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SOME GIRLS

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida 2017

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree for Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
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at the University of Central Florida  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This novel in stories explores the viewpoint of an unnamed, agender narrator as they navigate their life from childhood into early adulthood. Through the narrator's unique lens, the stories explore gender, sexuality, mental illness, family, and loneliness. The narrator's struggles with belonging and overarching feelings of abandonment intertwine with the sometimes isolating and dangerous landscape of Florida. From their interactions with both Florida and the people who pass through their life, the narrator begins to learn how to accept who are they are, without apology.

To my mother. I love you dearly, nagging included.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Thank you to my mother and Scott, for always encouraging me, and to my brother and Jess, for always being supportive. I love you. Thank you to the UCF community and Creative Writing MFA program for giving me a home to grow. I'm looking at you, Terry Thaxton. And especially thank you to Jamie Poissant, who constantly pushed me, encouraged me, and made me feel like my writing was valid. This thesis is here because of you.

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## SOME GIRLS

Dad was in the hospital again. Mom told Tony and me over breakfast. She told us she'd have to take extra shifts, so my brother would be the man of the house and look after me. Tony tapped his spoon against his cereal bowl and said sure, fine, he'd do it. I wanted to say I could do that too, be the man of the house. I didn't know what it meant. I just knew I wanted that. Then Mom's toast burned and we had to go to school. When the bus dropped us off that afternoon, Tony pulled me along by the frayed strap of my backpack, me dragging behind him like luggage. I wore a blue St. Augustine sweatshirt too big for me. It was Tony's, but I'd jacked it so many times he let me have the sweatshirt. The purple, fur-lined coat Grandma got for my ninth birthday hung neglected in my closet.

We waited for Alan and Matt to get off the bus on the sidewalk. They were my brother's friends, and I pretended they were mine too. Everything in Clermont was spread out, and there weren't a lot of kids around, except for Cassie. I didn't count her because she was bound to a wheelchair and went to school at home. I liked being around the boys better.

"Come on, let's go," Tony said, and we all listened.

We had to hurry and call our mom on the house phone so she'd know we were okay. Home was a mile walk down two hills, which was rare for Florida, and back then I thought made Clermont special. Tony walked ahead, already too tall for eleven. His limbs were gangly like his bones were frustrated in his own body and there wasn't enough room for them, like they might have popped out the skin any second.



I walked behind Tony and Alan and Matt down the hill, past the lines of trees and saw palmettos that separated houses. To me, the saw palmettos were a jungle, and when Dad was having his okay days we'd pretend to be explorers on safari in Africa. Now it was too cold to pretend, and Dad wasn't around. At the bottom of the first hill, my brother and his friends stopped, whispered, and started laughing. I heard what they were saying. They were going to run into the woods and water the grass and fallen leaves. Tony told me to stay behind.

"I want to go too," I said.

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"You're a girl," Matt said, and my brother sighed like that was my biggest burden.

The St. Augustine sweatshirt hid the shape of my body. I was oversized cotton and corduroy and scuffed sneakers. But there was no hiding what I was. I pinched the fabric of the sweatshirt between my fingers and felt like crying, even though I didn't understand why. My brother touched my shoulder and shook it, not hard, just enough for me to look back up.

"Don't cry," he said. "We'll be right back."

"Mom said you can't leave me alone," I said.

"I can still see you from the woods. Don't be a baby."

I crossed my arms and said nothing. I knew if I talked, I would cry, and then they'd never invite me along. Tony and his friends dropped their backpacks at my feet, then half-jogged into the wooded area, laughing like this was some secret, stumbling over exposed roots. They went

far enough I could barely see them. I knew peeing in the woods was something kind of private, so I turned the other way. Across the street, Cassie sat outside her house. She watched me.

I didn't know what was wrong with her, only that she was in a wheelchair and always had been. Her mom stuck her outside on sunny days, wheels locked on the sidewalk. My brother told me the doctors accidentally broke her arms and legs when she was born, and that's why she had to be in a wheelchair. It was a year before I realized he was pulling one over on me. I had to go to her house once for a play date and didn't know what to do with her. We played a board game and she wouldn't shut up about making s'mores. Mom didn't make me go back. Cassie cocked her head to the side, now, and waved at me. I thought about waving back. Tony and his friends came out of the woods and I didn't. Tony swatted at my ponytail.

"Let's go," he said.

"Cassie's outside," I said.

"Oh, yeah." He waved to her. "Come on, we gotta call mom."

#

House without Dad was haunted. I felt like he would jump out from behind a door any minute, or come to my rescue when Tony was being mean. He lingered in the bed sheets, his photo in the hall, a sock that fell from the laundry basket. Before the hospital, he'd had one of his bad days. Dad decided we needed to throw out all the food with high fructose corn syrup. He raccooned through the fridge and cabinets, threw unacceptable food into a cardboard box. Poison, he'd said, we were all being fed poison. Then he burned the box in backyard, and the air smelled like char and fruit snacks for days. After that, he stayed in bed for a week. The bedroom

reeked of stale chips, the smell crept into the hallway, and we all knew. We knew what happened when he got like this, when his stubble grew in and he couldn't look us in the eyes, got so depressed his mouth wouldn't make words. Mom and Tony and I avoided him, quarantined to his room. He came out one night while we were eating dinner, glass-eyed and saggy.

"Hide the knives," he said.

Mom drove him to the hospital.

This was Dad's third hospital stay, but only the second I could remember. That second time, Tony and I were too young to be home alone. Grandma stayed with us, there was spaghetti every night, and all I could think was that I wanted her to stay forever. I didn't know.

People assumed Dad went to the hospital because of something physical, and Mom let them, because it was easier than explaining that he was in a psych ward. Even I didn't really know why he was there. I wouldn't understand the word *bipolar* until later, or other things, like why Mom was always fidgeting and wouldn't stay alone with Dad.

Dad was gone, though, so Mom had to go too, and that left Tony and me alone in the afternoons until she came home with dinner. Most times, we just played with his friends outside, especially since our Nintendo 64 stopped working. I liked to follow them around. They always looked like they were having fun, loose-limbed and allowed to walk home alone. No one ever put them in dresses. No one told them they couldn't get dirt on the knees. Their bodies kept getting taller, and I wanted that. Sometimes, at night, I imagined waking up as one of them, and then my body made sense. I imagined running with longer legs and people I didn't know cheering me on. I didn't really know where I was running. I just ran, and I was happy. In those dreams, I ran so fast I'd start flying, legs kicking off the ground.

My brother's friends didn't mind me following them that much, but I was finally getting to the age when I wasn't just my brother's little sister anymore. I was a girl.

#

A week passed, and Dad still had not left the hospital. Despite the bitter cold, we all ran around outside under the dulled winter sun. No one thinks of Florida as somewhere cold, but February that year was wet and unforgiving. I rode my bike in oblong circles around the driveway, though eventually I became more interested in Tony and his friends and the soccer ball they kicked back and forth in the street. Every ten minutes a car would come around the corner, and they'd scatter to the grass, the ball left to roll to the curb. The third time, the ball came to me. I played soccer at school, so I laid my bike on the grass and kicked the ball around, then over to my brother and his friends.

"I want to play," I said.

"You're too little," Tony said.

I told him I wasn't.

"Why don't you play with some dolls?" Matt said.

"Yeah," Alan said. "With Cassie."

Tony told them not to be jerks. He touched my shoulder again. He always did that when he was about to tell me I couldn't do something.

"Just go play on your bike. I'll play with you later, okay?" he said.

"I want to play soccer," I said.

"You can't."

"If Dad were here, he'd make you let me."

Tony's nose wrinkled, and his lips pushed forward.

"Dad's not coming back."

Matt and Alan watched us, but, once I looked at them, they pretended to be fascinated with the grass, their shoes. My brother also looked elsewhere. A car came by and honked at us, even though we were already close to the curb. We didn't move. The car kept going. Tony flipped it the bird.

"Dad always comes back," I said.

My brother pressed his foot on the ball, hard, and rolled it back and forth. He looked frustrated, having to explain all this.

"Mom said we're gonna stay with Grandma for a while. Don't tell her I told you."

I didn't really get what he meant. I understood that this was something bad, but I knew it the way a child does, with the certainty that tomorrow would be fine. I just felt angry that Dad wasn't there now and wouldn't be, and angrier because I didn't understand why.

"I'll play with you in a little bit, okay?" Tony said.

I could tell he didn't want to talk about it anymore.

"But why can't I play with you?"

"Because you can't," he said, louder, maybe, then he meant to.

I didn't answer him. I was so hurt and angry I knew I'd only yell. Instead I dragged my feet along the asphalt and back to my bike. They started kicking the ball around again behind me, laughing and shouting. I didn't get why I had to be treated differently, just because I was a girl. I didn't get why my dad wasn't coming home. I didn't get anything. My bike lay on its side still. I didn't pick it up. I started walking up the hill to the front of the neighborhood. This one wasn't as steep as the one to the bus stop, but you'd still get winded if you ran to the top.

The soles of my shoes echoed against the concrete as I got down to the other side of the hill. No one was around, just me and the woods and the distant smell of a fireplace going. I took a second look around to make sure no one could see. Then, I sprinted into the trees. Twigs snapped under my feet, palm leaves scratched at my cheeks. I tucked myself behind a tree and lifted up my sweatshirt to undo my jeans. The sharp cold of my zipper bit my fingers, and I squeezed my hands together to warm them. I pulled my jeans down, underwear too. I stood there for a little bit, not knowing what to do. I knew if I just started peeing, I'd pee all over my pants, so I squatted a bit, trying to aim. My jeans were still in the line of fire. I thought about taking them off, but decided I didn't want to do that, in case I needed to leave quick. So, I leaned against the bark of the tree. I started going. I watched it, listened to it pop against the leaves before sinking to the earth. I felt like one of my brother's friends, cool and able to laugh about some secret joke.

Then, I slipped. My hands scraped the bark, and I landed bare ass on the ground, still peeing. The fall hurt, but I sat until I finished, couldn't do much else. I scrambled up, after, wet leaves on my butt, pee dripping onto my jeans. I had nothing to wipe with, and boys didn't need to wipe at all. I cried, mortified, even though no one could see me. I was used to getting my way—the baby of the family, Dad's favorite. Whenever I was upset, he'd fix the problem. Now,

he wasn't here, and I knew this was something that couldn't be fixed. I couldn't be fixed. I heard the sound of a car pass on the road, and that pulled my chest tight. I wiped my eyes against my sweatshirt and slapped the leaves off my butt. I pulled my pants back up. I didn't care that they were wet.

When I stepped out of the woods again, Cassie had been put outside on the sidewalk. Her mom always stuck her in the same place. I never saw her mom with her. Cassie waved, and, this time, I waved back.

"Come here," she said.

I pulled my sweatshirt down and crossed the road, wary. I hadn't been that close to her since the play date. She was bundled tight, though I could still see how skinny her legs were, like Play-Doh that had been rolled too thin.

"Hi," she said. "We played once."

I nodded.

"What were you doing in the woods?" she said.

"Nothing," I said. "Where's your mom?"

"She doesn't like the cold." Cassie motioned back to the house with her head, cheek brushing the woven mesh of her wheelchair. "Are you playing alone?"

"I guess so."

She smiled. Her teeth were white and crooked, cased in spit. I couldn't look at her without feeling like I was staring, so I looked up the hill to the bus stop instead.

"Hey," Cassie said. "Do you want to play?"

I shrugged. She asked if I'd go to the top of the hill with her.

"You can't go up there," I said.

"Yes, I can," she said, and pointed at her wheels. "Just unlock them there, see?"

I did. When I stood, she used a little toggle and moved herself forward. Her legs jiggled lifelessly against the chair.

"I can't get up there by myself," she said. "But you can push me, okay?"

She straightened herself out on the sidewalk with the toggle, reversing and turning the wheels as if driving a car. I pushed her. Her wheelchair was heavier than I thought it would be. She helped by using the motor. It whirred all the way up the hill, and at one point sounded like it was going to die out. From behind, Cassie smelled like stale Cheerios.

"How come you're not playing with your brother?" she said. "That tall boy, he's your brother, right?"

"He's playing soccer with his friends. They told me I couldn't."

"That was mean," Cassie said.

"Yeah," I said, nodding, even though she couldn't see me, and pushed harder. "It was."

"My mom says girls are naturally less good at sports, though. It's our hips."

I stared at the back of her headrest and said nothing. She kept talking, told me all the things she knew because of her mom, like how cats purr when they give birth. If you travel to



space, you de-age by one second. A shrimp's heart is in its head, and did I know that lightning *does* strike the same place twice?

"Oh," I said, every time she offered a new fact.

We got to the top of the hill, just a house away from the main road. My arms felt heavy. I shook them out, the sleeves of my sweatshirt slipping to cover my hands. I wanted desperately to grow into it.

"Anyway, you can't just play with boys all the time," Cassie said.

My butt felt cold now that we weren't walking anymore. I stood with my back to the sidewalk, aware that my jeans were still wet, and now they felt heavy as well. The sweatshirt covered my thighs, but I worried the pee had soaked through.

"What do you mean?" I said. "I play with boys all the time."

Cassie smiled at me.

"But you're not a boy, silly."

Wind came up the hill and cut through our bodies. The cold air pressed against my wet jeans. I could feel the dampness of my crotch against my underwear, the sure proof that I couldn't pee like the boys, that I wasn't one of them.

"You went to pee in the woods, didn't you?" Cassie said. "I see your brother and his friends go all the time, and you went too."

"No, I didn't."

I twisted my fingers into the bottom of my sweatshirt. I felt feverish with embarrassment.

"Yeah, you did," she said. "Did you do it? My mom says only boys can do that."

"Who cares what your stupid mom said?"

Cassie stared at me. From the bottom of the hill, I thought I heard someone call her name.

"You're just mad you're not a boy," she said.

"Shut the hell up," I said.

She leaned back against her headrest like no one had ever said that to her before. I'd never said the words before. I felt brave saying them. Adult. I heard someone call her name again.

"You're mean," Cassie said. "Take me back down."

I didn't move.

"Take me back," she said again. "Please."

We stared at each other, waiting, but we both already knew.

"Do it yourself," I said, and felt powerful telling her that, knowing that she couldn't.

I walked back down the hill. She didn't call after me. I turned back halfway down and saw her still there, a black dot. Then, I ran. Cassie's mom stood outside their house. When she saw me coming, she started waving her arms at me, all shrill-voiced and frantic. I ran past her.

"Hey," she said. "Hey! Come back here."

I didn't. I kept running. My legs burned when I went up the second hill. It felt higher, longer. I told myself I'd be okay if I could only get home. I'd fit into my sweatshirt and my pants would be dry. Tony would be waiting for me, Mom and Dad too. As I ran down the other side of the hill, I imagined myself growing out of my body. I imagined I flew, and that, for a moment, things were fair.

I did not fly. As I slowed to a stop in front of our house, I knew I was in trouble. I'd done something terrible. My breath rattled cold in my lungs. Inside, I pulled off my wet sweatshirt and jeans and wadded them into a ball. I would never wear that sweatshirt again. The house phone rang. I sat at the kitchen table with my soiled clothes in my arms and listened to the phone ring until the answering machine took over. If I wanted, I could have erased the message. I didn't move. My underwear was still damp, and molded now to the shape of my crotch. The house shook as the garage door rattled open with Mom's return, then stilled. I waited. There was no running, anymore.

## HOMEcoming

The day Dad came back there was a gator in the front yard. I woke up and saw him out my bedroom window, his black-green body in our driveway. The morning Florida sun beat down so hot it looked like waves of steam were coming off his scaly back. We watched each other, him unblinking, me terrified, then I ran to Mom's room.

"A gator?" she said, and then swore under her breath. "Where's your grandmother?"

Her body curved over the vanity so she could see better into the mirror and apply her lipstick. She had a dancer's body, lithe and muscular.

