

Phoebe and Evan never stayed any one place long. Too much talking only led back to the same subject, the one Evan knew Phoebe wanted to escape or avoid.

Evan asked about her parents and what she had been up to. Phoebe didn't mind him checking in. After a few sips, they reentered the car. Better to be close to home as the clock ran down. Evan knew Phoebe was skittish about being seen by too many people anyway, as her family's claim to local fame was her brother's death. Strangers still made faces of pity in her direction. Everyone had read the article that ran in all the local newspapers detailing her family's tragedy.

"I've been talking too much," Phoebe said. "Your turn. What have you been doing?"

"Besides twiddling my thumbs until graduation?" Evan laughed, then told Phoebe about his new art project. "I've been making collages, putting different pictures together. It sounds stupid, but the end result can really surprise you."

“I know what collages are.”

Evan looked down.

“They sound cool. Maybe I’ll see them sometime. I haven’t been to your house in forever.” She couldn’t remember what the house had been like.

“If you came during the week, my dad might be there, too.”

He was referring to the fact that she hadn’t seen Mr. Richardson in over a year. He looked like Evan, tall and thin, except with a thick beard and a heavy way of moving. He was a single parent, something Phoebe’s parents could never quite square with their understanding of men and women. Evan had mostly come over to the Roland’s house. What could her parents say now? He had shepherded his son successfully into adulthood and they had not.

“Sure, that’d be cool.”

She had already promised Delia a night of fun this week, but she didn’t ask to invite her along.

Fields of brown slid past the car, desolate in the noonday glare, as Phoebe and Evan’s talk strayed into local gossip, something Goshen was never short of. Would Maggie, the very pregnant girl, in Evan’s grade graduate? Would she drop out? Who was the father again? Right, it was Cam. A surprise—he played bass for the high school church service and was a bit of a celebrity in those circles. Worshippers attempted to call up similar waves of devotion when he turned his eyes up to God on a particular strum. She doubted the church would let him on stage ever again. Phoebe said “that church” as if she hadn’t attended her whole life. All of her friends were regulars, too. They had helped lead the kids service together for years. Phoebe didn’t have to explain dropping out after Jason died, and no one expected her to get back to her normal activities anytime soon.

“So you’re not going back then?” Evan said.

Phoebe slid the car into park. “Back to what?”

“To all the church stuff?”

Fayetteville was the Christian missions capital of the world, and Goshen, being so close, was hardly separate from the activities. Phoebe had really bought into the hype when she was younger, even told her parents she wanted to be a missionary in sixth grade. They had nodded and waited for her to change her mind, though Phoebe bet her mother’s reaction would be different if she proposed moving overseas today. Campus ministries shot up every other month at the university, and proclaiming atheism meant putting a target on your back.

“I don’t know.”

Evan nodded, no sentiment apparent in his face.

Evan was one of the few people Phoebe’s age she knew who wasn’t a part of the church. He told curious inquirers his father never talked about religion, so he had never really given it much thought. His ambivalence made him the target of much well-meaning proselytizing, but he shook off the efforts of his peers with jokes about knowing where to find God if he had any questions.

Evan looked back toward his house. “Do it again soon?”

Phoebe nodded.

Evan moved as if to say something, then seemed to think better of it and pushed himself out of the car with all four lanky limbs in a way that reminded Phoebe of a spider. She smiled and returned his wave as he disappeared into the house whose insides she couldn’t remember.

Phoebe tried to park Jason’s car just as she had found it. How close to the left side of the garage had it sat? She didn’t remember having trouble opening the driver-side door. She

restarted the engine, reversed, and pulled the car a few inches further from the wall. How had the keys hung before she took them? Was the key or the fob on the outside? She decided on the key. They swung like wind chimes. The house felt the same as when she left. An emptiness she could taste in her mouth held the place like a vacuum.

Phoebe understood her mother, too, how she let herself be swallowed here, as if descending to the depths of the silence would allow her to hear voices from the other side with clarity. The thought was warm and dark and tempting, but there was nothing to find in the hollow left by her brother except more grief.

###

Diane woke in the middle of the night to the familiar clench beneath her sternum. Her husband's snores continued in small bursts to her right. He held his arms to his chest, lower half twisted away as if about to slither from the bed. She peeled the sheet from her body, careful not to tug the covers Kelly had tucked beneath himself in his sleep, and lifted herself off the bed the same way she did when she was pregnant and convinced the child in her belly was sleeping. Diane crept down the hall, paused to lean an ear against Jason's door, then continued to where Phoebe slept.

She cracked the door with a mother's silent expertise. Inside, Phoebe lay still. Diane watched the mound of blankets for the slight rise and fall that indicated breathing. In the dark, Phoebe's arm twitched, then she sat up. She motioned her mother to her bed.

Were you asleep?" Diane said.

"No."

Diane didn't believe her.

"Come here." Phoebe pulled the comforter to the side and motioned her mother in.

Phoebe's mother had visited her like this a few nights after Jason died. They had spent the night weeping and holding each other in desperation, though nothing brought comfort or solace. Today must have been hard for her.

Diane crawled next to her daughter in clumsy movements like an overgrown child. She pulled the sheet over her shoulder and turned toward Phoebe, the child not taken. Phoebe had always been the complementary child, the chaotic answer to Jason's simplicity, the willful

opposite of his easygoing nature. Diane loved both her children equally, but Jason's personally had always held the primary position.

Guilt stung the back of Phoebe's throat. She had spent the day thinking about Evan, imagining living in a house that couldn't infect you with emptiness, bitterly examining her old devotion, thinking about anything else. Her mother's eyelids puffed like fresh welts, but no tears remained between them. Phoebe found her mother's hands and rubbed her thumbs over the bony ridges of her knuckles. Her mother smelled like soap and shampoo, flowers, maybe jasmine, definitely vanilla. She began to sob and Phoebe felt the tenderness leave her. She rubbed her feet up and down against the sheets and listened to the swish under her mother's quiet noises. The heat under the comforter grew until the sweat formed out on Phoebe's neck like dew and the skin of her legs radiated. Her mother grew quiet again.

Nothing Phoebe thought seemed appropriate to say aloud, so she rubbed her mother's hands until she left.

###

Phoebe bent over her homework as her mother sliced apples and chatted about the women's group she attended on Thursday nights. She addressed Phoebe as if they had been talking about all this before and she was simply offering an update as a convenience. The women in her group had prayed for her, and she had found so much healing during her time there, though apparently not enough to prevent the pain she had brought to Phoebe's room the night before. The group had taken up the work of prayer warriors, battling the forces of evil that preyed on hearts and minds.

The apple-sweetened air tingled in Phoebe's nostrils as she puzzled out math problems.

"Like grief. Grief is natural, a normal reaction. But depression, suicidal thoughts, those come from the enemy."

"Oh?" Phoebe penciled digits onto her notebook paper.

"But if we can find the root of them, the lie the person is believing, they can be taken out."

"You're taking people out?" Phoebe said.

"No, we're taking the lies out."

"Right."

Phoebe sucked in her lips. She knew this sprouted from the evangelical fervor always brewing down the road, but hearing her mother say those things out loud frustrated her more than she cared to admit. She felt her mother watching her, waiting for her to acknowledge her proclamations. Phoebe moved to the next math problem.

"You're so cold," her mother said.

“What?”

“You’re so cold now. You never cry or show what you’re feeling.”

Phoebe looked up. Her mother didn’t look angry or as if she knew her words were jagged. She sliced the apple in careful, even strokes, her face betraying none of the hurt she had just claimed.

“I’m dealing with things differently than you,” Phoebe said. She pushed her math to the side and waited for her mother to quit circling whatever was bothering her.

“Everyone seems to be.” Diane clinked the plate of apple slices in front of Phoebe. “Want peanut butter?”

“I’m good.”

“Can I show you the prayer method we use?”

“I’m really good.” Phoebe watched her mother’s neck muscles strain under her skin. “We could go for afternoon walks or something, make ourselves tired enough to sleep at night.”

“We could. We could go right now.” A hopeful note in her mother’s voice.

“I was actually going to go hang out with some people after I finished this.” Under the table, Phoebe pushed her index fingernail into her palm.

“Tomorrow then?”

“Tomorrow.”

Diane turned to the sink. Phoebe crammed the remaining apple slices in her mouth and left whorls of sticky fingerprint on her homework as she filed it into her backpack. She would give up her solitary walks, but she wouldn’t stay for a full explication of how the enemy gained strongholds in the mind.

“Hey, Mom. Do you think I could take the car to Delia’s?” She couldn’t refer to the car as Jason’s, but his name still rang in the air like tinnitus.

Her mother’s hands stopped in the sink. A deep sigh.

“All right.”

Phoebe didn’t ask any more questions as she slung her backpack over her shoulder. Her phone sat hot in her pocket, a message to Evan ready to send promising she’d be over soon. She went to her mother and wrapped her arms around her waist, her temple rested lightly against the cotton covering her back. They stood for a moment, breathing the other in, more aware of each other than they’d been before, then Phoebe gave a perfunctory squeeze and let go.

Evan’s house was small and had no extra rooms, just two bedrooms, a kitchen, laundry room, shared bathroom, and a small living room. Each held minimal furniture and a few accessories, a newspaper or picture frame, just enough to make the home feel real.

Phoebe ran a hand along a recently dusted side table.

“The collages are in my room,” Evan said.

They passed the kitchen. Every counter and appliance gleamed. Spices and a tub of spatulas sat in neat rows next to the oven. A pleasant smell like rising bread mingled with cleaning product ammonia.

“My dad’s a neat freak.”

Phoebe nodded. “Is he here?”

“No, he gets back from his trip tonight. Next time, though, promise.”

She wasn’t sure why Evan was so set on her seeing his father. Maybe he thought someone should know they were spending time together, or maybe his father was lonely, too.

Evan pushed open a door to their left. Phoebe immediately knew the room was his. The walls were dark green like the bottom of a lake, and the room held a trace of that same neat tendency, the pictures on the wall edged in straight rows, the bed made. But here clutter could be found everywhere, arranged in obsessive order. Opposite the bed, a desk piled with bright clippings and sketch paper drew her eye to its shambolic heap.

“Oh, wow,” she said without meaning to.

Evan pulled at his shirt as Phoebe stepped toward the desk and the row of canvases lining the carpet next to it.

Misshapen bodies cut off at the waist perused landscapes of forest scenery and empty beaches and hospitals. Small faces in black and white peeked from windows of a mismatched cityscape populated by skyscrapers, adobes, and minarets.

“Oh my God. What is that?” Phoebe said.

A human body attached to a rat head snarled up from a small canvas on the carpet. He must have finished it recently.

“It’s like a demigod or something, right?”

Evan shrugged. “I don’t know, really.”

She crouched to study the canvases and imagined Evan carving the papers’ edges precisely with an Exact-o-knife. She couldn’t say the collages were good, she wouldn’t know, but they had certainly been cut and arranged with care. She almost reached out to touch the smooth surfaces.

On the next canvas, against a river background, a headless male body, pink and bare, cupped the Heart of Mary in the place where its own heart should be.

“Um,” Evan opened his mouth as if to explain.

“Oh. Is that Jason?”

“I guess. I did it after everything happened.”

Phoebe held her body still, her gaze on the heart, its flaming center and the red rays flashing outward. Her brother wasn't a martyr. She considered the hope that somewhere her brother was touching the heart of a woman with no personality, just the title of virgin. Was Jason a saint to Evan, pasted together in this twisted icon?

Evan hadn't cried over Jason in a while. But something about seeing Jason's sister, her face like untouched water, next to his canvas moved him. Phoebe turned to him, her fists clenched, back stiff.

“I'm sorry,” Evan said, something sloping down his cheek. “I wouldn't have shown you if I'd known.”

She wasn't making sense, but she couldn't help but hate the picture.

“That's not him.”

Evan wiped the renegade droplet and considered the canvas with a pinched mouth. How could he have created something so wrong? He walked the canvas to his closet, threw it in, and shut the door without waiting to see it land.

“Don't throw it!” Phoebe said.

“No, you're right.”

“Maybe. You don't have to throw away what you've made just because I don't like it.”

“If you don't like it, I don't want it.”

He held her hand the way her relatives did on the day of Jason's funeral. “I'm sorry.”

Over the past few months, Evan had become the kind of person who could truly apologize. The offended nearly always forgave him. The note of sincerity in his voice, some kind

of understanding in the pressure of his hands, convinced them. It was as if he had been holding in his contrition all his life, and their acceptance of his apology would allow him to finally relax.

But Phoebe said nothing. Evan waited for her expression to soften, but instead she moved toward him, clasped his other hand, pulled his long arms toward her. Her face kept a few features of her brother, the way her teeth set in her mouth, the wide arc of her lips, the slant of her cheekbones. Did she look in the mirror every morning and sigh for the shadow of her brother that lived in her face, in the setting of her bones?

Phoebe was tired of crying, tired of tears, tired of condolences. She needed to rid herself of the heaviness in her limbs, the pity that followed her wherever she went.

The canvases lay static. Evan read somewhere that art should come alive. But how could he craft a portrait, even a collage, of a dead friend, and not imbue that deadness in his painting? Evan hadn't doubted his purpose—to go lightly and go kindly—these past three months, and now Jason's sister walked into the room, told him his depiction of Jason was wrong, and pulled him toward her. Not soft or light. It took him a moment to realize he was glad his headless figure, even if the figure had no eyes, was in the closet.

The room closed around Evan and Phoebe, the bright magazine shreds and the neat photos on the wall hovering behind them, waiting for the inevitable. Outside a lawnmower thrummed, and a fox dashed through the front yard's bushes. Evan, overcome and a little ashamed of how quickly he was reciprocating Phoebe's approach, discarded three months' guilt in the closet with the rejected canvas.

Later, Phoebe lay and wondered, her head rested tentatively on Evan's shoulder, how good this could be until it caught up with her. She didn't resent Evan, the thoughtful movements

he had acquired, but she wasn't in love with him either. She had made a decision, and here they were. Beneath her, Evan sighed.

Evan could feel the electric currents firing through his brain. He and Phoebe were now roped by their loss and by what they had just done. He couldn't guess how close this would hold them, or if one led to the other. Phoebe wasn't, of course, on his radar during his childhood. She couldn't have been, as the code went. None of Jason's friends cared to think of her that way. Phoebe was easy company. She had loved climbing trees with Jason and his friends, even when she was probably too little to be climbing. She got herself up and she got herself down and made no trouble. Although, as if opening a latch in his brain unattended for years, Evan remembered a time when Phoebe pinned herself too high. At least seven years ago, it must have been. The live oaks looked just the same in his memory. They hadn't gone far into the nearby woods. The air had just chilled, and a rare look of panic wrenched Phoebe's features as she called down from a shaky limb, unable to scoot backwards or forwards without upsetting her current position. Jason had climbed, always spider-like, and handed her down to Evan, who waited to catch her foot and then her shoulders and lower her gently to the ground. She had thanked him quickly and had not mentioned it again. He wondered now if she remembered that moment, when she had called on him for help.

Evan couldn't look away from Phoebe, her mind already contemplating something else, something—he realized—he wanted to be a part of, even if it had to do with Jason. The water rushed through his memory, glinting and dimpling. He couldn't escape it if he wanted to.

###

What they left in the closet: How one minute Jason was swimming in the river and the next he was gone. How at first, his mother and father and sister did not believe the story his friends told, the friends who made breakfast and blinked away hangovers in the same moment Jason had drowned. That the officials, the park rangers, the doctors, the water safety websites said it happens all the time, even to good swimmers, strong young men.

