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The Little Things

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Abstract

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Each short story encompasses some sort of loss or disconnection, whether it is made physical—like the death of a family member or an unwanted divorce—or made emotional, such as the loss of innocence or fear or love or confidence. Each character is different in his or her tendencies and therefore experiences different ways of dealing with loss. The collection will show that no matter how severe a character's loss may be, everyone has something to lose. Sometimes, the loss is positive and is a loss of a burden, but other times it is a loss that is negative and the character sinks deep in its waters. As the characters in each of the stories unfold, the idea of loss—and rising above such loss—is explored.

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Like Stars

It's Saturday, the wife's away, and soon they'll divorce. Mike knows it. He flips four burgers. Grease falls and flames flare up, heating his face. His beer is warm and bitter. He sips the rest while eyeing the kids in the pool.

Jenny won't eat what's on the grill. She only eats chicken. No pork. No beef. Mike melts the cheese on two of the patties—only he and Jake like cheese on their burgers—before serving them out on paper plates with plain potato chips and ketchup. The air is thick and sticky from last night's rain. Jake is crying about pool floats. Jeremy, the little one, is sitting on the side of the pool, splashing with his feet and singing. Without intervention, the crying ends and Jenny and the two boys gather at the table to eat when they see that Mike has set the plates down. Jenny leaves the table early, her plate completely full. The two boys make more of an attempt.

When he has custody, they'll eat chicken, he decides. That, and mac and cheese. He'll move into an apartment, and the kids will visit on the weekends. When they're over, they'll order cheese pizza and eat it while watching television. After they're finished, they'll have chocolate ice cream and brush their teeth before going to bed. Jenny will only have vanilla. During the week, Mike will eat whatever he wants, whenever he wants, and the wife will deal with Jenny starving herself.

When night hits, Mike has lost count of the time—eight, nine, possibly ten o'clock, he thinks. Little Jeremy is sleeping in his bed. Jake and Jenny are watching television. Outside on the porch, Mike watches fireflies flicker all around the property. He gently reaches for one. He smells a newly lit candle escaping through an open kitchen window. He wants to discipline Jenny for using his lighter, but the fireflies

respond to him more than she ever will. The candle label says apple pie, but it only smells like cinnamon. The wife buys stupid shit sometimes.

Mike stays outside. It's late now, but he's still unsure of the time. There is not a sound in the house. The kids are all right, he decides. His eyes focus above him, but the sight appears wrong, abnormal—some type of satellite burning up in the atmosphere, not a star or a plane. Mike waits. Five lights emerge in the north. They look like stars, distant bright specks, but he knows that they weren't there before. His hands sweat as he squints. The lights hover for a while before moving uniformly across the horizon westward. It's a spacecraft, he decides, and from what he can see, it's boomerang-shaped. The lights suddenly seep into the depths of black. He finally blinks. The house remains silent. He thinks of little Jeremy sound asleep, of Jake dreaming of trains, and of Jenny. The lights return, but only four this time. The bright speckles change course and start to move closer and closer toward the house. It's late, so he decides to check on the children before going to bed.

Inside, Jake is asleep on the living room couch. Mike gently drapes a blanket on him and kisses him on the forehead. The clock on the stove glows in the darkness: 1:30 a.m. He moves quickly upstairs and finds Jeremy sprawled out on his bed, snoring. He hears movement from Jenny's room. Her feet make little sounds from inside the door, like water dripping out of a faucet late at night. He opens the door to a dim-lit room.

“You okay?”

“Yes. Why, Dad?”

“Everyone's asleep. What are you doing up?”

“I’m too old to sleep this early.” Her pajamas remind him of his wife’s—they bought matching heart pajama sets for Christmas three years ago. It’s a wonder she still fits into them.

“Do you want to see something?”

“See what?”

“Outside. I saw a U.F.O.”

“U.F.O.?”

“An unidentified flying object.”

“Oh,” she says, “like aliens?”

“Kind of.”

Jenny smiles at the thought of an alien space ship hovering above her front yard. The two finally walk out to the porch carrying flashlights, but they find the night sky without one glimmer. Nothing but the deep black above them.

“Wait. It was here and it disappeared for a minute or two, before. And then it came back. It might come back again.”

They wait.

“I guess we must have missed it, Jenny.”

