
Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019

2019

Assisted Living: Stories

Donovan Swift
University of Central Florida



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

STARS Citation

Swift, Donovan, "Assisted Living: Stories" (2019). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019*. 6413.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/6413>



ASSISTED LIVING: STORIES

by

DONOVAN SWIFT
B.A. University of Tampa, 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2019

Major Professor: David James Poissant

© 2019 Donovan Swift

ABSTRACT

Assisted Living is a collection of stories that explores themes of parenthood, brotherhood, old and new love, adultery, financial strife, and the many faces of loss. The collection offers different points of view, which allow the reader to experience these themes within varying lives and situations. For example, the eponymous “Assisted Living” is from the perspective of a pet-sitter at the brink of losing both her job and husband, while “Holy Mother” explores the point of view of a wife coming to terms with her affair and the physical injury that has changed her husband. “The World of Reptiles” follows a father walking his son through a zoo before they receive his son’s cancer test results, while “Host” follows two sons who discover their recently deceased mother believed in reincarnation before she died. Other stories explore characters stuck in relationships—both familial and romantic—that started bright, but curled toward the dark, leaving the characters feeling trapped by the ones they love. The collection as a whole seeks to explore people stuck between selves, people striving to be new and better, while failing and succeeding in ways big and small.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

HOLY MOTHER	1
ADVANCED READER	16
THE WORLD OF REPTILES.....	31
HOST.....	41
TRICERATOPS	61
OCEAN WOUNDS	65
NEIGHBORS	73
ASSISTED LIVING	91
APPENDIX: READING LIST.....	103

HOLY MOTHER

Anne splashed water on her face and saw the ring of mountains—snow-tipped—beyond the cabin window. She had never seen snow before, wondered what it felt like among all that ice and cold. She and Henry were staying in the Poconos, up from Florida. They'd been married for four years, but never took a honeymoon. Anne had recently been promoted at the high school, given her own class, and Henry claimed his back hadn't hurt him in weeks. But Anne worried that Henry had grown suspicious. He insisted they celebrate. He booked the cabin online, bought Anne a puffy winter coat. He pulled her clothes from hangers and zipped her bag, gave her the window seat on the flight.

Anne peered into the cabin's bedroom, which was blue with winter light. The bathroom tile was cold on her bare feet. There was electricity and plumbing and a microwave, but at least it smelled like a real cabin, all musk and sanded wood. The space was internet-rustic: weathered bedside tables from Ikea, a lamp shaped like a sailor, and a fake bear skin nailed above the headboard. Moose antlers sprung from multiple walls.

"We have to get moving," Anne said. "Get dressed." They were having dinner with Henry's parents that night, and the sooner they got there, Anne knew, the sooner they could leave.

From the bed, Henry flicked Anne's hairite at her like a rubber band. He held a pillow as a shield, sheets to the waist.

"Come," Henry said. "Be one with me." He lifted the sheet and revealed his naked torso and waist. He looked giddy, eyes full and bright the way they hadn't been in some time. A swirl of greying hair shrouded his belly button. How strange it was to watch the person she married get

old. Anne's own aging hid from her in the mirror, steady and hard to pin down. But Henry's announced itself. She could mark the years by the lines on his forehead, by the thinning of his hair, by every new bald inch of scalp.

"We have to go." Anne brushed her hair and pulled it into a bun, her ends glinting a summer blonde in the bathroom light. She swept some loose strands from her sweater.

She didn't take her husband's offer seriously. They haven't had sex in months because of Henry's back. A year ago, he fell off a ladder laying shingle in Plant City. He broke a leg and shattered his coccyx, needed reconstructive surgery in his lower back. He got a nice payout because Jay was smoking a cigarette rather than holding the ladder. But now Henry's back hurt him doing anything remotely physical. He screamed, once, when reaching for tomato sauce at the supermarket. Most days, Henry was sprawled on the couch with the TV going, hand in a bag of chips, heating pad under his back. *River Monsters* was his favorite show, and he told Anne about catfish with four-foot whiskers and man-sized otters that hunted crocodiles.

Henry joined Anne in the bathroom, still naked.

"Mom's excited to see you," Henry said with a mouth full of toothpaste. "She's just not very good with," he leaned over the sink and spit, "*boundaries*." On his way up, his body stiffened, like he'd been stung by a wasp.

Anne put her hand on her husband's back. She found his eyes in the mirror. "You promised." She circled his lower back, tried to find a lump or soft swatch of skin. "You better tell me."

"Just stood up too quick," Henry said.

Anne finished with her hair, and watched Henry closely as he dressed. He lay flat on the bed to pull on his pants. His neck tensed as he pushed an arm through his shirt or looped his belt. He left his shoelaces untied, and Anne went to him.

“Here,” she said, bending to tie them.

“Leave it,” he said, pulling his foot from her.

“Give me the shoe, Henry.”

“They’re fine,” he said.

She smacked her lips and stood, refrained from calling him a baby, tried to preserve the mood. And just because she was sleeping with the math teacher didn’t mean she didn’t still care about her husband. She had meant to tell Henry before the trip, but he was so excited that she couldn’t bring herself to ruin it. He had a handwritten itinerary of antique shops, pancake houses, smokey pool bars. Besides, Anne wasn’t sure she wanted the affair to continue. It started out of a simple physical need. Patrick was the ninth-grade geometry teacher, also married. They shared a drunken kiss at teacher’s trivia night after they had both answered, incorrectly, Namibia. Neither of them were having sex at home, so they filled the blank spaces for each other. Henry was not the Henry she married, so she needed a bridge, someone to carry her over the rough water. Nothing more.

#

Bundled with layers, they went to the rental car. The sky was darker here than in Tampa, smeared with stars, and the snow cracked and popped under their feet. Anne pushed a finger through the snow, and it broke cleanly, like an ice cube not fully frozen. She had expected the

snow to have more give, like dough, like something that could be balled up and thrown. But this snow had already frozen, flat and hard.

Henry drove, and Anne watched the headlights sweep through bald trees. Henry's parents lived an hour away from the cabin, in the house Henry was raised in. Henry didn't see them on Thanksgiving and his father was sick. So he pleaded. "Just one night," he had said on the flight up, ambushing her. "We'll get it out of the way first thing." Anne agreed, but not without hesitation. His parents were old-fashioned, which was just a nice way of saying rude. They always asked about kids, about why Anne was eager to waste her life teaching the children of strangers with none of her own brewing. They insisted that Henry and she reconsider, before it was too late. Though it wouldn't be too late for some time with all the new technologies, Anne always thought but never said. In ten years, they could adopt, pay a surrogate. They could plant an egg in her middle-aged womb and watch it grow.

But Anne wasn't sure she believed her own arguments against having children anymore. They were fairly financially stable because of Henry's payout, and Anne had whole summers to be with the kids if she wanted. They could afford daycare. They had no interest in summering in Northern Italy, anymore, sucking olives from each other's belly buttons, wine-drunk. That was a twenty-four-year-old's dream. Henry had always wanted kids, but Anne wasn't sure if he still would, after she told him about Patrick.

The roads curled downhill, slick from the old snow. Once, the tires lost their grip and the car slid freely. Anne put her hand on Henry's, which sat on the gear shift. She squeezed his knuckles.

"Be careful," she said. "Do you know where you're going?"

“I know where my parents live,” Henry said. His jaw was tight, and Anne knew he hurt. “Move your hand, please.” He nodded at the gearshift.

Anne took her hand off Henry’s. He had driven to his parent’s house a hundred times before moving to Florida, she knew, but never from the west of the state. Anne typed the address into her phone, watched the blue arrow take right and left turns with them.

Henry sped past a turn that Anne’s phone took. The arrow rerouted. The phone offered U-turn after U-turn.

“I think that was our turn.” Anne turned to watch the street recede.

“Anne.”

“I’m just telling you what the phone says.” She turned the screen and Henry’s face was lit blue. A message from Patrick popped on the screen, and Anne quickly swiped it away, like she was rubbing out a smudge. She had his name listed as Caroline, the chemistry teacher, but worried that somehow that made it more obvious. Patrick had texted when they were at dinner once, and Henry said, *Caroline’s awfully chatty lately*, and he had this look. He ripped at some bread, chewed like a pissed off teenager. Anne struggled to differentiate between mere frustration from his back and real anger directed at what Anne did or did not do. She told Patrick not to text her at home anymore, but his wife went to bed early. He was careless.

“I said I know where I’m going.” Henry squinted at the phone. “We’re not even there and you’re starting.”

“This has nothing to do with your parents.”

“You can’t agree to do something, then just be miserable the whole time,” Henry said.

“You could have said no.”

Anne pushed the lock button on her phone, and the screen went dark. “You’re just being a child.”

They drove silently after that, Henry grinding the wheel, knuckles white.

She had tried to be understanding, assumed the frustration would fade with the pain, but the fall was a over a year ago. If she rolled over in bed the wrong way, kissing his side with her knee, he would groan and stomp toward the bathroom for more aspirin, then toss and turn the rest of the night. Mornings, he was red-eyed and short-tempered, banging around the kitchen for coffee or a slice of cheese. He yelled at her about things out of her control. The heat, the slow WiFi, the *plink plink plink* of the central air breathing on. He yelled about her coming home late.

After about a mile, Henry exhaled and did a U-turn at a gas station. They headed back the way they came.

#

At Henry’s parents’ house, the food was already on the table. The chandelier hung low and steam lifted from the potatoes and asparagus. Wood crucifix peppered the walls. A framed painting of the Virgin Mary sat next to a picture of Henry as a child. Henry’s mother, Paula, hugged them both and brought them to the table, where Henry’s father sat. Henry Sr., Hank, had tubes in his nose that snaked into a respirator by his feet. A lifelong smoker, he recently survived a bout with lung cancer, though the cancer took some of him with it.

After Paula said grace, she turned toward Anne. Henry’s mother was all sweaters and pearls. Pearls in her ears, around her neck. “It *is* nice to see you, dear.” She touched Anne’s hand. “How long’s it been?” She looked to Henry, with blame. “I feel like it’s been *years*.”

It had been years. Anne always had some sudden illness when Henry came here for a long weekend, and she said she spent holidays with her parents. Really, she spent them at home, with a bottle of wine and a book, their cat Springsteen kneading her chest.

Anne smiled. “The house looks,” she waved a hand at the Holy Mother, “great. So cozy.”

Paula smiled and put a hand over her husband’s. Hank’s respirator exhaled into the silence. Paula asked about school, about her students, about the books she taught, and Anne said, fine, fine, and fine.

They ate quietly.

“How’s the back?” Hank eventually asked his son between breaths. Hank had also worked construction, had taught Henry how to hold a hammer, a paintbrush, taught him how to strip and lay shingle. Hank talked to Henry on the phone for hours after the fall, talked him through finding a lawyer once the company—and they would—tried to blame Henry.

“Hasn’t hurt in weeks,” Henry said. “They have me doing light physical therapy at home. I balance on this big rubber ball all day.” He held his arms like he was surfing. “I look like an idiot, but seems to work. Don’t want to jinx it,” Henry knocked knuckles on the table, “but feels good.” He looked at Anne and squeezed her hand.

Anne was pretty sure he was lying. She had seen him use it a few times, but the ball mostly sat wedged in the corner of her office, starting to deflate. He was just trying to reassure his parents, she knew, but why had he just sat on the couch, letting his back turn to a fist? Anne’s phone vibrated with another message from Patrick. The screen glowed through her pants pocket, and she had to fight the urge to check it. She looked around the table, at her in-laws, and realized she longed to be with Patrick, instead. There was something simple about their arrangement,

something comfortable. Sex in Chili's parking lots and empty woodshop classrooms, sawdust on her back and ass. That she could understand. There was no talk of procreation, no bleeding Jesuses. She fell asleep in Patrick's arms, once, parked outside of a Dunkin Donuts. They lay in the back of her Camry, and he shook her awake. Not violently, but not gently, either, not a kiss to the eyebrow or fingers traced along her hairline. "Time to go," he said, already moving from beneath her, and she drove him back to his car.

"So," Paula said, and she began.

She asked Henry about grandchildren, but not outright, of course. She had just packed all these extra stockings, she said, after Christmas. That's all. From cousins of Henry's, aunts and uncles. Little red socks with sequin reindeer and candy canes and smiling elves. She'd love to fill them with Pez dispensers and boxes of iridescent chalk.

"Christmas was rather *quiet* this year" she said, smiling at Anne. "All this space," she waved a hand, "and not much to fill it with."

Henry stabbed at a piece of turkey, but it slid away. "Subtle, Mom. You're getting more and more cagey as the years go." He chewed. "You should be a spy," he said, "*espionage*." He pointed a finger gun at his mother, closed one eye. "Never too late for a new career."

Paula's eyebrows went up, like she didn't know what he was saying. Her hands said, *Don't shoot*.

Henry always told Anne to ignore his mother after dinners like this, but how could she? All Paula asked for was a grandchild, warm bodies to spend the holidays with, and this she could still do, if Anne didn't tell Henry. But how could she have a child and not tell him. How could she raise a daughter to treat others with respect, to tip waiters generously and help the elderly

reach a can of beans. How could she teach her daughter to never lie, to them, her parents, to tell Anne everything that swirled in her small head.

“We’re discussing it,” Henry said. He touched Anne’s thigh, and there was that look again, his eyes all young and dumb. He was leaning forward in his chair, so maybe his back didn’t hurt anymore. Maybe it was just the shock from the cold, from the flight. He squeezed her thigh, moved up her leg, smiling. “We’re working out the numbers,” Henry said. “Don’t you worry. We’re crunching them day and night.”

“It’s just not a good time,” Anne said, quietly, and smiled at Paula. Henry removed his hand. He was joking, and she hadn’t joined. She tried to bite an asparagus stalk, but it slipped from her fork, plopped into a puddle of gravy. “It’s not that we don’t want to.”

“Who says you have to want to?” Hank said.

“Dad.”

“We didn’t want *you*,” Hank said, pointing at his only son.

“*Hank*.” Paula dropped her fork on her plate.

Hank shrugged, gurgled a little on his mechanical breath.

“But we did once you came out,” Hank said, swinging his knife. “That’s all I’m saying. You’ll want it once you see it.” He pointed at Anne’s chest. “Once you got the thing in your arms.”

Anne nodded at Hank, uncomfortable. She smiled.

“We’re just waiting,” Henry said, “until we’re comfortable.” He didn’t sound very convinced. They were fairly comfortable now, Anne knew. They paid off the mortgage with Henry’s pay-out, they still had a hefty chunk to fall back on, and Anne’s job was secure. Henry

would have to find a job, eventually, but they wouldn't need much. He could answer calls, provide customer service for furniture companies, for power sanders, for waterproof watches. If she would just tell him, if he would get a physical therapist, they could do it.

Anne's phone vibrated again, lit her thigh. Henry glanced at her lap, and she placed her napkin over her leg. She wanted to run from the table and go stomp through the snow, back to their dark cabin. She would tell him there, maybe. She'd hold his hand and they'd look at the frozen lake. She'd talk about the future, first. Their future. Then she would tell him. She'd try to be gentle, to "let him down easy," but she knew she'd have to kick the ladder from his feet and watch him fall, limbs splayed at unnatural angles.

"Well, we don't have to decide this very instant," Paula said, and she put her hand over Anne's.

Paula let the conversation drift after that, let it turn to Hank's health, to leaks in the attic, to racoons that left newspaper strewn through the yard. As dessert came and went, Paula talked of bad knees and the plight of too many stairs, of driveways that filled with snow. She tried to cover her tracks, it seemed, like she felt guilty about speaking her mind, about scaring off Henry and Anne until next winter, and Anne felt for her. So Anne made cooing sounds about the blueberry crumble, held the coffee with grateful hands. She tried to act as pleasant as any daughter-in-law could, so that she could be sick again next winter, or busy, without a suspicious eyebrow being raised.

#

Back in the car, Henry fumbled with the dial for heat. He was pressing the buttons impatiently, and his jacket swished with his movements. When he had lowered himself into the

car, his back straightened and arms looked limp, fingers slipping from the door. Anne thought he might fall back into the snow. He had to try a second time, had to throw himself into the seat, like he was mounting a horse. So he was saving it for Anne, then, letting the pain cluster quietly for his betrothed. Now, they sat and waited for the windshield to clear. A cloud of heat bloomed on the glass.

“I can drive,” Anne said, “if you’re tired.”

Henry’s eyes were closed, but she knew not from sleepiness. He rubbed his lips together like he was spreading chapstick between them. This is what he did to avoid grinding his teeth. The dentist had warned him that his molars were starting to look like weathered stone. So he chewed gum, he chewed straws. He sucked on ice.

“Please let me drive,” Anne said, unclipping her seatbelt.

“You don’t know how a car handles on these roads,” Henry said. “You have to feel it.”

“I can try.”

“I’m fine.”

Henry flicked on the windshield wiper, and the glass cleared. He pulled the car onto the road.