That drowning people do not look like they are drowning. How hard it is to discern them from anyone else paddling water, pulling waves down from the surface. That the sensation of suffocation by water triggers an automatic response in the brain, takes over the brain's ability to direct the body's movements.

The fifteen yards between Jason and his friends. When they recounted the story, red and raw, Phoebe accused them of lying.

The spasm of his throat, the suffocation of his lungs, his paralyzed legs dangling straight. The throat that would not open in the water. Jason passing out, sinking, water pouring into his body.

The Brazos River, Texas, a common road trip destination of Jason's friends. Seniors mentally graduated by Thanksgiving Break. Their greed for adventure, neglecting their schoolwork for the conquerable bits of nature. The six-hour drive between their campsite in Texas and his bed at home. His mother's encouragement to have a good time.

The river that took him, splashing over limestone ledges into swirling pools, a thousand spike-finned sunfish twirling and turning, bass and crappie avoiding ill-colored temptations

hiding hooks, searching for the right bait to really sink into, a swirling blue mass of string, perhaps, or a shiny green plastic minnow.

The onlookers' stories, all the same: Jason and two others sliding into the river after breakfast, splashing sunrays on the river's surface, tanning on their backs. His strong strokes, then something wrong: a current, a cramp, some dirt-hidden trap. Jason gone.

###

Phoebe and her mother walked together after school every day. They set out in tennis shoes and left their small neighborhood to wander the borders of downtown. They talked on and off about school, Phoebe's future, the house, Diane's friends, running through familiar patterns of conversation until falling into comfortable silence broke only by one alerting the other to a colorful bird or waving to a passing acquaintance. Phoebe liked the walks. Her mother loved them. In moments of silence, she seemed to be having a spiritual experience. She would sigh or hold her palms to the sky like she was waiting for rain. Phoebe pretended nothing was happening until her mother brought up the women's group. Then Phoebe would grunt without commitment until Diane tired of sharing without reciprocation. Another silence would fall, and each settled into the murky churn of her thoughts. But the walks built a tacit understanding between Phoebe and Diane, an acceptance of the other, even if it wasn't approval.

The peace ended on a Sunday morning when Phoebe flat-out refused to get ready for church. She was putting her recent bond with her mother at stake, but she was tired of making excuses. She had muscled through the holiday services for her parents' sake, but a full month of early services had sapped her of willpower.

"I'm not saying it's not helpful for you, Mom."

"But you are saying I'm a liar." Diane rifled through the coat closet by the front door and searched for an overcoat with savage energy.

Phoebe stood at the end of the hall, looking into the living room. She would not cross over. "No, I'm not."

"Sure you are. If you think what we believe in isn't real, then we must be liars."

“That doesn’t make sense.”

Diane turned to her husband. “Kelly?”

Phoebe’s father looked at his daughter and shrugged. “If we make her go, she won’t pay attention.” He sat on the couch, hands clasped in front of him, eyes blank and directed at the carpet.

Diane sighed, then turned on her daughter. Her eyes were full. “I wish you would go, for me. For Jason.”

The clench of her teeth tightened. “No, thank you.”

Diane wiped at her eyes.

“Only God will help you heal, Phoebe. You know how important this is to me.” Her mother spoke softly.

“I’ll be fine.”

Her mother would get over it eventually—she would need to talk. Phoebe’s father wasn’t big on talking or listening to his wife these days, or staying at home at all. Plus, Phoebe’s mother needed someone to butt up against, to ask questions. She would find a way to fit Phoebe in next to her new devotion.

Before Jason died, Phoebe’s father would be asking their mother to hurry in half-amusement and half-frustration. He did not look up until they left without another word.

Phoebe tried walking to her circle of dying grass a few times after that, but mostly gave up the habit in favor of sleeping in. She needed the extra sleep. Her nights were interrupted by weird dreams about Jason and Evan and her parents and church, and almost always ended in her expulsion from the family. She would wake up angry and then remember nothing had happened yet. Well, Jason was dead, her mother was upset with her, and her father had checked out, but

she was doing what she wanted. She didn't need to escape.

###

A brief cold snap surrounded the house like a wet blanket. The weather man reported that the twenty-degree dip wouldn't last longer than the next forty-eight hours. Diane closed the curtains and lit a leftover Christmas candle. Their Christmas had passed in a shroud of mourning for their son, but she had still managed to receive that most popular of Christmas gifts, the generic holiday candle. Diane hadn't thought of it that way until Phoebe, even in her depressed state, laughed at the consistency of the gift. Diane never knew how to take Phoebe's laughing these days. She and Delia still holed up in Phoebe's room for hours at a time. No loud noise betrayed their activities except for an occasional muffled shout of laughter. Kelly was working late again, and the house breathed heavy with the heat on. She would distract herself by making dinner for the three of them.

Phoebe and Delia laid belly-down on the bed. In front of them, a computer played video compilations of people acting foolish. Singing girls fell from chairs and wacked their parents instead of piñatas. A little boy cursed in front of his mother. Someone woke a two-year-old from a nap with a soft "psst." The little girl turned her head from the pillow and whispered, "What?" The "t" on "what" was a breathy push, the separating of her little teeth pronounced and concerned. Phoebe and Delia whispered "What?" to each other for ten minutes, giggling and trying to get the "t" right, before clicking the next video and losing it again.

Delia was beautiful. Her mom let her dye her dark hair platinum blonde. Even if Phoebe dyed her hair too, she couldn't have Delia's wide brown eyes or Puerto Rican complexion.. They had been best friends since Phoebe's family moved to Goshen. Their friendship solidified when, in the seventh grade, their friend group, as seventh grade friends often do, decided Phoebe was

that week's outcast. Instead of ignoring her at lunch with everyone else, Delia found a spare projector cart and wheeled Phoebe around the cafeteria and the locker bay. They squealed with the cart wheels, and none of the teachers cared to stop them. No one had power over Delia, not even Phoebe.

After mindlessly browsing the internet, the two decided to rectify Phoebe's nail situation. They were weak and flaking. Delia chided Phoebe for never removing polish then they picked out new colors for both of them.

Delia wasn't a prier. She waited for Phoebe to tell her what she wanted whenever she was ready.

The polish bottles clinked as they scooped out glittering goop.

"I went over to Evan's the other day."

Delia looked up from painting her pinky finger. Her eyebrows peaked. She knew Evan and Phoebe saw each other occasionally, but they had never spent time at his house before.

"I went over to see his collages."

"Like, glue stick collages?"

"I think he uses fancy art supplies, but yeah. They were weird, and I don't think in the weird-is-good, artsy kind of way."

Delia laughed. Phoebe described a few of the pasted arrangements to Delia, who looked confused. Then she bridged to the part of her visit which included less art. Delia listened and then looked at her hands for a moment after Phoebe finished.

"I'm just imagining what your mom would say if she knew," she said and snorted.

"Oh my God, no." A few nervous chuckles emptied from Phoebe's chest. "He was really nice, but now I feel weird about it."

“Because of Jason?”

Phoebe nodded.

Delia pulled a magazine under her left hand and blew on the nails. She and Phoebe had gone to church together for years, but Delia wasn't one to share her opinion without a request. “I think you're old enough to decide what you want to do. As long as you're being safe and all that.”

“We are.” Phoebe grinned.

“So, are you a couple?”

“I don't know. I don't think so. Plus, he has to go to college next year.”

Delia tapped her finger pads on the magazine. “Would you want to bring him to my birthday party?”

Phoebe had forgotten about Delia's birthday being soon. February 10th. They had a tradition: Ignore all Valentine's parties, gather with friends in Delia's basement, and stay up all night acting much younger than they were. The group fluctuated from year to year. Last year alcohol made an appearance. The party wasn't a big deal to anyone but Delia and Phoebe, and a few close friends who had long been in attendance. It wasn't as if Jason and Evan hadn't come before. But “bringing” Evan was an implication.

“Yeah, if you want him there.”

“I was going to invite him anyway.”

“Sure.”

Their conversation turned to party preparation. Last year they'd covered the place in paper streamers and glitter that they spent days trying to get out of the carpet. No glitter this year.

With the plans made and their conversation lulled. Delia stretched out on the bed and closed her eyes.

“I’m not a bad person, am I?” Phoebe said.

“Phoebe, no.”

Delia understood the scope of her question. She was asking about Evan, about church, about her frustration with her parents. Delia was the only one Phoebe trusted to tell her the truth, even if she did have a dead brother.

Diane called the girls to dinner from the kitchen. She had put on music—a CD of cheery, classical music they’d owned for at least a decade. The strings brightened Phoebe’s mood and she shared a grin with Delia as they scooted their chairs in.

“Thank you for dinner, Mrs. Roland. It looks amazing.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad someone is here to appreciate it.”

Phoebe cringed.

“Delia,” Diane said, “Have you been looking at colleges yet?”

“I’ll probably go to Arkansas. It’s close enough to see my family, and they have a good animal sciences program.”

“You girls should consider looking around a bit. You’re both so smart.” She reached her hand over to the back of Phoebe’s chair.

Phoebe wasn’t sure what she would do. Going to Arkansas would mean staying with her friends, rooming with Delia, in-state tuition. More nights like tonight. But it would be easier to escape her family if she went out-of-state. No one would know about Jason unless she told them. Or about Evan.

Delia and Phoebe cleared the table and helped Diane scrub red sauce and garlic from the plates before slipping back to Phoebe's room. They groaned, stomachs at capacity, and sprawled on the blue comforter in exhaustion.

Diane called Kelly to ask when he'd be home, but he didn't pick up. She listened to his answering message. He spoke with energy she barely recognized. She hung up before the tone sounded.

When it was time to go, Delia gave Phoebe a tight squeeze. Delia didn't often give hugs or touch her friends, and she only hugged her family because the matter was non-negotiable. Delia gave the support Phoebe was too embarrassed to ask for, just as she had in the days following Jason's death. How would Phoebe move somewhere new without her?

Alone in her room, Phoebe texted Evan through heavy eyelids. They made plans to see each other again. As sleep hovered at the edge of Phoebe's mind, she thought of Jason applying for colleges last fall, groaning through application menus while her father surveyed each school's statistics with enthusiasm. She should call the admissions office and make sure they wouldn't send a letter to the house, acceptance or rejection. She shouldn't let her parents think about what could have been, about what he should be doing now. What would Jason say to her?

###

Evan and Phoebe met up more often after school, sat closer together. Diane knew something was happening, but she was too sullen to ask. Phoebe reminded Diane of her own mother. They looked nothing alike, her mother with her rail-thin body and thin, pointed nose, neither trait Phoebe carried, thank goodness. But when Phoebe rested her fists on her hip bones and gave Diane that look, the one she knew meant trouble, or when she backtalked her father, Diane couldn't help but see her own mother's fierce disposition. There was not a topic on which her mother didn't have an opinion, and she let no one boss her around, even her husband, though in those days letting your husband boss you around made you a good wife.

Diane pulled a few more books out of the junk corner behind her long coats where she hid those things she had no idea what to do with, her unbelongings. She was looking for an old prayer book that belonged to her mother. Diane wanted a guiding hand from the past, some validation that what she was looking for now had been found before.

Her mother would know. She was full of advice for being such a small person. Diane used to dread her calls. How is Jason doing? You're not putting him in daycare, are you? You have to let him follow you around, run errands with you, watch you interact with adults. That's the only way he'll grow up. Can't believe the way parents rearrange their lives around children these days. I never did that for you, did I? Diane would agree that no, her mother did not, to the derision of her friends' parents. And little Phoebe? Stubborn as ever? Diane would agree that Phoebe was stubborn, but then again she was two years old. Her mother had passed away when the kids were nine and ten. They remembered her, but Diane regretted they grew up without a proper grandma, the kind that would bake or take them out to eat and invite everyone over for

Christmas. She would have forced Phoebe to go to church.

“Prayer book, prayer book, prayer book,” Diane said to the empty house. A faded red spine in a cardboard box flashed into her mind. The attic, of course.

Diane yanked the white cord and unpacked the rough wooden stairs that lowered down. Cold rushed from the opening. She should’ve grabbed a sweatshirt, but it wouldn’t take too long.

In the attic, a city of boxes surrounded her, the same color as the unfinished walls. She began her search, lifting and ripping through tape untouched in years. In the corner, a pile of Jason and Phoebe’s old things: Stuffed animals, dolls, play houses.

Sweat collected on her hairline and crawled to her eyes as she moved pallets of picture frames and heavy-gutted suitcases. She would need to go through everything eventually. And what would she do with Jason’s old things? She avoided looking at the far corner. There was no point in keeping everything, much as she would’ve liked to. But she’d want to move one day, somewhere close to wherever Phoebe ended up with a job or a house or a partner. And then the load would be twice as heavy, her house a kind of graveyard. She wandered back to the corner and ran her hands through Jason’s old stuffed animals, the ones he raked his teeth over as a toddler and held onto till the end of elementary school. A bright blue elephant with huge plastic eyes and an orange shirt. Boxer was his name, if she remembered correctly. Under Boxer, a plastic tub of miniature race cars. She was such an idiot back then, didn’t know how to buy toys on the cheap, in bulk, or online. Those things cost her hundreds of dollars, all told. And what could she do with them now?

“I’ve seen enough,” Diane said. She rolled from her heels and sat on the floor. “I’ve been through enough. I deserve a break.”

Patience.

“Jason? Jason. Talk to me.” Diane stood and searched the attic, her vision blurred with sweat. Did she hear an audible voice or was it inside her head?

The voice didn’t speak again.

Diane looked back and forth, back and forth. The boxes and discarded lamps, dust-covered rugs and rollerblades did not move.

“Hello,” she whispered, but she’d already given up. Diane staggered forward and clutched a wall for balance.

The ladder steps remained mercifully in place as she descended. Once in the lukewarm shower, she rubbed her face with water and tried to remember the voice. It could have been Jason. It could have been God? Was that why the voice was all wrong? Surely not. She called to mind the last thing her son said to her: Bye, Mom. Love you. Then he strapped himself into the car seat that shuttled him to Texas, to his last days. She definitely remembered his voice. God, then? He had never spoken to her this way before, not at the ladies group or anywhere else. Surely His was a voice she would recognize.

###

After three weeks of skipping church, Phoebe's father left his silent brooding to confront her. He, Phoebe, and Diane were out for dinner, something usually reserved for celebrations. Diane had planned it, figured her husband couldn't stay late at work if they had plans. They headed to a local Mexican place, which made Phoebe roll her eyes. Her parents were cheap, and they loved Mexican food because the portions were huge and the prices low. Her mother overpronounced all the Spanish when she ordered. Her father used to tell Phoebe to ease up, she was learning. This time he said nothing as his daughter cringed. In the dimly lit booth, the three of them sucked water through straws until Diane asked Kelly the usual questions about work. His boss was still a jerk, and he was still tired. Another pause, and Phoebe clacked her fresh-painted nails on the table.

"Phoebe," her father said.

She pulled her hand back.

"How is school for you?"

"Not bad."

"Any good classes?"

"Not really."

Her father frowned. "Tell us what's going on with you."

Phoebe glanced to her mother, whose arched eyebrows told her to cough up an answer.

"It's the same old thing. School, hanging out with people, you know. Nothing interesting."

"Haven't you been hanging out with Evan, too?"

"Yeah, a bit."