"Sleeping," I said. "What if it tries to come in the house?"

"Baby, that won't happen. Gators can't open doors."

She carved off excess lipstick with her fingernail and leaned back, watching herself in the mirror with an expression I was too young to recognize as regret. We'd been staying at Grandma's house for the past four months—me, Mom, and Tony, though he'd shipped off to ROTC camp at the beginning of summer. At this point, I knew we weren't going home anymore. I just hoped we might go somewhere. Grandma lived in Nowhere, Florida, a town with lines and lines of orange groves that made it smell sweet, but the second you were there for more than an hour you knew the place was sour.

"I shouldn't have stopped dancing," Mom said into the mirror. "Look at me, waitressing is giving me lines."

"But you're beautiful," I said.

She smiled. Later, she'd come home exhausted with her makeup smudged around her eyes, raccoon-like and haggard. For now, she traced the line of my jaw with her finger.

"Let's go see about this gator," she said.

I followed her to the front of the house. We peeked out the screen door together. The gator was moving now. He swung his fat tail behind him, making for the lake behind the house. Gators terrified me back then. I thought their mouths were too big, was convinced they'd swallow me whole. Kids at school told stories about them snatching up children, eating dogs and homeless people. There was no telling which stories were true and which were kids trying to scare each other.

"There he goes," Mom said. "He probably just wanted to say hello."

"He was watching me," I said.

Mom laughed. She dug into her purse to check for her nametag, then bent down to kiss my cheek.

"I have to go now. Be good for Grandma today, okay?"

"You're always going," I said.

Mom got a watery look in her eyes and stood up straight.

"I can't help that right now. I have to work so we save up for our own place. Do you understand?"

I said that I did. I hated watching her go, and, lately, that's all I'd been doing. A soft rumbling noise started from outside. For a moment, I thought it was the gator coming back. I felt

my lungs squeeze shut. Then a pickup drove into view, dust spitting behind it. Mom squinted, gasped, and dropped her purse.

"Shit," she said.

I craned my neck around her body. Dad stepped out of the cab. He wore jeans and a dirty white t-shirt. He looked skinnier, half the dad I remembered him to be, but he was smiling.

"Dad!" I said.

Around us, cicadas screamed.

#

When my brother was a baby, Dad threw himself out the second-floor window of our house. Tony never stopped crying, born colicky, and Dad was so distraught he forgot the sunroom was just outside the window. When he jumped, he hit the roof of it and sprained his ankle. A few months later, a psychiatrist diagnosed him bipolar. By the time I came into the world, Dad had been off and on meds for almost three years. Growing up with him meant sometimes he checked himself into the hospital, or cut the phone lines because he thought the government was listening in, or Mom would hide his razors in the back of my closet because he was threatening to kill himself. I thought this was normal.

Once he went to the hospital for the last time, once we left our house, I realized he wasn't normal. Our family wasn't normal. The first night at Grandma's, I wondered what that might be like, to be normal. I couldn't imagine.

"Do you think they'll come back together?" I asked Grandma. "Mom and Dad?"

Grandma shrugged, mouth tight. She poured me cereal while her soap operas played in the background. I spooned Lucky Charms into my mouth.

"Well, he certainly can't stay here," she said.

Mom had walked out to meet Dad. She told me to wait inside, and I did, but kept the screen door cracked open to try and listen. Their voices were far away. Mom's arms were twisted and defensive at first, then fell to her sides, and then she was gesturing so violently some of her hair fell loose from the bobby pins. After a while, their lips stopped moving. She got into his truck with him, and they drove away. I shut the door and ran to wake up Grandma, my face already sweaty from the heat.

"Che cavalo," she'd said, and sat up searching for her dentures.

Now I ate in silence, sweat still curling my hair. Grandma had one hand on the chair across from me. Her neck craned to catch the last scene of *Days of Our Lives*. I took my time sectioning off the puffed rice from the marshmallows so I could save them for last. Grandma's soap ended and she eased herself into the chair.

"I don't want you to get your hopes up," she said.

I slowed my chewing. "Why not?"

"I don't think your father will be coming back."

I looked at my cereal. The milk was dyed pink from the marshmallows, and I thought about Dad not staying with us ever again. I hadn't considered it before, assumed he would come back to us eventually. I had asked Mom to visit him in the hospital once, and she shook her head, told me, "No, sweetheart. You don't want to see him like that." I didn't know what "that" meant.

I scooped up the last of my marshmallows and drank my milk, watching Grandma over the rim of the bowl.

"But don't you go to a hospital to get better?" I asked. "He should be better now."

"That's not how it works, I'm afraid." Grandma traced the wicker placement with her wrinkled finger and smiled at me. "You're handling this very well, though. You're already so adult."

I wiped milk off my upper lip. "I'm only ten."

Grandma laughed and stood up. She took my empty bowl and washed it in the sink. She liked to do the dishes right away, sink always spotless. I stayed seated and ran my tongue over the filmy coating on my teeth.

"Grandma, I saw a gator today. He was in the front yard."

"A gator?" she said. "Lord, and what did he want?"

"I don't know, he left."

"Well if he comes back, you be sure to ask him."

I liked the way she said that, as if I could demand answers.

"Okay," I said. "I will, I will."

#

I expected Dad to be with Mom when she came home. She walked in holding her no-skid shoes, hair pulled up into a messy bun that reminded me of twirled spaghetti. I was disappointed.



I didn't know. I guess I had this idea in my head that if Dad came back, we'd all leave together, and things could be like before. Even though before wasn't all that great, it was familiar, and I wanted it. I didn't do well with change as a kid. I asked Mom where Dad was.

"He's..." she swept her hand out in front of her as if he was going to appear. "He's like he always is."

"Did you guys make up?" I asked.

Grandma stepped into the hall to see what all the fuss was about. She had on an old pink apron I swear was from the 1800s, wore it every time she cooked. When she realized we were talking about Dad, she pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and started rubbing at her nose.

"That man never did good for you," she said.

"Ma," Mom said. "Don't. Not right now."

"Crazy men only make you crazy. You'd be in shows right now if it weren't for him."

"I know—"

"If comes back here again, I oughta shoot him myself," Grandma said. "He knows I hunted with your father—"

"Ma!" Mom dropped her shoes so she could clench her fists. "Please. It's over."

"I know," Grandma said. "I know. Now come on, I have dinner ready. Your poor daughter is starving."

She left the hallway. I stayed with Mom. She crossed her arms and looked down at the floor, only she wasn't really looking at the floor. She was thinking about dancing. Even at ten years old I knew that, knew she was imagining the tight line of her body, the rush of spinning under stage lights, so dizzy happy she couldn't even see the audience.

"Can I see Dad?" I asked.

Mom pulled her lips together and then shook her head.

"Not right now."

I knew she meant never. She picked her shoes up from the floor and walked into the kitchen.

#

I woke up sweaty and disoriented, couldn't remember for a moment where I was. The moon shone blue into the bedroom window, and I watched, thinking it was a dream. Grandma's house had been built before central air, and the unit now could barely keep up, and the house was full of little cracks for the air to keep out, spill our relief. I kicked the covers off and sat up. I saw the gator again out the window. He'd come back, was cooling his belly on the grass this time. We noticed each other right away. I was sure, then, that he'd been coming for me.

Tony shared the room with me, but since he was gone I took advantage of having a bedroom to myself. Muggy air crept in as I pushed the window open. I made just enough space for my hands and then bent down, kept my fingers on the edge of the window so I could slam it shut in case the gator came after me.

"Hey," I whispered. "Hey, what do you want?"

He didn't answer. I hadn't expected him to, even though some part of my young imagination had me convinced that was a possibility. He might open that pointed mouth and say something.

"Go away," I said. "No one wants you here."

No answer. Nothing but crickets and frog calls from the lake.

I stood back up and shut the window.

#

We didn't speak about Dad the next day. Mom left for work, and I didn't mention the gator to Grandma. I was sure she'd think I was lying—I had a habit of stretching the truth when I wanted attention. Instead I stood by her while she washed the dishes.

"Why don't you play outside?" Grandma said.

I bit my cheeks. I was afraid of seeing the gator again, but I was more embarrassed to tell her that.

"It's so hot."

"Just for a bit," she said. "For fresh air. You spend too much time with these video games."

I picked at the laminate on the corner of the counter and then nodded. Instead of removing her hands from the soapy water, Grandma leaned over and kissed the top of my head.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "What with everything that's happened?"

I didn't know what to say. Mom had asked me once, and I said I was fine. Truth was I didn't know what to think. What does leaving a family member behind feel like? Like chopping off a limb.

"Do you not like Dad anymore?" I asked.

Grandma didn't stop washing the dishes. The yellow sponge worked left, right, left, right, never out of sequence.

"I like your father just fine," she said. "But I love you and your brother."

I said okay, though I didn't get her at all.

"Go on," she said. "Run around."

I listened.

#

The end of our driveway faded into a dirt road that took you up to the main road. There were divots all over and you could hear a car coming before even seeing it, so I considered the road safe enough to play on. I liked to walk up and down the sides and scan the orange groves in the distance. There were acres and acre of orange groves. From a distance, the oranges reminded me of Skittles, like I could pluck them right off the trees.

I played alone, and I didn't mind. Grandma didn't live by a lot of kids. Even when I was at school, I didn't have many friends. I liked baggy clothes and never wore skirts and the girls made fun of me, and the boys didn't like that I ran faster than they did.

I kept close to our driveway for a while, eyes out for the gator, though minutes passed without any noise other than distant cars and cicadas. I got braver. I walked my usual path, not too far from the house, away enough that I could pretend I was totally alone. Then, I heard a car coming. I stepped onto the tall grass and waited.. A truck came bouncing down the dirt. I recognized the pickup—it was Dad's. He saw me and I waved to him. The truck slowed to a stop he and leaned out the window, forearm against the door.

"Hey, kiddo," he said. "What are you doing? It's nice to see you."

"Walking," I said. "Is Mom with you?"

"No." He glanced up the road. "Just me. I wanted to take you and Tony to lunch. Is Tony around?"

"He's at ROTC camp."

"How about just me and you, then?"

Even in the sun, his eyes shone bright, as if he weren't real. I thought maybe I shouldn't go with him. Mom might get mad. But I wanted to see him. I missed him. I still liked him.

"Can we get pizza?" I asked.

"You bet."

I got in the truck. The cab smelled kind of funny. I realized that smell was Dad. He smelled like chemicals and old cheese. I put my hand on the door handle and considered jumping out, except Dad started reversing down the dirt road. I pulled my hand back to my lap. In the side mirror, I watched the dirt obscure the view of our house.

#

We didn't talk on the drive. I assumed we'd go to the restaurant Mom worked at. We didn't. Dad took me to a pizza place I'd never been to before. It wasn't until we sat down that I realized something was off. His eyes were glassy even inside and his hands kept shaking every time he picked up his water cup. He had two refills before our food even came.

"Still dressing like a boy, huh?"

I touched my shirt, protective. Mom had let me buy it in the boys' section at Goodwill.

"This is my shirt," I said.

"Sure it is," Dad said. "How's school? How have you been?"

I didn't know what to tell him. I spent most of my time alone, walked up and down the dirt road to my grandparents' house, fantasized about who might be living in our old house. I stole my brother's shirts, sometimes his underwear, and wore them in secret. The neighbors mistook me for a boy often, and that embarrassed Grandma. Mom wasn't happy. Neither was Tony. I didn't say that. I didn't want to tell him.

Our pizzas came. Dad slid a slice of cheese onto my plate, then we ate in silence. Mom usually cut my slice into smaller pieces when got pizza, because the cheese was so hot it'd burn your mouth. Dad didn't know that. I waited for the pizza to cool while he ate, slice folded in half. His hands were tremors.

Once, when he was manic, Dad tried to invent a new type of pizza. He glided around the kitchen like a bird over water. He added ingredients from the back of the fridge that had expired. He made it seem like the easiest thing in the world, to make something new. Tony and I sat on

the kitchen counter watching, inspired. After we ate, Tony and I got so sick we threw up for three days. Mom was furious. She held my hair back while I retched and spit up every rancid ingredient, alternated between rubbing my back and yelling at Dad.

"I didn't know," he'd said, and kept saying it.

My pizza cooled enough for me to eat and I started eating fast. I felt antsy with Dad, now, like he was a stranger. I tried to think of times we'd be alone even when he was living at home. I couldn't remember any. He was usually at work, and if not work then home with us, and I got car sick so easy he refused to drive me anywhere himself.

"You know," Dad said. "I'll be getting my own place soon, if this job works out that I have lined up. You could come stay with me."

"Can Mom come?"

He paused mid-bite, the pizza chipmunked in his cheeks.

"Do you want her to?" he asked.

I said I did. I said we all could.

He laughed and started chewing again.

"Sure, we can do whatever we want. Mom can come."

His hands were shaking.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah," Dad said. "Yeah, sweetie. I feel good, really good, actually. I know I had to go away for a while, but I'm back now, okay? I have this friend Dave, he's going to help me remodel some houses. Won't that be nice? We can live in them."

He talked fast. I remembered times he'd talk like this, always times he'd been off his meds. Which meant he wasn't on them now. He was the same, and he shouldn't have been. Suddenly, I didn't know what to do with this Dad at all.

"Can you take me home?" I asked. "I don't feel good."

Dad looked away from me. On TV, the Rays were playing, gray dots on a flat field of green.

"I wish you were older," he said. "Then you might understand. We can't go home right now."

He looked back at me. "I love you so much," he said.

He meant that. Of all the things he'd ever said, that was one thing I knew he meant. We watched the last pitch of the inning together. Then I said I had to go to the bathroom. Dad nodded, and I slipped out of the booth. I didn't go to the bathroom. I walked out the side door and onto the street. There hadn't been rain for a few days and now it was blistering. But it felt good to be outside, to breathe. I mostly remembered which way we'd come from. We hadn't been in his truck that long, maybe ten minutes. I left him.

Places look different when you walk them alone. I always had my parents' eyes to see for me before. Now I saw everything at my level. Buildings were taller, people looked lonelier. I saw the gas station Mom sometimes filled up at, but I couldn't remember where I was supposed



to go after that. I couldn't even remember the name of our street. Things started blurring. I realized it was because I was crying. My tears were hot, and my cheeks were hot and it stung to cry like that. I wiped my sleeve over my eyes and looked back toward the pizza restaurant. Dad hadn't come for me yet. A plane hummed overhead. I looked up, followed it with my eyes and then looked down and saw the orange groves. I remembered where to go.

#

I made it back to the dirt road, and Dad still hadn't come for me. I don't think he'd even realized I'd left yet. I skipped my fingers along the tall grass and kicked up rocks as I walked. I felt stupid. I felt young. I felt like crying again, but I'd sweated out all of the water in me. All I wanted to do was get home. Our driveway came into view and I ran then I saw him. The gator. He lay across the driveway, eyes shut, and once I skidded to stop, they snapped open. I screamed. My legs became part of the earth and I couldn't move them, couldn't do anything but stand there and scream.

I knew I was going to die. The gator had been waiting for me, and now he was going to eat me. I couldn't move.

Grandma came out the screen door with the shotgun.

"Jesus," she said. "Don't move!"

"Shoot him," I said. "Shoot him!"

I screamed again when she shot him. The noise echoed over everything. Soon as the bullet struck, the gator took off fast, tail dragging. Grandma ran off the porch and grabbed my arm, shotgun still in her other hand. She yanked me behind her. I didn't think Grandma was

capable of having a grip so tight until that moment. My throat was itchy raw and I could hardly breathe.

"Grandma—"

"It's all right, he won't get you now."

She finally let me go. She readied the shotgun again.

"I'm gonna finish him off. No need for him to suffer."

I followed her quietly. I had some sick need to see it finished through, to watch that gator die. Grandma moved slow, but not like when she'd first wake up in the morning—this was calculated, careful. I wondered if I should tell her about Dad. Mom would want to know what happened when she got home, they both would. I was afraid Grandma would shoot Dad too.