The roads were getting worse. A fresh layer of snow sat on the pavement, and long patches of ice glinted in the headlights. On the first hill they snaked down, the car went rogue, roamed into whichever lane it pleased. Anne felt like her mother as she held the handle above the window with both hands.

“*Henry*,” Anne squeezed out. She stomped an imaginary brake.

“I got it,” Henry said. He had the wheel turned toward the direction in which they slid. Headlights sprayed into the pines.

Eventually, the tires caught pavement, jerked into place, and the car straightened. Anne felt her spleen in her throat.

“Henry, this is ridiculous,” Anne said. “Pull over.” She grabbed his coat sleeve.

“And do what?” Henry’s knuckles were white from squeezing the wheel. Veins thick as pencils pressed against his neck. “Go back to Mom’s? The roads’ll just get worse.”

“We could stay at a motel,” Anne said. “Sleep in the car.” Anne looked in the backseat, was glad this was not her car, with its familiar creases and nooks.

“It’s only another twenty minutes.” Henry sat perfectly straight, arms stiff and robotic. He curled around potholes and small rocks because Anne knew the slightest bump felt like brick dragged across his bare spine.

“We almost just rolled down the mountain.”

“I was in control,” Henry said. “We’re almost there.”

Henry took it slow after that. He pumped the brake before stop lights and stop signs, and took his foot off the gas on hills big and small. Anne’s phone lit her thigh again and stayed lit. A call not a text. Henry watched, and they listened to the phone buzz with vibrations.

“Get it,” Henry said, and in that moment, she was sure he knew.

“It’ll go to voicemail,” Anne said, hands still on the handle. Her stomach dropped again, though the car was steady.

“I left my phone at the cabin,” Henry said. “It could be something about Dad.”

Anne looked for a phone-sized bulge in his pockets, but couldn't see one. She pulled the phone from her pocket, tried to arrange her fingers so they blocked the screen, but she felt Henry's eyes.

"It's just my mother," Anne said, turning the phone to her husband. "Probably calling to see about the flight."

Henry looked up and down the screen, eyes near shut, then back to the road. Anne put the phone in her pocket, and they continued their crawl through the hills. Henry kept the speed between twenty-five and thirty, but the car still slid twice, tires locked. They almost hit the guardrail once, then a snowdrift. The car would not be tamed.

After the second slide, Henry looked pale and sweaty, defeated, like he might cry. After a few more blocks, he turned into a McDonald's that was closed. The gold and red still glowed, but inside it was dark. Chairs took to the tables. He parked in the back, a few spots from the dumpster.

"Just a break," he looked at Anne, forced a smile.

He got out and went around to her side, opened her door for her. He walked gingerly on the ice, calculating each step.

"What are you doing?"

He opened the back door. "Showing you to your suite," he said, holding the back door open.

Anne climbed in, and Henry followed. The heat rose from below the front seats, and Anne felt her face flush. Her husband lumbered on top of her and Anne watched the hurt ripple

across his cheeks. Henry was too big for them to lay alongside each other. He held his weight above her, in push-up position.

“Henry, you’re hurting,” Anne said.

“I’m perfect,” he said, but his eyes were desperate, like his arms might not hold.

He leaned in to kiss her.

“Henry,” she said, “can we just sit for a minute, talk?” She almost blurted it out, then, like maybe that would heal her husband, that the truth would release his back, and he would tumble into her arms. Once they’re back in Florida, Anne will tell Patrick that she told Henry. It will not be an invitation for them to be together, to run away to Paris or Rome, but just a confession, clean and simple and out of guilt. It will be their last conversation.

“No time to lose,” he said. “Clock is ticking on those grandchildren.” He smirked, but it made him seem more pained, lips wobbling. His eyes, wide and wet, looked like they might spill from his head.

“We’re going to freeze to death,” Anne said. “I can’t feel my toes.”

“That’s what I call a honeymoon.” He smiled again, nudged her cheek with his nose.

Anne wanted to believe that look was from his back, but of course he knew, had always known. One night after sleeping with Patrick, Anne came home to Henry balancing on that big rubber ball. He was in the living room, just the corner lamp on, so he was shadowed and dark. He grunted as the ball rolled an inch forward, an inch back. He held Anne’s pink dumbbells above his chest. His thighs trembled. A pony-tailed woman on the TV told him when to move, where to move, that he was awesome, that he had to hang in there. Pop music played, and Henry moaned in the dark, wrestling gravity, and Anne stood and watched her husband from the door.

In the backseat, Henry bent again for a kiss, and Anne met him halfway. He pulled his shirt off, then hers, undid their pants. The windows fogged, and a bag of chips crinkled under Anne's bare shoulders. Anne kept a hand on Henry's lower back as he moved above her. She could feel the knot there, big as a knuckle on an oak tree. She dug her fingers into it, tried to break the fist of muscle and bone, felt it squirm under her touch. She imagined huge and ancient fish swimming under his skin, fish that weighed eighty pounds, fish with teeth like blades and eyes that glowed green in the dark.

"Tell me if it hurts," she said.

Henry looked like he would scream, his face all pleasure or all agony, but Anne kept her hands working. She didn't know if she was helping, but she felt like she was reassuring Henry, cheering her husband on, guiding him back to her as the car rocked like a big dog shaking off sleep.

ADVANCED READER

It's hard to think Clara has a kid who can walk and talk. A little human all her own. She seems too small to be anyone's mother, too young. My fiancé Amy left a few months ago. Well, I left. But she was the one who asked me to leave. So I'm at the beach, sharing a towel with a person who says her name is Clara for my first date in five years.

"So, what's your son's name?" I ask her.

Clara glares at me, Or maybe she's just squinting from the bright beach sun.

"Why?" she says. "That's a weird thing to ask right out the gate." Clara runs a hand through her plastic Walmart bag. From the shorts she removed when we hit the sand, she pulls a blunt and lighter. "It's Brian," she says. "But let's maybe not?"

Clara takes two hits, then holds the blunt toward me. A diamond stud sparkles above her lip as she exhales. Clara's skin's almost yellow, like a sallow stain that used to be tan. Praying hands are tattooed on her ribs, a blurry rose on her upper thigh. She's so thin, I can almost see the outline of her spleen against her skin. I want to reach over and poke her stomach, that tiny space from which a whole boy emerged.

Clara and I "met" on a dating app. Which means I don't actually know this person. It was one of the sketchy apps. The kind you use if you don't want other people to know you use a dating app. In my profile, I only used pictures revealing my nose and chin. I gave a fake name. I said my hobbies include *going on adventures*, though I'm not sure I know what that means. Clara posted selfies with her middle finger aimed at the camera, as if she didn't want to have her picture taken at all. As if the camera just *needed* a picture of her, of Clara.

"Want it?" she says, nudging my arm with her wrist.

Hundreds of backs glisten in Florida sun, like car windshields in a parking lot. Our thighs are inches apart.

I don't usually smoke weed, don't even like it. But, today, I'm not myself. I am KyleP314=).

I take a hit, but I'm not ready for the weight of the smoke, the added bite. I hold a cough in the back of my throat and pass the blunt back to Clara.

"Good?" she says, but if I talk the cough will come pouring out.

She takes a few more hits, then clips the blunt. Which is a relief. If I were to have any more than two hits, I would be left paranoid and hungry, craving a soft bed and a bag of chips, wondering if this woman were drugging me.

"Let's go in," she says. She smiles like she's trying to convince herself this is a good idea. Her two front teeth are big and one hugs the other, crowding it like a needy sibling.

She grabs my wrist and we head to the water, sand skittering across the towel. We leave our bags. Mine with sunblock, a plastic container of melon from Publix, a book. Hers with who-knows-what. If her bag is searched, I decide, I will pretend not to know her. I will step cartoonishly out of frame, towel in tow.

As usual, the Gulf is warm and flat, like old bath water. We wade in until the water reaches our waists. A few feet over, a woman twerks, her ass smacking the oncoming tide. A man records this with his phone.

Clara asks me what I do for a living, and I say that I work in a bank, which is vague and boring enough to avoid follow-up. I don't work in a bank. Does anyone still work in a bank?

“And you’re a nurse?” I ask. I remember this from her profile but even if I didn’t, nurse would be a good guess. Nurses are to Florida what actors are to Hollywood.

She says she is, then skims her palm across the water, looks toward the sky. “At an assisted-living facility.”

Her sunglasses are pushed into her hair, which is thick with gel.

I try to picture her in turquoise scrubs, her tattoos covered and maybe even her piercing removed. I look at her hands, her long bony fingers, and picture her searching for an old man’s vein, pinching his crepey skin.

“That sounds tough,” I say. “I don’t think I could handle seeing that every day.”

“Seeing what every day?”

“Just, you know.” I dip my hand in the water, like I’m checking the temperature. “Sick old people.”

I say *sick*, though what I mean is *dying*. One reason Amy had on her break-up list—which was a physical list, by the way, a piece of looseleaf paper—was inability to “see the bright side” of things. *You’re just depressing*, she had said. She sat upright in what was until that point *our* bed. I stood, thumbing the end of our mattress. This was where it happened. *I need someone happier with themselves*, she added. *Someone happy*. We met young, in college, and had grown apart, she said. Grown into different people, though I very much felt the same.

Clara shrugs. She takes a step farther into the water.

“They’re still pretty all right sometimes,” she says. “The residents. Not all of them really need to be there.”

Later, I will Google the facility and see that it's nice, upscale. Grand oaks curl over a sidewalk that snakes around a small lake. The building is tall, regal, white marble steps with gold bannisters that twinkle in afternoon sun. A Fresh Market across the street.

Clara steps into a wave, and the water pushes her into me. Her hip is sharp, a knuckle against my skin.

"My bad," she says, putting a hand on my back. She leaves her hand on me, presses her body to mine.

I don't know what to do with my hands, so I keep them in the water. I look at our feet in the Gulf. They look broken in the refracted light, as if our ankles are trying to escape while the rest of us stays put.

Something about being in the water must have brightened her mood, because Clara's body is still next to mine. She steps closer, so that my leg is between both of hers. We stand there like that, her arm across my back, like dancers waiting for a song.

#

Back at Clara's apartment, we sit at the dining room table and drink watery sangria. She gets the pitcher from the fridge. Wine-soaked orange slices bob at the surface. We drink out of clear plastic cups ringed with cartoon tulips. Her apartment is spacey, trendily decorated. A tapestry with red and orange monkeys covers the living room wall. Her coffee table looks like it's made of weathered oak and has curled, wrought-iron legs.

"Where is he, now?" I say, pointing at the built-in bookshelves next to the table. Framed pictures of her son sit between geometry workbooks and beginner's guides to self-actualization. In one of the pictures, he's dressed as Buzz Lightyear. Her little spaceman.

“Mom’s,” Clara says. “She takes him Sundays.” Then she adds, “Sometimes.”

Her hair is still damp from the Gulf, but it falls onto her shoulders now. Without the gel, it looks lighter, more blonde. Her face is crisp, a reddish brown that will soon turn tan. We changed out of our suits at the beach, so she has on a peach sundress, while I wear shorts and a T-shirt.

“So, what do you do again?” she says, and again I say that I work at a bank.

“I know, but what do you *do*?” She stabs the last word with her finger. “At this bank.”

I didn’t think this far ahead.

“Just numbers,” I say, waving a hand, as if this explains anything.

She squints at me.

“I don’t think I could handle seeing that every day,” she says.

She takes a sip from her sangria. Under the table, her knee knocks against mine.

I rub my toes together and feel sand scrape at my skin. I look at my bare feet on the white tile, hope that I’m not tracking dirt. Clara takes another sip, then fishes around in her bag. She pulls the blunt and lighter out again, takes a hit.

She holds the weed toward me, but I hesitate. Eventually, I reach for her hand.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” she says as she exhales, blowing the smoke away from me.

Again, I hesitate, but this time I let my hand fall back to the table.

“I’ll stick to this,” I say, picking up my plastic cup.

Clara takes another hit, then taps the blunt in a lumpy ashtray. *FOR MOMME!* is painted on the ashtray’s side.

#

It was hard leaving the apartment Amy and I shared for four years. Not to mention finding a new apartment. A place that would have to be home. I don't know how to make a new place feel *homey*. The one-bedroom I have now is mostly vacant: white walls, fold-out chairs, and an ugly beachscape that haunts the wall.

Amy and I used to wander Home Goods. We filled our imaginary home. We touched the upholstery of a sectional, and nodded. We ran our fingers over the wood grain of dining room tables. We talked about colors for the bedroom. Mauve was mentioned, then shot down. Too bold, we agreed. We were more of a Cinnamon couple, a Sandstone.

But when I showed her listings online, actual homes with porches and grass, an extra bedroom for a child, Amy said we didn't have the money. She was an event coordinator at a non-profit, and I worked for State Farm. *We could squeeze it*, I said, and I talked about things I didn't understand: mortgages and subprime loans, refinanced cars. *You're not thinking this through*, Amy said, or, worse, *We're not even thirty*. I sent her links at work: *ADORABLE 2/2! CHARMING BUNGALOW w/ PORCH SWING!!* But I don't think she clicked them. I wonder if the list existed then, if she weighed the pros and cons of me at her lunch break, during conference calls, if she even struggled with the decision.

#

On the way to Clara's bedroom, we pass her son's, the door left open. I expect the walls to be blue, but then remember that this is an apartment, that certain luxuries of decorating are limited to those who own homes. So the walls are off-white, almost beige, like the rest of the apartment.

I pause at his doorway, so Clara stops, too. For some reason, I assumed that the kid, Brian, must share a room with Clara. Maybe even a bed. At what age do kids get their own room? Or start walking and talking? Kids between ages three and ten have always looked the same to me. So I never know what to say to them, never know how much they can understand. *So you're in school?* I usually decide on, thinking it a safe bet.

“What?” Clara says, maybe a little insecure. She grabs the knob to pull the door shut, but I see inside before she does.

Brian has a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle bedspread. There's a desk wedged in the corner. A huge pack of crayons sits next to a stack of construction paper. Brian's name is spelled out on the wall, paper block letters taped in a gentle arc. Each letter gets its own color. A stack of picture books sit on a small nightstand. A reading light is clipped to the topmost book, curling toward the cover of *The Giving Tree*. Still, this gives me no hint at his age. Could he be seven? Eight? How old would that make Clara, then? Maybe she reads to him?

Clara lets go of the knob and takes my hand, leads me toward her room.

“How old is he again?” I ask. “The books,” I add. “I can never tell.”

“Six,” she says. “But he's an advanced reader for his age.”

She doesn't say this with the pride most parents do, a braggy glow lighting their faces. She says it matter-of-factly, the same way she says his age. As if she had no hand in it.

#

Amy and I were in bed one night. The cat slept sprawled between us. Amy had these orange lights strung by the windows, like little glowing baseballs. Oak branches scraped the window, and Elephant Ear leaves cast cartoony shadows. I poked her ear. That night was our five

year anniversary, or thereabouts. We didn't have an exact date. We ballparked it. We didn't get each other gifts, but Amy got me a card with the plastic still wrapped. *Congratulations!* the card said. Inside: a monkey in a party hat. We ate cheeseburgers at Back Porch and walked home, fingers loosely locked.

"Derek is moving to Tallahassee," I started. "Might be an opening."

She pretended to be asleep, mouth open.

"I know you're awake." I put a finger in her nose.

"Can we not tonight?" she said, turning over.

"Everyone says now is the time to buy," I said. "*Buy low, sell high.*"

"I don't want to buy."

The cat pawed at my thigh, eyelids pulled back with sleep.

"Lowest prices in a decade."

"Go to sleep," she said.

"The market's hot."

She was half-asleep, I told myself after she said the next part, kidding. She didn't mean it, I hoped, though she did, of course, eventually.

"We don't need more space," she said, "though you leaving mine would be a start."

She pushed my chest away, playful, then turned and curled into to sleep.

#

Clara's bed smells nice, Mountain Fresh. On the detergent bottle, there's probably a clothesline with T-shirts billowed in a suggested breeze. We are naked, now, and Clara has the covers up despite the heat pulsing at the window.

I forgot how awkward first sex is. She puts a tentative hand on my hip. I run a finger along her thigh, where she has a birthmark shaped like Rhode Island. We laugh at things that aren't funny.

Clara was shy when getting undressed. She turned around, away from me, and stepped out of her dress, letting it turn liquid at her feet. When she faced me, she covered her breasts with her forearms, hands wedged into her armpits. She didn't take her panties off until we were under the covers.

Her hand trembles as she drags a finger along my waist.

"I'm not really looking for anything serious," I say, though I don't know if I mean it. I tap her hip bone with finger. "I just went through a rough break-up."

Clara's hand recoils. Her head retreats on her neck, like a turtle entering its shell.

"And who says *I* am?" she says.

I shrug. I place my hand on the bed between us. I graze her thigh with my pinky. The central air clicks on, breathes into the quiet.

"I don't care that you don't work at a bank," she says. "I don't care *what* you do."

I don't know what to say to that, so we start again. The sheets rustle in the quiet, and the bedsprings moan with our weight. When I'm on top, Clara keeps her palm flat on my stomach, controlling the pace. She also looks down occasionally—her chin dipping into her chest—to make sure everything goes where it's meant to.