“He’s a nice boy.” Her father leaned forward and watched her face.

The waiter arrived with their food. He set a hot pan of fajita meat and a plate of topping in front of Phoebe. She loaded a fork and shoveled the searing hot food into her mouth. Her eyes watered and she struggled to chew the burning strips. The waiter left and her parents commented on how good everyone’s food looked.

“Phoebe, we haven’t prayed yet,” her father said.

Phoebe swallowed her food and blinked. “Oh, sorry.”

Her father and mother traded disappointed looks before bowing their heads.

“Heavenly Father,” he began.

Phoebe stared into her hands until it was over. Her father was so hypocritical. He would know what she was up to if he was ever home. And acting like he and her mother were on the same team, please. He hadn’t done anything for her in months.

“Amen.”

Her father took one bite before starting in. “It seems like you’re forgetting some of what we’ve taught you.”

Phoebe denied it, but he continued, “Maybe you should go to church again. Your mother has a point about it helping, you know?”

Phoebe couldn’t answer. Was he just doing this to score points with her mother? Since when did he care about her spiritual life?

“I just care about you, Phoebe.”

She set her elbow on the table and leaned into her fist. “I’m fine, seriously.”

Her father’s bottom jaw moved forward, but he didn’t let his anger through. “You haven’t been going to church, you’ve been staying out late, and you’ve been hanging around Evan a

whole lot.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“We can’t help but wonder what the two of you are doing together.”

Phoebe looked to her mother, whose face had twisted in guilt. “We’re friends. And it has nothing to do with not going to church. If you want to know something, you can just ask, you know. And church doesn’t do anything for me, I’m sorry, but that’s just who I am. I don’t really believe in it anymore.”

Her mother’s eyes filled, a prelude to a plea for her daughter not to cause her so much pain.

“And I’m not going to stay at home forever. I want to do normal things again, feel like a normal person. I’m a junior in high school. I stay out late sometimes. It’s really not a big deal.”

The waiter walked toward their table then changed direction. Her mother had shed a tear.

“You’re moving too fast, Phoebe. You need to take time for yourself, to heal. I know it’s hard to believe in God right now, but it doesn’t mean He’s not there.”

Phoebe scooped refried beans and plopped them back on her plate. How could she argue with two people who had just lost their son? “I’m sorry, but no. I’m not going. I’ll figure it out myself.”

Her father still leaned forward, eyes locked onto her, as if he could not believe what he was seeing. The waiter passed by and asked how the food was. Phoebe had lost her appetite but gave the waiter a vague smile. It wasn’t his fault.

Her mother reached across the table and gripped Phoebe’s elbow. “Don’t you want to hear God? To hear Jason again, if you can?”

Phoebe pulled her arm away. Her mother had lost it.

The dinner ended with little conversation. Diane urged Phoebe to eat her food. Phoebe insisted she was full. Her mother asked her father a few questions about his work trip the next weekend. She didn't look at Phoebe again except to give her a small smile with her lips pushed together, eyes full.

In the car, Phoebe texted Evan. Her phone's light reflected in the car window, blocking out the dark landscape beyond the car. She licked the salt left on her lips and readjusted the Styrofoam box with her leftovers. In front of her, her father directed the car home. Phoebe couldn't understand him. Why care now, when she and her mother had only been secondary to his need to escape? She made plans to meet Evan after school the next day. They were going to go hiking. Her parents would cringe if they knew. Outdoor adventures had been out of the question since Jason's death. The phone vibrated in her lap, and her mother half looked back at her. Phoebe switched the phone to silent and turned the screen off. She needed to forget this, to forget everything. Outside, the misshapen shadows of trees swept by, unremembered in their details until the morning light.

PART TWO

###

The grand beginning of the universe lasts 180 seconds. Within the first three minutes, all of the chemicals necessary for light are present, but the universe is too hot to shine. Instead, the next 240,000 years are spent cooling. Opaque, thick as milk, nothing sees nothing. Atoms crash together with enough force to break up into a dense plasma of protons, neutrons, and electrons that refract the light. Not a bright flash of stars or a sun bursting into being, no dramatic opera flare, but a slow-lit fog, thick and heavy clouds through clotted space.

No energy, no movement, just stalling. Matter cools and condenses until electrons combine with nuclei to form neutral atoms. The absorption of free electrons rids the universe of its blindfold. Space remains dark, but is transparent. Photons travel through the milky-thick expanse. They whisper their secrets to scientists who will hear the echoes in the dark, eons and eons later, radiation from the cosmic microwave background.

Four billions years later, the universe emerges from its dark age. The universe (and the multiverse) grows. Inside our pockets are more pockets, gas-full. The gas clumps condense and the very first stars and galaxies gasp into being, hot balls of nothing but hydrogen and helium. Ultraviolet light beams outward, destroying neutral hydrogen in its wake, clearing the air for its own brilliance. Protogalaxies one million time more massive than the sun, spanning up to 100 light years across, dot the primordial soup. Dark matter bloats their bellies.

Another round of stars rip open, heavier with metal. Huge stars, struck with gigantism, too big to last long. Another. Another. They burn and fizzle, crackling over the universe into supernovas. Searing bright, hatching, stretching, sparking, and falling. Ashes to ashes. Stardust to stardust. Collapsing and birthing and burning and collapsing and birthing and burning,

ringing around each other like a child's game, pulled by gravity and those galaxies you love to watch, to sing about, to write into science fiction, to dream of. Clusters, superclusters, jewels in the dark. Exploding and screaming and hot and beautiful and gone.

Smaller stars form, swing together, spiral into galaxies spiraling into each other. The Milky Way spins and flattens, its arms stretch and curl. Somewhere within the behemoth a primal supernova calls our solar system into being. A sun flares, and soon a crowd of planets and comets and asteroids swing around it, colliding and rocking, circling on unseen pathways.

At last, the primordial Earth appears, a misshapen bulb of gas molting and spewing and seething, its core glowing like a hot coal. Gas and dust condense to oceans of magma and pitch, brawling and sinking, wrapped in steam and vapor. The surface cools and crust stretches around its gashes and heights. Water crawls over the surface, collects in pools, lakes, oceans.

The earth cools, a hunk of rock and water, steaming and raining in an endless cycle. The wait, though much shorter than all that has come before it, stretches on. No life, just the elements battling in the sky. Thunder and lightning grapple, then subside. The clouds part and the mists drift, revealing a swaths of ocean surrounding first land. Wind and water sculpt the stone into surreal shapes and then shave them back. Shadows move between the hills, a wave of sundials, and the wastes wait for another day the same as the one before.

###

A warm front blew in from North Texas, a break from February's monotonous cold. Outside, the trees still seemed to shiver. Their branches drooped, ugly and bare. Nothing was left from fall's amber beauty. Kelly sighed, placed his hands on the steering wheel, but didn't start the car. His colleagues emptied out of the parking lot around him, waving as they passed in identical cars. Where would he drive today? For the last month, he'd been going up through Bentonville and over the state line to Missouri, about an hour from his house. There, he would choose a bar or a movie theater and wait for the hands on his watch to click over a few hours before heading home. But the past few days had been different. He'd been driving around Fayetteville and Springdale, looking at the towns as if he might not see them again, noticing the sad trees and the squat little houses. Today he'd probably end up somewhere in Fayetteville, a restaurant or one of the lonelier coffee shops, before he went home. It was risky to stay this close to the house, but he would leave tomorrow. Diane would never know.

That was how he let things stay for now. He supported his wife, let her do whatever she wanted, did whatever she asked. He even intervened with Phoebe on her behalf. But he was tired. His back hurt. And he had nowhere to go.

Kelly's car shuffled down College Avenue, packed in by rush hour traffic. The college town reminded him of his son, the one who had planned on moving to this school just next year. Who was probably going to major in Business, who almost made it to adulthood. Around him, college kids talked in the cars with their friends. They rolled their windows down in hopes of catching a bit of the warm air. Rap and country music escaped from the gaps. Nothing to worry about except making it to class in time, memorizing flash cards, and hoping for snow days. Kelly

hated them. He hated his house, too, the one he had worked for and bought himself. He had redone the tile twice, haggled furniture prices with tired salespeople, and had been planning a porch in the backyard before Jason died. Jason. Whenever he went home, Jason's room stood in daunting silence. Kelly hadn't gone in since it happened, and his wife wouldn't stay out.

Kelly needed a new horizon. He pulled into the next parking lot, fished his cell out phone from his coat pocket, and dug through his email. United Airlines, United Airlines. There. The confirmation email listed his flight details and the customer service number.

Kelly dialed the number. He would drive to Florida.

"Hi, I need to cancel my flight...There's a fee? All right, that's fine. Go ahead... Yes, I'm sure." Kelly rattled off his birthday and spelled out R-O-L-A-N-D. "That's me. Thank you very much."

He drove around for another hour, rolled the windows down a half inch like the kids and tried to appreciate the beauty of the towns as he passed through them. The smell of gasoline and campfire drifted into his car. He rolled the window back up. Renovated houses lined the neighborhood streets between stretches of strip malls. Odd sculptures Kelly didn't care to understand covered electrical boxes and peeked out from behind brick buildings. Trails laced the northwest corner of the state in an elegant knot. None of it made him want to stay. He pulled away from Fayetteville and onto the road to Goshen. He needed to pack.

Kelly left the next day. He told Diane he wanted to drive to Florida through Mississippi and Alabama. He hadn't seen pines that tall in years. It might do him some good. She agreed and asked him to be careful.

Phoebe didn't even notice her father leave. She and Delia were busy with preparations for the party on Friday night. Soda bottles lined the refrigerator door, and the plans for alcohol had

been confirmed. Phoebe and Delia drove to Walmart for cake ingredients, then back again for snacks and party hats. The basement transformed from a plain room with bookshelves, a couch, and a TV to a nest of blinding blue-and-purple. Balloons shouted HAPPY BIRTHDAY! and the streamers Phoebe had bought and hung herself covered every inch of the walls.

Delia's parents watched them ferry food and decorations up and down the stairs with amusement.

Delia and Phoebe answered with no thank you's, no matter how full their arms were. Delia's parents had offered to take care of the food as long as the girls did everything else. They would order pizza, and her father promised his famous pasteles, Puerto Rican tamales. They were Delia's favorite, and her father was happy to have a crowd compliment him on his delicious cooking.

When they finished, Phoebe ran her fingers over the mass of rough paper taped to the wall. "Beautiful."

The day of the party, Evan and Phoebe drove out to Hobbs State Conservation Park for a short after school hike. Evan had sounded weird when he asked her to go on the phone, but Phoebe couldn't tell if anything was wrong when she saw him. She figured he wanted to spend a little time alone before the party. They changed in the school bathrooms, then met at his car. Phoebe lobbed her backpack into the backseat and settled into his Santa Fe. It was a bit beat up, but ran fine.

Evan took the windy roads to the park faster than he should have, but Phoebe didn't seem to notice.

"Wait till you see Delia's basement," Phoebe said.

“Why?”

“I might have gone overboard decorating.” “You? Overboard?”

“Watch yourself,” Phoebe said, but she kept smiling.

At the park, they hustled to the path. Rock formations like crude sculptures of animals rose as they passed out of the tree-filled area and nearer to the rock-face. Out there, Evan felt far from Goshen, though the quiet town waited a mere hour and a half away. Rivulets in the rock climbed the face to their left. To the right, a cliff, and beyond, brown billowing to the horizon. A few patches of green poked through, but this part of the state hadn’t survived the winter much better than Goshen. The Ozarks were nothing compared to the Rockies or Appalachians. The mountains were squat, friendly. Hikers called them the Ozark Hills.

Phoebe tried to take a picture with her phone, but it wasn’t the same. The park smelled like wet pebbles. It must have rained recently. The temperature climbed to fifty degrees, and sweat budded on Phoebe’s back as they made their way over the rocks.

“Can I put this in your backpack?” She gestured toward her fleece jacket. “Sure.”

Phoebe stowed the jacket then gave Evan a quick kiss on the cheek. He smiled back at her, but the emotion didn’t reach his eyes.

They walked in silence for another half mile before Phoebe spoke up. “You okay?”

“Oh yeah, I’m fine. Just thinking.”

Phoebe pulled a section of hair out of her face and met Evan’s eyes. “Anything interesting?”

“I’m thinking about your parents, actually.” “Oh boy.”

Trees crowded the trail and roots snaked across the rocks. Phoebe focused on breathing as they headed up a steep incline. She held her knees as she pushed up the jagged stones that

formed a precarious stair. At the top, she waited for Evan and caught her breath. Wind scraped across her bare cheeks and numbed her nose. But Phoebe didn't mind. She felt alive. Adrenaline pumped through her chest and she could taste the sweat on her lips. Even in this wind, she wanted to run.

Phoebe looked out over the cliff again. The horizon was so big she thought she could see it curving over the surface of the earth. Between the horizon and where she stood, a huge basin scooped down into the earth. Phoebe guessed a thin trail of moving water threaded its bottom. She rolled her weight to the balls of her feet, and for a moment, she wanted to jump from the edge and find out.

Evan climbed up beside her.

"I'm thinking about the talk you had with them a few days ago. It seems like they've guessed what's going on."

Oh right, they had been talking about her parents. "You mean what's going on with us?" Evan nodded.

"I doubt it. Even if they do, it's none of their business."

Evan motioned to start walking again. Trees creaked in the wind, and something skittered in the leaves. The thrill threatened to leave her.

"I'm not saying they're right, but I can understand why'd they'd be concerned." "And why's that? Because I have a life again?"

"No, you know what I mean."

She knew Jason was dead, and that he had been close to Evan. And that it had only been a few months. She surveyed Evan's face again. A deep frown twisted his mouth. He was serious, and he wasn't going to change his mind. Behind him, trees with few leaves dotted the flatter

parts of the cliff face. Everything brown, everything dead. They had only been out here for ten minutes.

“We should head back,” she said. “Phoebe.”

“I’m serious, Evan. I need to get ready for the party, and I don’t want to be late.”

They tramped back down the slope they had just scaled. Phoebe didn’t speak. As they reached the car, Phoebe fished for her jacket in Evan’s backpack and pulled it out with a frustrated sigh.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She closed the car door with a loud thunk.

“I’m tired of people thinking that I can’t handle myself or make my own decisions. My parents with church or dating, and now you. What would you like me to change?”

“Nothing.” Evan started the car. It creaked backward over the gravel.

Phoebe crossed her arms and watched the bushes chafe against each other in the rough wind as the car began its descent.

“I’m going to do whatever I want to,” she said to the window.

“I know.” A pause. “But I don’t think I should come to the party tonight.” “What? Why?”

Evan gripped the wheel with both hands. “I don’t think we should be seen together so soon. Delia’s parents might talk, and people will ask your parents why you’re out dating, especially someone like me.”

“I can’t see you at a party?”

“This is a small town. People talk. I just don’t want your parents to be angry with you—or me.”

Phoebe pushed the cuticles on her left thumbnail back with her right thumbnail, then did the same for the rest of her finger nails. She stared straight ahead as she said, “We’re not even dating, Evan. We’re just hanging out.”

Evan’s face changed in her periphery.

The car jostled in their seats, but Phoebe didn’t put a steadying arm near Evan. The cold seeped through her boots and into the bones of her feet.

###

Phoebe arrived at Delia's a few hours before the festivities were set to begin. Delia wore a bright red party dress.