We rounded the side of the house and Grandma halted. I could see the gator again. He was tucked away in the vegetation by the lake, black-red blood on the scales. There were twigs twisted around him like a bird's nest.

"What is that?" I asked. "Is that his home?"

"Hers," Grandma said. "It's her nest."

The fear left me all at once, then. Instead, I felt guilty, like when I used to sneak candies behind Mom's back. The gator hissed, a desperate and empty warning.

"I'm going to put her out of her misery," Grandma said.

"What about her babies?"

"I'm afraid they won't make it without her."

She welded her cheek to the stock and I fisted the back of her shirt, shaking.

"Can't we save her?" I asked.

"It's too late. Move back now."

I stepped back and didn't let myself look away from the gator. The shot rang out. The bullet made the gator's body twitch, then she went still. I stared into her dead eyes. Grandma let the shotgun go limp under her arm. She told me she would take care of everything, but I knew the babies would die. The momma gator was dead, and it felt like my fault. She hadn't come for me at all. She just wanted to protect her babies.

Grandma took me inside, and we waited together at the kitchen table for Mom to get home. I watched the dusty driveway from my chair. I thought I might see Dad's pick-up pull in, or maybe that gator sliding her belly across the lawn again. I waited. Neither showed.

## PRETTY HANDSOME

I had a friend who always looked so easy to hurt. Her body hadn't grown much taller at ten, but everyone knew where she was, when she was coming. We played pretend in Grandma's living room, and, whenever dinnertime came around, she always wanted to stay. She told me once she didn't like going home, but when I asked why, she wouldn't say. I assumed her dad beat her, even though she never had a bruise on her. She had bird bones and perpetually skinned knees. Hardly spoke above a whisper. She was my friend. We rode the bus together from school and sometimes had enough cash between us to buy two donuts at the Dunkin's on the corner. I liked the cruller. She liked the strawberry frosted. Both of us walked home with sticky fingers and mouths, and she'd spread the pink frosting over her lips and smile. Against her dark skin, the color popped.

People told her she was a boy even though she wasn't. No one really knew but me—she told me the second time we hung out. She told me God had given her the wrong body, the wrong everything. She said she would fix herself one day. She told me, because she thought I would understand. I did. I told her that I'd give her my body, if I could. I never learned to love it very much. Her parents had given her a boy's name at birth. Just between us two, her name was Julie.

"You two are a funny pair," Grandma said to me.

I was helping set the table for dinner. Mom worked until after seven most nights, and Grandma went to bed by eight, so we ate early. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten dinner with Mom or Tony, because Tony didn't like to come home much anymore. Grandma's house wasn't really our home, though. Mom said the situation was temporary after we left Dad, but temporary turned into two years, and Tony and I started to forget what our old house looked like.

"Why are we funny?" I asked.

"He's just so feminine," Grandma said. "And you're our little tomboy."

That's what they called me back then. *Tomboy*. Anything a girl was supposed to do, I wanted no part of. Everything soft line of my body, I hated.

I asked Grandma if I could play dress up with Grandpa's clothes again after dinner. He'd died from pancreatic cancer when I was four years old. I couldn't remember him, other than flashes of memories of times he'd held me. After he died, Grandma didn't change one thing about the house. She kept his clothes hung in the closets, and his watch on the bedside table. Even his razor sat rusting in the medicine cabinet. I liked the smell of his clothes, and more than that, I liked wearing them. Grandpa had dressed the way I wanted to, button downs and ties. Men's clothes. I wanted them to be my clothes.

Grandma said I could put on Grandpa's clothes as long as I ate everything on my plate tonight. She set down a dish of bread and sat across from me.

"Your brother might not be here," she said, "but at least I can keep an eye on one of you."

#

Summer snuck up on us. Spring came soft with flowers, but now, the sidewalks were hot with sun. Steam rose from the streets and the farmlands and carried a manure smell all over Ocala. The last weeks of school dwindled, and, when Julie and I left class we knew we'd have three months free from bullies. They'd call her my girlfriend, and me, a "dyke." I didn't know what the word meant at eleven but I knew an insult when I heard one, so I slammed Elizabeth Burgess' head against the wall and no one ever called me that again.

Julie and I walked home with no money between us, so no donuts. Dirt from the road swirled and stuck to our sweaty arms. Even though Julie had a better TV, we decided, like always, to go to my house and watch The Powerpuff Girls. This time, Grandma was waiting for us as we entered the kitchen for a snack. She sat at the kitchen table with a Target bag clutched in her lap. She was smiling, which meant not only had she gone shopping, but she'd gone shopping for someone else.

"I saw something that I knew would look so cute on you," she said.

I slipped my backpack off, took Julie's too, and set them on the kitchen counter.

"You're always wearing pants in the summer, and it's too hot," Grandma said. She pulled a dress from the Target bag. "I thought you might like this."

The dress was beautiful: red and white horizontal stripes, an empire waist and a scoop neck, sleeves cut to show off the shoulders. Mom had stopped attempting to fight me into dresses by age five. Grandma still held hope. She held the dress so proudly, like it might heal me. I imagined myself wearing it. The vision of myself slithered dread into my chest, my body contracting at the thought.

"Would you try it on?" Grandma asked. "For me?"

I said I would. I knew she wouldn't return the dress. I knew that Mom wouldn't make me wear it, but I didn't want to make Grandma feel bad. If I was lucky, she would forget she'd bought the dress at all after a few weeks. I took the dress from her and turned to Julie as if she could help.

"She'll model it for you," Grandma said to her. "Won't that be nice?"

Julie shrugged. The house phone rang. Grandma wobbled upright from the chair, her knees protesting, and then stepped into the hall, leaving us. I shook the dress in my hand, and it waved like a limp flag.

"It's pretty," Julie said.

"I hate it." I held the dress up to her thin frame and cocked my head. "It'd look better on you, I bet."

She reached to touch the dress but then set her hands back at her sides. At first, I thought she looked embarrassed. Then I realized she was imagining herself in that dress. I'd never seen her in a dress before—her dad made her dress like a boy—but I didn't have a hard time picturing her in one. She had slender hips and collarbones like ridges.

We heard Grandma creak across the hardwood, and I yanked the dress away. Julie and I stood with our hands behind our backs as Grandma walked over, head shaking.

"Your brother," she said. "I swear. He won't go to school to learn, but he has no problem going there to skateboard."

"Is he okay?"

"He's fine, just got in trouble with the resource officer. I need to go pick him up. Your mother won't be happy about this." She paused at the front door. "You two stay inside, okay? I'll be home real soon."

"Yes," we said.

She put her sun hat on. She was mumbling something about Tony, but I couldn't tell what. Grandma pretended like she didn't worry about him. Tony was the angriest that we had to move in with Grandma. I thought that, as the months went by, he'd become happier. So far, he'd only gotten angrier.

Grandma left. Julie and I did as we were told, went into the living room and switched the TV on. The set was old. If you stood close when you shut the picture off, the hair on your arms stood up like the TV was trying to suck you in. We stood there, she and I, not at all paying attention to what was on. I still had the dress in my hands. I was half-afraid to put it down. Julie watched the screen with a glazed look. She was miles away. When the commercials came, she looked at me, sucked her lips in, then out.

"Can I...try it on?" she asked.

I pulled at the hem of the dress so it flared out and held it up to her figure, one eye shut. I told her sure, she should.

When she grabbed the dress her hands were shaking, eyes glinting. She held it against her body first as if to test it, and then turned around.

"Okay, don't look."

I shut my eyes and sat on the couch, waited and listened to her move and change. After a minute she told me it was okay to open my eyes again, so I did. She was smiling. She never smiled like that—little crooked teeth and flared lips. The dress fell short on her, cut above her knees and then hugged her nonexistent waist, her collarbones cut against the scoop neck.

"Wow," I said. "You look so good."



"Do I?"

She touched her neck where a necklace might have been. I stood.

"Hold on. Let's go to my Grandma's room."

Grandma had a vanity full of jewelry and perfume. Her necklaces lay coiled in long boxes, her rings and bracelets collected in another like a pirate's chest. The perfumes were rowed nearly by the mirror, each one with a smell worse than the last. But they smelled like her, so sometimes I'd unstop them and inhale the scent and remember her like she was no longer there. I never touched her things when I played dress up. It made sense now to give them to someone, so the two of us could dress together.

I opened each box for Julie to look in. She held the dress bunched in her thin hands looked at every little piece. She was happy, and that made me happy, to see her smile like that. There are always sad people. She was one of them. Her sadness made you want to take the feeling and put it anywhere else. She pointed to the pearls, then picked out the matching bracelet, two rings. I fixed the bracelet on her wrist for her while she slid the rings on. I draped the pearls over her head and let them slide down her neck and rest on her skinny chest.

"I think I want to dress up too," I said.

Julie nodded. "You should."

We grabbed a dress shirt and jacket from Grandpa's side of the closet. Julie picked out the tie, a dark blue she said looked good with my skin color. I didn't know how to tie a tie back then, so I just knotted the fabric and let it hang. Grandpa's jacket hung heavy on my shoulders and

covered my hands. I liked it anyway. I put on his old newsboy cap, and Julie and I stared at each other in the mirror, heads cocked.

"Oh," I said. "One more thing."

I grabbed Grandma's black cherry lipstick. I didn't know which color would be best but Julie didn't seem to mind at all. I was going to apply for her until she told me she knew how. She twisted the lipstick up and drew herself lips, mouth parted. Finished, she smacked her lips and we admired ourselves.

"You're pretty," I said.

Her hands slid over the cotton of the dress, and she smiled.

"You think so?"

"Yeah."

She twirled in front of the mirror, and I *did* mean it, she looked pretty. She looked beautiful. Her hands pressed against her chest and I wondered if she imagined breasts there, two hills of flesh and muscle.

"You're really pretty," I said again.

"Like a girl?" she asked, quieter.

I nodded. "Yeah, like a girl."

I kissed her. A closed press of lips and the thickness of lipstick and I pulled back. Then I kissed her again. After every brush of our mouths I told her she was pretty. I said she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. She cried.

"Sorry," I said. I rubbed my hand over my mouth and the skin came back brushed with black cherry color. "I'm sorry."

"No," she said. "That's not it."

She pressed his palms against her eyes, her lashes sharpened to little black arrowheads.

"Do you want—?" she sniffled and touched the tie I wore with her index finger. "You're handsome. Like a boy. You could be a boy, do you want—?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Okay."

My skin felt hot under the shirt and tie now, and I felt wrong, wearing my grandfather's tie, doing this in his clothes. I felt sick and I didn't know why. I unknotted the tie, and we both undressed. We undressed quickly, like we might be caught any moment, like someone would see and expose us for what we were.

When Grandma came back, we were both on the couch pretending to watch TV. Tony didn't acknowledge us. He stomped straight to the room we shared and slammed the door. Julie left a little after bit after that. We'd missed most of the cartoons we wanted to watch. I walked her to the door, and she still didn't want to go home.

"How come?" I asked. "You never told me how come."

There was still a shadow of black cherry on her lips, but that was our only evidence.

"My dad always gets sad when he looks at me," she said.

She dragged her feet over the driveway and walked up the street, hand rubbing her lips. She disappeared around the curve.

#

I wore the dress once. A Sunday when we were all home and Grandma wanted us to go to Mass even though none of us were really religious. Mom always reluctantly let me wear a collared shirt to church, but that Sunday I put the dress on. It clung to me. I always felt like my body was too loud, always yelling, mocking, saying, *Here I am, Here I am, Here I am*. How did people live like this, when their bodies wouldn't cooperate with them? When they were wrong? I didn't know what would happen to Julie and I back then. I didn't know anything.

When Grandma saw me in the dress she brought her hands together and cooed, told me how pretty I looked. I looked so pretty. Was it really so bad? I didn't say anything. Even Mom told me how nice I looked. She had me twirl for her.

"Well, you do look beautiful," she said.

My face was hot.

We drove into downtown, all four of us, Tony staring out the window like he didn't know us at all. The day was bright and cloudless and so everyone was out on the street. I didn't want them to see me. The church was next to a park, and, when we walked up, I saw Julie eating ice cream on a bench with her dad. She saw me. She saw the dress. Then, she looked sad, this time for both of us. She wore shorts and an Orlando Magic jersey. I wished we could trade. As I

passed, she nodded. I nodded back, a silent understanding. This was our secret. For now, this was all we could be. At Mass, everyone complimented me. I was a pretty daughter, a beautiful granddaughter. Neighbors who had come to know me said they hoped to see me like this more often, like a girl should look. I sat in the pew and felt the wood against my bare legs. I wanted to pull the opening of the dress over my legs and disappear into it. I grabbed the hem and tested the stretch of fabric as Grandma sat next to me. She touched my shoulder.

"You just look so pretty," she said.

She looked happy. She wore her black cherry lipstick. I heard the organ pick up and let the edge of the dress go. My family looked happy. I told myself this wasn't so bad.

## **BLOOD IS THICKER**

Tony ran off the day Grandma died. Mom found her on the couch like she'd gone down for a nap and just never woke up. I knew something was wrong when I got home and Mom's car was there, but I realized she was dead the moment I walked inside. Does a house know when someone's died? Everything felt lonely and quiet even though we were there, like Grandma had taken part of the house with her.

"They think it was a heart attack," Mom said. "She probably went in her sleep. Very peaceful."

I nodded. I didn't cry. Without seeing her body, it was like she hadn't really died. Mom told me the paramedics had already come to remove her body.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Uh-huh."

I watched the couch. Grandma always sat there watching soap operas or doing crossword puzzles. Sometimes, if I bothered her, she'd fix me something to eat, and we'd go through the pictures on the fridge together. I liked to listen to her recall the memories of when they were taken, even if the memories weren't always right. I expected her to come back and sit down on the couch at any moment.

Tony came home, backpack hanging off his shoulder. He should have been home before me, but I knew Tony skipped class a lot. I think Mom knew too.

"Honey," Mom said. "Why don't you sit down? I have bad news."

"What?" Tony asked. "Tell me."

"Sit down."

Tony shifted his backpack and shook his head.

"Just tell me."

Mom pressed her lips together. She had this habit of fingering the loose skin of her elbow when she was upset, and she did that now. I forgot, in the strangeness of it all, that Grandma wasn't just my grandmother, she was also Mom's mother, and she'd lost her.

"Grandma died," Mom said. "Probably a heart attack."

"Fuck," Tony said.

Mom didn't correct his language. He looked spooked, real spooked, and pulled his backpack up so it was over both shoulders. He turned and bolted for the front door.

"Hey," Mom said. "Tony! Where are you going?!"

Tony didn't answer. The screen door yawned behind him. Mom didn't move, just twisted the skin of her elbow. We did not move. The couch looked heavy with Grandma's weight, as if she were hanging around to say something about her own death.

#

By the time Tony got in, I was in bed. Mom was talking on the phone in the kitchen, and then the front door opened. Mom asked Tony where he'd been. From there, things got loud, and I turned to my side. I watched out the window to where Grandma had once shot an alligator. I shut

my eyes and pretended to be asleep when Tony opened the door to our bedroom. I heard him drop his backpack and before dropping into his bed. He was silent after that. I turned and saw him staring at the ceiling into nothing.

"Where did you go?" I asked.

He tensed at my voice.

"Jesus, I thought you were asleep." He folded his hands behind his head. "Just out, is all."

"Are you okay? About Grandma?"

"Would you shut up and go to sleep?" Tony said. "You're so nosy."

I sat up. When I was younger I'd listen to just about anything Tony might say. I admired him. I wanted to be like him. Now he was angry all the time and I didn't know why.

"What's your problem? I just wanted to know if you were okay."

"I don't like people asking if I'm okay," Tony said. "Especially not my kid sister."

"I'm not a kid, I'm thirteen."