She also closes her eyes, and I can't help but think she is imagining someone other than me. Amy almost definitely did this for the last year of our relationship. I did sometimes, too, in fact. But it wasn't about imagining someone better, someone with more toned glutes or a flatter

stomach. Just someone *different*. But now that it's happening, now that I'm here, it's feels strange to have sex with someone other than my fiancé. The use of a fake name and pictures that only revealed nose and chin felt like an act of preservation. I was wading back into the water, while keeping one foot ashore. But now?

#

After sex, we slip on our underwear and lay under the covers. There's no spooning, no cuddling. After a few minutes of silence, we stand and put our clothes back on, facing opposite directions. I can't shake the feeling that Clara's son is going to walk through the door at any moment. I imagine him standing at the foot of the bed, wide-eyed, a stuffed monkey slipping from his little hand.

So you're in school? I would ask the boy, now standing next to his mother rather than looming above her. How violent sex would look to the young, advanced reader or not. If he saw, what would he think that night in bed, as his mother slept one door down? What kind of nightmares would haunt his sleep?

We walk back into the dining room, where the pitcher of sangria still sits.

"I'm an insurance claims specialist," I say, for some reason. "At State Farm. Which is basically data entry. I type in a client's personal information and membership number to create a profile for each claim." Like me, I don't say. I'm boring, but this is me.

Clara smirks, finishes the last of one of our sangrias. Her face twists from the warm wine.

"Don't say it," I say. "I don't think I can handle it every day either."

She puts her hands up like, *You said it, not me*.

Neither of us sits at the table, so I assume this means she wants to me leave.

“Well,” I say.

I pause, give her a chance to say, *Stay*. I linger, try to will the word from her lips.

Her hand is curled on the back of a chair. She squints at the living room window. The room has gone dark. But some last light forks through the plastic blinds.

“All right.” She purses her lips. “Hit me up sometime.”

We exchange a stiff hug, but as I turn to leave, I hear gravel pop under tires, the grumble of a car engine.

Clara moves to the window. Her bare feet clap on the tile. She pinches back the blinds.

“Shit,” she says.

Car doors slam shut. Clara runs a hand up her neck, through her hair. She lifts her dress to her nose, sniffs it. She smells her fingers.

I step behind her. We watch Brian come up the steps. He takes two at a time, like he’s trying to beat an invisible monster to the top. His backpack pendulums between his little shoulders. A woman follows behind him, leaning on the metal rail. She pauses as she takes each step, as if she needs to build up the strength for the next. Grey hair spreads from her roots, like an encroaching shoreline.

“Fuck.” Clara looks down at her wrist, but there’s no watch. “What time is it?”

I pull my phone from my pocket. Click the button on the side.

“Six-thirty,” I say, and the door swings open.

The kid bounds through the door. But rather than fling his backpack onto the tile, he carefully places it on the hook by the window. He smooths a wrinkle in the backpack’s side. A sticker on the bag says, *I can read!* When he turns, the boy sees Clara first, sees Mom, then me.

Clara moves away from me. Moves to Brian. She swallows the kid with a hug and kisses his cheek. The boy giggles. He wipes the kiss from his cheek with a face that says, *Ew*.

“Did you just wipe away my kiss?” Clara says in a voice I haven’t heard.

Brian shakes his head, *No*, but his smirk says, *Yes*.

“You did! You wiped away my kiss!”

Brian shakes his head, *No No No No No*.

But Clara devours the kid’s neck. She makes loud lapping noises, like it’s the first meal she’s had in years. She blows raspberries onto the boy’s skin, and Brian shrieks with delight, like a tea kettle long forgotten on the stove.

“No wiping away Mommy’s kisses,” Clara says, standing.

The other woman appears in the doorway, makes a flash of eye contact with me, then looks to Clara. The woman has rhinestone jeans, and her shirt is dotted with little holes. Her hair is straw blonde where it’s not grey.

“Sorry,” the woman says. “I didn’t realize you had *company*.” She says *company* as if I were a drug dealer, as if a steel pipe still hung from my lips.

The woman holds a McDonald’s bag out to Clara. The bottom of the bag is dotted with grease.

“*Mom*.” Clara grabs the bag, then looks inside. Closes it. “I told you no fast food. Did he eat his carrots?” Then to Brian, hands on hips in mock outrage: “Did you eat your carrots, mister?”

Brian hooks onto his mother’s leg, digs his face into her thigh.

“No carrots!” he says, voice muffled by Clara’s dress.

“I told you eight o’clock,” Clara says to her mother, voice now a whisper. She waves a hand at me. “I ask for one night.”

Clara’s mother looks at me again, squints.

“I guess I lost track of time,” she says.

“I was just leaving.” I shake my keys, but don’t move.

“Did he do his homework?” Clara says, but her mother doesn’t seem to understand the question. Her mother shakes her head and brings her shoulders near her ears. She swipes at an eyelash on her cheek.

Clara clenches her jaw, as if chewing on the words she wants to say.

“Mom, who’s that!” Brian shouts, pointing at me.

“No one,” Clara says. Without looking at me. I wait for her to add more, but that’s it, that’s me.

When Clara does look at me, she purses her lips. She raises her eyebrows, widens her eyes. I get the hint.

“I was hoping to stay for dinner,” I say, pointing to the McDonalds bag. But no one laughs.

Clara’s mother wheezes, then hacks something into her fist.

“Alright, well.” I move toward the door. When I walk past Brian and Clara, I say to the boy, “I hear you’re quite the scholar.”

I hold my hand out to the kid, and he looks at my palm like it’s something from Saturn. Clara takes it instead. She shakes like we just ended a job interview, pumping up and down and up and down.

“Goodnight,” Clara says. She puts a hand on my back and leads me away. I pass her mother, who smells like she took a bath in a bottle of Bombay, and head down the steps.

“Text me sometime,” Clara says, sticking her head out the door. Before the door clicks shut, I see a glimpse of Brian standing between his mother’s legs, a fistful of her dress in his hand.

And I do text her. About a week later. From my white-walled apartment, with its folding chairs and bad painting. *I’ve survived another week at my job*, I write. *What about you?* But Clara never answers. When I check the dating app, I also notice that her profile has been deleted. There’s only a grey, vaguely woman-shaped avatar where her picture used to be.

Let’s hit the beach, I type in the apps message bar and hit send, knowing she’ll never see it but hoping she might.

At home, I look at the beachscape on my wall. A single crane stalks the shoreline. Frothy waves threaten to break over jagged rock. The sky is all pinks and oranges, as if the beach is about to be incinerated. Dark blue smudges dot the shoreline in the background. Suggesting people. Suggesting beachgoers. Couples, probably, wandering the dusk. Their love preserved in that blazing moment.

On the drive home, I wondered what Brian and Clara did once I left. Once I stepped past her mother and down the steps, once I drove pulled away from them and toward home. What does a family *do*?

After her mother left, Clara probably made Brian dinner. Something with grilled chicken and little mounds of broccoli. She probably placed the McDonald’s bag squarely in the trash. Or maybe, as a Sunday treat, they ate ice cream. Maybe they ate dessert and worked on Brian’s

homework. Worked on measuring the lines of a square with a little ruler. Brian probably slurped the ice cream once it turned liquid in his bowl. Probably gave himself an ice cream mustache, and said, *Mom, look!* as it dripped down his chin.

Or maybe the two went to his room. Maybe they sat on the linoleum with construction paper and drew spaceships. Maybe they drew lizards with tails for heads and named them Derek. Maybe they drew dogs and, defying nature, made them say, *Meow*. Maybe Clara sat behind Brian and tickled under his arms. Maybe she held a palm to his chest and felt it vibrate. Felt his little heart pump. Or maybe Clara just watched, a fullness in her chest like after a big meal, just watched as her son fit within a single square of white tile and brought crayon to page. Or maybe he's too old for these things. I can never tell.

THE WORLD OF REPTILES

Ben's never been to the zoo before, so I let him lead the way. Mulch hits my nose, bright and sharp, and the stone path is peppered with flattened gum and popcorn, but there's something else in the air, something primordial, like I can feel that large predators share the same breath. That death by ape could be imminent. I grab Ben's hand.

It's Tuesday, but I took Ben out of school. He's six and the school year's a few weeks away from finished. I didn't tell his teachers about the doctor's appointment. I don't want people looking at Ben funny when he gets back. Besides, there are more consequential things than first grade. Hopefully, he'll learn to draw a rhombus next year. His mother's in Boston, anyway, so I don't have to justify it to anyone but myself.

"*Bear*," Ben says. He leans on the rail, points at the back of an anteater. When the animal turns, its nose noodles toward the floor. Ben looks at me, mouth an *O* of disbelief.

"Anteaters," I say.

Ben squints at the enclosure, arms crossed on the railing. I know that he has follow-up questions that he won't ask. Ben already doesn't like to reveal that he doesn't know something, to seek answers beyond himself.

"They eat ants," I say, assuming this is one of his questions. "That's why they have those snouts and long tongues."

I scrunch my nose at Ben, think he will be disgusted by an animal that eats ants. But he looks down.

"I *know*, Dad," he whispers. "Says so on the thing." Ben points at the placard with anteater information, which I know he hasn't read. We are still working on basic nouns and

adjectives (*The FIRE TRUCK is RED*). There's no way he read, *Anteater habitats include dry tropical forests, rainforests, grasslands, and savannas, while the silky anteater (Cyclopes didactylus) is specialized to an arboreal environment.*

I actually prefer this phase, since I can tell Ben things when I want to, rather than be held hostage by his questions. *How far is the moon?* he used to ask. *So far!* I would say. *So far that they can't even measure it!*

I feel less guilty now that I don't have to lie. About why trees don't feel pain or whether or not both mice *and* the snakes that eat them go to heaven. Or why Mom's not here.

Animal shit is carried on a breeze that lifts the hairs at the back of Ben's head around the spot where the doctor's shaved. I smooth it down, cup the knuckle of bone at the back of his head. He leans into my touch.

Ben has been having headaches and even fainted last week, as I walked him to baseball practice. His eyes went white, and his full weight pulled down on the hand I held. His head joggled on his neck, and his cleats limply clicked on the street. I thought it was just dehydration, but I took him to the hospital, and they did a CT scan of his head. Then they did an MRI. Ben's socked feet hung from the mouth of an MRI machine, and my stomach turned to air. The doctors clasped their hands and pursed their lips. There was a mass. It could be nothing, they said. Benign. A cyst or a small ball of meat with no intention of spreading. They would need to do a biopsy, they said. So they shaved the back of Ben's head, dug through his skull with drills and knives. Today, the results.

"Ready?" I pat Ben's shoulder, which fits into my palm like a tennis ball.

I adjust my backpack, which holds our snacks and sunblock, then hold my hand out for Ben. He grabs the bottom of my shirt instead. We continue down the sloped path.

Dried pine needles coat the path, and a cart overflows with popcorn and pink and blue cotton candy poofs. It's Tuesday, so the zoo isn't overrun by kids flitting around with teeth and tongues stained blue.

Still, Ben raises his eyebrows at the cart, points.

"Later," I say, tapping our bag. "We have snacks."

I'm a high school teacher in Far Rockaway, so the tickets were barely affordable as is, not including the train ticket. I paid for the one LIRR ticket into the city and had Ben sit in my lap whenever the conductor came by with his hole-punch. Then for the subway, I swiped my card at the turnstiles and carried Ben through, holding him aloft like baby Jesus or Simba. No one stopped me.

Ben sighs when I deny him cotton candy, but he doesn't pout or stamp his feet. I'm momentarily proud of myself. *See how easy it is?* I want to tell the other parents. *I offer you the well-behaved child.* But, in reality, it's early. Once the sun gets to him, forehead slick and shiny, blood sugar low. Then we'll see.

"Gorillas are... *this* way," I say, pointing behind us. "And the giraffes are—"

"Sharks," Ben says.

"Not sure they have sharks, bud."

I find the map in my back pocket and unfold it.

"OK, so here's the Butterfly Garden," I say, putting my finger to the map. "And the Wild Asia Monorail. Want to take a train?"

“Snakes,” Ben says.

I find the World of Reptiles on the map, which I notice sits suspiciously close to the Mouse House.

“There’s also African Wild Dogs, too—you like doggies, right?—and, oh, lions. They have lions, Ben.”

I hold the map to him, but he’s watching a squirrel balance on the lip of a garbage can. It has a piece of sandwich in its paws. The squirrel freezes, like a cartoon bank robber.

“OK, reptiles,” I say. I fold the map into a clump and shove it back into my pocket. “You’ll have to keep an eye out for me, though. OK, bud? Daddy doesn’t like snakes.”

#

The reptile house is a squat building with opaque windows. Ben pulls my shirt, and I can feel my neckline plunge. I check the time on my phone. I set an alarm for two o’clock. Ben’s doctors appointment is at four, so I want to make sure we have plenty of time to leave the zoo and get back to the subway.

“Do you want to eat first?” I ask. “We might lose our appetite in there.”

To our left, passed the Bug Carousel and Butterfly Garden, there is a square of open space with tables spread on the cement.

“Why don’t we eat a little first, Ben?” I say, pointing.

But Ben continues toward the reptile house, and today is his day, so I follow.

Inside, Ben puts his nose against a tank with a snake coiled among some mulch. The building smells musty, like a basement, and the low-light makes me feel like we’re intruding in the reptiles’ bedroom.

I put a hand to Ben's head again, feel his child-soft hair between my fingers. Would the doctor recommend chemo? If Ben needs to shave his head, I'll shave mine, too. I'll run his fingers over my smooth head. We'll apply sunblock to our shiny domes. I'll show him there's nothing wrong with being bald.

Ben moves down the line of tanks. The lizards sit in red light, their bodies riddled with spikes and bumps and ridges, like weaponized tree bark. Ben puts his finger to the glass. An iguana or chameleon, rainbow-striped, opens its mouth, pink tongue coiled and ready to strike. I fight the urge to snatch his hand back, to keep him away from the spindly monsters.

Ben bumps into my stomach. His face glows, eyes wide and shining. His face says, *Did you see it?*

"I *saw*," I say, putting my hand on his head, nodding. "I saw."

He leans back, leans into me, and we watch the lizard stalk the artificial branch.

#

Just before Ben was born, I could feel Julie, his mother, getting restless. She talked about getting back to work, getting out of the house. She said the sight of our house, our curtains and throw pillows and frog-shaped candles made her nauseous.

She was also worried that the baby was making her dumb. She held up half-finished crosswords to me as proof that the fetus had sucked the juice from her frontal lobe. Julie was a lawyer, a successful one in the city, and needed to be sharp. So, when she was offered a job in Boston, she took it. Ben had just turned four. Having a child made her feel trapped, she said. She was the first person in her family to go to college. *I won't get a chance like this again*, she said, and who was I to argue with that? Though I did, of course. I told her she was abandoning her

son, her husband, her life. I called her selfish. But that wasn't fair, and I knew it. She had kept us afloat for years as I tried to find a steady teaching job. She had been supportive, smart. She was too ambitious for me. I think she wanted to have Ben to try and convince herself we were right for each other, that we just needed to move the ball forward. Now, she sends her love in the form of a check. She takes Ben every other weekend.

#

Ben and I walk down a darker hall, deeper into the World of Reptiles. The tanks glow orange and green and lizards skitter across their mulch floors. Ben pulls my shirt forward. I let him lead me passed the pythons, granny-smith-green and thick as palm trees.

The hall comes to a rounded end at the Komodo dragon tank. The beasts, armored and sinister, pace across granite boulders. They test the air with forked tongues. Ben leans forward on the brass railing, smudged with fingerprints, and gets his face as close to the glass as he can. I hold the back of his shirt as his body see-saws on the railing, legs flapping as if he were flying. If I were to let go, he would leave the ground, I'm sure. Leave the earth.

So I hold on.

"Can we get one?" he asks, pointing. I can't believe this is his first time at the zoo. How else have I failed him? Has he ever smelt a hot dog at a baseball game? Or felt his ears pop on a plane? I can blame Julia for missed homework and sending Ben to school with a stained shirt. *I'm doing this all by myself!* I could yell at the other parents. But this? Maybe I let him stand too close to the microwave. Let him watch one too many burritos spin and bubble on that plastic disc. Or let him play too many games on my phone. There was also that baseball helmet he

whined about. That one that squished his cheeks and pinched his ears. Maybe it *was* too tight. Maybe I caused this.

“Yes,” I say.

If that’s what it takes to keep him here, I would line the walls with lizard tanks. I would douse the floor with mulch and turn the lights red. The entire house would become a lizard playground. We would wake up with geckos and salamanders on our foreheads and shins. Komodo dragons would be our watch dogs, tasting the air as they prowled the living room sofa.

“But no snakes,” I say, lowering my son back onto his feet. And because he has no idea that he might soon die, Ben squeezes his arms around my waist, grunts like he’s trying to split me in half. He hugs me.

“*I’m* a snake,” he says, hissing.