"Happy birthday!" Phoebe handed over a red envelope which held the concert tickets she had been hoarding for the past few months. She had bought them a few weeks after Jason's death. It was Phoebe's first movement toward happiness. Delia didn't stop grinning for the next twenty minutes.

Phoebe didn't bring up Evan's absence as friends started arriving for the party. This day wasn't about her. But when Delia brought down the pasteles and shut the basement door for good, Phoebe broke out the alcohol. They had been slowly smuggling in bottles, and the rest came in guests' purses and backpacks. The basement was soon littered with empty cans and half-finished bottles. A comedy movie played on the TV at a low volume while Phoebe and Delia worked the playlist. Phoebe floated through the basement, laughing and playing games, talking about the teachers and the other kids at school. She loved feeling weightless, how the sharp edges of her life softened. No one asked how she was really doing, or how her parents were making it. The assurance she searched for seemed to come up under her, and for once she could make plans with her friends. They made the kinds of plans that don't stick, but feel good when you're making them. They could all go to a school in Montana and climb the mountains every day, or share an apartment in New York City. Most of them knew they would end up at Arkansas, but they weren't lying either. In Delia's basement, surrounded by music and food and hazy happiness, what Delia and Phoebe and their friends most wanted was to start the rest of their lives with an adventure somewhere far away.

The first guest left halfway through the night. She had an early start the next morning. Only then did Delia glance around the room and ask Phoebe where Evan was.

“He doesn’t want to be seen with me in public, I guess,” Phoebe said. “He thinks my parents will be mad at me if I’m dating this soon.”

“I mean, they already are,” Delia said.

“Exactly. But whatever. We weren’t even dating anyway so how could he break up with me?” Phoebe lifted the end of her beer bottle and finished it off. “I don’t care.” The assurance which had eased the tension in her body started to disappear with talk of Evan. She turned the conversation to gossip of a new relationship between their friend Alex and another girl. How would they make it work in a town like theirs? They’d probably have to keep it secret until they started college, at least, and that was a long time to wait.

Phoebe drifted across the room, catching up with people she hadn’t talk to since Jason. Talking was easier with the alcohol in her blood. A few hours into the party, Delia’s friends from church arrived. They pounded down the stairs then yelled “Happy birthday!” Katie, a brunette with hair almost to her waist, produced a bottle of Grey Goose and whooped. They were from Fayetteville, and a lot of fun. Phoebe threw back shots with Delia and Katie, and coughed at the burn. Katie interviewed her, asking about her life in Goshen, and shared stories about the crazy stunts she pulled with her Fayetteville friends. They had apparently found a way to climb to the roof of the university’s library. Phoebe liked Katie and her friends, even if they were loud a little wild. She danced with them, and swung her hips back and forth as she hummed along. Her cheeks hurt from smiling, but she couldn’t stop.

Body heat thickened the air. Phoebe fanned herself, then slipped through the basement door into the backyard. The moon slid across the night like a scythe. A freezing gust cooled the

sweat droplets on her back. Delia and a few others joined her. They watched clouds pool and cover the moon without speaking, but Phoebe felt the bond between them thicken. A warm glow enveloped Phoebe, and she passed the night considering how much she loved everyone. “You’re just so nice, you know?” she repeated to Katie several times. Katie laughed and thanked her for each compliment. Phoebe’s praise of Delia was even greater. She was the best friend anyone could have. An angel to the core. Other attendees joined in and Delia had to disperse the circle with a good-spirited, “Yes, thank you, thank you. You guys are great, but you have to stop. Please shut up.”

Guests trickled out until three in the morning. Phoebe and Delia sent a trash bag of bottles and cans with one of the boys out the basement door. When the basement was empty, they did a preliminary pickup, then moved to Delia’s room for bed.

Phoebe flopped onto the full bed without brushing her teeth. She and Delia barely made it through two sentences of sleepy conversation before they drifted off. Phoebe slept and didn’t dream.

###

Phoebe headed home at ten the next morning. She and Delia finished cleaning, then she left to go finish her homework. Overhead a few cloud tendrils wrapped together near the horizon, but otherwise, the sky was empty and blue. The sun warmed the back of Kelly's legs, and she almost took off her jacket. The shades of brown surrounding her seemed almost lovely. Phoebe chalked her optimism up to still being a little drunk from the night before. Mercifully, her head felt fine.

Phoebe's street approached, and she turned down it with a sigh. Back to real life. Halfway down the street, a loud thump and a sound like cracking wood burst through the air. Phoebe covered her ears and looked over to the empty lot which led to her wood. The grass seemed to be uneven. No, it was the ground, a crack in the ground. She followed it into the forest, and half-screamed when, the ground opened in a huge gash. The hole was exactly where the patch of dead grass she used to sit by had been. Phoebe dropped to her knees and crawled toward the edge. The opening was oblong, but deep, and seemed to empty back under the ground. Phoebe threw a leg over the edge, then pulled back. Stupid idea, considering the earth had just opened up. There was no telling how stable it was now, or if it would move again.

She pulled her phone out of her back pocket and clicked on Evan's number.

Evan didn't seem put off that she had called. "Probably a sinkhole."

Phoebe had never heard of sinkholes in Goshen, much less Arkansas.

"Richland Creek and the White River aren't that far off. They could have eroded through the bedrock. You should really call someone to check it out."

"I will."

As Phoebe hung up, curious neighbors rustled in the distance, then picked their way to the sinkhole. Soon three of them gathered with Phoebe near the hole. They gasped and covered their mouths as they stepped out of the woods. Mrs. Parsons, the owner of the house opposite the Roland's, swore under her breath then apologized.

"It's really fine," Phoebe assured her.

"I was making breakfast and I must have jumped a foot in the air when this cracked open. I swore the end was coming."

The other two neighbors agreed and shared stories of their dogs barking and the TV blanking for half a second.

Phoebe called her mother, who soon arrived. She and the neighbors debated who the empty lot belonged to, and if it included the trees, one of which had been pulled under.

"We need to call the Home Owners Association immediately," Diane said. The other neighbors bobbed their heads.

It turned out the owners lived in New Jersey, and were going to send out an insurance adjustor and county emergency management officials. Back at the house, Diane searched the yard for any give. Phoebe laughed at her mother stomping around the yard like a toddler very concentrated on its tantrum. After ensuring the yard's stability, Diane called Kelly. He didn't pick up, probably because he was driving, so she left a message explaining what had happened and promised to text him pictures.

Phoebe moved to the kitchen to finish her homework. Diane talked to her about the sinkhole in between calling her friends to fill them in with the same information. Not a single development occurred that Diane wasn't aware of. Phoebe asked questions and oohed appropriately at each new step. The sinkhole was roped off, and work on the area was put off

until a full investigation of the cause could be conducted. The homework didn't take too long, and Phoebe liked seeing her mother busy and talkative. She hadn't talked to some of these friends in a while, and finally, they had a topic that wasn't related to Jason. Diane got to feel sorry for someone besides herself, even if they were strangers somewhere in Delaware.

Kelly didn't call Diane back that day, or reply to the pictures of the sink hole. He was usually good about keeping in touch with his wife. By nighttime, Diane was worried. She padded down the hall and peeked into Phoebe's room. The light under her bathroom door was lit and water ran from a faucet. She stepped into the room and knocked shave-and-a-haircut on the bathroom door.

Phoebe was mid-face wash, her hair tucked up in a bun and pulled from her face by a cloth headband. She leaned against the frame and wiped her face on her sleeve.

"Sorry to bother you. Have you heard from your father today?"

"Nope. Why, what's up?"

Diane didn't want to upset her daughter, but she couldn't hide the worry in her face.

"Mom, what's wrong?"

"It's fine, he just hasn't texted or called me at all today."

"That's weird." Phoebe scrunched her toes on the carpet. "I'm sure he's just been busy driving."

"He has to stop for restroom breaks, doesn't he?"

"Maybe he brought an empty bottle," Phoebe joked.

Diane gave half a laugh.

"For real, I'll text him and see if he says anything," Phoebe said.

Phoebe had just slid into bed half an hour later when a reply pinged on her phone.

“I’m good. Just made it to hotel in Georgia,” the text reads.

“You should call Mom,” she typed back.

“Will later.”

Phoebe didn’t want to think about what might be happening, but she couldn’t keep her mother worried about her father’s safety. Down the hall, she leaned into her parents’ room.

“Hey, I heard from Dad. He just got to his hotel in Georgia. He says he’ll call you later.”

“Thanks, Phoebe.” Her mother had pulled the comforter up under her elbows and was reading something the title of which Phoebe tried not to read. The lightning on the cover suggested something on harnessing Christian spirituality.

Phoebe turned to leave.

“Phoebe.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve been thinking about the sinkhole.” She patted the empty side of the bed.

“What about it?” Phoebe moved next to her mother and pulled the blankets over her feet.

“I think it’s an answer, to me, from God. I’ve been praying for some indication of where I should go next.”

Phoebe’s stomach turned at the automatic formulation of a joke about an invitation to join her brother in the ground.

“I know it seems silly, but I think He’s telling me to get it together, to be ready. That something new is going to come out of this whole ordeal. The ground breaking so that grass can grow.” Diane’s eyes watered and Phoebe had to look away from the raw emotion. That’s not how grass worked. In the bathroom, she spotted a full laundry basket threatening to spill, the cup of make up brushes next to the sink. All the small trinkets and photos her parents had collected

stood together on the bedside table. Souvenirs of an ordinary life.

“Well?”

“Sorry, what?”

“Do you think I’m being silly?”

“I think that you should do whatever helps you.”

Her mother’s expression hardened. “No, really, tell me what you think. You won’t offend me. I’m listening.”

Phoebe sighed. It didn’t matter what her mother promised. These conversation always ended badly.

“Fine. I think that you really believe God is speaking to you. And there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“He did speak to me. Out loud. I was cleaning up the attic, and I heard the word ‘patience.’ This time I know it was out loud. You could have heard it if you had been there.”

“And I don’t doubt you really heard it. Whether it was because your brain wanted to hear it, or because you thought of the word so clearly you tricked yourself into thinking it was audible, I don’t know.”

Diane’s eyebrows were high. It was a familiar look. Phoebe knew she was ready to argue.

“So do you think everything is a big coincidence, then?”

“I think that—yes, I do. I think that things just happen, and that’s the way it is. Sometimes life’s great, and sometimes it sucks.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Diane shakes her head.

“But who knows? Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe God really is speaking to you.” Phoebe stuffed her hands underneath her thighs and looked down at her sweatpants. She was bad at

diplomacy.

Her mother joined her on the bed. “And Jason?”

“What about him?”

“That was just an accident to you?”

Phoebe looked at her mother, the creases at the corners of her eyes, the wildness that held them so open, the corners of her mouth always pulled down, betraying her pain. “If it’s not an accident, then I don’t want to know the God who let it happen. I will never blame you, and I respect your faith, but I can’t have any. I just can’t.” Before her mother could reply, Phoebe leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “I love you, okay? And I’m going to bed.”

“I love you, too, honey.”

Phoebe climbed off the bed and tried to forget the near-mania in her mother’s expressions. She shouldn’t have said anything at all. Every mention of God only brought her mother closer to the edge. And Phoebe didn’t know what would happen once she crossed over.

###

At first light, Phoebe was out of the house and down the street. The rising temperature and earlier sunrises were too tempting to ignore in bed any longer. It was easier to be okay outside in the sun, especially when little green buds speckled the trees and bushes and the wind felt like a breeze and not a slap. Her steps lead her toward the sinkhole before she decided where to go.

The ground gaped as if someone had driven a giant knife into the ground and then tried to scoop as much earth out as possible. Phoebe dropped to her hands and knees and crawled to the edge. Curtains of dust dropped to the bottom. She hesitated, then, drawn by the dark bottom, hung her legs into the chasm. The slope was manageable until the last few feet. Phoebe looked up at the patch of sky above her, a fresh blue, then turned to the dark earth. She could only wiggle a few feet into the slit in the earth. She turned on her phone flashlight and swung it around. Dirt, roots, rocks, nothing interesting. The ground was damp here. Phoebe shifted backward for a better view.

Something hard dug into the heel of her palm. Phoebe rolled onto her feet and investigated. Under the light, she found the perpetrator, an oddly shaped rock jutting from the ground. Phoebe dug her fingers in the earth and pried the rock from the ground. Clumps of mud stuck to its inner angles. She began scraping the dirt from its crevices, then froze as footsteps approached the hole.

“Who’s down there?” A loud voice demanded.

Phoebe backed into the light. A man in a high visibility vest stood with his hands on his hips leaned over the sinkhole’s edge.

“What exactly do you think you’re doing?”

Phoebe apologized and explained she was just looking around. She steadied a foot on the wall and prepared to climb.

“Be careful!” the man shouted.

Phoebe teetered, then held up her find. “Could you hold this while I get back up?”

The man dropped to his knees then reached over the edge with a sigh. “Fine.”

Phoebe stretched as high as she could and handed the stone to him. She finished climbing without a misstep. He waited with a stern expression. At the top, Phoebe decided he must have been fifty, but it was hard to tell with people who worked outside all day. His skin was deeply tan even in February, and his mustache close-shaved and patchy. Phoebe swiped at the dirt that covered her jeans, shirt, shoes, and hands. She needed to get home and clean up before her mother saw.

“We’re about to start surveying this area, so you better clear out,” the inspector said, frowning.

“Right, sorry. Thanks for holding that.” She motioned toward the stone.

He shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t give this back.”

“What?”

“It’s part of the sinkhole, and it’s not your property. We’ll put it in the report that you moved it from its original location.”

Phoebe squinted at the investigator. She had no reason to fight for it, but she wanted it. She had found the hole after all.

“Fine.”

“It’s protocol. There’s nothing I can do about it.” He reached into his pocket and

produced a pen and small notebook of damp-warped paper.

“It’s really fine,” Phoebe said, and headed home. She looked back at the man before stepping out of the woods. He scribbled away on his notepad. On the street, more men in visibility vests unpacked a white truck full of what Phoebe assumed was inspection gear.

At home, Phoebe’s mother was already on the phone with a neighbor. Curious inquirers, it seemed, directed their calls to Diane. Phoebe waved at her mother and walked swiftly to her bedroom before she could ask what had happened. Her phone had no notifications from Evan. Good, he didn’t take her call as an invitation back into her life. But then again, he was the one who broke up with her, if you could call it breaking up.

Neither Diane nor Phoebe heard from Kelly again that weekend. Diane rationalized he could simply be busy with his work trip, or that he forgot his charger. But by Monday night, she admitted to herself that this was intentional, and he probably wasn’t coming back. She looked through his drawers for proof of his permanent departure. Were more than a few t-shirts missing? Did he take all of his favorite jackets The drawers betrayed nothing except for painful organization, each shirt and pair of underwear folded in a perfect square. Somehow that was worse, as if they were asking what she was fussing for.

After school on Wednesday, Phoebe threw her backpack on the floor.

“So is Dad ever coming back?”

Diane whipped around at the sound.

“I don’t know. And you shouldn’t throw things.”

Phoebe cast a “sorry” in her mother’s direction then popped the refrigerator open.

Diane continued double-checking the credit card bill. Usually she zipped through this task, catching errors quickly and remedying them with harsh phone calls. But today the total

seemed slow her down. She imagined herself trying to pay this amount by herself. She held plenty of jobs before the kids were born: a stewardess, behind the counter at a video store, temp positions at vendors to Wal-Mart and real estate agencies. But that was back when she had only supported herself. Now her name was tied to cars and a house, and Phoebe was about to be a senior. She had to wait it out. Everyone needed time alone, time to think, to connect with God. Maybe he just needed space. She mouthed a quick prayer that he would open his heart and hear God's plan.