Tony yawned at the ceiling.

"You're a kid. Go to sleep."

I stuck my tongue out at him, and realized right after that was a kid thing to do, so I dropped onto the bed and turned from him. A few minutes later, I heard Tony's soft snoring. My stomach hurt. It was not the kind of stomachache I was used to—the pain sat lower, felt deeper,



like someone was twisting my intestines. I'd heard some girls at school mention this type of pain. I placed my hand just below my bellybutton and pressed against the skin.

*Don't*, I thought.

#

Mom asked me to wear a dress to the funeral. She said it would have made Grandma happy, and she really wasn't in the place to argue about this, so, if I could be agreeable about my clothes for just once, that would make the day a lot easier. I agreed. She bought me something secondhand that didn't quite fit right with a tag that scraped the back of my skin and made me want to crawl out of the thing entirely. She and I were in her room along with Tony. Mom had a full-length mirror and Tony was trying to get his tie right. I watched him from the bed, and every time the knot came out crooked his fingers got more frustrated, until eventually he ripped the tie from under the shirt collar.

"This won't tie," he said.

"Just get the bow tie," Mom told him.

Tony threw the door open and left without answering. Mom watched the empty hall for a moment and then resumed putting in her earrings.

"Why is he so angry?" she asked.

Neither wanted to answer that question. Sometimes, Tony reminded me of Dad off his meds. I could not, and would not, let myself say that out loud. I'd even do my best to stop the thought. Mom smoothed her hands over her dress and then turned and told me I looked very

pretty. I hated the word. When I put on a dress, I felt like I put on different skin. And every movement reminded me of that.

Tony walked back in then with a bow tie on that had belonged to our grandfather.

"You look so handsome," Mom said.

That was a word I wanted for myself. I wanted to be called *handsome*. When we got to the funeral home for the viewing, people kept telling me how pretty I looked, and every compliment felt strange, especially because Grandma's body was ten feet away. The whole thing was open casket. Mom said this was because Catholics, and Italians in particular, love to be dramatic.

"Go up," she said. "Say goodbye. It's okay."

I didn't want to tell her that I was afraid. I went up when I felt no one was looking, stepped forward, and peered inside. Her body was like wax. Some people earlier had said she looked peaceful, but I didn't see that. She looked fake. I wanted to touch her so I could check. Maybe, I thought, she wasn't dead at all. I felt embarrassed that I'd never given thought to Grandma dying before. Nothing seemed temporary when I was kid. Everything was forever. Now it seemed like I couldn't hold onto anything.

I stepped down from the casket and walked back to Mom. She put her hand on my shoulder and rubbed the muscle there. She asked if I was okay.

"I need to use the bathroom," I said.

The bathroom was under a set of stairs and I could hear people moving on the other side of the wall. I listened and tapped my feet against the laminate while I took a piss. After I wiped, I noticed some brown stuff on the toilet paper. It was in the toilet, too.

"Shit," I said. "Oh, shit."

I folded a few squares of toilet paper and cradled them in my underwear. I was close to tears now. I knew my period was coming, though I'd convinced myself that I might skip the experience entirely, that, just once, my body would react the way I needed it to. But I'd bled, and I knew there was no stopping everything else that going to come with that.

Even though no one would think it weird I was crying at a funeral, I wiped my eyes anyway. I didn't want someone to hug me and smell the blood. I spent the rest of the viewing boxing myself into a corner and not getting too close to anyone. Tony had been doing the same thing earlier. He'd kept staring at Grandma's casket but he wouldn't go up there, and eventually he disappeared from the room entirely, but reappeared as we left for the cemetery, face paler than it should have been.

They lowered Grandma, and Grandpa's grave sat right next to her, already full. I wondered if he had been waiting for her. I wondered if they were together now, or separated in some black nothingness. Mom held my hand as the casket lowered. Tony stood in the back of the crowd. I kept glancing back for him, but he wouldn't look at me. Mom squeezed my hand.

"Is it bad," she said quietly, "to feel like I can leave now?"

Her eyes were too dry. I knew she wasn't really asking me. I said nothing.

#

What does death mean? For us, it meant overpriced catering, black clothes, and Mom, always with a tumbler of whiskey. I met more relatives the day of Grandma's funeral than I'd ever known I had. Grandma had a lot of friends, too, mostly from bingo, and they all fluttered around the house, after the funeral, making sure everyone was fed and telling stories. Tony had disappeared again, but Mom didn't notice or didn't care. She'd been pretty lax with us since Grandma died. She told us grief was strange and that was okay, and I think she wanted an excuse not to deal with us for a while. Neither of us listened to her, both in our way.

I lingered by the food table and stacked cheese and crackers onto a paper plate. I made a little tower and shoved them into my mouth. Then two of Grandma's friends spotted me and I couldn't move fast enough. I swallowed a ball of cheese and cracker and it sat lodged in my throat.

"We just loved your grandmother," one said. She had an auburn wig that no one mentioned was sitting crooked, and a tiny, beautiful nose. "She always told such stories."

The other, smaller and plumper and with real hair, agreed and start recounting some of them, ticked them off with manicured nails.

"And you have grown into such a beautiful young woman," she said.

I finally swallowed the cheese and crackers.

"Thank you," I said.

I felt blood ooze from my vagina. The movement felt like a worm or something. I stopped. I tried to adjust my stance, but I could feel the blood seep through the toilet paper. The dread must have shown on my face, because both women stopped talking.

"I have to use the bathroom," I said, and turned before they answered.

My plan was to get more toilet paper, but the hall bathroom was occupied, and I felt like people suspected something. I didn't ask Mom if I could leave, I just did. I eased the screen door shut behind me and started walking, hand cupped over my crotch. I knew I was walking funny as hell, and I had no idea where I was going. I kept walking. Earlier, it was easy to pretend my period hadn't really come. I felt it now, felt everything, and imagined myself at Grandma's age, with wrinkly friends and a wig that didn't fit right.

Once I hit the curve of the road, I saw Tony on the opposite side. I didn't want to see him now. He did. His nostrils flared as he sneered.

"Did Mom send you after me?"

"No," I said. "I was going for a walk. Leave me alone."

I knew he was watching. I didn't dare move my hand from my crotch.

"What the hell are you doing?" Tony asked.

"Nothing. Go away, Tony."

He didn't go away. He jogged over to me and grabbed my arm—not hard, just enough to stop me. I was close to crying already, eyes brimming.

"Hey," he said. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"No," I said, throat thick.

He stepped back, and I moved my hand from my crotch, felt the blood sit fat and real against my vagina. I told Tony I'd gotten my period. The words formed and then I couldn't stop them. I knew he didn't want to hear it but I didn't care.

"Fuck. Did you tell Mom?" he said.

I shook my head. "I don't want to. Don't make me, please don't. I don't want it."

Tony shook my shoulder.

"Okay, okay, I won't. Stop crying, it's okay."

I couldn't stop, though I did try.

"I don't know what to do," I said.

"I don't know either!" Tony chewed his lip. "I mean—shit, don't they give you girls stuff for this?"

We both looked back toward the house, and Tony blinked fast the way he always did when he was thinking.

"Okay," he said. "Okay, there are, like, twenty-five women in there. One of them has to have something."

"I can't ask for that," I said.

"No, dummy, I'll get it." Tony motioned to the grass. "Just wait here, okay?"

"Okay."

He started back for the house. I didn't sit. I didn't move. I cupped my hand on my crotch and waited. Some cars were lined up on the road, and I watched Tony turn and disappear beside them. I tried to think about what I'd learned in fifth grade about menstruating. The video had been full of medical diagrams and practical explanations, but no one said what getting your period felt like. No one said it would feel like this—like an end. We'd watched the boys' video after, and they'd gotten a way better deal: no blood, no pain, just more muscle and deeper voices. After school, that night, I'd watched Tony as he got ready for bed, and I envied the way he was flat, the way he could wear t-shirts without anything getting in the way.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. I looked up and saw dark clouds forming by orange groves, though our house was clear and sunny. I hoped for rain. We'd been having a drought lately. I thought rain might make everyone leave earlier. I saw Tony coming back up the road. He started jogging to me, something tucked in his hand.

"I jacked this out of Aunt Bianca's purse," he said.

He handed me a pad. It felt light, but also thick. Without saying anything, I turned around and walked behind the tree of our neighbor's yard. I pulled my underwear down and hiked my dress up. There was a thick brown stain drying on my underwear. I unfolded the pad and placed that on top, poked at the thick cotton lining. I tucked the empty packaging into my underwear band to throw out later. Tony was sitting in the grass when I came back. He stood when he saw me.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Thanks."

We stood by the road, still half in our neighbor's yard. I couldn't remember the last time we'd spoken so friendly to each other. So, I asked him then, because I didn't think I'd get another chance.

"Why are you so mad?"

"What? I'm not mad," Tony said, and then stopped himself. "I'm not mad at you."

I didn't ask him who he was mad at. I thought he might not have been mad at anyone at all, just mad. Tony plucked out a blade of tall grass and threw it.

"She said her chest hurt that morning," he said.

I didn't realize he was talking about Grandma at first. He didn't look at me.

"She said her chest hurt, and I didn't really pay attention. I just didn't think...but then I knew, later. Like I felt her die, maybe. I don't know. I just knew. Like, I should have said something."

He was crying. I hadn't seen Tony cry in years. He didn't sob. Tears fell light over his cheeks, and his lip quivered. He wiped his face. The tears lasted all of fifteen seconds.

"I won't tell Mom," I said.

"I won't tell her either," Tony said. "I mean, about you."

He put his arm around me. Now we had each other's secret. We walked back to the house. Mom's eyes narrowed when she saw us come in. She darted over and grabbed me by the arm, her other occupied with a perpetual tumbler.



"Where did you two go?" she leaned close, her breath sour and dangerous. "Now isn't the time to run off. We have responsibilities here."

I told her to let go of me. I said the words very low, through my teeth. Mom inhaled sharp, then looked down toward my crotch.

"Why is your dress wrinkled?"

I ripped my arm from her grip. I didn't bother to try and cover myself.

"I only did this for you," I said.

Tony and I sidestepped her and walked into the kitchen together for more cubed cheese and buttered crackers. Mom did not talk to us the rest of the day. That night, I smelled blood on my funeral dress. Tony told me to give the dress to him—he's take care of that. In the morning, the dress was gone. One month later, Mom would tell us we were moving. We were leaving this place this behind.

## DYKE

After we moved to Orlando, the wildfires happened. Summer in Florida meant afternoon thunderstorms, angry bursts that lasted thirty minutes and left a hot, wet pavement smell behind them. Come August that year, we'd barely had any rain. Somewhere near Ocala National Forest, a spark became a blaze. Too far, Mom said, to have any impact in Orlando. For the first time in my life, I wasn't sure I believed her. I'd started seeing her in different ways, lately, started realizing she was human and capable of mistakes. I didn't know what to do with that.

"I'm going out," I told her.

"What do you mean, 'out'? Rich is cooking for us."

They were both in the kitchen, Mom supervising while her latest man boiled lasagna noodles. She was teaching him how to cook Italian. His family was German, and, up until he'd started dating Mom, he'd never had marinara sauce in his life.

"I got ricotta cheese," he said, hitting the *t* sound hard.

I snorted.

"That's not how you pronounce it."

"Hey," Mom said. "You are in a mood today. Where do you want to go?"

"Just the playground for a bit."

Water boiled over the pot and hissed against the burners of the stove. Mom lowered the heat.

"I expect you back for dinner," she said. "With a better attitude."

I didn't answer. As I shut the front door, I heard Rich ask her how to pronounce *ricotta*.

#

The original plan: live by Disney. Mom was going to get a job there with the dancers and Tony and I could go to the parks for free. Except when we finally moved out of Grandma's house Mom found a job teaching at a dance studio in downtown Orlando. Then she found David. And after David was Steve, then Terrence, and now Rich—a personal trainer ten years younger than her with a jawline like a steel beam, triceps that could rip the sleeves of his shirt if he flexed them. My brother and I both found him insufferable. We hated the way his smile begged to be liked. Hated that he never asked us what we thought about him. He had no standout negative qualities, didn't smoke, didn't raise his voice, didn't try and act the surrogate father. He even gifted us the Gamecube we'd been begging Mom for since last Christmas. But, he was in our space, and, for us, that was enough.

Tony was full speed into sixteen now, and every view of him was his back walking out the door. That left the apartment playground and me. When Rich was over, which was an awful lot, I slipped out the front door made myself a sanctuary by the swings and monkey bars.

I left the apartment, and the sky should have been darkened by clouds and rumbling. Instead, I squinted against sunshine and watched a plane move overhead. There was a banner attached to the tail. I couldn't make the words out. When I looked down and reached the playground, I saw a girl hanging from the monkey bars.

She had her hair cut short the way I'd been begging Mom to let me cut mine for years, and her limbs stretched out from her body, arms giraffing to grab at the monkey bars, flawlessly

boyish. She was incredible, a teen celebrity. She moved two bars over and jumped, sneakers skidding on the mulch.

"You just moved in, right?" she said without looking over. "You guys live above us."

I didn't answer at first, because I didn't know if she was talking to me. She cocked her head my direction and raised her eyebrows.

"Yeah," I said. "Like a month ago."

"Yeah, I've seen you." She wiped her hands off against her shorts and waved me over. "Come here, you wanna play on the bars?"

I said I never had before and didn't know how, but I had already started walking over. I was awestruck that she was talking to me.

"Girl like you can do it, no doubt," she said. "I'll show you."

She told me her name: Carla. Then she showed me how to move across the monkey bars like a trapeze artist. The hot metal burned and rubbed my hands raw and I didn't mind. I loved the feeling of my legs dangling, my hands holding something tight. I could decide when to let go. Carla and I took turns traversing the monkey bars and then sat on the swings together. For a while we both tried to go as high as possible, legs kicking, but eventually we slowed, panting, and now our feet grazed the mulch as we spoke.

"I bet we're gonna go to the same middle school," she said. "I hope we have a class together."

"Me too."

I wanted a friend, desperately. I'd left the only one I'd ever had when we moved out of Grandma's house, with the promise that we'd write letters to each other. Before we left I saw her again, and we sat in her bedroom and she told she'd die there without me. She was like, No one knows I'm a girl but you, what I'm gonna do until I'm eighteen? I wanted her to move to Orlando with us. I told her that. I didn't realize there were other people like her and me in the world until I met Carla. I left, and I wondered if she was right. I wondered if she'd die. If that's all people like us could do.

I twisted the chain of the swing, then let it spin me dizzy as it unfolded, Carla and everything else fuzzing. Once I stopped everything was still spinning, and Carla leaned closer to me.

"So," she said. "You're a lesbian, right?"

"What?" I said.

"It's okay, me too." Then she sunk her teeth into her lip, doubtful. "Aren't you a lesbian? You look like a dyke."

I wanted to tell her no, but the second I opened my mouth I realized those words might not be true. Girls at school had called me a lesbian, called me a dyke. They hadn't said it the way Carla had—like being gay was normal and not a punishment. I knew what being gay meant, I just hadn't considered that could be me.

"I don't know," I said.

"It's easy to tell," Carla said. "Do you like girls? Like, more than guys?"

I pretended to think about it, though I already knew the answer. Carla's head rested against the chain link of the swing. She looked like she already knew the answer, too. I wondered how someone my age could know so much more than me.

"Can I kiss you?" she asked.

The world felt silent, then. I looked at Carla and she was real close, smiling and everything, and I noticed she had braces. I wanted her to kiss me. I felt like I couldn't say yes, because that was wrong, but if I leaned closer I thought she might get the hint, and she did. She kissed me. My nose pressed against her face, and I held the chain of the swing tight. We stayed like that for a moment, our lips touching, and then she opened her mouth a bit, and I felt my groin flutter. She pulled back still smiling.

"Oh yeah," she said. "You're gay."