#

Outside, a man’s in a butterfly costume. He’s a monarch, wings a brightly artificial orange. He dances to Hall & Oates played from a speaker near the Butterfly Garden.

As we walk past the entrance, the alarm on my phone chirps.

“*Here,*” Ben says. He pulls my shirt toward the food court, toward the smell of French fries and burgers.

The sign for the butterfly entrance is a big bronze caterpillar chewing on a leaf.

“Butterflies?” I say. “How about butterflies?”

Ben stops walking. His face and body say, *No*. I hit snooze on my phone, so the alarm will sound in another fifteen minutes.

“Let’s just see,” I say.

Ben pouts, but he follows me into the big white tent.

Inside, it's humid, the air of the world shut out. Vines climb toward the ceiling, and flowers bend into the walkway. Butterflies flap through filtered sun.

With his head turned toward the fluttering bugs, Ben bumps into a man. Despite the heat, the man wears a fleece sweater and khaki shorts. A tour guide.

The man turns and smiles at Ben.

"*Beep beep*," he says, grinning. He gives Ben's hair a tussle, and I grab the man's wrist, hard, before I realize what I'm doing.

The guide looks at me, horrified. He wears a flesh tone mic across his cheek.

"Sorry," I say. "Sorry." I let the man's arm go. "Just instinct, I guess."

"I want to *go*," Ben says, turning toward me. His face is red, and he swipes a wrist across his forehead.

We come to an opening at the head of the path, a small circle ringed by bushes. I nudge Ben forward, and he drags his feet, kicking white rocks.

He stops in the middle of the circle, turns my way. His face a bright ball of fire, like a scorched thumb. I worry he might faint, for a minute. He presses his temples with both hands.

But then a butterfly lands on Ben's shoulder. Then another. One more. Some are black. Some green.

My alarm chirps, But I turn my phone horizontal, use it as a camera.

"Hold still," I say to Ben. "Don't you move."

Through tears, Ben says, "I want to *leave*." He rubs at his temples, squeezes his eyes shut, like his head is pounding.

He grabs the hem of my shirt, a whole fistful, and tugs, pulls. I hear the crack of ripped fabric, feel the shirt swimming around my neck.

My alarm screams.

“I’m leaving,” Ben says.

“No, let’s stay.” I sit down on the path, among the rocks. I cross my legs. “Ben? Let’s stay, huh?” I pat the rocks, call my son to me. “How about we stay?”

And here it comes. Ben’s face twists into a scream; it shrinks with rage, a whirlpool curling toward center. The tantrum.

And all I can think about is a time when Ben was younger, a time before. Julie and I took him to a baseball game in Queens. The stadium was blue and concrete, ugly. Julie swiped sunblock onto Ben’s face, below his hat, and Ben whined. *It stings*, he said, but we knew it didn’t sting. Ben said that about everything: soap, cold water, broccoli. Julie kissed his eyebrow, and Ben said, *Owwwch!* We laughed. We held hands. We walked from the train to the stadium. In the parking lot, there were men selling t-shirts and water bottles and hot dogs. There were police officers on horses. Ben pointed at the horses. He wanted to touch one. Julie and I exchanged looks, and Ben squirmed in my arms. We gave in. *Ask first*, Julie said, but Ben already reached toward the horse, little hand opening and closing. The police officer smiled, but the horse flinched, headbutted Ben and knocked his hat off. The cop trotted away. And oh how Ben cried then. I panicked. I talked about broken vertebrae, concussions, CTE. I talked about aphasia and synesthesia. *He’s going to hear brown for the rest of his life*, I said, but Julie already took Ben in her arms. She rubbed his head, held her lips on his forehead, rocked him from side to

side, and they danced like that, past traffic cones and piles of horse shit. They dipped and turned to their own rhythm, swinging outside of time.

HOST

Aiden's mother was against cremation because she was scared of fire. She was against embalming because she worried the formaldehyde would block her soul's journey from one body to the next. She believed in reincarnation, thought that every squirrel and hamster and pink-tongued lizard held a human spirit. So, before she died she told Aiden she wanted a green burial. And—though she had left Aiden and his brother when they were kids—Aiden found a nature preserve in Gainesville that moonlit as a cemetery. He found the preserve online, but the only reviews were for the park itself. “Scenic,” the reviews said. Or, “Beautiful place for a picnic with the kids.” No one rated the experience of burying your mother in a biodegradable sack.

Aiden and his older brother Dan followed a park employee to get to the plot. The preserve was a swamp with knee-high sawgrass and ancient, knuckled oaks and cypress trees. Red-shouldered hawks circled the treeline. They followed paths that curled around bright lakes and saw signs that warned about gators and panthers and black bears. Aiden wondered if the animals ever dug up the bodies, ever tore through the thin layer of sack to get to flesh. Was anyone ever killed on their way to a gravesite, dragged away by a wild cat, or bitten by a snake and left to decompose among the palmettos?

When they reached their mother's plot, Aiden and Dan stood under the shade of a tentacled oak. Spanish moss touched the tops of their heads, and a plain rock marked their mother's grave. They looked into the hole of dirt at their mother, shapeless in the brown sack.

Already around Mom's plot were people Aiden didn't recognize. They looked like neo-hippies, dreadlocked and shoeless, feet frosted with dirt.

“What's with the drum circle?” Dan said, nodding at the other guests.

“From Mom’s group,” Aiden said. “The spirituality thing.”

“Where they walk through the woods and admire the beauty of the sparrow.”

“It’s harmless.”

“It *was* harmless,” Dan said. “But I personally feel harmed by these strangers at our mother’s funeral.”

“Yes, I’m sure this is devastating for you.”

Dan flipped Aiden’s collar up, and Aiden folded it down. Dan flipped it up.

“Here?” Aiden pushed his collar down.

Dan flicked his little brother’s ear, then clasped his hands by his thighs.

Aiden forget to mention to Dan that the funeral would be deep in the Florida woods, in August. His older brother wore a black suit and tie, and his face was maroon, like he was being squeezed by a giant fist. Dan tugged at his collar and tried to wiggle his chin free. Aiden had to give his brother props for coming at all, though.

The other guests looked at Aiden and Dan to start, but Aiden looked at the ground.

Instead, a bearded man cleared his throat. He said his name was Gabe, and he talked about Mom’s first spiritual experience in the woods. He said that she wept at the sight of an armadillo, that she couldn’t help but mourn the animal’s inability to see this vibrant world. Next, a woman in a skirt that scraped the grass said Mom nursed a bird with a broken wing in a shoe box. One guy said that she lent him her car for a job interview at a supermarket.

Dan huffed whenever someone said the word spiritual or profound. He elbowed Aiden in the ribs when someone got choked up during an anecdote about roadkill. But Aiden knew his

brother. Dan's jaw clenched when these people, strangers, listed their mother's acts of charity. Aiden didn't have to state the obvious. They didn't have any stories to tell.

After the group spoke, they turned again to Aiden and Dan. The bearded Gabe even came and put his hand on Aiden's back, gave little reassuring pats. Aiden looked to Dan for help, but his older brother was prying at his tie, unbuttoning his collar.

Aiden told a story about getting lost at a corn maze. He had cried and cried, he said, beseeched by the stalks, until someone lifted him from behind, hands tucked into armpits.

"Mom found me," Aiden said, "among all that corn."

Gabe squeezed Aiden's arm and brought him in for a hug. Over Gabe's shoulder, Dan glared at Aiden.

Aiden had embellished some. Dan was actually the one who found him. And his older brother didn't lift him, gently, into the air. Dan snuck up and shoved Aiden into the stalks and laughed so hard he almost choked. Aiden was seven at the time, his brother twelve, and their mother was already gone.

#

After the service, as park employees shoveled dirt onto his mother, Aiden exchanged numbers with Gabe. Gabe typed his into Aiden's phone and said, "If you ever need anything," he held Aiden's phone between his hands like a Bible, "don't hesitate to call. There's no shame in asking for help." Aiden thanked the man and promised he would call, that they would all go for drinks, though he had no intention of doing either.

Dan got in Aiden's car, and they drove the three hours back to Tampa, where Dan was staying with Aiden for a few days. Aiden had picked Dan up from the airport in Gainesville, and

they went straight to their mother's funeral. When Aiden asked Dan to come, he was surprised his older brother agreed. Dan hadn't seen their mother in over fifteen years. He and Aiden lived with their Aunt Janine, their mother's sister, after she left. As teenagers, Dan got into drinking and smoking and, Aiden was pretty sure, pills and left high school his junior year. He later got his GED but never went to college, like Aiden did, on a scholarship. Aiden's older brother still lived in upstate New York, where they were from, and worked as a delivery driver for UPS.

Dan threw his blazer onto his bags, which lay rumpled in the back seat. He pulled his tie off and threw it on the dashboard. The car smelled of sweat.

"You knew didn't you?" Dan said.

"I knew all that you knew."

"My ass." Dan held his fingers over the A/C vent, waited for cold.

"It's broken." Aiden pointed to the vent.

Dan slapped the dash and exhaled, rolled the window down. "You should have warned me," he said. "I didn't fly down here to pass around the peace pipe."

"I told you about the meetings." Aiden turned his blinker on, took the interstate exit west. "Doesn't mean I knew they'd get a front row seat to her funeral."

Dan waved away Aiden's answer and fumbled with the radio.

Aiden knew about the group because, two years ago, his mother showed up at his door. Her hair was grey and knotted, tied back, and she wore a billowy white dress, like a Victorian bed sheet. She held Aiden's cat, Petey, stroked behind his ear. She was dying of breast cancer and had discovered reincarnation, she told him, discovered the group. She wanted to make

amends. She smiled a weak smile. She owned a house an hour away, on the Gulf, so there she was at Aiden's apartment, back from the dead.

"And Sarah?" A line of cold sweat slid toward Aiden's hip.

"Nope."

"What happened?"

"Moved out."

"And you didn't tell me?"

Dan stared out the windshield, and Aiden watched for some look, a hint of something. They only saw each other about once year and talked every few weeks, less after Mom came back into Aiden's life. Whole seasons passed without a word from his older brother.

"Correction: She made *me* move out." Dan put his shoe on the dash, where the airbag would emerge and turn him into a pretzel if they crashed. He rolled down his dress socks, and they bunched at his ankles like leg warmers. His leg hair was plastered down with sweat.

"Where's Max?" Aiden said. "When did this happen?"

"She has him." Dan glanced out the passenger window toward a hillside dotted with cows. The grass was storybook green. "He's getting up there now, anyway," Dan said about his dog. "Can't walk so great. Swings his back leg around like someone with a steel hip." Dan scratched at a mosquito bite on his calf until blood rose. "Apartment I got was no pets," he said, "so she has him."

Maybe because of the funeral, because of their mother, but something about the dog made Aiden want to cry. He remembered when Dan got the black lab, almost ten years ago. Aiden was still in high school, so Dan was about twenty, living on his own for a few years

already. Aiden spent some nights on his brother's couch, which smelled like Tabasco sauce and loneliness, and the dog would curl into his side, snout tucked under Aiden's chin. Aunt Janine couldn't have pets because of her allergies, so Max felt like Aiden's dog, too.

Aiden drove the rest of the way in near silence. Billboards about mega sex stores and Jesus came and went, as did fields thick with cows and gnats. He tried to picture his brother in a one bedroom apartment, mattress on the floor, back slumped against a wall and laptop aglow in his lap. But he couldn't. His brother was thirty, now, with a hairline in quick retreat, and he couldn't see him living the way that Aiden did, eating pizza and microwavable burritos every night. Aiden was a teacher at a catholic high school, and Dan thought that was hilarious. But the pay was better and the kids were easier because Aiden had the threat of the Lord on his side. But Aiden still lived alone. He had been on dates, but didn't quite know how to start a relationship, to bring another person into his life. He was used to being left, used to people appearing from his past like hallucinations, but he was untrained in how to keep someone around.

When they got to Aiden's apartment, his cat was waiting at the door. Petey rubbed his side on the rusty railings and meowed at them coming up the stairs. Frogs erupted from the little estuary next to Aiden's complex. Aiden let them inside, and Dan plopped on the couch, kicked his shoes off. There was just the couch in the living room, with two fold-out chairs, and the TV sat on an upturned milk crate. Aiden took Dan's bags into his room, then came back out.

"Thanks for coming," Aiden said from the dining room. He faced his patio, saw a corner of the courtyard pool glisten with moon glow. The tile was cool under his feet. The room was quiet, and he didn't want to turn on the lights. He wanted to stand in the dark, hide in it, because how could one face a bright-lit room at a time like this?

Dan didn't answer, so Aiden turned, and his older brother was already asleep, mouth open, and Petey was curled on his chest, purring into the quiet dark.

#

The next morning, Aiden and Dan drove to their mother's house to collect her things. Her place was a bungalow bordered by palms, with an oak curled over her roof, like a bear protecting her cub. The porch had a wrought-iron table and chairs and a quilt spread on the wood. When Aiden came to see his mother this is where they would meditate, legs crossed on the quilt.

Inside, the house was spare. There was a table, a couch, some books. The place still smelled of incense. By the table, Dan examined the pink Buddha salt shaker. He tapped some salt on his palm, licked it off. He sucked his cheeks like he ate something sour.

"You're disgusting," Aiden said, and Dan gave him the finger.

When they were younger, Dan would suck on limes and throw the rines at Aiden watching TV. They hit Aiden on the forehead and plopped to the floor, and Aunt Janine found the rines under the couch, between the cushions. She thought they had rats for years and layed trap after trap.

In their mother's kitchen, there was a single pot and pan, one set of dishes and utensils; a sandalwood candle melted to the wick. On the fridge, there was a picture of the two of them. Aiden looked about five, in his tee ball uniform. He was crying. They were on their old couch, in their old house, their old lives.

Dan grabbed the picture, flipped it over, but the back was blank.

"You know what day this way, right?" Dan slapped Aiden on the forehead with the picture.

“Nope.” Aiden swiped at the photo, but Dan pulled away, held it over Aiden’s head.

“It was my birthday,” Dan said, “and you threw a fit because you didn’t get any presents.”

“Mom bought two cakes.” Aiden remembered the chocolate whale on his cake, the worried love on his mother’s face as she opened the white box.

“Yours just said, ‘Congratulations!’” Dan pushed the picture into Aiden’s chest, hard, and Aiden stumbled into the stove. “Always Mommy’s favorite.”

In the bedroom, the mattress was on the floor. Succulents lined the windowsill, and a stack of books stood in place of a nightstand. Light slanted through the bamboo blinds. Dan lifted the top book.

“*Beyond Flesh*,” he read, “*Transcending Your Body’s Earthly Chains*.” He flipped the book over. He was quiet for a full minute. Then, “So, she was nuts, or is this a joke?”

“She wasn’t nuts.” Aiden grabbed the book. “And it’s not a joke.”

Dan raised his eyebrows near his hairline.

“She believed in something,” Aiden said. “Is Catholicism really that different?”

Dan grabbed another book from the stack, thumbed through it.

“Yes,” he said. “This seems different.” He held up a diagram of a human soul entering the mouth of a Golden Retriever. The soul was iridescent and pink and very bright. It looked textured on the page, like Aiden would feel the ridges under his finger if he touched it.

Aiden snatched the book from him. “A belief is a belief,” he said. “They’re all equally crazy or not crazy at all.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works.”

Dan lifted a third book. He read for a minute or two, then took another book. He read quietly as Aiden looked around the room for something to pack. He opened the closet, but there was only a pair of sandals and two dresses, dust flurried down from the light bulb. Their mother left Aiden the house, so he wasn't in a rush, though he agreed to split the money with Dan if he sold it. He closed the closet door. He would come back for her clothes, the bedspread, he told himself, though he already knew he wouldn't change a thing.

Dan closed the book. "She talked to you about this?" Dan said. "You saw this?" He pointed at the cover.

"I knew some," Aiden said.

Aiden came here every Sunday for two years, listened to his mother talk about the multi-dimensional properties of the soul. She talked about moths that housed the souls of prime ministers, about slugs with the spirit of war criminals. There was order, she said. People went somewhere for a reason. Justice. Which is why she was there. To do what she should have done much earlier. When she said this she grabbed Aiden's wrist and squeezed, she dug into him with her eyes.

"Sounds like she was nuts," Dan said after Aiden explained.

"No," Aiden said. "Just afraid."

They packed the books and succulents and salt shakers in a box and left. Aiden placed the picture from the fridge on the books, but they left the table and couch.

"We should have got a truck," Dan said, as Aiden drove back over the bay. "How did you not think to get a truck?" he said, then stuck his finger in his little brother's ear.

#

The next night, Aiden sat with Dan on his patio. They sat on plastic chairs and watched trash skitter in the courtyard, watched the pool glow a chemical blue. A boy rode a bike around and around the square of apartments, curling past fallen palm fronds. It was just before sunset and bugs hung golden in the air.

Dan was still reading one of their mother's books, this one titled, *Life after Life: Living in Your New Host*. He spent the previous night flipping through the books on the couch. He exhaled disapprovingly every few paragraphs, making sure, Aiden knew, that it was loud enough to hear.