Phoebe plunked into the seat at the kitchen island, huffing at every noise and slamming her plate.

"Phoebe—"

The doorbell rang before Diane could chide her daughter. She gave her a meaningful look and hurried to the front of the house.

A woman in a suit waited with a folder. The sun was hot today, and a bird chirped obnoxious hee-haws from the yard's tallest tree. She smoothed her hair back one last time.

"Hi there, is this the Roland residence?" the woman asked Diane. She pulled her folder to her side and stood up straight.

"Yes, yes it is."

"I'd like to speak to your daughter if she's home."

"All right, come in."

"Phoebe!" Diane yelled as she motioned to the living room.

Phoebe sat across from the woman who introduced herself as Ava. What had she done? She couldn't think of anything. Ava looked about the same age as her mother,

"I'm from the University of Arkansas geosciences department," she said.

Phoebe pushed on her cuticles and nodded.

“Can I confirm that you were at the sinkhole on Saturday morning, and that you removed an object from the scene?”

“I did.”

“Well, the insurance company and the Arkansas Geological Group called us in to take a look at the piece of rock, and it turns out it’s a fossil.”

“Like an arrowhead?”

“No ma’am, a fossil. At first we thought it was an invertebrate—cephalopods are most common around here, but then we sent it to the lab, and it looks like you found the second dinosaur fossil ever in the state of Arkansas.”

“Oh wow.” Phoebe wondered for a moment if she was still drunk from Delia’s party.

“Yes ma’am, it looks like another piece of the *Arkansaurus* identified by a Mr. Friday in the 70s. The *Arkansaurus* is an ostrich-like dinosaur we believe to have lived in the Early Cretaceous period. We’re not sure if this particular fossil is the same species, *Arkansaurus fridayi*, or a slight variation. We called the owners of the property where the fossil was found and explained the situation. If this is a different species, they would be credited with the find and given the opportunity to name it. They insisted that honor fall to you should the species be new. We won’t know for a few weeks. We are going run a few more tests and see if we can match the fossil up with to the *Arkansaurus* toe bone fossil.”

“What kind of bone is this one?”

“That’s hard to guess just by looking. Like I said, we have to continue testing. If you give me your contact information, I would love to keep both of you updated on the process.”

After taking down their information, Ava handed Diane and Phoebe a couple pamphlets

on previous fossil finds in Arkansas.

“Here’s my card. Call me if you have any questions.”

Phoebe and Diane thanked her.

“I told you!” Diane said as they walked back to the kitchen.

“What?” Phoebe slid back into her chair and picked up an apple slice.

“It’s a gift. From God. Right out of the ground like I told you.” Diane placed both hands on the island and smiled like she’d just predicted the winning lottery numbers.

“A dinosaur fossil?”

“And we get to name it.”

“Maybe.”

“I thought y’all didn’t believe in evolution, though.”

Diane cut her eyes at Phoebe. “There’s no reason God couldn’t create dinosaurs.”

Phoebe spent the rest of the afternoon rolling her eyes good-naturedly at her star-eyed mother. She wished she had taken a picture of the fossil while she’d had her hands on it, not that she would have been able to discern its shape from the photo. She read through Ava’s glossy pamphlets. Most of the fossils found in Arkansas were invertebrates, shell-like organisms swirled like galaxies, the hundred-legged creepers of the ocean, hollow pasta noodles. What an odd marker of life lived some millennia ago, the shells of something she’d never meet sprinkled in the earth for careful diggers to cherish and study, something that moved, maybe crawled from the looks of the small legs, pulsed with energy, then sighed one last time. She tried hard to block the image of Jason’s body decaying to skull and ribs, their eventual settling into the layers of the earth.

###

Phoebe's father finally called. Except he didn't call, he sent Phoebe's mother an email and addressed it to the two of them. Phoebe's mother had retrieved her from her room, her face red and sticky, and said, "You need to see this." She left the email up the desktop computer, and left Phoebe to read it alone. Phoebe hung onto the cold plastic of the mouse as she read what was no doubt something her father had drafted and sent in five minutes. The email was precise and plain, his usual manner of speaking. Reading it, Phoebe was almost swayed over to his side. His arguments seemed to make sense from his point of view. But the clear logic couldn't obscure the hurt he knew he would be inflicting on his wife and daughter.

"Diane and Phoebe," the email read, "As you know, I have taken a brief respite in Florida for the last week. After the meetings were over, I imagined going back to Goshen, and I just couldn't. Though I have not been able to put it into words, spending the past few months in the house where Jason once lived, seeing his features in both of your faces, driving around the town where I raised him, these things have been slowly killing me. Though I love you both immeasurably, the pain I experience living in our home is too great to bear. I have talked to my company, and we are working out a way for me to stay in Florida for the time being. I don't wish to cut off all communication with the two of you entirely, but I would like to ask you to, for the moment, respect my wish to be alone with my grief, and to spend time in a place that brings comfort instead of recalling memories. I will continue to support the two of you as long as I am here. I am sorry to do this, but I cannot imagine going on in any other way. Love, Kelly."

A sick feeling swirled in Phoebe's stomach. "Selfish bastard," she muttered. But the anger she called up was merely a screen. How could he not love her mother enough to stay with

her? They weren't even six months past Jason's death. A vase of funeral flowers still bloomed and died on the mantle. And what about her, his only remaining child?

The house suddenly pulsed with music. Synthesizer blared from her mother's room, and the familiar "Yes, Lord"s of her mother's worship music uttered into the living room. Phoebe forwarded the email to herself, left open the window and stalked to her bedroom. She opened a reply and began typing: "Dear Dad, Fuck you." She slammed her fists on the carpet and groaned. That didn't even cover it. Where was the spare bottle of vodka she had sneaked home from Delia's party? She snaked the shiny thing from under her bed and held it to her lips. She hated crying, even about Jason. The helplessness of shaking, the disgusting sobs erupting from her chest. She hated being out of control of her own body. Though her eyes burned, Phoebe willed herself to lie on her bed without a drop leaving her eyes. Instead, angry thoughts teemed. She reviewed every injustice her father had committed against her, and her body shook. Then Jason, his calm demeanor, his easy laugh moved broke the chain. Would her father have left Jason if she had died? She had lost so much with her brother. He always knew what to do.

Shouts permeated through the wall, her mother pledging to follow God anywhere along with the music. Phoebe hated it, hated her mother's devotion, her rejection of simple pain. Hated her father. Her jacket slipped on without a sound. Phoebe tied up the laces of her boots. In the kitchen, her brother's car key offered an escape. No, she had been drinking. Phoebe would have to go on foot.

Halfway to Evan's house, a car slowed down. The sun had slipped halfway down the horizon, and Phoebe had to squint to see who was driving.

Katie leaned over to the passenger window, her brunette hair dripping to the passenger seat.

“Hey girl, whatcha doin’?”

“Just walking.” Her smile wasn’t convincing, she could tell.

“Want a lift?”

Katie’s car smelled like vanilla and incense. On low volume, strings backed ethereal crooning.

“Where you headed?”

“I don’t know.”

Katie grinned. “Well, I’m going home if you want to come over for a bit. It’s like one minute away.”

Phoebe agreed. She placed herself entirely in Katie’s care for the time being. Just hanging out with someone who knew none of her troubles was enough to calm her breathing. Katie didn’t ask any personal questions. Her chatter narrated what they were experiencing right now, together.

“I found out about this singer from a movie soundtrack if you can believe it. Everything they make sounds like it was recorded in a cave, but I like it.”

Phoebe closed her eyes as Katie turned up the volume. She let the slow calls sweep over her and hummed in agreement.

Katie’s room was a conglomeration of glitter and earth tones. Little statues Phoebe guessed were gods from an eastern religion sat on her bookshelf. Her bookcase hung heavy, and fairy lights adorned almost every angle of the wall and piece of furniture. Something that looked suspiciously like a bong huddled in the corner under her desk.

“Do your parents know you have that?”

Katie grinned. “Yeah, they don’t really care.”

“Oh, cool.”

“Yeah, they work a lot so when they get home they don’t really feel like yelling at me. They’re pretty mellow.”

For a brief moment, Phoebe remembered her parents and the splitting of her family. She quickly changed the subject.

“Is that your boyfriend?” She wasn’t usually this rude.

Katie glanced up at the picture Phoebe pointed to, a frame of her and a young man grinning at Disney World. She laughed.

“No, that’s my friend Sam. He moved to Florida last year, and I visited him in the summer.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend, do you?”

“Well.” Phoebe described her relationship with Evan as best she could without bringing up his relationship to her brother, or that she had had a brother at all. “It was just a physical thing. But he didn’t want to date, so we broke up, even though we weren’t dating.”

Katie nodded wisely. “Some people don’t know how to separate dating from everything else.”

Phoebe relaxed. “Exactly. I just needed a release, you know?”

Katie nodded, and told Phoebe about a guy she had been with recently who had the same problem. They leaned back into the bouquet of pillows on Katie’s bed. Phoebe tucked a strand of hair back. Katie’s billowed behind her like a train.

“Are you okay?”

Phoebe must have sighed. “Yeah, sorry.” She was okay here in this moment, in Katie’s room. She met eyes with Katie and smiled.

“You’re really beautiful, you know.”

Phoebe’s cheeks grew hot. Her heart beat out of her chest, but not in the same way it had a few hours ago. Katie’s hand slid onto hers, warm, not clammy. A familiar hot feeling grew in Phoebe’s chest and gut. Katie’s expression was open and kind. She was waiting for Phoebe’s response, no matter what it was. Finally, Phoebe placed her hand on Katie’s elbow. Katie wasn’t an old friend, but she felt like that, and more, like the kind of person she could trust with the burning in her body.

It was a long few hours of kissing and touching, laughing and groaning.

They put their clothes back on and shared a bowl of ice cream. They leaned against each other as Katie turned on the TV. They watched a few episodes of a medical drama until Phoebe decided she had to go home.

“You want a ride?”

Phoebe tried to conjure the phrases that would explain to Katie about her brother, about her father, that even though Katie had given her the release she wanted, Phoebe wasn’t free of any of it. She still carried them heavy in her shoulders. Maybe Evan was right, maybe she was doing everything too early. Heat rose in her face but she willed it down. She knew Katie would understand, but the words lay empty in her lungs.

“Thank you, but I’d rather walk.”

“I’ll see you around then. Take care of yourself, okay?”

Phoebe agreed, and a sick tingle of remorse spread through her limbs as she walked through sulfur-soaked air to the house full of emptiness.

Her mother wasn't home, and her car wasn't in the garage. Phoebe didn't have enough brain power to wonder where she was. Instead, she sat down hard on her desk chair. The bottle of vodka still sat on her desk, so she poured herself a shot. She hoped her mother hadn't seen the bottle.

Phoebe was exhausted. She rolled off her clothes and filled the bathtub with hot water. This small vat of water, calf-deep and of her own making, she could control. Steam coated the mirror and the small window facing the backyard, too high for Phoebe to look out of or anyone to look into. In the tub, between the wall and the semi-clear plastic sheet, splashes echoed and Phoebe sighed out everything she'd been holding back.

She realized she hadn't even told Delia what her father had done. Or Evan about the fossil, even though he'd been the one to help her identify the sinkhole. Somehow she'd become a walking compilation of secrets, sections hidden away from her family and her friends. Since Jason had gone, she'd made decisions she wouldn't have dreamed of before. Come to think of it, no one in her family was the same, her mother or her father. They had morphed into the kind of people that left each other, religious fanatics. Phoebe'd announced her atheism. A year ago, the fossil would have been the highlight of her month. Now it was just another weird twist in a life that had lost direction.

Phoebe took a good look at her body, the skin pale and sad, winter skin. She'd pick up the habit of laying out by the pool again once school lets out for good. Her elbows were dry and tough. Had she been dragging these across Katie? Across Evan? Does he just not notice? Her soft belly, hip bones hidden under round, soft skin. Her legs, too long for the tub, propped on the chilled tile wall. She raised them and let her torso sink beneath the waterline. Soft leg hairs rose in the chill. Stomach, breasts, shoulders, chin submerged, sending ripples to bounce off the tub

walls and collide with each other, a mess of hollows and tiny waves.

She imagined Jason for the first time in a while. After he died, she tried to recall his face every morning, to think about his voice, about how he sounded when he said her name, when he was excited. Once her mother claimed to have heard his voice in a dream, Phoebe gave up. But now she wanted to remember, to be sure that the time before this mess was still real. They could have been old together, still teasing siblings. She could have asked him for advice, not that she would have told him about Evan or Katie. Somewhere his face was pulling back from his teeth, nothing to do but become part of the ground, meld with the the dirt, maybe fossilize.

Her leg jerked involuntarily, and the water waved its irritation. If Phoebe lowered her face, held it below, refused to surface without answers, what would she see? She took a deep breath in and submerged her head beneath the surface, forcing her eyes open against the instinct to close them. Above, the water wobbled and shimmied, reflected the sheathed light cresting the curtain rod. Her hearing filled. Under the water, every movement reverbed, deep and strange. She knew her brother didn't get such a peaceful ending. All the literature described a process of agony and pain until the release of unconsciousness. Maybe that's the release she was looking for. If she didn't emerge, what would happen? Who would she meet? Nothing but the end of suffering? Phoebe closed her eyes and counted the seconds, wishing her lungs were larger and stronger. It didn't really matter, though, she'd run out of air eventually.

The supply of oxygen to Phoebe's brain thinned, and her vision clouded over. Everything went dark, but she was more awake than she had ever been. Suddenly, the world folded out in front of her, and, for a moment, she saw clearly.