#

I went home later and ate Rich's shitty lasagna and pretended I liked it. He talked at me. I didn't pay much attention. I was thinking about Carla, about her braced mouth and her lips and how, for the first time, I had something to call myself that seemed to fit. The moment Carla said the words, I knew I was gay. I didn't know, at thirteen, what to do with that information. I assumed I'd change somehow, I didn't know what would happen. The idea scared me. I had an identity, but that meant the girls at school were right—I was queer and different. I stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom that night and stared at my naked body. I put my hand against the glass. I said to my reflection, "You're a dyke." Then I started laughing. Not because I found it funny—there was a kind of freedom in saying the word, like I took it back from everyone who'd ever hurled it at me and swallowed it for myself. Mom knocked on the bathroom door.

"What's so funny?" she asked. "You okay in the there?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm okay. I'm okay."

#

Carla and I had agreed to meet at the playground again. When I found her the next day, the wildfires had spread dangerously close to I-75, and Carla invited me over for pastelón. I told her I had no idea what that was. She started laughing.

"It's Puerto Rican lasagna," she said. "My mom makes it the best."

I wasn't sure what Puerto Rican lasagna would consist of, but I knew I liked lasagna, and I knew I liked Carla, so I followed her. As she walked, I watched her bare nape and wondered if all lesbians cut their hair, and if I should do that too. I wanted to.

Carla lived below me. She had a single Mom too and a younger brother named Jorge. He was splayed out on his stomach across the tile floor, smashing action figures together. Carla's mom had her back to us at first, turned once Carla kicked the door shut and smiled. The apartment smelled delicious.

"Oh, is this your new friend?" she asked. "I hope you're hungry."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, ma'am."

Her mom smiled wider. She had beautiful long hair and dark eyes. She looked young.

"Call me Miss Valeria."

She let us eat the pastelón in Carla's room so we could watch cartoons. Instead of noodles, there were sweet plantains, and it tasted sweet and like nothing I'd ever had before. I had two helpings. I heard Miss Valeria wrangled the boys and then she walked into Carla's room and sat on the bed with us.

"Do you like it?" she asked me.

"Yeah," I said.

She started asking me questions about where my family lived before this, if I had any siblings. Carla eventually shooed her away, but, truthfully, I didn't mind answering her mom's questions.

"We missed, like, the whole episode because of her," she said.

I shrugged. "Your mom is really nice."

"Yeah, she's pretty cool." Carla pushed some leftover meat around her plate. "She raised my brother and me all by herself."

"Does she know you're gay?"

Carla laughed. Her fork dropped onto the mattress, metal on floral pattern.

"Are you crazy?" she said. "She's super religious. She'd beat my ass. I have this uncle who's gay, and, like, no one talks to him anymore. It sucks."

I couldn't believe she was talking about the same woman. Her mom had been so nice to us. Carla and I stared at the TV during commercials. There was a different quiet around us now.



"Should I not tell my mom?" I asked.

Carla thought for a moment.

"Is she a homophobe?"

I'd never heard Mom say anything bad about gay people. I'd never heard her say anything about gay people at all. I knew from school what a homophobe was, and I couldn't imagine Mom being like that. I wouldn't believe that she could be. I said she wasn't.

Carla told me I could probably tell her. Knowing Mom wasn't very religious made me feel better about my chances. I wanted to give her this secret. I wanted to give her a side of myself I didn't realize I had, even if later I'd come to find who I am was more complicated than just being gay.

I liked Carla a lot. I wondered if we would kiss again. Were we girlfriends now? Asking that felt impossible. I looked at the ceiling, knowing Mom was above us. I decided I'd tell her that day. I'd tell her who I was.

#

Mom and Rich were on the couch when I got home. Our apartment was laid out the same as Carla's, but I liked ours less now. We hadn't totally unpacked, and nothing felt lived in, nothing felt warm. I shut the door and said nothing when Mom greeted me. I was excited. Walking up the stairs, I'd been nervous—now, the moment was mine, and I felt ready. I stepped around in front of the TV where Mom and Rich were watching the news. The wildfires had yet to be contained. Flames spread behind me on the screen.

"Honey," Mom said. "What are you doing?"

"I want to tell you something."

"Okay—"

"I'm gay," I said.

She didn't say anything. The newscaster behind us kept talking but Mom stayed silent. Rich had an arm slung over the back of the couch. He pulled it down now and sat forward, looking between us.

"I should probably go," he said.

Mom blinked, still looking at me.

"What?" she said. "Oh, yeah. That's probably for the best, thanks, Rich."

He kissed her quick and then got up without saying goodbye to me. Before he shut the door, he looked at me with thin lips and kind eyes. I didn't realize then that was pity. Once he was gone, Mom picked the remote up and shut the TV off.

"Okay," she said. "What's this about?"

"I'm gay."

"Why do you think that?" she asked.

"Because I like girls."

"Have you ever kissed a girl?"

I lowered my voice. "Yes."

She hadn't been expecting that answer. Mom blinked rapidly and pushed her hand over her forehead and through her hair. She looked exasperated, confused, upset. Not the reaction I had anticipated.

"You're young," she said. "You're only thirteen. Everyone experiments and thinks they're different. That's okay. That doesn't mean you're gay."

I felt very small, listening to her. Small and stupid and confused.

"But I am gay," I said.

"I don't think you are," she said. "I'm your mother—I've known you since you were a baby. If you were gay, don't you think I'd know?"

I didn't know. The logic seemed there, and I hadn't really taken time to think about being gay. It was just something I felt. Something I knew. Maybe I was wrong. I couldn't even try and tell her about Carla at this point. Mom gestured me forward and then pulled me into a hug. She stroked my hair and kissed the top of my head.

"Do you believe me?" she asked. "I know being young is hard, but you're not gay."

I nodded, but I still wasn't sure. I wanted to believe her, but I also didn't. That's the trouble with moms, even when they're wrong, sometimes you still want them to be right. You want them to have the answers.

Later, in bed, I cried into my pillow.

#

"No offense," Carla said. "But your mom doesn't know what she's talking about."

We took turns walking across the monkey bars with our hands. Another day without rain and I was starting to hate the sun.

"I don't know," I said.

I knew somewhere in me that Mom was wrong and I hated that. I wanted her to be right. Later, as an adult, I'd remember obvious clues: my brother sneaking me his DVD of *The Waterboy* and me not being able to stop staring at Vicki Vallencourt's crop top, or the funny feeling I got in my stomach when Victoria's Secret commercials aired, and the way it seemed right, to hold a girl's hand. To hold a girl. Right then, I wanted Mom to be right. That would have been easier.

"You should tell her again," Carla said.

I lost my grip near the end of the bars and dropped to the mulch. Gravity took me sideways and I fell onto my side, mulch cutting into my palms.

"You okay?" Carla asked. "You gotta move quick—"

"You don't know everything either, you know," I said.

I wiped the splintered wood from my palms and stood up. Carla watched me, suspended on the monkey bars, her shirt pulled up over her belly button. I felt guilty for snapping at her. I liked that she told me what to do. Back then, I never knew what to tell myself. I needed someone to do that for me.

"Sorry," I said.

Carla let go of the bars and landed a neat dismount, knees bent.

"No one's looking out for us, you know," she said. "We gotta take care of ourselves."

We stood under the monkey bars, and I said nothing. I wanted, and not for the first time, to be what I considered normal. I didn't want Carla and I to be alone, my friend, either. I didn't want that for anyone. Little black flecks, like giant eyelashes, started landing on our shoulders. We looked up. They were coming from the sky.

"What the hell is this?" I asked.

"I don't know," Carla said. She shook her hair out. "Gross. Let's go inside."

We ran into her apartment and stood in the kitchen catching our breath. Miss Valeria walked out of her bedroom at all the noise. Carla pulled at her shirt.

"Mom, look, all this black stuff started falling on us."

"What in the world—"

Miss Valeria yanked the blinds open and looked out the window.

"Oh," she said. "Oh my Lord, it's raining ashes out there. The wildfires."

"Here?" I asked. "All the way over here?"

"The wind carries that stuff everywhere." She closed the blinds. "Stay inside, girls."

Mom had been wrong. Carla took me to her room, but all I could think was that Mom had been wrong about the fires. I sat on the edge of the mattress while Carla flipped on her fat little white TV and started flipping channels. She walked backward to the bed after landing on SpongeBob SquarePants and took a seat. I could see the fallen ash outside her window.

I stood and grabbed a pair of scissors from Carla's desk. I held them out to her, chin up.

"Cut my hair," I said.

Carla laughed. "What? You're crazy."

"I mean it."

She watched me sideways, then smiled. I noticed for the first time that she had dimples. Carla took the scissors from me. We peeked out her bedroom door, and then snuck into the bathroom on our toes. Carla cut my hair while I sat on the toilet. When she asked me how short, I told her to go up to my neck. She pulled one big chunk of brown into her hand and snipped it right off, dropped it into trash. She cut another chunk, then another. When she finished, I felt behind at the uneven cut of my hair. My neck felt cool.

I stood and admired myself in the mirror. The edges of my hair felt jagged, and Mom would ground me for weeks for this, but I loved the cut. The word "dyke" sat in my mouth again. Something about the word didn't feel quite right for me yet. I had to grow into it, I thought.

We snuck back into Carla's room. I pressed my palm against the back of my neck and sat on the bed. Carla wiped the loose hair from her scissors and tucked the blades into her desk drawer. I could see outside the window that the ash had stopped falling. I watched the thin layer of black that had settled over the pavement and grass. I imagined it crusting over the earth, a reminder, always.

## **GIRL CRIMES**

By sixteen, here are the crimes I'd committed: kissing girls under the stairwell at school, sleeping with my bra on, because I'd heard it made your breasts stop growing. Refusing to buy a dress for the homecoming dance, even when Mom started crying in the store while holding a fire engine red maxi dress against her chest. Letting my skin get rough and cracked from sports, my palms scraped white from throwing footballs and lifting barbells. Refusing to pluck the sharp black hairs that grew from my nipples. Getting my clothes from the men's section. Cropping my hair. Touching myself to thoughts of her, or her, or her. My aching, unending desire to be invisible.

By sixteen, I stopped writing letters to a girl I knew in Ocala who was like me. We started with letters about switching bodies. I told her I'd give her my breasts. Later, we wrote about how we might die.

By sixteen, I sat alone on the beach during a school trip to St. Petersburg. The girls in my class were shopping together inside the hotel. Two of them, I'd been in a fight with. I was not invited. I laid on hot white sand in a one-piece bathing suit, and listened to the waves. This early, and on a school day, there were not many people out. Gulls waddled along the wet sand, looking for food, and scrambled into flight when the waves pushed the water back up. They repeated this for every wave.

To my left, there was a man in a navy blue bathing suit applying sunscreen to himself. I saw two neat scars under both his pectorals. I knew what those scars were from, because one night, when I should have been asleep, I snuck into our computer room and Googled "ways to get rid of your breasts." A double mastectomy. The scars looked older, fading into white, now. I

watched from my towel, sun burning my right cheek. He looked over at me. I didn't look away. Maybe there was something in my eyes. He gave a half smile, as if sympathetic, as if he knew. He set his sunscreen onto his towel and walked to the water. I followed.

I felt like there was a string formed between us, and it tugged me to him. Even in the hot Florida springtime, the water was still cold, and my skin broke into goose bumps, as if reaching out to him. He walked until the water was nearly to his scars. He turned when I was about five feet behind him. We watched each other again, bobbing in the water. How sad did I look, I wondered? And did this man know I hated him a little bit, the way you hate anyone who's gotten what you want?

I inhaled, cold waves breaking over my swimsuit, pebbling my nipples. I swam closer. When I got to him, he cradled the back of my skull and tilted me backward into the water. I panicked, dug my feet into the sand below to anchor myself.

"Relax," he said. "I'm not gonna hurt you. Just lean back."

I watched him, considering. His grip was gentle. I could have wiggled away, if I wanted. I knew he meant what he said. He wasn't going to hurt me. I relaxed, and let him ease me back into the sea. Above me was just white sun and sky. I heard the water ripple over my ears, filling them like cotton. I could hear nothing else, and knew nothing else. Even his hands felt like afterthoughts. I closed my eyes against the sunlight and thought of nothing. At that moment, I had transcended myself. I was nothing. And part of everything.

Then, I heard his voice over the water: "Hold your breath. I'm gonna dunk you."



I breathed in and forced my nose shut, furrowed my brows as I attempted to close my eyes harder. Then I was underwater. The water felt gelatinous, the flow of it slowed down. Maybe he kept me down for only a second, but it seemed an eternity to me underneath the water. As he pulled me back up, I relaxed my nose too soon. Salt water gushed up my nasal cavity and I resurfaced coughing, saline rushing down the back of my throat. I rubbed at my eyes, and spit.

When I opened them again, he smiled at me.

"There you are," he said.

I shivered, and there I was. I was sixteen, new.

## BONNIE

After I dropped out of college, I worked at a diner near downtown Orlando that served breakfast all day. The diner was the last building in a strip mall, decorated in orange vinyl booths and tables with sugar packets stuffed under the legs to stop them from wobbling. We served all types—mid-20s hipsters, drug dealers, families, young couples so sickeningly in love they fed each other French toast. Almost every Sunday, this married couple came in for blueberry pancakes and bacon. They always sat in my section, and always by the window so Bill could keep an eye on his dogs in the pick-up, and sometimes Bonnie had a black eye. I loved her in secret, the way I loved most things in those days. Bonnie was an ugly kind of pretty, six years my senior with exaggerated features and long, honey colored hair. Every time I brought the check she smiled at me, one of her teeth chipped like the edge of a china teacup.

"Everything was wonderful," she'd say. "Thank you."

She left the tip while Bill brought extra bacon out to their dogs, all strays he had rescued. I hated Bill, and not just because he was Bonnie's husband. I was pretty sure he'd given her the black eyes I saw. I imagined Bonnie and I running away together all the time, especially at night when Mom wouldn't answer my phone calls.

Then, one Sunday, Bonnie came alone. She had the pick-up, but no dogs. No Bill. I saw her sitting at her usual booth and walked over, pen tapping against my leg. When she saw me coming she smiled and ran her tongue over the jagged edge of her chipped tooth.

"Blueberry pancakes?" I asked.

"How about waffles," she said. "And whipped cream."

I nodded, pen still working against my jeans. She looked bright-eyed and hungry. I thought, for a moment, that she'd killed Bill and dumped his body into a lake for the gators to handle. She held my eyes with her own. There was a kind of freedom in them that made my heart miss a beat. Something was different.

I told her I'd put her order in right away and turned to greet my next table: two boys who looked about my age, fresh into college and adulthood. Bonnie's eyes were still on me, I knew, but I didn't let myself look over. I took the orders with me into the kitchen and let the warmth from the ovens overwhelm me. I was tired. I'd been tired for a long time. After I came out, Mom and I couldn't stop fighting, so I left. I didn't want to. I moved out with an old friend, also queer, and we scraped by on server jobs and dog walking gigs. College had to be put on hold to live. It was worth being able to live as myself.

Bonnie's order slid across the warming line and I walked it out. I'd had them pile the whipped cream high for her. When she saw me coming she straightened upright and tucked some hair behind her ear. She had small ears, the flesh and cartilage never pierced. As I set the plate down, Bonnie touched my wrist and said thank you. My cheeks rounded with my smile.

"Can I get you anything else?" I asked.

"Not at the moment."

I walked back to the kitchen for my other table's order and hurried over to them. When I asked if I could get them anything else, the thinner of the two boys leaned forward.

"Sir, can I get some hot sauce?" He paused and looked at my breasts. "Or is it ma'am?"

His friend snorted around his fork. I grabbed the Tabasco from the counter and slid it across the table and didn't let my face drop. I was used to interactions like this. After I hit puberty I stayed thin, but my hips rounded and my breasts always felt too heavy. Oftentimes, I imagined myself without them. In middle school, I cut my hair short, and I still shopped in the men's section. Sometimes, people didn't know what I was. Sometimes, I didn't either.