On the patio, Dan said. "It blows me away that you believe this stuff. Mom, whatever. But you?"

Petey rubbed against Dan's plastic chair, tail an exclamation point. His purr filled the silence.

"I never said *I* believe in it."

"But you do don't you?"

"I'm not sure." Aiden scratched behind Petey's here, and his hand came away stuck with fur.

"You're sure," Dan said. "It's shit, and you know it."

Aiden wasn't sure. He didn't think he believed in anything that needed believing. He taught English at the Catholic school and felt shame when he saw the old men in the halls, playing dress-up in their black robes. But something about his mother might have knocked something loose. He had watched her close her eyes on that porch, shut the world out, then open them with a calm he's never found himself. She seemed excited when she talked about death, like it was a country she had yet to visit in Southern Europe. Whether it was just the belief that

gave her comfort or if his mother had actually stumbled upon something, Aiden couldn't tell. But it worked.

Dan leaned forward, and his chair scraped the cement. He grabbed the cat and held him under his front legs. The cat stretched toward the floor, white belly like floured dough.

"So who's to say this isn't Mom?" Dan said.

Dan turned the cat toward Aiden, and Petey blinked a languid blink, like he had already been confused for a deceased relative that day.

"That's not funny." Aiden reached for his cat, but Dan pulled back.

"I'm just following the guidelines of the book." Dan nodded at the book on the floor. "It said the deceased will chose a host close to their loved ones."

Aiden sat forward in his chair, waited for his brother to finish.

"And we both know Mom didn't have many loved ones to choose from."

Aiden reached for the cat again, and Dan pulled away.

"And she didn't choose *one* of us in her previous life," Dan said. "So, obviously, she wasn't going to in the next one."

"Put the cat down, dick," Aiden said.

"Say 'Hi' to Mom, Aiden." Dan lifted Petey's paw and waved it at Aiden.

Aiden stood.

"You have a litter box and everything, now. OK, Mom? The works."

Aiden reached for his cat, who was squirming, trying to kick Dan's hands with his back paws, but Dan pulled away again. Aiden lunged at Dan and pried one of his brother's hands

loose, and Petey jumped free, dragging a paw down Dan's forearm, which left three red streaks like a mini pitchfork had raked his skin.

Dan sucked his teeth, and grabbed at his arm, while Petey squeezed through the patio door, belly catching on the metal.

Aiden looked at Dan and felt like he was eight again, like he had just violated the younger-older-brother hierarchy and punishment was imminent. He felt ready to cry. As kids, he was always the first to cry during fights with his brother. Maybe because when he did, Dan looked guilty for a moment, eyes filled with something like compassion. He waited for his older brother to stand, to tackle him down the steps, but Dan just sat and watched the pool, the cuts rising on his arm.

#

The next morning, Dan was on the patio with Aiden's phone. Aiden's brother laughed his fake laugh, muffled by the glass doors. He paced from rail to rail, the way he always did on the phone, as if he owed the person money. He sounded nervous, though, stuttering like that time he called Melinda Jeffries. He had asked her to the eighth grade dance, and she declined. Aiden and Aunt Janine stood within range of the phone, and Aiden heard the girl chuckle before she said told him, "No." That was the only time Dan cried openly in front of Aiden. He asked Aunt Janine if there was something wrong with his face, something *deformed*, then spent the night pinching skin under his chin, above his lip, stretching his eyelids, checking for flaws.

Eventually, Dan hung up and stepped inside.

"Who was on the phone?" Aiden said.

Petey meowed at them from the kitchen counter. His tail swept behind him.

“Have you fed our mother breakfast yet?”

“Who was on the phone, Dan?”

Dan walked into the kitchen and poured himself coffee. He sat at the dining room table and took a loud sip.

“Dan.”

“It was your boss,” Dan said. “You’ve been fired for flirting with students.”

“I work at a boys Catholic school.”

“Even worse,” Dan said.

“Tell me who was on the phone.”

Dan slurped his coffee again. Petey meowed at them from the kitchen.

“It was Gabe,” Dan said, twirling his mug. “The beard? I asked if we could pay him and his friends a visit.”

“I’m not going,” Aiden said.

“He said they’d be delighted to have us,” Dan said.

“Why are you doing this?”

Aiden went to the kitchen and got Petey’s food. He peeled the lid off the can, then scanned the counter for a fork. He usually sectioned off the cat’s food, cutting it into fourths, but he dumped the whole can into Petey’s bowl with a wet *plop*.

Back in the dining room, Aiden noticed another of Mom’s books laying spine-up on the table. *Facing IT: Experiencing Death with an Open Mind*.

“I thought it was all bullshit.” Aiden pointed at the book.

“It is,” Dan said, leaning forward in his chair, “but I was curious.” He twirled his mug and some coffee slopped onto the table. “I don’t know if you recall, but she never told me any of this stuff. Come to think of it,” he raised his eyebrows in mock surprise, “I don’t believe we spoke at all before she died. I’ll double-check my texts, but I think she might have skipped right over me.”

“I was close,” Aiden said. They had never talked about this before, and Aiden didn’t realize how strange his justifications sounded until he said them out loud. “You were still in New York.”

“And we all know dying acts are all about convenience,” Dan said, “and saving on airfare.”

“I told her to call,” Aiden said, but that wasn’t true. He never told their mother to call. He never even mentioned Dan’s name. “I told you to come visit. I tried.”

“*She* didn’t.”

But she had tried with Aiden. On the third Sunday he went to her place, Aiden’s mother asked if they could hug. They were on her couch, facing an empty wall, where a rectangular dust imprint of a past TV or picture frame sat. “Or is it too late?” his mother said. Her hands were in her lap, warped and bony, a stranger’s hands. But Aiden leaned over, put his arms around this woman he used to call Mom. The hug was awkward, and he was worried for a moment that his fear was finally confirmed, that they had failed to make the most reliable connection in human history, mother and son. But after the initial uncomfortability it all came back, even after fifteen years. Here was his mother, squeezing his shoulder, holding his hand.

“She didn’t think you’d forgive her,” Aiden said. Their mother never said this openly, but Aiden always suspected. Aiden was young when she left, and they both knew what Dan was like.

“I wouldn’t have,” Dan said quickly, but his face seemed hesitant after the fact, like he wished he had another minute to consider. He scratched the mug handle with his nail, trying to chip the paint. He sat for a moment, considering, then stood and went to dump his coffee.

“We’re going tomorrow.” Dan lifted Mom’s book and put his hand on the patio door. He paused.

He was waiting for Aiden to protest, but what was the point? Aiden didn’t want to go, to put his belief to the test, absolutely not, but Dan would get him to the park one way or another. He had let him slide the night before but it wouldn’t happen again. And maybe Dan at least deserved this, maybe he wanted to go for reasons all his own.

Dan slid the door open, and Aiden’s cat slipped through, followed his older brother outside. The two sat on the patio, in the heat of the coming day, and Petey fell asleep in the sun, legs alive with dreams.

#

The spirituality group met at a park twenty minutes east of Tampa. It was a special park. Their were big oaks on hills, but the dirt had eroded around them. So the roots were exposed, like rib cages of baby whales, and kids monkeyed through the hollow spaces, swinging from one root to the next. The group met in the valley below the trees, morning light slanting through the roots. The group liked to “awaken with the day,” so the grass was dew-dipped, the sky still purpled. Aiden palmed his eye, as he and Dan approached the circle.

Gabe and his beard opened his arms as he walked to them.

“Brothers,” he said, and Aiden didn’t know if Gabe was calling them *his* brother, or if this was how he saw Aiden and Dan, as a single unit of measurement, an inseparable two.

Gabe hugged Dan, then Aiden. Though Gabe was vegan, he smelled like old sausage, and his shoes were off, feet frosted with dirt. He waved them toward the group.

Dan bent to remove his shoes, and he used Aiden’s shoulder as a balance. He squeezed, hard, fingers digging under Aiden’s collar bone. Aiden tried to move, but his brother had a tight grip.

“Why are you torturing me?” Aiden said. He didn’t know if it was from the pain or the early hour, but he felt his eyes water.

“Pain is a product of the mind,” Dan said.

Aiden wiggled free from his brother’s hand, and Dan almost tipped over as he slipped off his other shoe. Dan went to throw his shoe at Aiden, but saw the group watching.

They joined the circle, and Gabe said they would start with meditation. Then, they would walk through the woods.

“Close your eyes,” he said. “Feel the breath enter your nose, touch your nostrils. Feel it fill your chest, your lungs. Listen to all the awakening life.”

Aiden and Dan were cross-legged on the grass. Everyone’s eyes were shut, and Dan punched Aiden on the arm.

Aiden glared at his brother.

“Close your eyes,” Dan said. “Listen to all that life.”

“You could have abused me at home,” Aiden said, rubbing his arm. “Why’d you drag me here?”

Birds chirped in the quiet, and bugs hummed like a distant weed-whacker.

“You didn’t tell her to call,” Dan said. He whispered, but the others in the group fidgeted. “She knew you wouldn’t ask a thing.”

“That’s not true.”

Dan was getting louder. “She knew you’d welcome her back with open arms.”

“I told you to come stay with me,” Aiden said. “To see her.”

“Guys,” Gabe said. His eyes were open, but everyone else remained focused.

“You don’t think I called her?” Dan said.

Aiden didn’t know what to say to that. He scanned his brother’s face. “You’re lying,” he said.

“You believe that?”

“We’re focusing on the breath,” Gabe said.

Aiden’s mother never did ask much about his life, about where he worked or who he dated. She talked about herself mostly, her spiritual awakening. She talked a lot about making amends, but he never saw her make many. She talked about the next life, about bright spirits with no names, and her resting place in the belly of a Pomeranian.

The other group members sat with their eyes shut, legs crossed, and Aiden thought of his mother here, chest brimming with what would soon kill her. He imagined her closing her eyes to it all, the roots like fossils of woolly mammoths and the grass and trees damp with morning. She could sit there and not be the mother who abandoned her sons, the wife whose husband left before their children’s birth. She could sit there and be no one but Anne.

“All of this,” Dan said, waving at the group. “Who do you think it was for?”

“I don’t want to ask you to leave,” Gabe said, walking over, and Aiden took a swing at Dan. Sitting cross-legged, he couldn’t get any momentum, so he only grazed Dan’s chin, his knuckle kissing his older brother’s jaw.

Dan sprung into a catcher’s crouch, like he had been waiting for this, and swung, caught Aiden under the left eye. Aiden felt the warm trickle of blood almost immediately, and he tried to blink away any coming tears. Then Dan was on top of him, a knee on either side. His older brother reared back to hit him again, but something made Dan stop. Maybe the stream of new blood, Aiden’s eye swelling red, or maybe the realization of where they were and why.

Gabe grabbed Dan’s cocked arm by the bicep, and another man got to his feet. They pulled Dan off Aiden, who still lay on his back.

“You two should leave,” Gabe said. The two men held Dan by the shoulders, like he was a criminal awaiting sentencing.

“We’re OK,” Dan said, and Gabe looked toward Aiden.

“He’s just having a real tough time,” Dan pointed at Aiden, “with our mother passing and all.”

Gabe ran a hand through his beard. He didn’t seem like he had ever dealt with a confrontation before, especially not mid-meditation. The other group members were stealing glances now, their trances broken.

Dan put his hand out for Aiden, and Gabe looked at him one more time, then nodded, went back to the group. He motioned for everyone to stand. They were ready to walk through the woods.

When Aiden took Dan's hand, his brother didn't pull. Aiden's felt his shirt, wet from the grass, cling to his back.

"Convinced?" Dan said, he waved a hand at the group, who were disappearing through the trees.

Aiden tried to pull his hand back, but Dan squeezed. He looked at his brother, always towering over him. He felt the pressure of his hand and thought of a Sunday at his mother's near the end. He and his mother sat on the porch, on the quilt with swirls of reds and greens and blues. His mother reached over and squeezed his wrist, his hand. Her hand was all bones, like rubber-banded pencils. He smiled, then shut his eyes to meditate. "Keep them open," she said, squeezing. "I want to look at you." Her face was not the usual yogi-calm. Her eyes were wet with what looked like fear, guilt. "I should have been there," she said, rocking. Then, "I just need to look, please. Don't move," she said, squeezing until his knuckles bunched. "Just stay right there."

Dan squeezed Aiden's hand. The group had moved into the woods, their feet crunching pine needles. He looked at Dan's face and imagined his older brother turning unrecognizable with grey, skin sliding off his jaw, his cheeks, his hands twisted and stiff, like the claws of little beasts. He would leave the next day. He'd pack some of the books from Mom's house, then apologize at the airport. Aiden would, too, though he won't be sure for what, then they'd hug and promise to call more, to stay in touch, though they knew things wouldn't be the same.

"OK," Aiden said. He nodded.

Dan studied his face for a minute, then pulled Aiden to his feet. He smiled at his little

brother, poked at his swelling eye. Aiden swatted his hand away as they walked into the woods. They passed lizards on low-slung oaks, passed palmettos like praying hands. They saw a hawk stamp the life from a paper bag. Aiden knew that he and Dan walked the same trail, stepped on the same flattened mulch, but they wandered different woods. They stopped as an armadillo waddled blind through the brush, into the trail, and Aiden thought of his cat at home, stretched in a patch of sun, legs twitching with dreams of nothing but small mammals with long delicious tails.

TRICERATOPS

You never thought you'd have a son, but you're there when he trips at the neighborhood park. His head connects with the yellow pole that signals approaching bikes, and his skull on metal rings like wire clacking against a flagpole. When he falls to the path, you lunge, but the knuckle of bone between his ears kisses concrete, and this sounds solid and wet, like melon dropped from rooftops. He bleeds.

This was supposed to be a nice Sunday. You let your son dip his feet in the pond. There he was, ankles in brown water, blonde hair stuck to forehead. You joked that he may lose his toes to the snapping turtles, and he wiggled his big toe. Your son pointed at a bird. The bird was a swan, white feathers mud-brown near its belly. Your son said, *Duck*, and you said, *Swan*, though the bird was the bird no matter what you named it.

Your son is four, and you never thought you'd have a son because you and your wife had trouble conceiving. Some nights, she tapped her knuckles on her tummy, as you held an ear to her belly button. *Hello?* you'd say to her midsection. Some nights your wife held a rosary to her stomach and spoke to Jesus, though neither of you were religious. Some nights you talked of sacrificing a chicken.

Now, though, you carry the son you never thought you'd have into the emergency room. If not for the blood that seeps into your shirt and his, your son would appear to be napping. The last time you were here, when you came to identify your wife's body, the nurses were clinical and distant. But your son garners more attention. A bleeding child is a bleeding child, and no forms can come before that. So the nurse takes you to the back, sits you in a little room with a curtain for privacy.

The nurse reaches for your son. His face is tucked in your neck, and you have a hard time letting go.

Let me help, the nurse says to you, but your fingers have become father fingers, and they won't be tricked by a stranger in floral scrubs.

Eventually, though, you give your son to the nurse. Your son is dazed, head-wobbling, but still he reaches a hand for you as the nurse takes him.

The nurse combs his hair for the wound. This doesn't take long. When she finds the gash, she takes a sharp inhale of breath, like a balloon leaking air.

You put hand on your son's shirt, you grab his calf, his ankle, because you don't know how else to make him whole again.

The nurse says, *We need to take him to the back*, and you stand.

You have to stay, the nurse says, and she puts a hand on your shoulder to lower you into a seat.

She carries your son the way you carried him into the hospital, and you think she must have little boys or girls of her own, little kids whose heads are also in danger of bursting with blood.

You watch for your son to reach for you again, but his eyelids flutter with something you pray is only sleep.

As the nurse carries your son away, you look at the room and wonder if this is where your son's mother died. The privacy curtain has these little yellow ducks. You wonder if these ducks were the last thing she saw. But you know she died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. This is what you were told. You were at home with your son. You pulled at his toes and

looked at a book about dinosaurs. He liked when you touched his toes. Your son was two and had a sheen of drool on his chin. You said, *Triceratops*, and tapped the image of the horned dinosaur, as your son's mother was punctured by a Dodge Silverado on a trip to CVS for rocky road ice cream.

You never thought you'd have a son, because you were too afraid to have your insides worn outside. You thought it'd be like having your spleen walk beside you, vulnerable to sharp corners and objects made of glass. You told this to your wife, but she said that it'd be worth it, and she was right, but now she's dead, and your son is all you have.

When a nurse brings you to your son's room, his head is bandaged. You imagine your son's wound looks like a stapled cantaloupe and are thankful for the white tape. You are told that your son will be fine, that it was just a flesh wound, a minor concussion.

You never thought you'd have a son, but when you see him swaddled in hospital sheets, head like a swollen golf ball, you wonder who you were before him. You wonder what it would be like without your son's bright voice, his lispsy good mornings. You wonder how a backyard would look devoid of tricycles and wiffle ball bats. You think of how silence would hang in the house, damp and humid, like a wet sheet on a clothesline, as you tongued the barrel of a gun or Googled which knot and rope could hold a human's weight.