Nothing.

“When’s Mom coming home, Dad?”

“I don’t know. She’s got some stuff she needs to figure out.”

“At Aunt Clair’s house?”

“Yes, at Aunt Clair’s house.”

“Why can’t she figure stuff out at home?”

Mike looks down at his child to remind himself of what is appropriate to say to a thirteen-year-old girl. Jenny acts older than she looks. She's the shortest and smallest one in her class, but surely the loudest. She's smart, just like him, but she looks more like her mother. It is hard not to think of his wife's sad eyes when he looks at Jenny, but Mike can't hold this against her.

"You know you're too old to waste food like you do."

"I don't like hamburgers. You know that."

"You don't like anything."

"That isn't true. I like what I like."

"There are kids dying of starvation out there."

"Would you want me to switch places with them then?" Jenny sits down on the porch and folds her arms across her chest.

"Do you see these stars, Jenny? They're light years away."

"How far is that?"

"Well, say that one." Mike points to a star directly in front of them. "It could be about fifty light years away, and that means that the light waves from the star take fifty years to reach our eyes. And light is the fastest traveling thing we know of, so I'd say the stars are pretty far away."

"And that's where your alien lives?"

"Yeah, Miss Smarty Pants. *That's* where my alien lives." His eyes fixate on the North Star and the dark horizon below it. Mike longs for a shooting star, a comet, any movement, any change.

"I didn't say I didn't believe you."

"Well, do you?"

“Yes. I do. You’ve never lied to me, and you aren’t crazy. I have no reason not to believe you, Dad.”

“Thanks,” he smiles. *Not crazy*, she says. He decides to take that as a compliment. Mike thinks about the billions of stars that burn years ahead of them, some bigger than Earth, others smaller, and some bigger than the sun. The light from inside the house shines on his daughter’s petite hands, her heart pajamas, her brown curls.

The two of them sit and wait for Mike’s spaceship.

“Wait here, I’ll make us some cocoa. I know it’s your favorite even when it’s warm out.” Mike walks inside to heat up some milk in two mugs. He sprinkles a few marshmallows in Jenny’s mug. He wants to forget about the whole thing, but inside he is sure of what he saw, and Jenny believes him.

Through the window, Mike sees Jenny wave around the flashlight. She makes noises as she swirls the light up and down. He smiles and pushes the porch door open with his foot. Sitting together beneath the black sky, the fireflies flicker all around them. They look like stars, like copper and white mixed confetti across the skyline.

The Little Things

You pick up a shiny, metal muffler of some special kind and look through the metal holes with such awe, feeling the weight of it. You hold it up and blow through the top of it like a movie-screen villain with his precious gun and we smile at each other, and those doubts I've been pushing out lately squeeze their way back into my brain. I can't tell if I've lost myself because I love you, or if I love you because I've lost myself.

Now I'm at a car show with you, wondering what I'll have to give up when I'm your wife. It's not completely uneven because you've given up little things too: like watching game shows for five hours straight, and going to car races completely inebriated, and letting go of that former friend of yours who makes misogynistic jokes. We both are giving up small pieces of ourselves until, in the blink of an eye, I'm at a car show, lost and trapped, and you're wiping sweat and curry off your stubble when we go out to dinner and I pick the restaurant, so it's obviously Thai. Love means doing things you hate but pretending you like them. Maybe we should have waited longer and tried different things, different people.

I'm trying to figure out how we got here, to this garishly carpeted room at a hotel that rents rooms by the hour. The car show is sandwiched between a high school reunion and a Bar Mitzvah; I know this because these conference room walls are thin and nothing says reunion like *Forever Young*. In such a small space there are people of all kinds crowded with cars of all kinds. I didn't expect our tickets to be a two-for-one to a monster truck rally, too. When we started dating, it was simple and fun and I never thought that in eight years I'd be at a car show with you. Back then I didn't want to be your girlfriend because I didn't want to be anyone's anything. Somehow you stuck to me

and since you lived two doors down, you grew on me after a while. I thought it was interesting that you liked cars in this odd fetishy way and loved running marathons and wanted to teach me how to drive stick shift. I liked the things that made you different from me because it made my days new and exciting, so then I did little things for you—things that I gave up to be a good girlfriend: like drinking too much raspberry vodka and flirting during girls night out, or the morning alarm I like to set, but you say it gives you a headache, or the spices that I like to cook with, but make your face as red as a circus balloon.