When I turned away Bonnie watched me. There was whipped cream at the corner of her lip and I imagined her fingers were sticky with syrup. I went over.

"How's everything?"

"Can you fix a sink?" she asked.

"What?"

She glanced at the table I'd given the Tabasco to and then cut another section of waffle.

"Bill is out of town, and I have this damned leak I can't seem to get fixed. Thought you might be able to help. I could pay, of course."

I didn't know shit about sinks. I didn't want to say that. I watched the whipped cream at her lip and said that, yeah, I might be able to do something. At this point, I wasn't sure there was a leak at all. I hoped there wasn't. We exchanged numbers when I brought Bonnie the check.

She hadn't been gone five minutes before I got a text with her address attached.

#

I'm not a girl. Even before my ass from my front, I knew that. I grew up trying to be one, because that's what I'd been told—wear a dress, play with Barbie dolls, smile sweet when boys

harass me. I was not a girl, but there was one in me. She existed, and she shouldn't have. I created her. She was created for me. Killing her seemed impossible. Instead I battled with her. I became feral and angry and impossible. I wore loose clothes and cropped my hair short. I sat with my legs spread and dared someone to question my genitals. The skin around my eyes became darker, tougher. I was a dog sinking its teeth in raw meat.

When I tried to come out as gay at thirteen, so proud and sure, Mom calmly told me I was not. I spent the next five years a secret. I spent five years kissing girls in darkened rooms and watching my body grow in a way I didn't want it to, breasts and curves, a softer jaw. At eighteen, I tried again, in the car after we picked up pizza.

"You're so beautiful," Mom said. "I don't understand."

She told me that often. She didn't understand why I wouldn't date boys. She didn't understand why I never wanted to wear shirts that showed off my figure. I had large breasts, heavy and obvious, like sandbags. Some days I wanted them gone entirely. I fantasized about popping them off. I could keep them in a box for the days I felt comfortable about them, or I could trade them in for smaller breasts that were easier to conceal. I didn't know how to explain this to Mom without terrifying her. In the car, I kept my voice meek and my gaze on the pizza box. I had it in my lap and could feel the heat through my jeans.

"I don't know what you want me to say," I said.

"Say you'll try harder to like men."

I ate dinner in my room with the door locked. The next morning we argued again. Every conversation we had was tense. Somehow, I'd fooled myself into thinking she hadn't spent all my

life being willfully ignorant of me. I regretted my decision, but I could not take it back. The best thing to do was leave, which I did, a night she wasn't home with a note on the stairs to let Mom know. I expected a call from her within the hour. Then weeks passed, and my phone never rang.

#

Bonnie lived a few blocks away from the diner in a one-story bungalow. Delicate moss dripped from the oak trees surrounding the house. I knocked on the door with one foot behind me, ready to run. Anxiety told me this was a cruel joke, that Bill would open the door and pull me inside to beat me senseless. I heard a woman and her daughter arguing behind me on the sidewalk. The daughter looked about fourteen. They both had tight expressions, angry about something. I knew they'd make up later. Whatever they were bickering about, they'd hug later and maybe do things Mom always wanted to do with me, like paint their nails beautiful colors. I wished I could be that daughter. I wished that a lot—to be that daughter, even though I didn't want that.

Dogs howled from inside the house and I heard Bonnie's voice hushing them. When she opened the door a few pits rushed out. They circled me, sniffing. I didn't mind, not with Bonnie standing there. She had on the same clothes she'd worn at the diner but her hair was pinned back. She looked beautiful. I felt ugly standing there in my diner shirt and smelling like pancake batter.

"I'm glad you came," she said. "Come in."

I walked in still nervous, expecting Bill to pop out around the corner. Bonnie saw my darting eyes and smiled.

"Bill's out of town," she said, as if I'd forgotten from earlier.

"Which sink is leaking?" I asked.

The dogs were still circling me, four in all, though two had lost interest now. Bonnie stepped toward me and the hardwood moaned under her feet.

"Let me ask you a question," she said. "Do you want to be a boy?"

She asked in a way no one had before, like she wanted me to know for myself. I tried to draw breath and it stuttered. My face pricked hot.

"No," I said.

"But you don't want to be a girl."

I shook my head.

"So, what do you want to be?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

I said that a lot, lately. I don't know.

Bonnie tilted her head to the right. She didn't understand, but I got the feeling that she wasn't looking to, and didn't mind either way.

"Well, whatever you are, I like you."

She touched the bare skin of my neck. Her skin was soft and a little cool. I knew for sure then that there was no sink, and definitely no Bill around.

"I like you too," I said.

Bonnie kissed me, and I sighed into her. We stepped together as one toward the bedroom. The dogs were quiet, kept their distance. I could feel Bonnie's ribs through her t-shirt, prominent enough that I felt like I could thread my fingers through and hold onto them. Bonnie laughed into my mouth when I pretended to try and led us to the bed. I undressed on top of her, shirt and bra tossed over the edge of the mattress. She cupped my breasts with cool, sure hands.

"These are nice," she said.

I hunched inward, shoulders rolling.

"I don't like them," I said.

Bonnie was the first girl I'd been with that I'd ever told. I'm not sure why. Maybe because I felt like Bonnie and I were similar in a certain way, stuck with something we didn't want.

"No?" Bonnie said. "What about this?"

She slid her hands down toward my crotch. I told her that was more than fine, and she grinned.

"You're such an odd little thing," she said, fingers slipping in, and for once, I was proud to be so.

#

I started sleeping with Bonnie regularly. Whenever Bill left town for work, I'd live at Bonnie's for a few days, naked and laughing. Bonnie liked to chain smoke cigarettes after sex. She'd sit on the floor next to the open window to let the smoke filter out and listen to me talk nonsense. I was always chatty after sex. I told her about how I didn't talk to my family, how once



I'd stolen money from the diner when I couldn't afford rent, and other stuff I probably shouldn't have said, tangled up in her yellow sheets. Whenever I realized I'd been talking too long and hushed up, Bonnie would say, "You can keep talking. I like listening to you."

I imagined her leaving Bill. I imagined us together in our own apartment, eating breakfast together for a change, Bonnie's chipped tooth puncturing the thin skin of a blueberry. I told no one about our affair, because there was no one I could tell. My roommate would have judged me, and she was the only person I really talked to anymore. Bonnie didn't even bother to take her wedding ring off when we got together. I didn't mind. I was myself with her in a way I had never been able to experience before.

One day, she told me she'd gotten me something. She rolled from the bed and dug into her purse by the dresser. There was a bruise on her ribs I hadn't put there.

"Think fast," she said, and threw a roll of Ace bandage at me.

I caught it and fingered the fabric, tested the stretch and pull of it. I let the bandage unravel into my bare lap.

"Is it safe?" I asked.

"I should think so." Bonnie came back to bed and pulled a bit of Ace bandage across my chest. "Trans men do it all the time, right?"

I nodded, though, really, I didn't know. I'd only seen a trans man once, during a school trip to St. Petersburg at fifteen. I stared at him on the beach, at his fading scars from a subcutaneous mastectomy, the hair testing its boundary on his chest and stomach. When he saw me staring, he smiled. He knew. I wanted to be like him, and in other ways I didn't. I wanted

androgynous hips and a flatter chest, shorter hair and taller legs. I didn't want a deeper voice or facial hair. I wanted to exist without a boundary, let the edges of me fade out until I was seeping into everything all at once.

Bonnie bound my breasts in the sunlight of her bathroom. Constricting them hurt. The breast tissue didn't want to press in. But each pass Bonnie made I saw them become smaller, and that made the pain bearable. When she was finished, I turned profile and smoothed my hands down my chest. There was still a bump, still proof of my breasts' existence, I just didn't mind as much. They were smaller now, and I could love them. Bonnie came up behind me and swam her hands up under my arms to squeeze my breasts. I felt a sharp jolt of pain but I still laughed.

"You look handsome," she said.

I pulled my t-shirt on to test out the look. With the shirt on, my breasts were practically nonexistent, a reverse puberty. Right then, I was still Mom's little tomboy, back when it was cute that I liked to wear boys' clothes. Back when it was okay because I was going through a phase.

I wished Bonnie and I could go out together. I wanted to walk with her down the street, hold her hand and kiss her under a mossy oak. Sometimes I forgot she was married even with the ring on, and little reminders of Bill around the house, his cologne on the back of the toilet. Then I'd serve them at the diner and remember. What we had was secret, for now. Any time I mentioned us going out Bonnie always shut me down.

"This is just how it is for us," she'd say.

With my breasts bound, I felt braver. I told her again that I wanted us to go out together for real, get dinner somewhere. Bonnie reached for her cigarettes on the bathroom counter. She held an unlit cigarette between her lips, then pulled it away.

"I wish you wouldn't push me like that," she said.

The cigarette was placed back in the pack.

"Sorry," I said. "I just want to be with you."

"Baby, you are with me." Bonnie slid our fingers together, hers yellowed. "Now come back to bed."

She walked out with her cigarettes in hand. I stayed in the bathroom for another few minutes and watched myself in the mirror. My chest was flat. My lungs felt heavier and my nipples hurt. But this was my body, I thought, how it should have been. At least for now.

#

Soon, I was confident enough to bind on my own. The first time on my own, I served at the diner. I felt strangely confident, powerful, as if I'd been fitted into a new body. I smiled at people, and they smiled back. I danced between tables near the prep line with the short order cooks. One of them tapped their spatula against the stove for a beat.

"What's with you?" he said. "I ain't never seen you so happy."

I paused twirling. I'd forgotten that word, lately. I didn't think about myself like that anymore. There was someone now, though, who understood. Even if Mom never would, I had one, and I knew I was lucky to have even that.

Then Bonnie stopped answering my texts. We'd never texted every day, but enough that I knew something was up after two days. That Sunday at the diner I watched out the windows for Bill's pick-up or the barking of dogs. They didn't show. I finished my shift shaky and nervous. Had Bill found out? Was he holding Bonnie hostage in their home, or had he done worse? He was supposed to be out of town, but maybe he hadn't gone after all.

I leaned against the brick of the building after I got off, my apron dangling by my feet. There was an odd pain in my ribs, a phantom pressure that wouldn't go away. I pressed my fingers against the binding of the Ace bandage and took a slower breath. Deep breathing had become an issue recently when I wore the binder, which was often. I ignored it. I loved the way I felt too much to let myself worry.

I drove back to my apartment with no word from Bonnie. If Bill had figured something out, it was best I didn't go anywhere near her house. For a few hours, I sat with my phone in my lap and waited. Then breathing became more difficult again. In the bathroom, I undid the Ace bandage slowly. My breasts and back were marked with deep red lines, slightly discolored. I touched the skin of my breasts and it felt tender, the way a bone feels under the skin after it's been broken. The pain from earlier came back, sharper. I hissed and doubled over. Every breath I took had something stabbing into my lungs. I swore into the stale air of the apartment—even that hurt.

I eased my shirt back on and texted Bonnie again. No answer. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know who to tell. My roommate was at work until midnight, and no way I could call Mom. I decided to go to Bonnie's anyway, Bill or no Bill. I walked to my car looking like Frankenstein,

no movement above the waist. As I curved my body into the car I swore, both at myself and at Bonnie.

#

The pick-up was in the driveway, but only one light was on. Instead of going to the front door, I tiptoed to the side of the house to the bedroom window. The bushes scratched at my bare legs. I couldn't take a deep breath to ready myself for what might come, just tapped my knuckles against the glass and waited. After a moment, the light in the bedroom came on. When the blinds went up, I saw Bonnie's face. She looked angry. She pushed the window open.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asked.

"Is Bill home?"

"No, but that doesn't give you any right to come here."

I had my arms wrapped around myself as if I was cold. The pain was constant now.

"You wouldn't answer my texts," I said. "I got worried."

Bonnie eased down to her knees and rested her arm over the sill of the window.

"I'm pregnant," she said.

Even though the words registered right away, I said nothing. I couldn't believe she'd let that man put a baby in her.

Bonnie climbed out the window and onto the mulch. The bushes shook. She was taller than me by a few inches. She seemed even taller now.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"The only thing I can do," she said. "I can't get an abortion. I just can't. I'm sorry."

"You're breaking up with me," I said. "For Bill."

Bonnie ran her tongue over her bottom lip. "He's my husband."

The sun hadn't even begun to set, and we must have look silly to anyone passing back, standing on the side of a house in the bushes. The full weight of what Bonnie was saying really hit me. I felt two different types of pain now, and an anger that telegraphed from my cheeks to my kneecaps. I put my hand to my side without thinking, face pinched.

"What's wrong?" Bonnie asked.

I didn't want to tell her now. I didn't want to give her anything more of me.

"Bill beats you," I said.

Bonnie's jaw squared and her lips thinned. I'd never seen her mad before. I knew I'd said the wrong thing.

"You don't know anything about that," she said. "You don't know a thing about marriage."

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't act like you didn't know," Bonnie said. "You knew this wasn't forever."

She pulled her gaze away and tugged a few leaves off the bush at her window. Her eyes were wet. I said her name. She shook her head.

"I need you to go," she said. "Otherwise, I'll call the cops."

She wouldn't look at me. As she climbed inside, I said her name again. I asked her not to do this, to please not do this.

"Everything doesn't always go the way we want it to," Bonnie said, then she shut the window.

I didn't move. I stood in her yard, afraid to do anything. My chest burned. I'd forgotten about the pain, for a moment. There was nothing to distract me from it now.

#

I drove myself to the ER because I didn't know what else to do. I had no insurance, but the pain was so terrible at that point, I was willing to pay any price. The anxiety of what damage I might have done left my legs numb. Holding my foot on the gas pedal felt near impossible. I started to wonder if I'd broken a rib, punctured a lung. If I died, how would the doctors explain that to Mom? Would they even know how?

At the next red light, I grabbed my cellphone and dialed Mom's number. She didn't pick up. Voicemail did. There was her voice, for the first time in two months, asking me to leave a message.

"Mom," I said. "...Mom, I'm on my way to the ER at Orlando Regional. I need you to meet me there. I'm hurt."

I thought about texting Bonnie to tell her I was hurt. I fantasized about her coming to the ER to see me, and deciding to leave Bill. Beyond sex, my entire relationship with Bonnie was fantasy. The light changed, and I tossed my phone onto the passenger's seat.

#

*Bruising*, was what the doctor told me a few hours later. Bruised ribs and pinched nerves. I was laid out in a hospital bed on mild painkillers, embarrassed and young and hurt for other reasons. I'd been stupid.

"Help me out here," the doctor said. "How did you do this?"

I swallowed, lip tucked into my teeth.

"Binding my breasts," I said.

He looked down at them, briefly. Then back up to me.

"Why were you doing that? Do they cause you pain?"

*Yes, I wanted to say. In every way possible. But not in any way you could imagine.*

"I just wanted to try."

He didn't understand. He nodded and pretended to check something on my chart, cleared his throat twice.

"It's not uncommon for women with larger breasts to experience back pain," he said. "If you've been bothered by that, I'd recommend talking with your regular physician about options."

When he left the room, I placed my hands over my breasts. I could really feel them now. They were screaming at me. I wondered if I would ever be able to bind again. Instead of listening to Bonnie, I should have researched how to bind properly. There were a lot of things Bonnie said that I shouldn't have listened to. I tried to imagine her as a mother. I imagined her breastfeeding



during late nights, exhausted and craving a cigarette. I imagined her hiding bruises from her child. Would Bonnie do anything to protect the child? Would she drive the child to the ER? And what if the child were queer?

I listened to the quiet sounds from outside my room—sneaker shuffling, phones clicking back onto their cradles. I heard the tight snap of rubber gloves, then a woman's voice. She sounded worried. Someone came close to my room. The door eased open, and, there, shadowed by the light in the hall, was Mom. She'd come.