When your son sees you, he cries, and you feel much more like Dad than other names you've been called: Son and Husband and Widower. You kiss his forehead and tell him you'll never let this happen again, though you know you can't promise anything. After all, here is the son you never thought you'd have, bandaged and motherless. The world will do what the world does. But, for now, you put a palm to his cheek, honk his nose with thumb and finger. You pinch

his big toe, which juts from a paper gown. You ask him what that particular piggy does and wait for your son to speak.

OCEAN WOUNDS

Dad took us surfing the morning before he left. We would always go on cold fall mornings, the sky still a nuclear orange. My older brother and I were young then, eight and thirteen, so we went on Sundays, Saturday morning cartoons still too precious to sacrifice.

I was in the backseat, and my brother the front, ours heads dipping with sleep. Dad blew on a coffee and drove the jeep down the empty stretch of Ocean Parkway, water on either side of us. Just before the bridge, he pulled the car over and we got out and he pointed, claiming he saw seals bobbing in the dark water. I squinted and stood on my toes, my chin coming up just above the metal rail. I said I couldn't see them, and he said, "Right there," and pointed again.

"Where?" I said

"*Right there,*" he said, grabbing my head and turning it closer to the shore, toward the rocks glazed with ocean mist.

His eyes were red—like they were most mornings—but I hoped that it was just from the cold this time, as he waited for me to see seals I never would. You needed a good eye to see them, their slick heads blending in with the sheen coming off the water.

"I don't think they're down there," I said. My brother rolled his eyes from the car. He didn't get out to look at the seals anymore. He never saw them either.

"Well, they've probably been eaten by something, by now," Dad said, rocking on his feet, shoulders hunched against the cold.

I looked at the water thrashing below, the waves a frothy white, and I wondered, just for a second, what it would be like to jump, wondered if Dad would dive in after me.

At the beach, we stepped into our wetsuits with the jeep doors open. I complained about the cold, as the wind pushed sand across the black top.

“Just got to get the blood flowing,” Dad said, and he lifted my arms by my wrists and twirled them in tight, little circles.

“Come on, like this,” he said, and he jogged in place with his knees coming high up above his waist, my wrists still in his hands. Sometimes he even did a lap around the jeep and made me follow suit, knowing my brother would be the one to say no.

Then, we dragged our boards across the beach, leaving swirls on the sand that was smooth and untracked, like a layer of fresh snow. The water looked green in the light, then black against the clouds, and the saltwater breeze bit at my nose and cheeks. I whined and stopped walking and needed to be coaxed into carrying on.

Sometimes I didn't even go in the water at all. I sat back on the sand and sulked, or I took the wax to my board until it was caked with the yellow goop so there was almost none left for anyone else. On those trips, Dad came in from the surf and pointed to my board. He said, “I think you might need a wax,” and there was something mean in his eyes. Disbelief that I was his son, maybe. Or disbelief that I was anyone's son.

But we got to the water, our ankles freezing in the receding tide, and Dad dove in under the first wave. The seagulls were still hunched into their wings, their heads tucked down against the wind, and I stood at the lip of the ocean, squeezing clumps of wet sand between my toes.

“You first,” my brother said, a little mustache sprouting above his lip.

I tried to push him under, but he was six inches taller than me and almost forty pounds heavier, so he flung me off into the water without needing to move his feet.

Out on the ocean, it was mostly sitting and waiting, our legs dangling off our boards and disappearing into the black water. I always hated not being able to see what was swimming underneath us. Even in backyard pools, I would panic at the thought of something lurking below me, my body left slow and helpless by the water. So I just laid flat on the board and waited for waves that way. It wasn't like I could stand, anyway. I just rode the small waves back to shore with my body still parallel to the board, as Dad watched my brother fall off again and again.

My brother got frustrated and wanted to quit, which he would in a few years time.

"I can't do it," he yelled over the hiss of crashing waves. His voice cracked from both the throes of puberty and the cold of the water. His board was bobbing behind him—attached at the ankle—as he swam back from the recent fall.

"The key is to try to stand for the *whole* wave," Dad said. "Not just the first two seconds."

My brother climbed back on his board and glared at him.

"You know, standing?" Dad asked. "With your feet?" He pointed to the soles of his feet, which were pointed up in the air, purple with cold.

Then he paddled to my brother and mimed the proper way to lift onto the board. "The beginning is everything," he said, "one fluid motion." And he gently pressed his chest off the board. "Get your balance and just ride it out," he said, kneeling on the board, arms outstretched like wings.

He put a hand on my brother's shoulder, told him to relax, that's all. "Just relax," he said, squeezing and releasing the back of my brother's neck, like kneading dough, but my brother slapped his hand away.

Another wave came, curling up in the early morning light, and my brother fell again, then again, and I paddled back out from the shallow wake.

The sun was more up than not at this point, but a blanket of thick clouds was moving across the sky.

Dad told us that now it was his turn to catch one, and he paddled way out, where the waves were huge and rolling, black like the backs of mythical beasts. I kept thinking the sea would open up all of sudden, revealing teeth, huge and gleaming, that would swallow Dad whole. But he disappeared slowly, instead, gradually, paddling further and further out, until he became a dot in the endless rise and fall of the ocean.

We bobbed in the water and I started to shiver.

“What if one of us drowned?” my brother said. “What the hell is he doing?”

On the way to the water, a sign always warned in bright red letters, “No Lifeguards on Duty Swim at Own Risk.”

“He’s just trying to catch a big one,” I said, and my brother rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, something that’ll take him halfway to England.”

It got to the point where we couldn’t see him at all, and I wondered if he was coming back or if this really was his way of escaping, lost at sea and martyred, like in some dumb fisherman’s tale. They’d create a bust of bronze for him and place it at the head of the beach, citing his bravery at taking on the vast ocean with nothing but a slice of fiberglass and his indomitable spirit, neglecting to mention the part where he left his two sons alone to fend for themselves.

But it wouldn't be the first time. Most nights, Dad passed out on the front porch or came home early in the morning, just as we were getting up for school. Or, sometimes, at night, he crawled up the stairs on all fours, like a child, as we sat at the top step and watched him struggle, like something out of a horror movie, something made of scale and slime. This happened so often that I grew up thinking that there was something about the night, about the dark sky, that brought my father to his knees, as if he were marked from birth. And I often wondered, sitting up in bed, if he had passed it along to us, if, as adults, we'd be forced to crawl our way through one prolonged night.

By the time Dad got back from the deep, we were sitting on the sand with our boards stabbed into the beach behind us, wobbling in the ocean breeze. We had our arms wrapped around our knees, skin turning blue in the cold, and there was this look on Dad's face when he padded across the sand, like something electric had been run through his limbs.

"You see it?" he asked, punching my older brother on the shoulder. A little too hard for playfulness, but not quite enough to hurt him. "Fifteen feet. Easy."

"Missed it," my brother said. "I was too busy getting frost bite on my toes."

Dad put his hands out, proclaiming innocence, but my brother grabbed his board and dragged it back to the car. Dad looked at me, and I shrugged and did the same as my brother, my staged anger just a knock-off version of his.

In the car ride home, Dad said, "Oh come on, guys. Don't be like that," and his eyes flashed in his mirror to look back at me.

His eyes found mine, and I held them for a second, searching, but then pretended that I didn't notice. Instead, I looked out the window at the dunes of grey sand speckled with yellow grass.

"How about pizza?" he said, looking over at my brother in the front seat. But he, too, had his eyes fixed on something out the window. A rabbit maybe, or some other rare sign of life.

Dad's voice started to get panicky at that point, the way it always did the morning after, his eyes pleading and desperate.

"Since when is catching a wave a mortal offense?" he said to the silent car.

I didn't know what a "mortal offense" was, so I thought of *Mortal Kombat* instead, of hearts being ripped from chests and rib cages pried open by spears.

"I catch one wave," Dad said, "and it's like a killed the fucking dog."

The rest of the drive home was quiet.

The only nights Dad didn't go out were Sundays, surfing days, but when we got home that day, he told us that he was going back to the beach to surf with guys from work.

"That means he's out drinking," my brother said, but I tried not to listen to him. Drinking was still such a mysterious thing to me then, magical almost. I wasn't convinced that it existed. This thing that could bring a grown man down to his hands and knees. I was sure that it was something else, something more powerful than liquid sealed in a bottle, something outside of Dad's control that made him crawl up the carpeted steps like a roach through the dark house.

That night, I sat on my bed and stayed awake as long as I could and waited for the Jeep to pull back into the driveway, headlights flashing in the window. But the hours rolled by, and sleep started to coax my eyes shut.

When I woke up the next morning, Dad still had yet to come home. I could feel his absence in the house, like something light and hollowed out, and for a minute, I thought he was dead, thought someone would find his bloated body on the shore of a faraway beach, like a piece of waterlogged driftwood or a forgotten shoe.

This wasn't the first time he didn't make it back by morning, though, so my brother made us cold sandwiches with wet ham from plastic containers. He wrapped them in a loose paper towel, handed me mine without speaking, and we went and stood at the bus stop on the corner, the cold breeze waking me up the second it touched my skin. I hadn't showered, so my hair was crunchy and dry and I could feel sand between my toes.

Even though Dad didn't come that night, didn't poke his head in the door to check on us, I have the distinct memory, even now, of waking in his arms. His hands were rough, the smell of the ocean on his neck and face as he tucked my head against his collar bone.

"How were the waves?" I remember asking, drunk with sleep.

I remember him rocking me, then, still his baby boy.

"Huge," he said. "Bigger than you could imagine."

"How big?" I whispered into his neck, his stubble scraping against my cheek.

"So big that it looked like they might swallow the sky," he said.

I lifted my head and looked at the moon reflecting in his eyes, trying to see if he was being his usually sarcastic self, but his face was sincere, more genuine than I'd ever seen it during the day.

"And you made it out OK?" I said. "You didn't get hurt?" I checked his arms and chest for ocean wounds, for shark bites or bones broken by the crashing tide.

He put his hand on the back of my head and pressed my face back into his shirt, which smelled like him and him alone.

He shushed me and told me not to ever worry about him.

“Go back to sleep,” I heard him say. “I’m fine.”

I felt his calloused fingers scrape through my hair, and I saw him at the top of a colossal wave riding out toward the ocean. His white board gleamed in the moonlight, and the shore receded in the distance behind him, the jeep a green dot against the long stretch of beach, like a distant memory.

“I’m here,” he said, and I felt the words vibrate in his chest. “I’m not going anywhere.”

NEIGHBORS

Jason thinks the house he and Christine bought—the newest on the block—is perfect. The house is two-storied and concrete and painted a utilitarian grey. In their new home, they can look down onto the roofs of the old bungalows that line the street, making the little houses look childish and weak, with their bright paint and wooden frames.

The one thing Jason hadn't noticed, however, was the man next door. Or his dogs. The realtor—fucking Amar—must have ferried the man inside during the showings or paid him off to stay away because Jason hadn't noticed him until he and Christine were already moving in.

The man is older, with long, sagging jowls, and he sits on his porch steps all morning and night. He also lets his two Chihuahuas wander all over Jason and Christine's yard. One of them is young and vibrant, his coat full of shine, while the other has a milky eye and an egg-plant-like growth on his stomach almost equal to the size of the dog himself. And Jason hates them both equally. They bark at him when he goes to the car or tries to grab the mail, like he's invading *their* space.

The man isn't the most neighborly person himself, either. Today, when Jason waves hello on his way inside after work, he grunts and does a slow eyebrow raise, the absolute minimum expended energy.

"I don't think he likes me," Jason says to Christine on his way into the kitchen.

Christine combs through the flyer of a supermarket they never go to. "Can you blame him?" she says.

"Hilarious."

Christine had wanted a different house, a little bungalow like the ones on this street. Of course she did. The one that Amar showed them was on the other side of town, too, in the trendier neighborhood, an area that is still, in Amar's words, "transitioning," which Jason knew just meant that there was a higher probability of murder. The house had cracks in the walls, old pipes, and the whole structure tilted to the left like it might break free from its foundation at a moment's notice. And Christine had loved it all.

Jason pinches back two blinds on the side window and looks at the man sitting on his porch steps.

"Who doesn't like you?" Christine eventually asks. She sits at the kitchen island, her elbows sliding away from her on the marble countertops.

"The old man next door."

"Oh yeah," she says. "He seems like a real charmer."

"He was conveniently absent when we came to see the house," Jason says. "And now a day hasn't gone by when I haven't seen him."

"Ben and Jerry's is buy one get one free," Christine says, licking her fingers to turn the page.

"Fucking Amar."

At the bungalow, Christine cooed at the black and white tiled kitchen floor, the baby blue bathroom walls, all the tall windows that lined the living room and kitchen. Amar had said, "You won't find charm like this in a new house," and it was like he and Christine had taken sides against Jason.

Outside, the old man has a mint green beanie on despite the heat, and he stares off somewhere into the middle distance. Even though it's March, he still has some wooden reindeer struggling to pull Santa's sleigh on his front lawn.

"I should say something to him," Jason says. "Shouldn't I? Shouldn't I say something to him?"

Christine squints out the window again. She is in her work clothes, a green polyester polo and black slacks, face oily from the day's heat. She manages volunteers at the local food bank, spending most of her day in the warehouse, so she always comes home exhausted, glazed with sweat.

"And say what exactly?" she says.

Christine had wanted something "homier," something that radiated warmth, but practicality had won out, though Jason's not sure why he had fought so hard for it. What, exactly, were they planning for? They weren't married, and they had never seriously dealt with the fact that Jason wanted at least two kids and Christine wasn't sure if she wanted any. But Christine put a little porcelain Buddha out front to add a flair of hominess, and this, to Jason, was their version of a compromise.

Jason opens the giant fridge that came with the house and looks at the empty shelves, not sure what he was expecting to find. When he closes the fridge, the screen on the front tells him the week's forecast. Expect heat.

"I just think it's rude," he says. "Isn't it rude? Letting his dogs wander all over our yard like that? I mean, we have certain rights as homeowners, don't we? Homeowner's rights? That's a thing, isn't it?"

Christine turns passed a page of sales on packaged meat and cheese, then turns back again. She always combs through supermarket flyers to see what will be donated to the food bank in the coming days. Powdered mashed potatoes, cans of beans, a couple loaves of bakery bread.

“Well, that would apply to him, too, then. Wouldn’t it?” she says.” He was here before we were. Maybe the old neighbors like the Yorkies.”

“They’re Chihuahuas,” Jason says.

“*Oh*,” Christine says, tearing out a coupon for Greek yogurt. “Never mind, then. Nobody likes Chihuahuas.”

#

There was no one thing, no inciting incident, that left Jason and Christine this way, and that almost surely makes it worse. Jason wishes something big had happened, something definitive. An affair or a life-threatening disease. Something that would have made one of them act and figure out what they actually felt.

But they simply became inured to each other’s company, bored. They even listened to *This American Life* during dinner because what was left to say after five years together? And when they did speak, they repeated themselves. Jason would tell an anecdote from work as the two walked the streets and Christine would kindly let him finish before saying he’d already told her that.

“Really?” Jason said. “When?”

“Twice, actually,” Christine said, and a hefty silence would follow.

Though it's getting more difficult, now, Jason can still remember when they first started dating. Like most young couples, being around the other person had been thrilling enough. They would walk around antique shops, point at lizards in pet shop windows, stroll along the river until day turned dark. It didn't matter what they did. It was exciting enough to be around this other person, to pluck away at their exterior until they revealed their insides, pulsing and red. Christine had admitted to never seeing *The Big Lebowski*, and Jason to never seeing *The Princess Bride*, and both marveled at how such a person could exist in this world. Were there other adults so incomplete, so uninformed walking around like they had nothing to hide?

"I've also never read *Moby Dick*," Jason said. "Or *The Great Gatsby*."

But on that they agreed. They bonded over all the things they had not read. They watched movies in dark apartments as their hands explored a body previously unknown to them.

#

After work the next day, one of the dogs is in their driveway. It's the one with the milky eye and eggplant stomach, and he's staring down the grill of Jason's car, ready to fight for his land.

Jason lowers his window and waves at the old man on his steps. A wall of heat pours into the car.

"Think you could call your dog over?" Jason says, pointing at the dog in question.

The man puts his hand to his brow to block the sun. He's wearing his beanie, and he squints at Jason, then at the dog, then gives a little whistle. The dog hobbles over to the man, the growth on his stomach making him waddle.

Jason parks behind Christine's car, which still has a bumper sticker from the election the previous fall, the blue now faded and peeling at the edges.

Jason walks over to the man and introduces himself over the sound of the barking dogs.

"I'm Jason," he says, putting a hand out. "I don't think we've met."

The man squints at Jason's hand like it's a strange object he's never seen before. And when he does shake, he just lets his hand sit there, limp and cold like a dead fish.

"Stanley," he says. "I go by Stan."