Did I ever tell you about seeing my grandparents for the second time in my life, after sixteen years without seeing them? I was my grandpa's only granddaughter, and he always wanted a grandson. After my grandparents were finally granted their visa and were allowed to live in the United States with us, they stayed at our house for a few days. They were surprised to see me towering over them, wearing big earrings and too short shorts, with too dark eye makeup. Completely culture-shocked, my grandpa didn't say one word when he first saw me. To this day, he never acknowledges me because of the little proprieties I gave up to fit into American society. I remember how my grandpa's jaw dropped like your mother's when I mentioned that tattoo you got during Spring Break. (I really did think your mother already knew.) Since then, my mother and father always remind me that grandpa didn't understand modern American society and that I was not a prostitute—he had said that to grandma—because I went to school and made good grades and was working hard to become something for the family.

There's a demonstration in the corner of the room. You lead me to it by my hand and we join the forming crowd. Your fingertips are fleshy and rough against my fingers, spindly like the rest of your body, and you see the discomfort I'm trying to hide. You kiss

my forehead and lead me away, making more space for the crowd behind us who crane their necks and watch with appreciative eyes. The last time you held my hand like this you were dragging me along with your friends to ride a roller coaster called *The Tower of Doom* and you learned that speedy loops and heights did not work well with my stomach, especially after demolishing a turkey leg and a cherry Slurpee.

If I die here from some psycho shooting up the place—because who knows what some of these people are hiding underneath their clothes—I want you to know I'm sorry about that time I told your parents about your run in with the police during that one crazy weekend, and that time you found out your grandparents were cousins and then I told everyone you were inbred.

Next to me, there's a man with tattoos covering every inch of his arms and he's grunting, so naturally I'm curious. He's taking pictures of his wife on one of these sleek machines. Her bare thighs on the sport car's hood create long, drawn out squeaky sounds—like a lazy window washer—every time she shifts from one thigh to another. Eventually a curious audience surrounds the scene, encouraging the two. He turns towards the audience and flexes his muscles. *How do you like these guns, huh?* he says. Even though the crowd laughs at them, the couple seems to find this completely normal. You completely ignore the fact that this is happening and comment on how *sexy* the car is and how awesome it would be to drive that thing down a long, straight, empty road. You whisper this in my ear to try and turn me on, but I can't take my eyes off the big blonde that's spread eagle on the car. It's better that we see different things because it makes life entertaining. Maybe we see distinct little things because you grew up in the South and I grew up in the West. I squeeze your hand and give you those eyes that get you every time so that we can move over to the other car parked in the corner with shiny

rims.

This is my first time at a car show. You made me come here with you, and I'm not very good at it, and the women in skimpy attire make me nervous, and I don't know why I've decided that this is something a good girlfriend does for her boyfriend. I don't understand these machines. What is so special about their sheen or exhaust pipes? Is the neon blue glow at the bottom of the car necessary or does it simply make it look impressive at night? Why does it matter if the rims are black or chrome or thick or thin? Maybe after we watch the monster truck rally together, I'll understand more of the little things that make you my boyfriend.

Just the Way You Like It

Liv knows that the man who orders a Number Six with two additional patties, triple cheese, and extra special sauce will come right at three o'clock and ask for extra large instead of medium fries. With a wide grin on his face, he will also order two fried apple pies and a chocolate milkshake. Since there are only twenty minutes before the door opens to this panting, balding, Rush enthusiast, she wipes the grease off the counters and washes her hands with soap and hot water, just like her manager always advises.

Without the lunch hour chaos, Liv follows the usual routine of restocking the sauces, napkins, and plastic ware. She mops the floors of the empty restaurant tile by tile and cleans the restrooms, stall by stall. Back in the kitchen, the sizzle from the fries sitting under the heat lamp and the shake of the secret seasoning remind her that the large man with the special Number Six combo will wheel himself in the doors any minute because he knows that fresh fries are ready at three o'clock sharp.

Something that sounds like an electric razor combined with a broken vacuum starts gliding in through the doors, so Liv pulls her shoulders back, tightens her ponytail, and straightens her nametag that has her name spelled wrong. "What'll you have today, sir?" she asks, even though she knows what he will order. She uses "sir" because he's a regular, but also because she respects him in a way—he's been loyal to this joint for about a year now. "Nice to see you again, sir," she says with a big smile.