She sat in the chair by my bed, purse clutched in her lap. She looked at me like I was someone she hadn't met before, as if she had to be cautious when speaking. I waited for her to say something, anything. Finally, she said, "Tell me what happened."

I did. I told her everything. I told her about Bonnie, about my diner job, and trying so hard to make my breasts disappear that I'd hurt myself instead. When I finished, she shifted in her chair and pulled Chap Stick from her purse, uncapped it, and then recapped and threw the tube back in her bag without ever applying any. We both had the same habit of nervous fidgeting. We'd do anything with our hands, touch anything, like maybe we could transfer the energy to something else.

"This Bonnie doesn't sound like a very good person," Mom said.

I laughed once, shortly, then winced at the sharp pain that followed. I didn't know how to act around Mom now. Part of me wanted to be held by her, cradled and hushed in my delicate state. We didn't have that, anymore. I wasn't sure what we had, or if we'd have anything ever again.

Mom tucked hair behind her ear, wearing the diamond studs a boyfriend had given her one Christmas. She and I had the same ears. The slightest display of emotion and they throbbed red.

"Are you...are you a transsexual?" she asked. "A transgender?"

"I'm just me," I said, aware that my face was wet now. "I'm your kid."

Mom stood and grabbed my hand. She wore a lot of metal bracelets, and they clapped together as she gripped me tight.

"You are," she said. "You're my baby. I just don't understand you."

She squeezed my hand, then sat back down.

"I want to understand," she said.

I reached for her hand and she took mine again. She looked tired. I wanted to tell her that she didn't have to understand. She didn't need to. But her hand was so warm, and then pain meds wouldn't let me keep my eyes open.

I woke the next morning, and my breasts were still there. Mom was not. Tucked into the folds of my hospital blanket was a white envelope with my name on it in Mom's handwriting. Inside, I counted seven hundred dollars: enough for my rent and a few weeks' groceries. I sat up enough to grab my phone from the tray table. I dialed Mom's number. There was no answer. I put the phone down and held the envelope against my stomach, eyes on the speckled ceiling tiles. Then I stood and began to dress. The process was slow and painful. My breasts felt especially heavy, held by nothing. I buttoned my top between shallow breaths. I tucked the envelope full of money into my back pocket. I left.

## VANISHER

After six months of silence, my brother called me at half past midnight and said he needed a ride. He said he didn't know where he was. He also said, "bring pants." There was an edge to his voice Dad used to get when he was manic, the tremor that warned he might come undone, or, already had. I had Tony send me a pin of his location, grabbed a pair of basketball shorts I thought might fit him, and pulled off my quiet little street under a thumbnail moon to follow my GPS into the less savory parts of Orlando—buildings with barred windows, parked cars you crossed the street to avoid. As soon as I passed the train tracks, the road felt darker.

Tony and I had been close, once. Then he was diagnosed. Now we talked only occasionally, brief texts or short phone calls. I never knew quite where he was, because he never told me any details beyond vague gigs he was getting into, like curating art galleries or setting up equipment for bands. Sometimes, he didn't answer my texts for a month. My family was disappearing. Mom and I talked very little and saw each other even less. For her, it was easier to pretend her only daughter didn't bind their breasts and fuck girls. Dad, I hadn't seen in seven years. Last I'd heard from him, he'd taken a job on a Carnival ship out of Port Canaveral, then, Tony told me he'd left the boat at port in Nassau and never returned. He went on meds. He went off them. I made myself stop caring. I had to, or every unanswered call became a scab I could not stop picking.

I followed Tony's pin onto a side street off OBT that was all boarded up businesses, and the GPS told me I'd arrived. Only, I saw no Tony. There was a man shadowed under the streetlight, legs crossed as he sat on the curb. The shops around us looked long closed. There wasn't even a bar nearby. I didn't know where Tony could be.

I called his phone. Straight to voicemail. I looked at the man under the streetlight. He paid no attention to my car, more his feet and the blistering hole in his sneaker. Grass poked through the cracked cement. I rolled the window down and asked if he knew a man named Tony.

"Tony..." he said, as if it were a foreign name, or a dream he was trying to recall.

"Yeah. Italian guy, short black hair."

The man scratched at the back of his head. Flakes of white snowed down under the streetlight.

"Yes, sir," he said to me. "I seen a man like that."

I didn't bother to correct the honorific. There was no explaining to this man that I wasn't a sir, and not a ma'am either.

"He's my brother," I said. "Do you know where he went?"

The man's eyes were shiny. He was on something. I figured he was too loaded to remember, and I didn't want to idle in this area for any longer than I had to. Being in a bad area is scary enough, being there when you're queer is even scarier. The wrong person might ask the wrong question, and I always gave the wrong answer. Before I could decide to roll the window back up and consider finding Tony to be a lost cause, the man snapped his fingers. The sound echoed down the empty street.

"Tony," he said. "Yeah, yeah, Tony. He went with JoJo, over to Wally's."

Wally's was a bar, I knew that much. I also knew that meant Tony was definitely not sober, even though he knew better than to drink on his meds, if he was even still on them. I had no idea who the fuck JoJo was supposed to be.

The man on the curb stood upright. He stumbled forward a moment, knees unwilling to bend, then stuck his neck out. He looked at me. The whites of his eyes reminded me of eggshells. I gripped the steering wheel tight, afraid he had discovered me as an imposter.

"Hey, now," he said. "You all right, brother?"

I didn't answer. The man asked again, as if we were old friends.

"I'm fine," I said.

I thanked him, and pulled back onto the main road, fingers tapping against my upper lip. I dialed Tony's number again. Still no answer. All I had were his breadcrumbs to follow. I drove over the train tracks and drifted down the darkened road. I kept my phone in my lap, in case Tony called. My brother had this running joke after he got diagnosed bipolar. If people asked him about Dad, he said, "All he gave me was the crazy gene." This made most people uncomfortable, though they usually laughed anyway, the way people laugh when they don't know what to say. They didn't realize Tony meant what he'd said.

Mom used to tell us stories about Dad when he was healthier. Not much of a ladies' man, she said, but she found his awkward parts charming, like how he held doors open for everyone, how he hoarded condiment packets whenever they went out to eat, pockets stuffed full of ketchup and lite mayonnaise. Sometimes, she smiled while telling us. Most times, she told the

tales like warnings. Dad had seduced her right into the sticky, sick web of his. It took her a long time to get out.

Tony and I told anyone who asked that Mom had raised us by herself. Dad was there, but no more than that. He haunted us instead, transparent, like I could have walked right through him. I wished for him to be solid. It was no secret he liked me best. As a child, I thought he'd do anything for me, even get healthy. I held onto that hope until it abandoned me, like water slipping through the fleshy spaces between my fingers. After Mom left Dad, I stopped checking around corners of the places we lived for him.

#

Wally's smelled perpetually of cigarettes that had been hissed out in beer. The bar was quiet, the collective solemn feeling of drunks who know closing time is coming. Tony was nowhere I could see. I checked both rooms, and even pushed open the doors of the bathrooms, bent to look underneath the stalls. For all I knew, the loaded guy off OBT had been thinking of a different person entirely. I went to the bar and tapped the wet bartop to get the bartender's attention. She turned, septum ring crooked. The words "Ride or Cry" were stitched into the pocket of her t-shirt.

"Do you know anyone named Tony? Maybe came in here with a guy named JoJo? He wouldn't have been wearing pants."

"JoJo or Tony?" the bartender asked.

"Does it matter?"

"Guess not." She threw the towel over her shoulder. "I don't really pay attention to what people are wearing or not wearing, though. There was this one guy about ten minutes ago, walked in with his fucking dog. He tried to buy it a beer."

"Thanks anyway," I said.

Before I could leave, the bartender pulled a pint glass from underneath the bar and gestured to me. She told me to at least have a beer. I realized I might as well. I'd hit a dead end with Tony. The bartender poured me a beer without asking what I wanted and said it was on the house. She needed to kill the keg, anyway. I held the cool glass between my palms.

"Why are you looking for a JoJo and a Tony?" she asked.

I said I wasn't looking for JoJo specifically. I was looking for Tony.

"He needs some help," I said.

I sipped my beer. The taste was too bitter for me. I grimaced and wiped the foam from my upper lip. If the bartender noticed my distaste for the beer, she didn't show it.

"You're the kind of person who likes to help people?" she asked.

I knew what I should do if I found Tony—take him to the hospital. I knew he needed something I couldn't give him. I also knew, if I found him, that I would convince him to come to my apartment. He would stay for the night, two, if I was lucky. Tony wouldn't ask me for money, but I would give it. I would let him know, without saying, that he could come back. I would do what I could to keep him.

"Actually," I said, "I'm pretty selfish."

As soon as the bartender stepped away to help someone else, I left my beer behind and walked back out into the night. It was nearly two, now. Almost everywhere was closed, or closing. I tried Tony's phone one last time. Still voicemail. He must have passed out somewhere. Maybe I'd get a call from the ER later, saying they'd found my brother delirious and covered in powdered sugar near Lake Eola. He'd been in the ER many times before.

I drove Tony to the hospital once, for an overdose. He'd taken some Xanax. I'd asked how many, and he'd said, "Enough." On the way to the hospital, I held his hand to keep him awake, squeezing every few minutes.

"What's it feel like?" he asked. His voice was slurred, like the words were dripping out.

"What's what feel like?" My eyes darted between him and the road, the asphalt black and slick with rain.

"Being like you are. Having a girl's body. Does it bother you?"

Tony had never asked me questions like that before. He'd accepted me without question. I wasn't sure if I should answer him. Talking felt like it slowed us down.

"I don't know," I said eventually. "A little. It bothers me more what people assume when they look at my body."

We were lucky, hitting every green light. I worried something would go wrong. My old Honda Accord was dusty and the black paint had lifted in too many places. I told myself that if it came down to it, I'd shove my finger down Tony's throat for him. I felt his hand spasm against my own and squeezed again. I didn't want him to die.

"What's it feel like being bipolar?"



Tony laughed, head pressed against the passenger side window.

"Like my brain is the deepest part of the ocean. What's that called?"

"Mariana Trench," I said.

"It's too much," he said.

I wanted to tell him that I understood. That I knew, in my own way, how terrifying it was to try to understand yourself, especially when no one else seemed to. How lonely, for everything to be so dark. To scramble in that darkness for someone to hold onto, and hope they aren't the type to eat you. But, I did not say that. Instead, I asked Tony if he thought it was like that for Dad.

"Why do you care so much?" he asked. "He abandoned us."

His head dipped forward, then snapped upright, eyes bulging as if someone was squeezing them out from a tube in his skull. His pupils had nearly overtaken his irises at that point. I dug my thumbnail into his skin to keep him with me.

"Dad liked you best, anyway," Tony said.

Yes, I thought, but he'd still left.

At the hospital, they pumped Tony's stomach, and he volunteered for 72-hour care at their psychiatric ward. I told him I'd pick him up when they released him. He never called.

#

I drove back down Mills exhausted. Hipsters and crust punks were walking away from closed bars, huddling together, happy drunk. I looked for Tony among them, knowing full well he wouldn't be there. I turned off the main road toward Colonialtown. I drove slower than usual. I didn't want to get back to my apartment so soon, where I'd be alone again. The thumbnail moon was bright and high in the sky. I wondered if Tony was watching that same moon, or Mom, or maybe even Dad.

After a set of blinking traffic lights, I saw a dog on the street corner. He sat in the tall grass, holding vigil. I thought about what the bartender had said. Maybe that was the same dog. I felt like the damned thing was watching me drive by. I slowed, and pulled over onto the curb. When I got out of my car the dog came bouncing over to me, tongue out and pink and hot. It had a smooth brown coat and a bite taken out of its left ear. I scratched the top of its head, then noticed the lump in the grass behind it. The lump wore no pants. The lump was Tony.

I dropped beside him in the crushed grass. He was passed out, I thought. Hoped. I grabbed his shoulders. They were thinner than I last remembered. I shook him. The night was fairly cool, but he was nearly soaked through with sweat.

"Tony," I said. "Wake up."

I had to pull his eyelids open a few times for him come to. He blinked once, then five more times. When he recognized me, his eyes cleared for a moment. There was crusty drool collected at the corner of his mouth like a salt deposit.

"Tony, it's me." I pushed back his sweaty bangs. "I brought you pants."

"Sis," he said, and then sat up and yelled at the dog: "JoJo, this is my little sister!"

The dog sat behind us, panting.

"That's JoJo?"

Tony cocked his head at the dog, fond. "We found each other."

I helped Tony stand, and all six feet of him wobbled, knees knobbing like a colt trying to stand for the first time. I got him into the passenger seat of the car and put the basketball shorts in his lap so he could slide them on. Then, I opened the back door so JoJo could jump in. He had no collar.

I got back in the car just as Tony got the shorts on. He smelled awful, like plastic and vinegar. He looked embarrassed as well, having to call me. I pulled onto the road. I struggled to think of what to say to him. I hated that he felt like a stranger now.

"What happened to your pants?" I asked.

"Lost them."

JoJo leaned his head between us, dripping drool into the center console. I tried driving to my apartment, but, once Tony realized we were leaving downtown, he protested. There was some phantom itch on his thumb he kept scratching at.

"No, no," he said. "Take me to the Lynx Station."

"I thought maybe you could come home with me for tonight," I said. "You could sober up and we could talk tomorrow, you know?"

"I can't."

"Is the Lynx Station even open? Where the fuck do you have to go?"

Tony tapped his fingers irritably on the dashboard. His bottom lip was tucked underneath his yellowed teeth. A few breaths later, he leaned against the seat. He told me he just couldn't. He had things to do first. Some people, he said, might be following him.

"That was me," I said. "I was following you, Tony. I was looking for you."

"I'll jump out of the car if you don't turn around," he said. His voice was severe.

He meant it. I kept drove on, silent. Tony put his hand on my arm. His skin was clammy. My chin quivered.

"You have let me go," he said. "Please."

At the next light, I pulled a U-turn and took us downtown. I drove past every car headed home, every girl stumbling drunk in her heels, holding a street vendor hot dog. I parked under the wavy roofed bus port of the Lynx Station. The glass reflected green in the streetlights. Tony got out, and opened the back door for JoJo. He leaned over and whispered something into the dog's chewed ear, then patted his backside and walked away. I shut off my car and got out.

"You can't just leave the dog, Tony."

"He'll be fine. He knows his way home."

And maybe JoJo did. He trotted into the night, tail wagging. I felt so horribly sad for that dog, and I didn't know why. Tony walked back. He pulled me against him and hugged me tight.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll call you soon. We can catch up."

He wouldn't. I wouldn't see Tony again for a long time, and we both knew that. He let go before I could return the hug, but his scent lingered. I didn't mind. I watched him stumble into the Lynx station. I loved him, despite the drugs, despite the disappearances. All the times he never called me back, never let anything be easy. I loved him.

I drove home and crawled back into bed fully dressed. I felt a very deep loneliness, right in the pit of my stomach. My bed was pushed against the window, and, through the blinds, I saw the sliver of moonlight from earlier, cut by a telephone wire now. I put my phone on the pillow in case Tony called. Lately, I did an awful lot of waiting, always for someone who wasn't going to call. I waited anyway.

I thought about the day I'd see one of my family again. Any of them would have been fine, but, in my fantasy, I always imagined Dad. I imagined him descending the stairs from my apartment, somehow having gotten there before me. He'd have his arms outstretched for me to curl into.

"Here I am," he'd say, clean-shaven and steady on his feet.

He'd say, "Tell me how you've been."

He'd say he missed me, loved me too much to stay gone.

## SKINNY THINGS

Dad was gone long before he ever died. Mid-morning on a Saturday, I stood outside his apartment, an apartment I'd never been to, and could not make myself open the door. I held still with the key in front of the lock as if I were posing for a painting. I told myself to just open the goddamn door. No one else was going to come for his things. Instead I shoved the key into my jean pocket. I decided I needed a coffee before I could do anything else.