There's trash spread across the porch behind Stanley. Newspapers, sandwich wrappers, and a lone can of store-brand chili. Through the window, the house looks dim, but Jason can make out the shadowed outline of bulky furniture, stacks of wilted boxes.

"Well, nice to meet you, Stan," Jason says turning to leave. "My wife's name is Christine by the way. I'm sure you've seen her around."

Christine and Jason aren't married, but sometimes he says they are to avoid additional explanation. But, if he's being honest with himself, there's probably something aspirational in it, too, as if saying it enough times will make it true.

Stan offers a little wave, then reaches down to give one of the dogs, the healthy one, a scratch just above his tail. The dog's body ripples with delight, his face forming something like a smile.

Inside, Christine unpacks plates and silverware in the living room. There are stacks of floral-patterned bowls and serving trays surrounding her, like the walls of a fort. The house is cool, if slightly antiseptic-feeling. On the T.V., *House Hunters International* is playing, and a couple is looking for a vacation home on a Greek island.

“Cable guy came?” Jason asks, looking for somewhere to put his keys.

“Just missed him,” Christine says. “He was a fantastic lay, though.” She swipes at her forehead in mock exhaustion.

She grabs a handful of knives from a box and places them on the fleshtone tile next to her.

“Why are you doing that out here?” Jason asks, nodding at the dinnerware.

“I didn’t feel like standing anymore,” she says. “My ankles were hurting.”

Christine sits with her legs crossed, lotus-style, and has already changed into yoga pants and a t-shirt. Her shirt says, *Peace & Love* and has a tie-dye Ringo holding up two fingers.

“Anyway, why not make this the kitchen?” she says, waving a theatrical hand through the air. “It’s not like we’d be sacrificing any of the place’s natural warmth.”

Jason sighs.

“Can you just try, please?” Jason says. “Just try. That’s all I’m asking.”

“Oh, I am trying,” she says, her tone more playful than bitter, now, though. Or at least, playful-bitter. “It’s just not going very well.”

Jason puts his keys down on the kitchen counter and sees Stan through the side window. The healthy dog, the one without the growth, is venturing to the other side of the street, now, one tentative stop at a time, like an astronaut exploring an unknown world.

“How’s your friend?” Christine says, watching Jason watch Stan.

“His name is Stanley,” Jason says. “But he goes by Stan.”

“Fascinating,” she says and turns back to the T.V. The couple in Greece are now not so sure which island they want to be on. In a private aside, the “realtor” tells the camera that she can’t believe what she’s hearing.

“I wonder if he’s lonely,” Jason says. “It’s kind of sad, isn’t it? Being alone like that all day? I think it’s sad.”

Christine drops a plate on the tile, but it doesn’t break. It just wobbles around like a top, clattering into the big, empty house.

“He’s got the Yorkies,” she says. “That’s something.”

Jason imagines living in this new house, their new house, alone. Would he get a dog to fill the quiet? To have someone to talk to when he gets home from work, the dogs nails clicking against the tile, like tap shoes?

“Chihuahua,” Jason says. “They’re Chihuahuas.”

#

When they first moved in together, they hated where they lived but enjoyed it anyway. This should have been the first sign. The apartment complex was awful. The super once had to spray human shit off the side of their sickly-yellow building.

“How do you know it’s *human* shit?” Jason had asked the man.

“You know it when you see it,” the super said, spraying the wall with a hose. “Something in your brain clicks. It goes, *Damn, that’s some human feces right there.*”

But Jason and Christine stayed up late at night and talked over the sound of their neighbor’s Reggaeton coming through the walls. They’d lay back on their mattress on the floor, put their feet on the walls, and talk. Who knew there was so much to say? Jason told her about

the time a horse head-butted him outside of Shea Stadium as a kid, and Christine told him about how she broke her wrist in the tunnels of Chuck E. Cheese's. Jason got cheated on in high school by a girl named Maria, and Christine ate lunch alone in the library well into her sophomore year. They talked about their parents—both their fathers were no longer in the equation—talked about friends they no longer knew. They talked until the music went quiet and their toes tingled, asking for blood.

Even food shopping was an adventure, then. Almost every night, they went to the local supermarket after work and walked the overlit aisles with their arms locked around each other's waists. They bought Newman's Own frozen pizzas and boxes of popcorn ("Because it's for a good cause,") and perused the craft beer section. (Every store, even gas stations, had craft beer these days.) Invariably, they got a six pack of a double-chocolate stout or something equally heavy and, if they were buy one get one free, two pints of Ben and Jerry's.

At check out the cashier, a pimpled kid with too much gel in his hair, said, "All you need is some Netflix, and you guys are set."

#

The next morning, Jason steps in dog shit on his way to the car. He and Christine leave for work at the same time, so she is directly behind Jason when it happens. He puts his arm out and holds her back as if she were approaching the edge of a steep cliff. She gasps, startled.

"What?" she says. "What's wrong?"

He holds his foot up, and they both look down. It's not a lot of shit, but it's wedged into the grooves of Jason's shoe.

Stan is on his porch, and he watches as the dog with the growth lifts his leg to pee on one of the wooden reindeer.

“At least he doesn’t have Great Danes,” Christine says, eyeing the small mound of shit.

Jason wipes his shoe on the grass, then checks the progress. Then he does the same on the cement of the driveway. It’s only eight-thirty, but he can already feel the sun baking on the back of his neck.

“Here,” he says, handing the keys to Christine because his car is blocking hers. “Just take mine. I have to use the hose, I think.”

She takes the loop of keys from his hand.

“Homeowners’ rights,” she says and nods over at Stan. “Now or never.”

On her way into the car the healthy dog skips over to Christine, and she bends to give him a scratch behind his ear. The dog leans into her hand and presses up against her pant leg, and Jason does everything in his power not to walk over and punt the little dog across the lawn.

“He’s cute,” she says to Stan, waving a little, and Stan purses his lips, nods.

Christine backs out of the driveway, and Stan and the dogs and Jason turn their heads to watch her go.

Jason walks over to Stan’s porch.

“Morning Jim,” Stan says, squinting.

“Jason,” he says. “It’s Jason.”

The dog with the growth is riggling in the grass, while the other stands by the lip of the street, tempting fate.

“I just stepped in your dog’s poop,” Jason says, lifting his shoe. “I was on my way to work.”

“What do you do for a living?” Stan says.

“Not the point, Stan.”

Stan squints at the shit wedged into the grooves of Jason’s shoe, like he’s trying to solve a riddle, his face leaning in close, too close.

“You’re sure it’s theirs,” Stan says. “Plenty of dogs come down this street.”

Jason can’t tell if the old man is smirking, fucking with him, or if he’s still squinting from the sun.

“Can’t you just put them on a leash?” Jason says. “Or get one of those collars?” He brings his hand to his throat. “We don’t appreciate them walking all over our lawn anyway. Shit or no shit.”

“We?”

“Christine and myself.” Jason waves at the street as if Christine were still there. “My wife?”

“I’ve always liked the name Josephine,” Stan says, turning his head away. He looks toward the old dog who has stopped squirming in the grass but is still on his back, eyes wild with delight.

“*Christine*,” Jason says, almost certain that Stan is now fucking with him. “Her name is Christine.”

Stan brings his eyes up to the empty lot across the street. A realtor’s sign is stabbed into the grass, reading, “We don’t find houses. We find *homes*.”

“Another new house,” Stan says bitterly, as if Jason doesn’t own the new house next door.

“In the empty lot, there are tire marks ripping through the uncut grass, revealing mud, and *SOLD* is stamped across the realtor’s face.

“Can you just put them on a leash?” Jason says, turning to leave. “Please?”

“Jason and Christine,” Stan says, still staring across the street. “Been married long?”

But Jason gives up and turns to leave. He looks inside Stan’s window on his way back to his own driveway, though. The boxes and hulking furniture almost look like people gathered around the old man’s living room. Jason wonders if, at night, Stan turns off the lights and imagines that there are people in his home, friends and distant family, all there to spend time with him. Who, other than Christine, would come see Jason if he were to live alone? His brother, maybe? His mom who lives two states over?

#

After a year of living together is when things started to go south. Jason felt a low-grade anxiety whenever he was in the apartment, like something hid under the white kitchen tile and beige-carpeted halls. He and Christine would fight about dishes, about hair left in sinks, about how dirt could possibly get on bedroom walls.

“It’s from our feet,” Christine said, placing her foot within the footprint on the wall.

At some point, for Jason, it extended beyond the apartment and became about the neighborhood, too. Most nights, he and Christine walked around the street, running their hands along chain-linked fences. The distance of the walks kept growing, though. They’d make random left turns down streets they didn’t know. They walked until their shoes pinched their pinky toes

and made their skin bubble and bleed the following day, like their feet had been held over fire. They walked until the streets were fresh, until they no longer recognized where they were. They walked along the river, down where cars were worth houses and houses were worth small city blocks. Christine always liked the more modest houses, of course, single-story bungalows swamped with giant leaves and tall, knuckled oak trees—siding the color of fresh pine needles. Jason’s eyes would seek the for sale signs stabbed into the otherwise immaculate laws.

At night, he combed through listings on Zillow, turned his phone to Christine in bed, the blue glow making her look underwater. He made lists and called banks to get an estimate on a loan. He put a dishwasher down as non-negotiable.

“Somewhere with a yard,” he said, “and a porch. I want to have space to walk around.” He held his arms out to demonstrate his need for space. “Definitely something with more space.”

Why did he want more space, though? Did he really think that he felt trapped by the size of their apartment? He pictured their kids running through their backyard grass, but he never seriously thought that was what he was planning for. Did he?

A backyard went on the list, a porch—front and back, preferably.

Jason’s list kept growing with some additions from Christine: hardwood floors, a gas stove, barn-style doors on the bedroom closets.

Eventually, Amar, the realtor, was brought into the equation. He told them they would have to compromise. He said their expectations would have to be adjusted.

#

That night in bed, Jason stares at the high, arched ceiling. The ceiling is completely dark, so the walls appear to fall off at a certain point, like a starless wash of night.

“How was work?” Jason says.

He puts his hand on Christine’s shoulder, but she slides out from underneath it. They haven’t had sex in months, but this has nothing to do with the house.

“You already asked me that,” she says. “At dinner.”

Jason finds her hand under the covers and laces his fingers through hers. This she lets him do.

“Really?” he asks. “What’d you say?”

“I said it was fine,” she says, her shrug making the bed sheets *swish*.

“Well, that’s good.”

“Mhm.”

Orange light from the street slants through the blinds, tiger-striping the carpet.

“What are you going to do about the old guy?” she says.

“Stan?”

Christine pauses, and this means she’s trying not to say the first thing, the sarcastic thing, that popped in her head.

“Yes,” she says. “The only old man that lives next to us.”

Even though the house is empty other than the two of them, they talk in whispers.

“I don’t know,” Jason says. “I said something to him this morning, but he seemed sort of out of it.”

“Mhm.”

“I’m not sure he’s all there,” he says.

“Mhm.”

“Like, mentally.”

“Mhm,” she says, and her voice is dreamy with sleep.

Christine is fighting to keep her eyelids open, like they are hung with weights, and she is losing. Her mouth hangs open as if mid-sleep.

Maybe they’re just tired. Maybe they need to take a trip somewhere. When was the last time they took a trip? A year ago? Was it Atlanta or Nashville? South Carolina? They should go somewhere in the mountains, a place where the leaves and temperature actually reflect the passage of months and weeks. Somewhere they can look down from on high and make a comment about how everyone looks like ants from up here.

“I’m unhappy, too,” Jason says. “I don’t know what we’re doing here,” he adds, not sure if he means here in this house or here with her.

There’s a long pause, and the central air clicks on with a breathy exhalation.

“Mhm,” she says, almost like a gurgle, and he can feel the quiet of the whole house when the central clicks back off. In the kitchen, in the two and a half bathrooms, in the spacious den they’ll never use. Did he actually think two people could fill so much space? Was this his way of introducing the prospect of children, of little bodies to warm the home?

Amar had said that it was a perfect home for a young couple looking to start a family. They were standing in the empty living room, then, their realtor’s voice echoing in the hollow house. Jason felt his stomach drop out when Amar said this, and he and Christine exchanged looks. There was something mutual about the look they exchanged, though Jason, even now, doesn’t want to admit it. It was something that lurked beneath the surface before but was being thrust into the open air. Something like, “Have kids with *this* person?”

Now that they're in the house, living here, it's like that look announces itself in the cold concrete walls and wide sweep of backyard, in the fashionable kitchen fixtures and extra bedrooms sitting unfurnished.

"I don't know if we're going to make it," Jason says.

But Christine doesn't reply. The words hang in the half-dark house.

She is asleep. She must be. He can see it in her face, in the way her cheek caves into the pillow, that she is already lost in sleep. Her hand is still in his, though, and her fingers twitch with dreams, dreams he hopes, selfishly he is still a part of.

#

When he runs over the dog the next morning, Jason tells himself it's an accident even though he knows it's not. He hears it before he sees it, the awful yelp and liquid crunch. At first, he tells himself that it's just a recycling bin or the box of a recently purchased appliance. He lies to himself because who's to say that bone breaking—that life leaving a body—has its own particular sound?

Jason stops backing up and pulls forward. It's early still, the sun peeking over the roofs of other houses, but Stan is already on his feet. Jason gets out of the car, and Christine joins him. He wonders if she heard the sound, too, but her face tells it all, her eyes alight with something primal.

Jason goes to the edge of the driveway and sees the dog. He is panting, eyes more white than not, and his back legs are folded underneath him. It doesn't seem like he can move. Jason feels his stomach disappear, like a thought in the night.

Stan is standing over the dog, and the other Chihuahua, with its milky-eye and stomach like a fallen moon, is watching at Stan's feet. Of course, Jason hit the healthy one.

"I am *so* sorry," Jason thinks, but the words feel cheap and false even before they leave his mouth. Is he even sorry?

Stan slides the beanie off his head and slaps it against his thigh. Jason turns to Christine because he doesn't want to know if the old man is going to cry.

"Should we call somebody?" Christine says, her voice quiet and far-away.

The injured dog is taking long, heaving breaths, while his partner-in-arms stares on obliviously, tail gently wagging. Despite his broken body, the fallen dog's coat gleams a coffee-brown in the morning light.

"I could drive him somewhere," Jason says, still eyeing Christine. "To the animal hospital? If you could move him?"

Stan looks down at the dog, his little body melting into the pavement. Jason pictures the old man whispering in his empty house, draping a sheet over boxes to create the illusion of life. What would Jason say if he was left alone? What regrets would he whisper into the ear of an uninterested Chihuahua?

"Stan?" Jason says. "What do you want to do?"

Christine puts a hand on Jason's back. She balls his shirt up in her fist, and something about her touch, about the way she clings to him, makes him think everything might turn out fine.

"We can get him to the hospital," Jason says. "They'll be able to help."

But they all know what would happen then, because who hasn't had a dead or dying pet on their hands? The vet will bring the little dog out, cocooned in a white towel, eyes like wet blueberries, and she'll tell Stan there is nothing they can do. Jason will pay the bill in an attempt to seem neighborly, in an attempt to make it seem like he's sorry.

"Let's at least try," Christine says, and they do.

Stan scoops the dog into his arms, holding the back of its head like a newborn's. The little dog snarls, bearing his teeth, but he doesn't seem to have the energy to bite. Stan lays the dog across his lap in the backseat of Jason's car, its body a bag of loose meat, and they back out onto the street.

In the rearview, Jason sees the house, grey and looming, but he also sees the other dog, the one he meant to hit. The dog follows the car with his one good eye, marooned on the lawn, and Jason wonders what Stan will do when this dog dies. Who will he fill the silence with, then? The dog stands among the wooden reindeer, and watches as the car leaves. Christine puts her hand on Jason's leg, and the dog watches as the only world he's ever known rolls down the street.

ASSISTED LIVING

At her last visit of the day, Caroline loses the dog. She's on Beth and Jim's—her customers—back porch, reclined in a deck chair. She must have fallen asleep in the Tampa warm, lulled by the chatter of cicadas. Inside, Ramshackle, that old Jack Russell, is no longer scooting his butt along the rug.

Caroline fed fifteen different cats already that day. She walked seven dogs, gave a cockatoo a flu shot. She dumped crickets into several lizard tanks and gave a hamster named Gerald a bath. She scooped an animal kingdom's worth of poop. Her day started at five-thirty because a certain dog was on a "pee schedule." By noon, Caroline was nodding off at the wheel.

When Caroline got to Beth and Jim's around eight, the dog was making circles. His back legs made a V in front of him, like he was sledding down some steep hill. She thought he'd gotten into something. Sometimes, he'd eat toilet paper and old tissues and Q-tips, then shit them out the next day. Once, he had a tampon string hanging from his ass. He looked like a wind-up doll. Caroline had pinched that string and pulled, eventually, felt the tampon slide out from the dog with any last shred of pride she had left.