Number Six wears the same extra extra extra large t-shirt every time, the one with the Starman logo from Rush's '76 album. She thinks about how she wears the same yellow grease-stained polo everyday to work and wishes that she could wear a nice silk blouse from time to time. Liv wants to save ten dollars from each of her future

paychecks to buy that scarlet silk blouse from the boutique four blocks down. She sees it when she walks to work and sometimes when she's not working on the weekends, she tries the blouse on and pretends it's hers. Maybe after four months of saving money, she can feel like a new woman and finally have people over for dinner. Liv sometimes dreams about being a dinner-party hostess in her own home.

The man looks up from his electric wheelchair and reverses a bit because he's too close to the menu overhead. When he's ready, he orders his usual, but this time there is extra ketchup. He trembles a little like Jell-O when he gives her the money and she's not sure if it's because he's nervous or if it's a struggle. Realizing that she's lost her taste for Jell-O, Liv wants to throw away all of her favorite boxes of gelatin the minute she gets home, even black cherry. After he wheels away to his favorite spot in the corner that's surrounded by windows, she makes sure to tell the kitchen boys in the back to make it extra special for him because a loyal customer is like a loyal friend.

She desperately wants to ask for the man's name because he's been to this restaurant for so long, but his eyes are focused on something outside, so she doesn't want to be a bother. There is nothing outside but a rival Mexican restaurant and a road filled with too many potholes and two-week old road kill. Liv occupies herself with the milkshake machine and picks up two fried pies to add to his tray. Barbecue and honey mustard are his favorite, so she places two of each on the tray and adds a pile of ketchup packets. A kitchen boy slides the burger her way and she tries to pull out a *thank you* and a smile, but he turns around and continues with his frying and flipping. With a lot of workers in the back, Liv thinks about how oddly quiet it is. No one ever speaks to each other unless there are *too many onions* in an order or *the burger's undercooked* or if the boss fires a random worker and causes a riot. Liv shovels some fries into a large box,

sprinkles a little extra seasoning on top—because he likes it that way, too—and walks it over to his table.

When she hands him the tray of food, Liv expects that the extra ketchup he ordered on his cheeseburger will spill on the same spot, right in the middle of the shirt where his two drooping breasts meet. Each time it happens, she wants to wash the stain just like her mother taught her—with cold water and white vinegar—but she doesn't even know his name, so why bother? After handing him some extra napkins, Liv smiles at him and says, "Here you go, sir. Our burgers sure get messy sometimes, don't they?"

Without even looking up, he mumbles *thanks* with a mouthful of food and continues on with his burger showdown. He stares only at his food as he eats, never up, down, left, or right, and she wonders if he treats every meal in the same manner. After finishing his meal, Number Six wheels over to the trash receptacle, pushes his tray into the small swinging door, and comes to her at the front counter. "Lunch was damn fine good, Miss...Lillian. Is that right? See you tomorrow." He pushes his head back into his neck and purses his lips together.

Realizing that he's trying to smile, Liv smiles back, teeth showing and all. She shrugs off the fact that her nametag has her name spelled wrong and says, "Yes sir. Have a good one, too." She decides that the name Livian is not the most common name and curses her mother for passing down such a thing. She wants to tell him how people called her *Livy* back in the day and how she's stuck in this dead-end job with no one to talk to, but she doesn't because she can't even gather up the courage to ask for his name.

She's scared that knowing his name would cause unwarranted nightmares and sleep is the only thing that keeps her sane. Customers are allowed to get anything *Just the way you like it* and preventing a slow death due to overconsumption of two-day old

grease and fried apple pies is not part of her job description. “Come back and see us, sir,” she says. As much as she wants him to come back as a loyal customer, a friend might tell him otherwise.

Liv watches as he pushes through the doors on his wheels and slowly, but surely inches his way to the Mexican place next door. Across the street, a man with a purple polo and a black visor opens the door for handicapped access and welcomes Number Six with wide-open arms. She asks her manager if she can take her break now so that she can step out of the grease for a bit. When she sees the large man sitting with a tray of tacos and burritos through the window of the Mexican place, she hopes that he will be able to come back at three o’clock tomorrow and order his usual, but in reality, she doesn’t want him to. Liv has been feeding him for over a year now and has chosen not to know his name.