Back in Orlando, I'd gotten a rare call from Mom that Dad passed away. I listened, half asleep, as she explained there was no possible way she could go back to Ocala, and, of course, it would be too difficult for my brother. Mom told me there was no reason I absolutely had to go. She gave me the out. Yet, I told her, in some strange fit of obligation, that I'd handle it. Both of Dad's parents had passed long ago. His brother already made plans to fly down from Georgia to make burial arrangements. He refused to stay longer than that. There would be no funeral. After we hung up, I went back to sleep. I woke later knowing that call hadn't been a dream. I still felt nothing. The last time I'd spoken to Dad was almost seven years before. In between then, I pretended he did not exist.

Ocala always depressed me. The town felt barren, every store smelling of sawdust. Homes that had been foreclosed on still sat empty years later. Moss fell and clumps and lived on rooftops. If you took the country roads in, there was always someone on the side of the road selling gator jerky from their pick-up. I don't know why, out of all places, Dad had come back here. Ocala boasted itself the Horse Capital of the World, but in the three years I lived there, I'd only seen a handful, skinny things tucked under the shade of trees. As I drove out, I passed a farm from my childhood. I saw two horses out to pasture, and they looked to be the same horses

from over ten years ago, same speckled Appaloosa, same American Saddlebred with the tapered ear. My heart felt so heavy, seeing them there still. As if they'd ever had the choice to leave.

I ordered a coffee and bagel from Dunkin' Donuts, because this far outside Orlando, Dunkin' was the only place open before 10AM. I sat at a back booth to eat. I had what every girlfriend declared to be a weird habit: I liked to dip my bagel in my coffee. I'd tear bites off and soak the bread brown. A few people who walked in, mostly tired ranchers and frantic mothers, stared at me, not because I was dipping my bagel, because people had a hard time figuring out if I was a boy or a girl, and I was tired of explaining that I was neither. I scrolled Facebook on my phone without really looking, wasting time. People were traveling, graduating college, or becoming engaged. I'd dropped college and still worked two jobs to pay rent. I'd never left Florida. When I finally tucked my phone away, a beautiful woman with braided black hair noticed me and walked over.

"Oh my God," she said. "I thought it was you."

I stared. I tensed in my seat, ready to bolt, until I realized who she was. As kids, only I knew her as Julie. Everyone else used her birth name, a boy's name, because they all thought she was one. Now there was no mistaking her—Julie with long hair and breasts and a summer skirt that teased along her thighs. She was Julie as she'd always wanted to be. My heart felt slammed against my ribcage, seeing her like this now, both of us out and somehow still alive. I never thought I'd see her again. We'd lost contact years ago. I swore, loudly, and we both laughed.

"What are you doing back in town?" she asked.

I traced the rim of my coffee cup with my thumbs.

"My dad died," I said. "I'm getting his stuff in order."

Julie sat across from me immediately, hands clasped. She said nothing, no trite words of comfort, which I appreciated. Seeing her now was enough.

"It was a heart attack," I said.

I'd always expected Dad's death to be dramatic. He'd tried to kill himself so many times I assumed one day he'd be successful. To hear that something as dull as a heart attack took him seemed almost cruel. In a way, I found it unfair, that he didn't get to achieve something he'd tried so often to succeed in. I'd read once that having bipolar disorder shortens your lifespan by at least a decade. I wondered if Dad hadn't been ill, if he might have had more time, or if a heart attack was always his fate. If he hadn't been ill, maybe our relationship would have been different, normal. Maybe I'd feel sad now.

"Is there a lot to get in order?" Julie asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't been in his apartment yet."

I tore at my bagel without dipping any. Crumbs littered the napkin. I watched the softened features of Julie's face and thought of us together at ten years old, her wearing the dress my grandmother had bought for me. The dress had always belonged on her. I had a hard time believing she was sitting across from me now. Right before Mom moved us to Orlando, Julie told me she felt like she'd die here in Ocala.

"You're not still stuck in this shithole," I said.

Julie laughed open-mouthed.



"Hell no," she said. "I'm only in town to visit my dad. I left at eighteen for L.A. I moved to Ft. Lauderdale a few years ago, though, for my top surgery."

I often imagined escaping Northeast, or West to San Francisco, Portland. Places more welcoming for queers. So many friends had left, followed a trail out like some pilgrimage to sanctuary. A childish part of me felt jealous that Julie had gotten out, if only for a while. I was jealous I wasn't there to see her grow like that.

Julie pressed her folded hands against her cheek and smiled.

"I can't believe this," she said. "You look really good."

I wore my binder that day, like I did most days now. I kept myself as androgynous as possible, a blur among cis people.

"If you need any help with your dad's stuff, I can stop by," Julie said.

I watched her dark painted lips.

"I'd love to catch up with you," she said.

She said, "I'm so glad we're both still alive."

I told her I'd like that and stopped worrying at my bagel.

#

Dad never remarried after the divorce from Mom. Before my high school graduation, he was on good meds. Stable. We talked sometimes on the phone during that period. I remember asking him if was dating anyone. He laughed at himself.

"Your mother was the only one who could put up with me," he'd said. "But maybe one day."

A month later, Dad went off his meds again. He spent my high school graduation in a psychiatric ward. I stopped trying to call him after that. I had other things to worry about, like trying to come out as gay, like trying to help Tony before he ended up like Dad, like anything but remind myself of how he disappointed me every time.

#

The more questions Julie asked as we walked the stairs to Dad's apartment, the more I understood I didn't know. Was my Dad messy? Did he live with anyone? Collect anything? I couldn't imagine what his apartment would look like. I could only shrug at Julie's questions. I even tried to hand her the key to open the apartment. She shook her head.

"I think you should do that," she said.

With her there and no other excuses, I held my breath in anticipation of a foul odor, and swung the door open. The apartment was neat. I breathed out, and there was no smell besides must. *Great Expectations* and *Fight Club* were stacked on the coffee table. There was an unplugged, white microwave on the kitchen counter. There was a painting of grapes and wine over the kitchen table, the kind you buy at Old Time Pottery. Everything looked in perfect, normal order. Like the apartment of a healthy person. Julie and I opened all the windows to air the apartment out. Morbidly, I wondered where in the apartment Dad died. Couch, maybe, or bed. Or, if he passed as quick as Mom said, collapsed on the floor somewhere. He'd dialed 911, gasping for help. When the paramedics arrived, he'd only been dead a few minutes. If he hadn't called, I'm not sure how long it might have taken anyone to find his body. I don't think anyone

would have wondered where he was. That terrified me, to be so alone no one thought to miss you.

"I don't know where to start," I told Julie.

She suggested the bedroom. The apartment was small enough that I might finish in a few days.

"I shouldn't have asked you to come," I said. "This is weird. I haven't seen you in thirteen years."

"You didn't ask," Julie said, skimming her thumb over the dusty top of the TV. "I offered. But if you want me to go, I understand."

I didn't want that. I knew that answer right away, which felt good, because lately I felt like I knew nothing at all.

"No," I said. "Stay."

She smiled. As kids, I'd only seen Julie smile a few times, always, I thought, for me.

#

There were photo albums, books, CDs. We sorted things into boxes slowly, starting in the bedroom. We took our time flipping through the yellowed pages of photo albums. Julie showed me every one of my chubby baby pictures she found. I was red with embarrassment, the two of us sitting spread-eagle on the floor, a cardboard box between us.

Julie had never met Dad. When we left Dad, Mom took Tony and me to her mom's here in Ocala, our old home an hour behind us. Dad only followed after he'd been released from the

hospital, and his time here was short. I saw him once more at ten. After that, he became phone static and a memory.

"If your mom and my dad had gotten together, they would have made a complete unit," Julie said.

I tried to imagine that. Julie's dad was quiet and polite. I asked if they got along. They must have, if she was visiting.

"Yeah, I mean...he always knew I was a girl, I think. It took a while. He helped me, though, when I needed my top surgery." Julie pushed the full box away as I folded another. "I know I'm lucky. What's the lifespan for trans women, anyway? Thirty-something?"

We both fell silent. I grabbed another pile of books and started stacking them in the box. Was that the definition of lucky, for people like us? Recently, I'd cut back on dating. The ritual had become too complicated. I was tired of reminding dates of my pronouns, of the disappointment on femme girl's faces when they realized I was not the bull dyke lover they were looking for. "Why do you dress so masculine?" one had asked me, "When you act like such a girl?" I had no response. Last year at a bar, I'd tried to use the women's room and an older man stopped me. He called me a pervert. When I tried to explain, he punched me, hairy fist smashing into my face. I left the bar drooling blood, and did not call the police. It was easier not to try and explain. I squatted in an alley to pee.

"Did your dad have a girlfriend?" Julie asked.

She was holding an open shoebox of polaroid photos close to her chest, like she wasn't sure she should hand it over.

"No," I said.

I reached over and grabbed a fistful of photos from the shoebox.

"I don't think so," I said.

Each photo was furred with dust and dated. Dad stood in many of them with a redheaded woman I didn't know. Some were in the apartment, others in places around Florida, like the Ponce de Leon Springs, the black, yellow, and red striped Southernmost Point Buoy. And then, some places I didn't recognize. In one photo, the redheaded woman was seated on his lap, head tucked under his chin. I swallowed, furious. The anger made me heavy. Who was this woman? How had she known Dad? How dare he love her, when he hadn't reached out to me since I was eighteen? I checked the dates on the photos. One with the redheaded woman was dated only six months ago.

"Where was this?" I asked.

"I think under the dresser."

I couldn't look away from the photos. Dad looked so happy in them. This woman, whoever she was, was obviously no longer around. I wanted to know what he was like with her. What parts of him did she see? On the back of one photo, written in fat black ink, were their names: Teresa and Anthony. I didn't realize I was crying until Julie took my hand in hers. She had soft hands, manicured, and she squeezed my own. I let the photos drop into my lap. I pulled on Julie's hand and held it against my cheek. Over a decade later, the skin was still familiar, though even softer now, like the flesh of something innocent.

#

I resembled Dad more than Mom. My body carved out an angular jaw and spread my eyes wider. There were other things, too, little things that made me more like him. I had a hard time falling asleep, was sensitive to loud noises, gestured with my hands a lot, and sat too still when thinking. As a kid, those similarities made me proud. He told me we were twins, and one day I might grow into him. He said this with our hands pressed together, his so much bigger than my own. I wondered if Dad thought of me when he couldn't fall asleep at night. Had that woman, Teresa, found sleep elusive as well? Had Dad even told her about me? About Tony? As I grew older, and Dad let me down again and again, I pretended I didn't notice our similarities. I pretended they were singularities, mine alone.

By evening, Julie and I had boxed up the bedroom and bathroom. After we stacked the last box, I followed her in my car to meet her dad for dinner. Neither of us had eaten lunch, and our stomachs were furious with us for it.

We met Julie's dad, Neal, at a French restaurant with angry red walls. He remembered things I did not expect to.

"She used to run to the mailbox when she was expecting a letter from you," he said. "I think I ended up being more disappointed when you both stopped writing."

Julie blushed into her wine. I had little experience being comfortable with parents. I folded and unfolded the cloth napkin in my lap, grateful every time our server refilled my water. I don't know why I stopped writing Julie. It seemed easier to leave her, rather than wait for the day she left me. Neal asked me where I was living now. I told him Orlando.

"I have to admit, I'm surprised you didn't leave," Neal said. "I think there's something about Florida that sucks people in."

"Florida is its own succubus," Julie said.

Neal smiled at her, his only child, his only family.

"I just wanted you to be happy," Neal said. "I really did."

He was looked at Julie, but I thought maybe the sentiment was meant for me as well. I felt pressure on the backs of my eyes, the kind that comes right before you cry, and excused myself to the bathroom. I dabbed my eyes dry with paper towel, then stepped back out. Through the front windows of the restaurant, I saw a woman walk by with red hair. The image of her was too quick and ghostlike to know for sure. So I decided to find out.

Outside was full of families and young couples out for the weekend. Christmas still held itself almost two months away, but lights had already been strung along downtown. In the brightness of them, I saw the redheaded woman again. She was walking with another woman. I followed, cutting in between people. Did she know that Dad was dead? I didn't think she'd care, if she were out like this. She and her friend turned into a bar. I had so many things I'd already thought to say to her. I'd ask her if she knew about me, why she left. I would demand to know who Dad had been when she knew him. I was angry she knew a part of him I'd never see. I was angry she could walk away. No matter what length I kept him at, Dad never stopped being blood. I never stopped being part of him.

As she and her friend took their seats at the bar, I realized the woman was not Teresa. The nose was all wrong, the jaw too soft. I couldn't tell if I was relieved or disappointed. I walked back to the restaurant. Julie and Neal said nothing, and my jarret de porc had gone cold.

#

Julie invited me back to her dad's after dinner. I went, grateful. I didn't want to go back to Dad's any sooner than I had to. On the darkened road, I tried to see my old home, but the night was too black, the house too obscured. I wondered who lived there now, and if all my family's memories had been washed away.

Neal took our leftovers for us, and Julie guided me upstairs to her childhood room. I'd been in that room only a few times. Julie always wanted to be at my house so she could try on women's clothes. Her mahogany desk was covered in Lisa Frank stickers. I leaned against the wood. Julie crossed her arms, then uncrossed them.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You're quiet. You've been quiet since dinner."

I said I was. My thumb scraped at an already peeling sticker. I thought of Dad, living out the last of his days so alone. I felt the heaviness of living in his apartment, of being so content with the feeling that your heart one day might stop.

The sticker ripped in half and fell to the carpet. Julie watched me, concerned. She looked so out of the place in her old room. She had outgrown Ocala, maybe all of Florida.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" she asked. "Can I ask you to stay?"

Julie cradled my face with her hands. Masculinity lingered in them. I wished I could take that away for her.

"Ask me again," I said.

"Stay," she said. "Please stay."



She kissed me. This time we were not children anymore, so unsure. She asked me if I wanted her to turn off the light. I said no.

There, in her childhood room, Julie pulled her skirt down and covered her penis with her hands. She asked if that was okay. For a moment, I wasn't sure. I'd never been with someone in this way, and a secret part of me was terrified. I wondered how many others had stopped Julie at this point. I knew how many had stopped with me. I stepped the distance between us and kissed her.

"One day I'll get the surgery," she said. "Thailand, probably."

She talked quickly. I kissed her again. When I pulled back, she started to say I didn't have to do anything I wasn't comfortable with.

"I want to stay," I said.

We sat on the bed together, and I stayed.

#

Fog visited Ocala the next morning. It hugged the trees and power lines, and sat thick in the air. Julie and I drove separate to Dunkin' Donuts so I could go back to Dad's. She had to leave for Ft. Lauderdale tomorrow. We sat in my car with our coffees and watched the fog as it thought about lifting. I would finish packing up Dad's place today. I'd take the memories of him with me. The rest, I figured I could sell. His medications, I would flush.

"Did you mean it, when you said you'd go to Thailand?" I asked.

Julie nodded. She explained how much cheaper the surgery would be there, how cheap Thailand would be in general. She hoped to have the money saved up by summer.

"Maybe we can go together," she said.

"I think we could," I said.

I believed that.

Later, I drove past the horse farm again. The fog still lingered, but I could see the two horses out to pasture. I stopped my car. The horses walked through the wet grass to meet me at the wood fence. I felt the warm breath from their noses, the smell of oats and saltlicks. I sat on the wooden fence rail and listened to wet hush of the cars passing on the highway. The hem of my jeans was soaked indigo from dew. Tomorrow, I would leave. I would not come back here again. I pressed my cheek against the velvety muzzle of the Appaloosa. We watched the fog lift together, until the sky was blue, until the highway stretched out so far and clear I could get back in my car and go anywhere.

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