###

Alone in the dark I see nothing except the black thick around me next to skin I cannot see I wait for millennia eons I wait for myself to become something I can see or make sense of no form or coherence no time to count though do count and wait

I am not alone something stirs in the dark a soft breath a small intake of air like the birth of joy which replaces all sadness light rips into the existence we are born I am born we are born dusty clouds gather and sail through the void without a horizon or a place to land stars rip open flare and die new worlds birth then pass away in quick succession I ignite and die with them we are born I am born we are born the forge of the universe smelts particles and smaller pieces I cannot see but know are there because I am one of them rapid combinations nothing sticks nothing stays the bright explosions make me smile even though I am part of them and even though I am not yet

Again and again until we hit on a bubble of gas and dust and heat this is the one we say we are born I am born we are born wild uncentered circling and abrupt explosions settle into a predestined pattern the sun brands me and the flying rocks and we all glow from within until we cool and settle and our middles harden underneath a storm of hot orange goo steam clouds my sight my surface settles the riot of fire and earth too hot for anything itself hot but calm the wet rises up in hot streams thickens and falls back on my skin I cool and become the water keeps falling on my face thunder and lightning cracking from my eyes I am an endless storm on a hot face when the clouds part land emerges between my puddles I shape the land with wind and water carve the stone into my own likeness shadows fall and we rotate swinging round in days and years alike the vast landscape waiting I know it must be

soon

In the boiling water that bubbles and shoots we are born I am born we are born
something soft and yielding something changing endlessly something so small I only know it is
there because I am the same as the thing it does not wait to change or hold any shape for long
but it is itself it grows and sprouts new versions of itself swirling like a deep pool they
thrive in the spring and then I realize they are a new thing life odd negligible things
squirming barely animate but alive

We drift in solitude through the vast sea underneath phosphorescent skies the earth still
erupts hot heavy fire heavy rocks fall from the sky like water menace the stilling crust a
chunk of moonlets floats around us until they gather into one and my dancing partner floats
around me graceful changing growing cold

In my valleys secret pouches and hidden ridges colonies of scums and muds tint the
shores like grimed bathtub rings unchecked by anything bigger than themselves nothing
really ends they mat the edges of oceans nub the chalky rock like hard cauliflower join
together and grow into something new the thick slush creeps inland spreads of volcanic ash
like a layer of velvet

I breathe oxygen over the new things and they bloom chlorophyll gems we are born
I am born we are born I teach some of the plants to live without the sun and they turn into
assassins robbing life from their peers I cower and watch as they prey on each other multiple
and spread and change my waters are full heavy with the roaming plants and gelatinous
creatures every wish permitted every fancy a new thing I make them in and my head and they
appear before me swimming and whole they harden to bite and cling and clash and armor
themselves from each other I die with the weakest those who leave new trace behind I

conquer with the strongest and move to the shore

Sea water froths and fizzes around me as I crawl from the water to a strong plain I put thin strips of myself below me grab the hard surface smaller quicker things move the world quiet no more the reedy choir of insects spreading from the wet places to dry I sing too with the flying things and the all the little hunters looking for food

Nothing stands still or keeps its place I watch and I grow and I change never lingering in one form rush forward into all things until I become myself something completely other than these small beings

I take the shore again this time with lungs and little feet and wet skin I run and play in the swamping sprawl each year the same I am an amphibian a reptile a huge scaly thing I have wings I do not I roar and scream pull apart smaller things that scatter from my strength I hide my young we are born I am born we are born

I dawdle I wander I delay my varying forms cruelly ended twisting and turning through a maze I know I must continue but I do not know how I do not know what I will become more bones more tiny glands more wrinkled hallways in the mind

A huge rock throttles into my side a cloud of dust covered the earth like the old volcano ash for years I am fallow still the biggest ones die off the smallest ones hide we are afraid the wound gapes angry the rain heals nothing we wait I wait until the survivors crawl forth

I sling us forward into growth again the wasp the crocodile the shark go patiently about their tasks the grasses sprout an age of wild mushrooms huge as houses and further birds and soon out of the branches we are born I am born we are born

We fight we survive we build we kill the earth bright red with the blood of a sister we forgive we birth thistles and thorns in the ravaged earth cities in thrust upward and fall vacant

thickest walls thrown down by war everywhere my skin littered with the stone heads and vases
painted with ancient gods temples engulfed by the rising sea cities destroyed in one stroke a
thick world a full world

And then myself I am here I am born where has nature left me where have I left myself
I was there I remember and you were there too I saw your face in the nebulous clouds in the
lichened seas in the curve of the first hatching egg I remember I remember I remember

###

Evan heard through friends of friends that Phoebe's father had left for a trip to Florida and never come back. He asked to see her, as a friend and as someone who cared about her. She acquiesced, but only if she could meet his legendary father, who had so far not been home. She said it would be nice to meet him before he sneaked off to some coastal beach. Phoebe was interested in meeting Evan's father as she was in being with Evan in front of a third party. His adulthood made him a notary public in her mind, able to stamp a Yes I Did See Them Together on his testimony. Phoebe was as done with secrets as she could be, now that the whole neighborhood knew her parents' troubles. Privacy was an illusion she couldn't afford. And if her father could leave for Florida, she could be seen with Evan, even in a context that looked like dating.

Evan's father was not much more than a taller, bulkier Evan with grey hair and skin that had seen the sun. He waited a full ten seconds after she had finished a sentence to begin a new one, as though carefully weighting and committing to memory her every sentiment. When it was his turn to talk, he seemed to explode with enthusiasm. How strange to be someone who was a caricature of another.

Finally, Evan and Phoebe returned to his room alone and he asked how she was. They revisited the topic of her father. She and her mother had heard nothing from him since the email. She told him about the fossil, too. Evan protested that she was lying, but Phoebe insisted that this was entirely legitimate. The university people were even looking into it. She felt bad leaving out Katie, but then again it was none of his business. Maybe if he had come to Delia's party, she never would have hooked up with Katie. And she was glad she had.

Then Phoebe confessed what she had to no one else, that she plunged underwater, and when she sputtered into consciousness and crawled out of the tepid tub, she couldn't remember much except the feeling of exhilaration and some sort of bodily knowledge she couldn't undo.

"I don't get it," Evan protested. He sat on the bed like a youth pastor portrait, elbows propped on his knees, hand clasped together and hanging between.

"I can't explain it, but I know that I saw something, maybe everything that I asked for. I got answers, if only I could remember them."

Evan ran a hand through his dark hair and shifted his weight on the bed. He didn't want to upset Phoebe, but he wasn't one for not saying what he thought. She hadn't asked for his opinion, though.

Phoebe watched him struggle to reconcile her story with what he knew. She was like him, a believer in the concrete, but this had been a concrete experience, even if was brought on by near-unconsciousness. She still couldn't figure out if she had actually passed out or not. If she had, she likely would have floated on the water until she regained consciousness.

"Just promise me you won't do it again."

"Do what?"

"Go underwater with no intention of coming back up."

"It's not what you think it was."

Phoebe stayed a bit longer and asked about what Evan had been doing. He had received his acceptance from the university. As soon as he mentioned going to the U of A, something seemed to come between them. The ghost of Jason, perhaps, or the irrefutable fact that soon Evan would be off in a different world, and Phoebe would still be here.

"Can I call you again?" Evan asked as Phoebe made for the door.

“Sure.”

“Do you want a ride home?”

“No, I drove here.” Phoebe spun Jason’s car key on her finger. It was her car key now.

Evan couldn’t help but feel as if he was partly to blame for Phoebe’s current situation. He didn’t make her father leave, but he never would have left if Jason were still alive, and she wouldn’t be worrying about whether or not to be seen with people, or how she was going to manage the world knowing all of her business.

He still remembered furnishing his fancy camping stove by the river, while the rest of the camping crew, including Jason, crawled out of their tents. He’d brought plates, spatulas, and utensils. Evan was proud of himself, perhaps a little too proud. The water lapped the shore, and light shimmered in the river. Evan had focused on handling the egg yolks with care, the bacon, the way the smell of burning fat mixed with the trees and campfire and freshly awakened skin. He’d been waiting to leave Goshen all month.

Even then, Evan’s father had no problem with his many trips, his roaming around. Evan had always done well in school and with his teachers. Kind, smart, funny, good grades--even without a mothering presence in his life. Every mother he met still cooed over him, asked how he got along. Just fine, he told them.

Just a cold little swoosh, that’s all it took. Your whole life could turn round. Bacon, eggs, warm sun, breezes, body, and a little lap of water where your friend disappeared.

The girls had started to shout, and the guys, too. Somehow Evan knew what had happened before he followed the direction of their panic, but he didn’t know who. They faced the river, at the place where Jason’s body last contorted through the waves. A new body, already not Jason’s, floated to the top, limp, hunched, as if it balanced on a great sphere, facedown, and Evan

was glad for that and he was not. He didn't want to see Jason's face without the life that made it his.

It was better to survey him during visitation, what remained of Jason's body, to think about it in that way—remains. Not that Jason's death had much inconvenienced Evan, though he would never use that word himself. He grieved along with everyone else, more than most of Jason's other friends. He and Jason had been close. Neither Evan nor Jason were the type to share all their secrets, but they shared everything they could without risk. Girls, teachers, bouldering, trails, all that. How did young people live so confidently? What inconveniences Evan now faced were of his own making. Water he had made his peace with, not that there were tons of pools and lakes to dive in during the winter. But he could no longer even picture the Brazos in his mind. Evan hadn't told Phoebe that he'd applied to other schools, too, schools in Texas. He won't go there now. His father had tried to coax him out of the notion. I know it's painful, he had said, but you'll find a way to make peace with the world in your mind. But Evan needed somewhere with walls, strong ones, maybe mountains, land that protects itself. The Ozarks and their foothills weren't far. He would stay in Arkansas, and keep climbing up.

Evan and his father took a walk together after Phoebe left. The magic hour slipped a golden veil over the sky, but winter still clung to the ground and the trees, a brown mud that wouldn't come out. Prickled branches leered over the road. They'd soon be thick and dark, sending spores into the atmosphere and clogging the sinuses of everyone without much brown in their ancestry, including himself. His father asked a bit about Phoebe, rubbing the grey hair along his temples. Evan explained that she was Jason's sister, and he was trying to be there for her. His father nodded without comment.

Life was too easy, Evan thought. He tried to shake away the euphoria of survival, the

feelings of horror that are really shots of pleasure coursing through his neural pathways.

Dopamine. Not schadenfreude. The ecstasy of living through death yet again.

PART THREE

####

In the searing heat of a boiling spring, an organism, soft and malleable, lives. It resists the elements, remains unchanged even as it adapts. New variations invent their own variations and soon the little pool teems. The exact moment the little things cross the line between inanimate and animate can't be pinpointed. Life doesn't appear at the stroke of a clock or in a moment of glory, but all of the sudden small thermophiles pump their singled cells and shift from the pool to the sea, afloat under the wheeling sky and its circling constellations reflected perfectly in the seas below.

The great land shifts, volcanoes go off in a string of explosions. Meteors and comets attack the earth, break off a chunk, and suspend the crumbs in the sky. The little moons whir and cluster and meld into one. The little organism survives, attaches to the bottoms of cliffs and the insides of caves, multiplies into thick carpets and rings the rocks at water level. Growing, climbing, stacking, and combining, sheets of microbes become bacteria and combine together like coral reefs.

Oxygen, at last, filters into the air, and the changes come quick. Plants imbibe sunlight, then each other, then spread through the ocean. Their insides harden to teeth, and they consume each other in the universe's first bites. Mosses and liverworts follow the sun's beckoning light, frost and lichen break rock into soil, and millipedes, scorpions, and crabs scuttle to the shore. Insects shuffle their wings in their first song, zoom about the soft, plush ground in little spirals. Next come the legged, lunged things, out of the ocean, and into the wet Eden. They grow tall with the grasses. Reptiles into dinosaurs. Grasses into trees. The first mammals peer out from their hiding places in the trees, wait for the chill of night to scout the ground.

Something unseen until it's too late, a hunk of rock hurtling from space, charges into the earth, covers the life in a layer of dust. Plant life dies off and take their feeders with them.

Activity quiets until the survivors come forth. Life plunges forward, mutations and alterations make species of their own. Grasses spring up again. Birds fly overhead, search for sustenance.

Something climbs down then stands erect. Consciousness quietly slips into the world. Quicker than the opening of an eye, the wild reindeer are penned, a roof is thatched, the field is furrowed and water guided to the soil. The last creature of great arrival sheds the blood of its own kind, sucks the earth dry and moves to a new patch, levels towers and stone walls, discards one god for another, beckons the sea rise higher.

###

Diane hadn't been alone for much of her life. She was only twenty when she married Kelly. That was the norm back then. She had dated him since she was in high school and he was in college. No one thought that was so bad back then, but she understood why it was taboo these days. They had worked together, opened the ice cream stand together, he had owned the video store. Then they went bankrupt and moved into her mother's place for a while. Kelly didn't talk about missing Diane's mother, but she knew he did. They got along better than Diane did with her own mother. Then Kelly went back to school nights while Diane was pregnant. They moved out just in time for Jason to be born. People always said to marry your best friend, and she had. But now they were two different people. Middle class. Kelly was a business man, and she was a homemaker and a woman of God. When she was young, she couldn't picture the two of them doing much besides what they had been doing at that exact moment. Making the money stretch. Raising their kids. Now they were separate. It had been a long time coming, she thought, the slow untangling of their lives. He had told her she couldn't understand what it was like to work in his office, spending all day on business calls, cajoling reps into lowering their prices or moving shelving. Diane had agreed back then. She had seen the abundance of beige in his office building, sat at tables with his coworkers and listened to the monotony of numbers march by. She didn't tell him that managing the house and the finances wasn't all that different, that she negotiated with lesser companies, the cable company, damn them, insurance reps who didn't care whether she was reimbursed or not. So their separation grew, each section of their life boxed into its own compartment, not to be shared with the other spouse.

Kelly finally called. His voice sounded groggy, stretched thin through phone wires all the way from Florida. Diane was equal parts relieved and angry. He could have died in Florida for all she knew. How was he living? Did his work let him phone it in or was he taking vacation days? She couldn't ask him those things; she wasn't privy to those details anymore. Instead she settled for a simple "How have things been?" He claimed everything was all right. He was working as much as he could.

"How has Phoebe been?" Kelly asked.

"She's been all right." Diane certainly was not going to reassure Phoebe's father that she had been unaffected by his leaving. "She's a tough one."

Kelly didn't speak for a moment. "I'd like to see her, Diane. I want to come up there and talk to you guys."

"You know Phoebe may forgive you for leaving her, but I never will. Especially after Jason."

"I know," Kelly said. "Do you think she would talk to me?"

"You can ask her yourself. Either call her or bring your ass back to Arkansas."

Kelly was looking at a flight for the next day, a direct from Florida to Northwest Arkansas. Diane agreed that sounded like a good idea.

Kelly clicked the "confirm" button as soon as they hung up. He reserved a car and a hotel room as well. Diane was not going to let him stay in the house yet. Kelly did feel bad about what he'd done. Since he'd come to Florida he'd felt like a different man. Never one for deep contemplation or much more than simple pleasures, he had spent nearly every sunrise on the beach in the flip flops he'd purchased from the convenience store next to his hotel. The sand had worked its way into every piece of clothing he had brought, but he didn't mind. The moving

water relaxed him, reassured him. His work hours were spent in coffee shops, and, in case of a conference call, his hotel room. Before the trip ended, he had spent more time with his coworkers. On previous business trips, he ducked out of late dinners, eager to be up early for the work day, but this time he had spent nights on restaurant patios with them, letting the wine he usually declined warm him from the bones outward. His coworkers encouraged him, knowing his situation with Jason. The women were beautiful and composed even after a few glasses of wine. They mentioned the tough balance of work and family, but didn't complain.

"I can't help but admire you," Kelly had toasted his coworker, Natasha, after she described with tenderness her newborn baby girl. She was one of the leaders of their office.

The men were equally stressed, but mostly because they wanted to get away. This was why Kelly hadn't spent much time with them before. He had always been a family man, and they knew it. He complained about being away from his kids on trips, and at home enjoyed watching his children roll out accomplishments. Jason was his pride. He was a man, about ready for college, handsome, friendly. Nothing was more enjoyable to Kelly than relaxing at home, chatting with his children, watching football, observing the small machinations of everyday life around him, everything as it should be, and all the product of his hard work. He told his family that's what made it worth it, being able to come home and see them living well. Now his house was thrown out of balance. Diane and Phoebe made do, scrabbled along. But the routine of it all had disappeared.

Kelly had watched his single coworkers with the most interest. They seemed to be the happiest, even if they were the most restless. He had never envied their position, the uncertainty of their futures, but now he wondered if theirs was the best way to be. He couldn't go back to life

as it was before, with its predictable schedule and its dependable rewards. Perhaps he should seek comfort in the empty road ahead.

Kelly picked up the rental car after an uneventful two-hour flight. He had booked a budget airline, the only company with direct flights to Arkansas. More than a few babies had boarded the small plane with him, but his many business trips had honed his ability to pass out on any flight no matter the circumstance.