Now, Caroline moves toward the sound of the doorbell. She scans the living room for the dog—yellow-lit wood floors, a brown sectional, a two-armed pillow that embraced you from behind, a Wii below a TV that can play movies, access Facebook. The screensaver is of mountains, then a hammock strung between palm trees, then the Colorado River. She checks the kitchen, decorated with old Guinness cartoons and novelty-sized bottle openers. Above the fridge is a kit for home-brewing. She opens the pantry, hoping to find the dog on his back in a puddle of bacon twists. But no luck.

The doorbell rings again.

Caroline moves to the front door, opens it hoping to see Ramshackle swaddled in the arms of a good samaritan. But it's just Greg, her husband.

He looks haunted in the porch light, skin pale, eyes retracted into skull. He's leaning over a bush, pinching a leaf between forefinger and thumb. He smells his fingers. He's in his blue coveralls from work. *Jeff* is written in script over his breast pocket because Brookdale never gave Greg a shirt of his own. Greg's a maintenance man at an assisted living facility. He fixes the air-conditioning and the lights and the reclining chairs in the residents' rooms. He takes out the trash. When he and Caroline met just after college, he wanted to be a writer and she a musician. Their current jobs were supposed to be temporary, that's what they said. Just to pay the bills. Just to keep the lights on. But now she can't remember a time before them.

When he sees Caroline, he shakes his head.

"I called and called." He wags his phone at her. "I thought you got in a wreck. Fell asleep at the wheel."

Caroline pulls her phone from her pocket, sees all the missed calls from her husband.

"I fell asleep." She points a thumb back inside, and looks over Greg's shoulder, scans the yard. "And now the fucking dog is gone." She pictures Ramshackle, hair like a grill cleaner, nodules of skin pimples across his torso, she pictures him flattened on a nearby street, legs still twitching.

The bushes rustle by the front steps, and Caroline and her husband freeze. Caroline puts a finger to her lips and holds a hand out to say, *Be still*. Greg takes a step toward the sound, and an orange cat splits the bushes, gallops down by the moon-rippled retention pond.

“Why’d you move?” she says. “I said don’t move.”

“It was a cat,” Greg says. “And you didn’t say anything.”

Caroline lets her cheeks balloon with air, then exhales. They step inside, stand in the darkened kitchen. Greg lifts a mason jar. *YEAST* is marked across the side.

Caroline and Greg went to dinner with Beth and Jim once, at a brew pub. Jim kept talking about the types of malts in his nitro stout. “You can really taste the chocolate,” he kept saying, offering his glass to Caroline. It was then that Caroline remembered these people—the ones paying her, the ones with a house all their own—were much younger than her and Greg’s thirty-three. Beth works in advertising, and her last big campaign was for an organic toothpaste that you can swallow. She works downtown, in one of those giant crescents of glass and steel that look over the river. She’s twenty-four. Jim does something with computers. Whenever he talks about it, though, Caroline feels like she’s in high school chemistry, trying to focus while Mr. Aronauty explains the molecular structure of salt.

“How do you lose a fifteen-year-old dog, by the way?” Greg says. “How’s that even possible?”

Greg picks up the note from Beth and Jim. He reads, then turns it over. Then reads the front again. Tropical birds flit in the margins.

“They’re always going *somewhere*.” He shakes the paper at Caroline. “Where is it now?”

“Not now, please,” Caroline says. She blows a loose hair from her eyes.

Caroline grabs the bacon twists from the pantry. A Golden Retriever gives her a thumbs up from the bag. She shakes the treats and scans the empty home, yellow and shadowed from the

one corner lamp. The rug is dog-haired and slightly crooked. A sign on the wall reads, *God, Family, Beer: Order May Vary.*

Caroline goes down the hall, and Greg follows.

In Beth and Jim's room, Caroline drops to a push-up position and lifts the bed's skirt. She squints, but can only see little mounds of shadow in the dark.

She's about to ask Greg for a flashlight, but he's already patting his pockets. He raises his phone, pushes a button on the screen, then crouches next to Caroline. He puts a hand on her back to balance and sweeps the light under the bed.

There's just a hand vacuum and some speakers turned on their side and a stuffed monkey missing an eyeball and several limbs. But no dog.

So they check the closet. Caroline pushes aside yellow-flowered sundresses and vintage jeans. Flared ends are back in. She squints passed high-top sneakers and ergonomic wedges. Next, the bathroom. They look under the marble vanity and open the glass shower, peer below the showerhead with a massage setting. Greg smells fluffy white towels in the closet. They check the laundry room off the hall. They look behind baskets, and Caroline peaks behind the mammoth dryer. They check the guest bedroom, with its hotel-crisp sheets and maroon wallpaper.

Last, they check the office, or "chill" room, as Beth and Jim call it, with its stacks of vinyl and acoustic guitars. Caroline looks under the desk, behind the leather couch. But still, no sign of Ramshackle.

"I'm fucked," Caroline says, and plants in her face into her hands. "Correction: *We're* fucked."

She raises her head and looks at the Martin on the wall. The dark wood and pearl inlays glisten in the lamplight. She doesn't even think Beth or Jim play, but that guitar is at least three thousand dollars. Six months ago, Caroline had to sell her guitar on Craigslist because the A/C in her Hyundai broke. Some guy named Derek came and bought it from her. His email was BigBoi5460. Now, she has to play at guitar stores, has to listen to sandaled white guys fumble through "Fire and Rain."

Greg sits next to her and the couch exhales with his weight. He puts a hand on her knee and squeezes. Greg smiles, but Caroline can see the worry on his face. His job wouldn't be enough to cover rent, she knows he thinks but doesn't say. They better find this fucking dog that look says.

"I can't do it anymore," she says. "What if he's dead?"

Caroline liked her job until she had a rabbit die on her. She liked all the dogs excited to see her, tails like swinging fish hooks. She could listen to Joni Mitchell and John Fahey as she drove from house to house. But then she found that rabbit. A little ball of white sprawled among some hay. She shook the cage, tapped a finger on the metal. She called the rabbit's name, which was Petey. The rabbit didn't move. When Caroline told the owner the news, the woman squinted as if Caroline had personally strangled the bunny. She asked what Caroline fed the rabbit. She asked if Caroline shook the cage, if she left Petey in a hot car. She withheld pay.

"He's old." Greg squeezes her shoulder. "He couldn't have gotten that far."

"I know the dog is old. I've watched him a thousand times."

"Well, where is he then?" Greg says.

Caroline rubs her temples, takes another breath. She needles at her lower back, which is sore from the plastic deck chair. On the porch earlier, Caroline fell asleep to thoughts of her own home. The other night their landlord, Hank, came when she and Greg were having dinner. Hank said the folks downstairs complained about a leak. So he went to the bathroom, and Greg and Caroline tried to get back to their food. But Hank kept talking. So Caroline stood in the bathroom as Hank bent over the tub and told her about his grandson with a heart condition. He showed her a picture of the kid on his phone. The screen was cracked so the boy's face was split between shards of glass. Clear tubes were stuck in the boy's chest and neck and mouth. Hank teared up, and Caroline wanted to shove the man into the tub for her own swelling dread. It wasn't fair for this stranger to force his emotions on her. People who own homes can shut their door to the world, while she had this crying man's life to deal with, too.

"Let's keep looking," Caroline says to her husband, without looking at him. "Please."

#

Back on the porch, Caroline walks to the railing and peers into the yard. She shakes the bag of bacon treats. The porch is raised about four feet from the ground, so the grass is black. The bright porch light makes the yard seem darker. Their backyard at home is a shared slab of concrete, about six feet wide. Greg and Caroline live in the top floor of an old house. An older couple lives below them. Outside, there's a white plastic table from Kmart with a big green stain and plastic chairs. This seems like a football field in comparison, an estate.

On the porch, she looks behind her, and Greg lifts a ceramic turtle. Dirt sprinkles from the bottom, and he bends to look below it.

"Can I have the flashlight?" she says. "I need to check the yard."

“I’ll hold it.”

“Give me the flashlight, Greg.”

He holds his phone up, presses a finger to the screen. Light shines into her face, and she snatches the phone from his hand.

“Can he even get down these steps?” Greg says, as they move down to the grass. “What’s his name again?”

Caroline blinks a few times, tries to get the white dots in her vision to fade. Greg checks one side of the yard, Caroline the other. She stands barefoot in the grass. She shines the flashlight across the yard, like a lighthouse signaling to wayward dogs. There are some potted tomato plants and aloe vera lining the fence, and she shines the light behind the clay pots.

“He over there?” Greg says. “See him?”

Caroline turns, and her husband’s bent behind a shrub.

“Shut *up*, please,” she says. “He won’t come out if you don’t be quiet.”

She runs the flashlight along the fence, which is old and wooden and chipped at its triangular tops. There’s a coiled garden hose that makes Caroline jump and a weed-wacker leaned against the house siding. A pair of gardening gloves, fingers stained brown, sit in the dirt below a sign that reads, *Where there's a garden, there's a home*.

Caroline is about to turn back when she sees something near the side of the house. The fence has a hole, a big gaping mouth. Some of the boards are broken off below the knee. Caroline bends and shines the flashlight through the hole, and there’s the street and the other houses and the whole sprawling world.

“Fucking great,” she says.

“Do you see him?” Greg’s making his way across the grass.

“There’s a goddamn hole.” Caroline stands and shines the light toward the fence.

Greg squints in the dark. He puts his hands on his hips.

“You think he could fit through that?”

Caroline gets on all fours and puts her shoulders through the hole. She stands. She holds her palms out like, *Voila*. “A Great Dane could fit through that.”

Greg chews his lip, brushes a thumb across *Jeff*.

“They have guitars worth more than my car,” Caroline says, “and they can’t fix a fucking hole in their fence.”

She kicks one of the boards and the things snaps, plops down on the grass.

“And now we have to pay for *that*,” Greg says, pointing at the wood.

Caroline stares at the hole. She thinks of ways she’ll explain all this to Beth and Jim, but comes up empty.

“I’m going through,” she says, and gets back on her hands and knees. The grass is sharp against her feet and palms, as she crawls.

On the other side of the fence, Caroline walks toward the front lawn. She scans the flashlight along the house and onto the neighbor’s lawns. She peers behind the porch bushes, and the garage light clicks on. She kneels on an oil stain and looks under her and Greg’s car. She stands in the driveway, hands on hips, and her shadow stretches toward the road. Down the street, she sees all the porch swings and TV-lit windows and hibernating SUVs and thinks of all the years she said were the last year at this job. She played a few open mics here and there for a while, at coffee shops and bars. She’d show up to the bars smelling likes Golden Retriever and

gerbil and she'd struggle to keep her eyes open. People told her she had a beautiful voice. Strangers. They looked into their beers and lattes and asked if she recorded anything. They wanted to hear more of that voice, of her voice. She would soon, Caroline always told them. But at some point, that stopped, too. At some point, it just seemed irresponsible to sacrifice rest for a five minute spot at The Frisky Bagel or The Wounded Hound. She and Greg spend most nights at home, now, scrolling for a show to watch, listening to their neighbors whisper to each other in bed.

#

On way her into the backyard, Caroline sees Greg on the bottom porch step. His face melts into his palm, and he looks about to topple over with sleep. She feels guilty for keeping him out this late. He can't sleep without her anymore. At work a few months ago, he found a resident dead in her LaZboy. He went in to change a bulb. Greg told this to Caroline. They were on their shared slab of concrete, and the cicadas were singing. "She looked like she was sleeping," he said. "She looked like she was sleeping, except her skin was this blue and her eyes lay sort of open." He fluttered his eyelids, and Caroline said, "Please stop." They sat quietly. They didn't eat that night. They sat as the sky went dark and the couple beneath them opened and closed their kitchen cabinets. Their neighbors were looking for something. Maybe a trash bag or the last half of an onion. "I touched her wrist," Greg said. "I put a hand on her forehead. I don't know what I was doing." Caroline said, "Please stop." Her husband was crying and so was she. "I don't know what I was doing," he said, and she squeezed his wrist, locked his fingers with his because she didn't know what words would do. In bed that night, Greg held Caroline close, his forearms too tight around her chest, as if he were afraid she might leave in her sleep.

His head perks up when he sees Caroline come back through the hole in the fence.

“No luck?” he says, standing. He reaches for her hand, and she takes it.

“Nope.” Caroline scans the yard one more time. She turns the phone to the grass, but the flashlight’s off. She squints into all that dark. “We should wait for him to come back, though.”

She can tell that Greg’s about to protest, she sees it in her husband’s face.

“He’ll come home, eventually.” She points to the deck chairs. “We’ll wait out here.”

Caroline can see the words bubble behind her husband’s face, but he just raises his fist to stifle a yawn. Caroline’s about to cave, herself, actually. The thought of their little bed in their little room in their little house doesn’t seem so bad. The thirst for sleep can trump anything. Sometimes at night, in the dark before sleep, her husband’s arms covering her chest, sometimes she can convince herself that nothing matters beyond their bedroom door.

“All right, let’s wait,” he says. “But I’m sure he’s just next door or something. Maybe someone took him in.”

Caroline yawns as they walk across the yard to take the porch steps, and her husband puts an arm around her. She rubs her face on his shirt and smells citrus disinfectant and sweat and old lady perfume, like something her mother would wear.

“We should go somewhere,” Caroline says. “Aruba or Santo Domingo. Somewhere we don’t speak the language.”

Greg palms his left eye. He doesn’t say they can’t afford it, though she knows the thought emerged.

“Italy,” he says. “The Riviera.”

“We’ll drink wine and eat whole bowls of tomato sauce.”

“We’ll go to Florence, pretend we know about sculpture.”

“Let’s do it,” Carolina says. “I’m not kidding.”

She tugs her husband’s sleeve, but he’s looking into the house.

Caroline turns to see what he sees. They’re at the top porch step, and there’s the dog inside. He’s on the rug again, but he doesn’t move. There’s a dark cloud underneath Ramshackle, now, and Caroline’s been doing this long enough to know it’s pee. They watch the dog from the porch. He could be sleeping in the warm light of the house, taking a little nap. Maybe he’s dreaming of the worlds he’s yet to explore, all those dogs yet unsniffed.

Caroline looks in the house, the couch and the kitchen and all those fridge magnets holding wedding invitations and birthday cards. Beth’s sister is getting married, she remembers. That’s where they are. She’s marrying some financial advisor in the woods. There’ll be lights strung through the trees, and one groomsmen will sleep in a patch of poison ivy.

“Maybe he’s sleeping,” Caroline says.

They watch the dog, and the dog doesn’t move.

“Fifteen’s real old.” Greg touches her elbow, palms it.

“He might be sleeping,” Caroline says.

“We should call them.”

“Go check if he’s sleeping,” she says.

In the porch light, her husband’s cheekbones seem like they might break skin, like his flesh has been scooped out. In certain light, she has to look twice to make sure it’s him. They met on Greg’s lunch hour last week, and she walked right by his table. “Caroline,” he said, waving

from a booth. “Sweetie, over here,” he said, and she turned, but it didn’t click right away. She read his blue shirt and thought, *Do I know an old janitor named Jeff?*

“Go check,” Caroline says. “Please.” She pushes her husband’s shoulder toward the door.

Caroline waits on the porch, as her husband stands over the dog. He bends down, puts a hand to Ramshackle’s belly. He lifts the dog’s paw, let’s it fall. Lifts the paw, let’s it fall. He puts a finger to Ramshackle’s nose

Caroline already knows the dog is dead. She knows even before her husband, bending over Ramshackle’s body, purses his lips like a doctor giving bad news, before he shakes his head, like they’re in some movie. She knows he’s dead, and all she can think about is that hole in the fence. The whole orange-lit world unfurled from that hole, telephone poles and fire hydrants and all the world’s cats. But they find the dog on the rug, where it all started, in the only home he’s ever known.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

Acampora, Lauren. *The Wonder Garden*.

Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

Antrim, Donald. *The Verificationist*.

Ball, Jesse. *A Cure for Suicide*.

Barrodale, Amie. *You Are Having a Good Time*.

Cunningham, Michael. *The Hours*.

Danticat, Edwidge. *The Dew Breaker*.

DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*.

Diaz, Junot. *Drown*.

Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

Groff, Lauren. *Florida*.

Houston, Pam. *Waltzing the Cat*.

Johnson, Adam. *Fortune Smiles*.

Johnston, Bret Anthony. *Corpus Christi*.

Link, Kelly. *Get in Trouble*.

Lipsyte, Sam. *Fun Parts*.

Menendez, Ana. *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd*

Miller, Mary. *The Last Days of California*.

Moore, Lorrie. *Birds of America*.

Moshfegh, Ottessa. *Homesick for Another World*.

Munro, Alice. *Runaway*.

Packer, ZZ. *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*

Russell, Karen. *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*.

Saunders, George. *Tenth of December*.

Sharma, Akhil. *A Life of Adventure and Delight*

Sittenfeld, Curtis. *You Think It, I'll Say It*.

Smith, Zadie. *NW*.

Strout, Elizabeth. *Olive Kitteridge*.

Unferth, Deb Olin. *Wait Till You See Me Dance*.

Ward, Jesmyn. *Salvage the Bones*.