The Arkansan landscape had ripened even in the small span of time he'd been gone. He still couldn't find any fondness for it, though. A pang went through him, a wish for the sun and the flat expanse rolling out before him. The hills here hid too many surprises.

Phoebe and Diane waited for him in the house. They had pulled all the curtains open, and somehow in the light it seemed like a new place, one that belonged more intimately to them and not anyone else.

He reached to hug Phoebe and she briefly obliged.

"How have you been?" Kelly asked.

"I've been all right." Her voice was not unkind, but her expression was firm. She looked like her mother when she set her lips like that.

They moved to the living room. Phoebe lounged next to Diane on the couch, who sat straight with her hands in her lap. Kelly took the arm chair opposite. His chair. Diane didn't offer him any food or water, so he figured he better get right down to business.

Kelly looked from one face to another, faces dear to him, faces that always would be.

"I am truly sorry for the pain I have caused you. I didn't mean to make everything so much worse. Phoebe, I am especially sorry to you. I worded the email in such a way that must

have made you question whether I even love you. I do, just as much as I loved and still love Jason. It will always be that way.”

Phoebe’s face remained neutral.

“I, like you all, was going through something. I still am. We never could have predicted that we would lose Jason.” His throat threatened to close. Diane’s eyes watered in response.

“This seems to be messing me up the most, for some reason.”

She knew some men thought that way. That the father would be closest to his son, that they would understand each other the most clearly. Others assumed the opposite, that a son would love his mother the most, that they would have a closer bond than all the other family members.

“What’s done is done,” Phoebe said. “There’s nothing you can do to change it. But you can decide what to do from here on out.”

“I promise I will be there for you, both of you. If it’s okay with both of you, I’m going to drive back up from Florida next week and stay in Arkansas permanently.”

“Where are you going to stay?” Diane asked.

“I was thinking—” His eyes roamed over the kitchen. For a moment, he wanted to try again, for Phoebe, for what he and Diane had lost.

“No, you can’t stay here. You will stay somewhere else until you decide where you want to be permanently. I won’t have you running in and out of the house as you please. You’re either a part of this family or you’re not.”

The visit didn’t last much longer. Kelly inquired about the sinkhole, and Phoebe informed him about the fossil without much enthusiasm. He left by giving Phoebe a kiss on the forehead.

She resented his freedom, to come and kiss her, to go and ignore the situation he had created, how little any of this meant to him anymore.

A few days later, Kelly and Diane officially began their separation. He wanted to restart, and he couldn't do it in the same house. It wasn't their fault, it was his. He needed to work on himself.

Phoebe couldn't gauge the emotional reaction of her mother, a feat, since Diane usually did nothing to hide her feelings. Diane did nothing different after the announcement, said nothing to Phoebe except the short sentence affirming what Phoebe had known was coming since her father had disappeared, "It's for the best."

Phoebe supposed it was. Nothing could be the same, and she expected the changes would keep coming.

###

Fayetteville, Arkansas was known for many things, the school of both Bill and Hillary Clinton, the Razorbacks, the beloved football team that never seemed to get it together in time to be something, and its farmers market. The farmers market held every Saturday in good weather, and in mini version on Tuesday and Thursday, put the yuppie produce lovers of even the like of Portland to shame. Each week, produce growers saddled up next to grass fed meat stands, bright booths of fresh flowers, coffee shop pop ups manned by the hippest hipsters, and the dog shelter's collection of vest-laden adoptables. The farmers market opened in early March, as soon as things started to warm up for good, and stayed open as long as it could while fall's temperatures made their downward slope. Phoebe often attended the market with her friends in the summer. They bought all-natural fruit pops and cooed at all the dogs and babies that ringed around the Fayetteville square. The square was equally beautiful in the winter. The city decorated it with extravagant light displays, and camels trotted little children around for eight bucks. But it was the farmers that held Fayettevillians' hearts. The promise of spring, the long, beloved summer all wrapped up flowers and thick sprouts of kale and the smell of coffee. Goshen had briefly attempted a similar market, but the square was more of a main street, and most of the growers wanted to sell at Fayetteville anyway.

Evan made good on his promise to call Phoebe, and the two went to the first farmers market of the season. Phoebe baby talked to each passing dog until their owners offered them up for a scratch.

After they finished a few rounds, Evan and Phoebe departed for a nearby side street and a dim-lit bakery. Next to the building, a garden area covered outdoor seating. Evan and Phoebe

ordered inside, waving to a few friends from school with the same idea, then claimed a table near a burst of ferns. The vendors' smiles and the various babies had lightened Phoebe's mood considerably, and she engaged Evan in idle chit chat about Fayetteville and the college and who all would be going there in just a few months. Their sandwiches arrived, ferried by a waitress with a septum ring, gauges, and smile that overtook her entire expression. They thanked her, and Evan cleared his throat.

"Phoebe, I'd like to see more of you, in a serious, romantic way."

Phoebe grinned. In this weather, his request sounded more like a compliment than an attempt to hold her down.

"I'll be going to the school in the fall, and I know you probably won't want to date when I do that, and who knows where you'll go to school. But until then, I'd like to be with you. Even if it's not official."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I just want to hang out with you."

Phoebe drank from her coffee. "We're hanging out right now, aren't we?"

Evan looked offended. "We are."

"Okay, then we just won't stop."

She knew what he meant by a serious, romantic way. It wasn't that she didn't, but she wasn't going to promise right now in this bakery. He could wait and figure it out.

Phoebe excused herself to go to the restroom. The bakery had one of those perilous public restrooms, multiple stalls whose sliding locks seemed to be falling off or didn't reach across to secure the stall entirely. Phoebe washed her hands and looked up when someone walked up to the sink next to her. It was Katie, her long, long hair curled into ringlets.

“Hey, Phoebe,” Katie said. Her expression was kind and calm.

Phoebe was genuinely pleased to see her, if not a bit embarrassed.

“Delia told me about your dad,” she paused, “and your brother. I’m really sorry. I hope you’ve been doing okay.”

“I really have, actually.” Phoebe wasn’t lying, though at Delia’s name a little guilt grew inside her for not telling her about Katie.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t tell her anything. It’s no one’s business but ours. And if you ever need anything, I’m here, although I don’t expect that will be any time soon.” Katie grinned, and although Phoebe felt weird about how much Katie seemed to be able to read from her expression, she grinned back.

Phoebe didn’t make Evan wait too long. He drove her home and she invited him inside. Sunday mornings meant her mother was at church, and then at lunch. It was different with him. He knew about her family, knew her brother, knew—to some extent—what she was experiencing. She kicked him out soon after. Her mother’s Sunday schedule was unpredictable, and though Phoebe doubted she’d broach the subject of her and Evan again, a good Sunday service might just push her over the edge.

Evan kissed her before he left. “Call me soon, okay?”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Phoebe joked.

Evan laughed and left without another word.

Phoebe hadn’t needed to be so hasty. Her mother whisked in the house late that afternoon. She and her women’s group had somehow been approved for visits to the community corrections center. They would only visit women, and they would provide advice and spiritual guidance. Her mother vibrated with happiness, rolling out the details, the woman who had

trained their group, how wise Esther their leader was, and how much they were needed. They had passed the background check. Then she needed referrals from her pastor and two other esteemed individuals in their religious community. Diane didn't have a hard time securing those. She had been through enough that everyone in the community respected her faith deeply. They had just completed the chaplain's training that day.

"Look at my badge!" Her mother held up a picture of herself stamped on a thick piece of plastic. Her chin jutted and her eyebrows raised.

"Nice." Phoebe nodded and smiled, but declined to ask questions. The less she knew, the better, she figured. Not that much could go wrong visiting inmates in a minimum security jail. They were probably lonely. But Phoebe winced imagining her mother forcing her visions of her son and the Lord on people who probably just wanted a decent conversation or a friend.

Diane hardly sensed the hesitation in her daughter. She hadn't felt so sure about where she was going in a long time, about making a difference. She used to imagine that she was positively impacting her children, but now her daughter was too independent to take her mother's advice. And Jason was gone.

Diane visited the center Thursday nights. Her friend Erma picked her up and drove her to the jail to meet with the rest of the group. Erma was black, and had to be careful about who she talked to. Several white inmates had let her know that they considered themselves above her advice. After they finished, Diane, Erma, Esther, and the other ladies prayed together about the inmates they had spoken to. This week Diane had to leave early. Phoebe was picking her up so they could go to a play with Delia and her mother.

Phoebe pulled up to the prison at a quarter to eight. Diane escorted Esther to the exit. She motioned to her daughter to get out of the car. Phoebe huffed. They needed to get going.

“This is Esther. Esther, my daughter, Phoebe.”

Esther nearly broke Phoebe’s hand when they shook. Her skin was soft and thin. Phoebe nearly shuddered at the texture. Esther was likely in her early seventies, skin sagging, eyes wide in alarm, the same look Phoebe had seen on similarly enthusiastic elderly.

“You could join us, you know. It’s a long process, but I’m sure you’d have no trouble.”

“Thank you very much, but I’m okay. We really need to get going.”

“Come to our group then!”

Phoebe looked to her mother. Was this a set up? Diane looked excited, not guilty.

“Thank you very much for the invitation, but we really need to go.”

Her mother agreed, gave Esther a prolonged hug, then entered the car.

Diane looked at her reflection in the mirror, reapplied her lipstick, and rescued jewelry from her purse.

“We take our jewelry off when we go to the prison. We don’t want to distract them.”

Phoebe rolled her eyes before her mother looked up at her. She couldn’t wait to see Delia. They didn’t talk about Esther’s invitation. Instead, Diane asked Phoebe questions about how they got these tickets. It was a college production, the actors part of the University of Arkansas’ theater department. Delia’s brother, Sam, was in it, one of the main characters.

The arts center was packed to the edges, the attendees creaking in the seats and chattering at a low hum. Delia waved from the center of the front section. She and her mother looked like copies of each other with different hair and dresses. Both wore dresses and heels, ready to stand up for their boy. The group exchanged hugs then settles in. Phoebe hadn’t told her mother what the play, *Angels in America*, is about. She couldn’t complain, anyway. The tickets were free.

During the play, Phoebe blocked her mother's reactions out of her periphery. She wanted to enjoy the story without monitoring her mother's shock. Sam was an amazing Prior, his tears and joy as real as Phoebe's had ever felt. Delia and Phoebe squeezed hands as Sam's character died. Phoebe wasn't sure who had reached first.

Phoebe, Delia, and Delia's mother all whooped and whistled during Sam's bow, standing in three separate ovals for the cast. Diane questioned Phoebe as they walked to the car. What did she think was the play's meaning? Who wrote it? Were they Mormon, and if so, was that really what they thought of heaven? Phoebe explained as much as she knew with patience. The night wrapped them in cool, wet air.

"You drive," Phoebe said, and handed her mother the keys.

"All right."

"So, overall, did you like it?"

Diane strapped herself in. "I did. Sam was very good."

"Good." Phoebe smiled, and spent the rest of the ride watching the blurry stars twist and glide overhead. For a moment, she hoped Jason was in some heaven, a good one, not like Bentonville or Fayetteville in the skies, but somewhere with a mountain and a river, somewhere he could swim without fear, dive and streak, climb trees and mountains. Would Jason still see her from wherever he was even if she didn't believe he could?

Diane drove on autopilot, the plot of the play stretching out before her. It had almost been too much to see her friend's son die, even if he was only pretending, even if he didn't have Jason's name. How lucky his mother was to be able to stand at the end, to clap, to know she could tell her son again and again how much she loved him.

"What are you thinking about?" Phoebe said.

“Nothing.” She refocused on the road and tried to mean it.

###

Dr. Jackson from the Geosciences Department called Phoebe and Diane back two weeks after she announced they would be putting the fossils through testing. She invited Diane and Phoebe to come up to the university and meet some of the faculty who had been working on the fossil.

Phoebe hadn't been one of those children who went through a serious dinosaur phase. She wasn't opposed to dinosaurs, but horses had been the animals which had caught her imagination. For two solid years, all of her drawings and stories, science projects and books, centered around the equestrian world. She begged her mother for a horse, as many children do, but her mother told her sharply that horses and their upkeep cost a fortune, and when she had a fortune, she could buy a horse and stable herself. Phoebe had continued coloring rainbow horses in her Lisa Frank coloring books and vowed to herself that one day she would amass a fortune larger enough to acquire a horse of every color. Jason was the dinosaur child. His love began early, stemmed from a set of flannel dinosaur themed sheets, and flourished well into the fourth grade. He wasn't one of the genius children who learned every dinosaur's taxonomy in Latin, the number of bones in its rib cage, and its original home. Rather, he wanted to be surrounded by pictures of dinosaurs on all sides, and most of all, he wanted to play dinosaurs. *Jurassic Park* was a huge hit with Jason, and Phoebe can't count the number of times she had watched it with him, perhaps before she was really old enough to do so.

Phoebe and Diane donned nice dresses and applied make up before they left for the university. Ava had mentioned that some newspapers would be there to report the fossils found in someone's backyard. Of course, it wasn't really someone's backyard, the fossils had been in an

empty lot whose owner lived in New Jersey, but they'd put it that way to drum up local interest. Ava met Phoebe and Diane at the front doors of the Geosciences building and decorated them to a large lab which had clearly been cleaned and polished for the photos.

Ava introduced them to several paleontologists and experts on soil. They shook hands with all of them in turn, smiling and asking questions about their role at the university. Some of the scientists belonged to regional groups and had flown in to be a part of the investigation.

Phoebe was shuffled to a pair of women who introduced themselves as Nicole and Erica. Nicole was owner of the plot, and Erica was her wife. They taught at Rutgers, public health and urban planning. They cooed over Phoebe, asked for details of her discovery.

"We're not here to claim the fossil, of course. We're going to claim it as a joint find, with emphasis on you as the one who physically found it," Nicole said.

"Oh wow, thank you."

"Of course," Nicole smiled.

Diane shuffled over and asked how progress on the sinkhole was going. Nicole and Erica began describing the laborious process of contacting their insurance when Ava asked everyone to take a seat. The small crowd of university officials filled the row as a young man brought the fossil out in a wooden box. Phoebe and her mother sat in the front row. Phoebe wondered if, were Jason here, he would be freaking out about the fossil she had discovered, if he would have been jealous, or if he would have been the one to have found it. Maybe he was meant to find the fossil, but she had to do it in his stead now that he was gone.

Ava addressed the group, "A few weeks ago, Phoebe Roland found a strange object in a sinkhole on a plot of land owned by Nicole Kenning. This object turned out to be a fossil, and not just your run of the mill cephalopod. Clearly this was something special. Preliminary reports

lead us to believe that this fossil might be a part of Arkansas's only dinosaur fossil, the *Arkansaurus fridayi*. After more testing, we believe that this fossil is, in fact, of a slightly different species of the *Arkansaurus*. The bone we believe to be a—"

"Shoulder bone," Phoebe muttered.

"Ms. Roland?"

"It's a shoulder bone, because of the way it fits on the animal, the upside down cup on the bottom is where the upper arm attaches." In Phoebe's memory, the creature to which it belongs takes long strides with skinny legs, its head bobbing on a thick neck.

Ava looked stunned, then resumed her speech as if nothing had happened. Yes, Phoebe had it right, this fossil was a shoulder piece.

Diane turned to her daughter and gripped her wrist. "What is up with you?"

Phoebe smiled a sad smile at her mother. "I remember."

In her mind, the *Arkansaurus* galloped on two legs to a patch of new color, plucked fresh white blossoms from the earth, lifted the soft petals onto its thick tongue, coughed on the potent pollen. Ancient birds with strange, crooked beaks and hard fins protruding from their skulls swooped and dived over the confused beast. More buds opened among the ferns and flat leaves wide as eagle's wings. The creature ran and killed and ate, slept among the flowers at night in dangerous rest until the thunder rock bawled from the sky, crashed hard into the nearby ocean, drowned the great beasts in tidal waves. Phoebe died with the dinosaur, starved in the cursed empty land too soon to see the flower born again.

###

School warped forward the way it always does when fidgety students are waiting to have nothing to do. In April, the school let seniors out early, and they counted down in the cafeteria on the last minute of their very last day. Phoebe watched them, jealous. She felt as old as they were, like she had been through just the same amount of nonsense, like she was ready to be done. But instead another year waited on the end of summer, a year of applications and limbo.

Other jealous juniors hung on the railing with Phoebe, waving to their older friends and resenting them. Phoebe had become quite popular since the fossil story went out in newspapers. She had been interviewed on the news, too. No one reported her interruption at the fossil showing, her premonition about the bone, the way she cradled the imprint of some dead thing like she was its mother. People asked her about the fossil, and how far she had to dig to get it, and if the owners of the land were mad. She had answers for all those questions, but she never could tell her mother or Ava what happened. She tried with Evan, told him she remembered everything she learned that night in the tub, that it was a part of her now. But Evan preferred not to comment on that stuff. He knew Phoebe was dealing with a lot, the least of which was having had a vision even as she left the church permanently and swore she couldn't believe in anything.

Evan had a small get together at his house, a min graduation party. He had invited Phoebe and her mother. He said that parents were just as big a part of graduation as the students. In a way, it was their day, too. Then he admitted that's what his dad had told him, and that he had to invite parents. But Phoebe didn't mind. She tried to get her mother out as often as she could, especially away from Esther and the group.

When Diane and Phoebe arrived at Evan's, a sign hung on the front door and fence saying, COME AROUND BACK. The yard smelled like barbecue, and even from the front yard, Phoebe could hear the excited bubbling of people amassed in Evan's backyard. Beyond the fence, a covered concrete patio extended from the backdoor. Evan's father merrily flipped burgers and hot dogs on a bright red grill while yelling at Evan for details of a story he couldn't remember or chatted up the parents of another student. Even in a crowd, his demeanor didn't change. He listened with his eyes down, as if he were watching the words appear on the ground in front of him, then waited before replying. Phoebe bet he learned a lot of secrets that way, and earned many people's trust. Phoebe hadn't asked what had happened to Evan's mother. He never brought her up, not even as an example when discussing Phoebe's loss, so Phoebe had always assumed she had left his father when Evan was little.

In the grass surrounding the deck, several birdhouses rose from the ground. A patch of grass devoted to vegetable gardening had been fenced off with barbed wire. Phoebe knew without asking that was for the deer. Evan and his father had erected several fold-out tables and covered them with the cliché red-and-white checkered picnic cloth. A pile of desserts, sides, and parents' proudest dishes weighed down one of the tables, and was constantly surrounded by a committee with forks or fingers picking out favorites. A few trees boasted streamers and balloons floated from ever surface possible.

"I like what you've done with the place," Phoebe said as Evan sauntered across the yard to greet her and her mother.

"Well, thank you. Did you see the fairy lights?"

"No, they're wonderful." Phoebe followed his arm upward to the ceiling of the patio cover. Strings of white fairy lights criss-crossed it in dense lines.

“It’ll be real pretty when the sun goes down.”

Diane and Evan’s father said hello. They hadn’t seen each other in years, back when they had to pick their boys up from each other’s houses.

“This must be a hard day for you,” he said softly.

“It is. But then again, every day is a hard day.”

He nodded and Diane continued.

“It would have been nice to see Jason graduate, but we’re still so proud of Evan and everyone else. Plus, Phoebe will be next.”

“Yes, she will.”

The light settled into a nest of clouds before descending to the horizon and the yard cooled. The partygoers cracked open beers and settled into circles of plastic and fold-out chairs. The burgers didn’t stop for a few hours. Phoebe and Evan talked to mutual friends while Diane chatted with Evan’s father. Phoebe looked over every ten or so minutes. Her mother’s eyes were wide and passionate, and she knew they had found their way onto one of her favorite topics, religion or heaven or visiting prisons. Once Phoebe caught her mother wiping tears away from her eyes. Most anything could make Diane cry, but Phoebe wondered if Evan’s father had revealed to her the secret of his wife. She nudged Evan with her elbow and jutted her chin in their direction.

“She’s fine. Don’t worry.”

“I don’t want her bothering your dad,” Phoebe whispered.

“That’s what I meant. She’s fine. He likes to talk to people.”

The fireflies bobbed and twirled in the growing dark, and mosquitoes polka dotted the guests’ legs and elbows. The Goshenites prided themselves on their ability to withstand the pests,

but soon sprayed thick layers of repellent on like a second layer of clothing. The moon rose heavy and full, brightening as it ascended the sky.

“The ring means someone has died,” said someone in a nearby folding chair.

Evan looked to Phoebe and squeezed her hand.

She and Diane tried to stay after and help with the cleaning, but Evan and his father shooed them out the gate.

At home, Diane poured them both glasses of water and made a suggestion.

“We should have a small ceremony, just us, to remember that he would be graduated now.”

Phoebe didn’t need a ceremony to remind her, she knew at all times that she had a brother, and if the river hadn’t taken him, he would have walked across a stage this weekend.

“As long as we don’t have to sing.”

Diane acquiesced, then retrieved a photo of Jason, and the cap and gown she had picked up in his name.

“Mom, you still rented one? They’re like one hundred dollars, right?”

Diane nodded. “I know, I know. But we have the money. It made me feel better.”

Phoebe added memorabilia of her own, treasures she had hoarded since his death, not even dared to look at lest the passage of her brother become real. A small rock he had brought her back from a trip to Honduras, a photo booth sequence they had paid for on a boring trip to the mall with their mother. In the first picture, they both stick their tongue out. In the second, they cross their eyes. They blur across the third pictures as Phoebe tackles Jason. Her hair is a mess in the fourth, and both of their mouths hung wide open in laughter.

They arranged the objects on the kitchen table. Phoebe bit back comments about this seeming very witchy and not Christian at all when her mother began to cry.

“Did you know that ‘Brazos’ is short for ‘*Rio de los Brazos de Dios*’? It means ‘the River of the Arms of God.’” Diane’s voice cracked.

Phoebe tried not to flinch at her mother’s terrible Spanish accent and shook her head. She knew what the Spanish meant, but she didn’t know that was the full name of the river.

Diane pulled a bottle of white wine out of the fridge and filled her empty glass. She motioned toward Phoebe, and Phoebe nodded. Diane filled Phoebe’s glass only a bit less than her own.

“It should be comforting, the River of the Arms of God, but it’s not.”

Phoebe reached to her mother and rubbed circles on her back. “Nothing is comforting.”

Diane dropped closed her eyes and began speaking aloud. “Jason, we miss you. We know you’re happy now, and you have no pain, and we will try to remember that as we go on without you. But nothing will stop us missing you. To me, you’ve already graduated. I’m so proud of you son. I always will be.”

Phoebe nodded. The windows reflected them back, two women leaning on a counter, searching the same pictures over and over, and finding nothing but each other. They finished the wine and stayed up half an hour longer. Diane said she enjoyed her talk with Evan’s father. He was a very kind man. Phoebe nodded. She was glad her mother had a good time.

After a lag in conversation, Phoebe said, “Did God ever talk to you again? After he told you to be patient?”

Diane sighed. “No.”

“Do you think you found what he was telling you to be patient for?”

Diane met her daughter's eyes. Diane was the only one in their family of four who had green eyes. Everyone else was brown. Phoebe never noticed the small brown flecks in her mother's, as if Diane were determined to be like her kids and had grown the brown herself.

"I do."

###

Phoebe's father had always been reliable, prompt. Both her parents had, but her mother was prone to spending too long reviewing the details, changing dresses, collecting every item she might possibly need during her day. Her father was concise, efficient. Phoebe supposed life had allowed him to be that way. When he was home and took her mother's carpool shift, he was in and out. He always found a way to circumvent the traffic her mother got stuck in.

Her father did not, to her knowledge, have many hobbies. He used to love his work, but now he was tired. It wasn't the same as when he had opened up his own ice cream stand, his own video rental store. He golfed, too. The rich man's sport. Phoebe figured he did it to solidify his new place in the social strata, to forget the days of being bankrupt. Although Kelly certainly took any chance he could to identify with the working class. He often told stories about his time going to night school, about loading trucks with soda cans, about the men he knew back in those days. He liked to call his friends from Goshen "good old boys." They used "ma'am" and "sir," hunted annually, liked a good beer, saved up for a boat to putz around the lake before tying up, laying out, and cracking one open. God-fearing folks. Phoebe wondered if her father felt guilty about his life now. He golfed. He left his wife. That wasn't allowed in the Bible, she was pretty sure. And now he was living in a hotel.

Phoebe drove to his temporary home in Fayetteville. Kelly had suggested picking her up, but she had insisted on meeting him where he was. She wanted to see how he lived. In the parking lot, she called him on his phone. The hotel speared into the sky, and Phoebe couldn't help but wonder that he had spent so much money on a room. He was frugal like her mother. Like the trip to Florida, here was another crack in the person her father used to be.

Kelly welcomed Phoebe inside and showed her around his small room. The sheets and comforter were bright white, the sign of a nice lodging. A huge mirror spread across one of the bathroom walls, and a TV decked both the bedroom area and the little living space adjoining.

“I have something for you.” Kelly opened the small closet and fished out a bright paper bag with yellow wrapping paper.

Phoebe’s birthday wasn’t until August. She held the bag’s bottom and weighed it like a fruit at the market. The weight of an orange.

“Go on, open it.”

Phoebe reached into the nest of tissue paper and recovered a huge shell unlike any she had seen before. The shell shone like a pearl and curled into a crescent shape.

“It’s not technically called a ‘moon shell,’ but when I saw it, I thought of you, and your name. Both your name and your brother’s name were in the Bible, but they both have beautiful meanings in Greek. Jason means “healer,” and yours, though it literally means “pure,” is tied to the moon.”

Kelly tilted his head in anticipation.

“Wow, thank you. It’s really pretty.”

Kelly waved her away. “You don’t need to thank me. Ever again, really.”

Phoebe laughed dryly and restored the shell to its paper bed.

“I have something else to show you.”

Kelly ushered his daughter to his car which, in addition to the mud it had procured on its journey back from Florida, sported sand in the seams of the seats. Another uncharacteristic oversight. He parked in front of a squat house that looked at least fifty years old.

“What do you think?”

“Are you moving here?” Phoebe turned in the passenger seat and surveyed her grinning father. The grey holding his temples had spread around the back of his neck.

“I am. It’s close to the square and the school, in case you decide to go, and even closer to my work than before. Want to see inside?”

Kelly tried to hide the small shakes in his hands. He was inviting Phoebe back into his world, asking her to approve of his new situation.

“Of course.”

The house had recently been refurbished. Steel appliances glittered over hardwood floor.

“God, this is nice.”

He pointed out the bathroom, the master bed and bath, then opened the door to a second bedroom.

“And I’ve got a guest room, in case someone wants to come stay with me.”

Phoebe was too old to negotiate custody, but she understood this gesture.

“Wow, that’s perfect,” she said.

“You’re not obligated to come here, of course. But there’s a place for you if you want it.”

After the tour, they found the walking path near his house and snaked through the rest of Fayetteville. Kelly pointed out the different restaurants hidden in the backstreets off the trail, and the path to the university that took two minutes. He walked as if he had just landed a business deal or his football team had won the game.

As they turned back to the house, Maggie, the pregnant girl in Evan’s grade, passed them with who Phoebe guessed was her mother. Her stomach was flat now, and Phoebe wondered how her baby was doing. They both smiled and waved without stopping to talk, familiar but not friends.

Back at the hotel, Kelly watched his daughter place her new present in her car. He pulled her into a tight hug and without releasing her, said, “I know this is a lot, especially after how hard I’ve made everything for you. Thank you for coming to see me.”

Phoebe gently pushed out of the hug.

Kelly put his hands on her shoulders. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.”

Kelly waved until the little car was out of sight.

###

School finally let out, and Phoebe wandered into lazier days. For the first time since Christmas break, no schedule forced her into to action, into business. Not that she had been busy during the school year, but she had enough distraction. Now the days until senior year stretched out before her with strange possibility. She had her own car, and she had Evan and Delia, and her father waiting in Fayetteville to buy her dinner whenever she called. There were applications to be thinking about, too. But the empty time reminded her so much of Christmas Break, and the hours she and her family spent mourning together, or at least in close proximity to each other, that loneliness crept into her bones again. The only event marking her time was the concert she and Delia had tickets to.

The day of the concert, Phoebe didn't spend much time thinking about the night's event. Delia sent her nervous text messages nearly on the hour, mostly thank yous dotted with exclamation marks and questions about outfits and departure times. Phoebe found her feet walking her down the street, around roundabouts, past neighbors and strangers whose lives she guessed through their open windows. She arrived at Nicole and Erica's land, and forged a path through the high grass to the woods behind.

The air cooled around Phoebe as she entered the green cover, and she listened for the small sounds of bugs and curious creatures. In front of her, finally, the sinkhole. The word sinkhole sounded so negative, like a nuisance or a disaster. The crag where she found the fossil was, to Phoebe, a landmark, a miracle. The tape still looped around it, a promise of return. She figured they'd scour for more fossils then pump concrete into the chasm. Her mother had mentioned that some neighbors worried their own yards were unstable, too, that they would open

up, or that they had begun digging in hope they lived on a mine of expensive historical artifacts. Phoebe didn't want anything on this plot of land to change. She doubted they'd be lucky enough to find a second fossil, but still, this was the site of a miracle.

Phoebe lowered herself down into the damp, dark earth once more, rings of reddish clay circling the edges above. She had already showered this morning, and would have to shower again for the concert after this. Once more, the wall supported her, and she made her way down to the chilled floor. She planted her butt on the ground and crossed her legs. The moisture immediately soaked through her shorts. She leaned back her torso, her hands behind her head, until she was flat on her back. Above her, a patch of blue circled between the green boughs. Puffs of white drifted around the edges, but never obscured her view. Suddenly, she realized she was where Jason was, just without the view of the sky, and with her skin still elastic and organs unrotted. But they would cover her up eventually, the same as him, and perhaps her body would have already begun its slow unraveling. At least Jason would avoid that return to infancy, the process of losing yourself to time. Though maybe she would, too, who could say.

Even the universe couldn't avoid its own unfolding, a thinning out or a cooling or a cosmic rip. First the sun's staggering glare, its explosion into the sky. Phoebe didn't believe that would happen without something else starting, some process they hadn't identified yet, some invisible life or substance would form in the dark. Something always did.

Evan had given Phoebe a collage, the first one he'd made since he threw one of his own creations out of sight. He'd included Goshen fields and the Ozarks and birds that wouldn't leave the outdoor seating at coffee shops and restaurants. But above the familiar, galaxies and red dwarfs and supernovas whirled and touched, and water flowed everywhere.

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