Looking at her watch, she knows that another faithful customer—Number Eight with extra mayo and pepper jack cheese—will walk into the doors around four-thirty with a son and order a kid’s meal for him. Liv straightens her nametag and rinses her hands with soap and hot water, just like her manager always advises.

Sign Language

The wind pushed Kana so hard that she could barely walk. Her very bones vibrated with every gust that blew her way. It took all the strength her thin boney arms had to keep the umbrella above her head. On windy days like today, it felt more like she was living at the top of a Japanese Alp rather than in a valley between the Alps. It had not been this windy since her father led her out into the city where there were too many people to count. She loved Tokyo because there they enjoyed bright neon lights, food on every street corner, and hours of shopping. Here in the valley, it was different—there were only school friends and family and rice fields.

Her umbrella slipped out of her hand and she jumped back to grab it. Over the top of the umbrella, she saw a giant shape trudging up the sidewalk with slow steps. She froze. Her mother always told her to be wary of strangers in the valley. Because of his heavy steps and his fancy suit, she knew that he was a foreigner and definitely not the one that taught at her elementary school. Her elementary teachers never wore suits to school. He had to be the new high school English teacher since there was no other reason for a foreigner to be in a town this small. Foreigners taught English. That's why they came here and not Tokyo.

Kana tried to walk quickly away from the foreigner, but the wind kept her movements slow. Out of the corner of her eye, the giant was closely approaching. He was completely soaked and his wet shaggy beard reminded her of the family's dog after a bath. Kana wondered why he didn't have an umbrella, but it was expected that foreigners were different. It wasn't like her umbrella was helping anyway because the winds made the rain come as much from the front of her as from above.

His huge legs brought him beside her and he slowed his plodding steps. She felt him eyeing her. His blue eyes upon her were different and strange and his gaze felt calculating. He was going to say something. Kana knew he would say something. Foreigners liked to hear the children's attempts at English, but he wasn't going to hear it from her. When he spoke to her, his voice sounded like gravel falling from a shovel onto cement.

Kana could tell that he had asked her a question. He did that rising intonation thing that her first English teacher had tried to explain to her. She had aced that test where she had to listen to a CD of English sentences and mark down which ones were questions and which were statements, but that didn't help her much here. The question could be about anything. She would have to fall back to her primary defenses.

"No. No English," she squeaked out at him. It was a magical phrase that almost always made foreigners go away.

Rather than walking away from her though, he quickened his pace for a moment—just enough to walk in front of her, then slowed back down to match her speed. As soon as he was in front of her, she felt that strange calm that comes with getting out of the wind because it was much easier to walk now. Each time the wind slowed and wafted near her nose, there was a lingering scent of vintage English leather, like that leather-bound journal her neighbor, Daichi, gave her before she started school. It was a pleasant and familiar smell. Behind this large foreigner, she felt safe and comfortable. She could not remember the last time a teacher made such a polite gesture. Since a teacher was a child's elder—and an important guest—it was a child's role to be respectful and hospitable in every way possible. Even with unconditional hospitality, however, the teachers usually taught for a year or two and left. In a valley so small, Kana

and the children knew of their quick departure and wondered why foreigners did such a thing.

Kana had heard a little about this new English teacher just the other day. The grocery clerk told her mother that even though he was an adult, he still bought a lot of milk to drink. He bought four of the one-liter cartons every week when he went to the store. She thought about how he probably had very little room in his fridge for anything else.

She stiffened at the thought of these rumors and nearly stepped into a gigantic puddle. Kana was disappointed in herself for accepting such gossip. Without him in front of her, she would be pulling her umbrella left and right in the wind. He was doing something kind for her, so she wanted to show her appreciation somehow.

With her free hand, she reached into her backpack. There was a rustling sound as her hand fell against an old McDonald's cheeseburger wrapper that reminded her of fun times in Tokyo. There was also an empty bento, her journal, some pencils, and a textbook, but nothing else. There was not one token she could give him to show her appreciation.

Her face blushed as she became worried about appearing impolite to the foreigner. Would he think that all Japanese children in this town were so ungrateful? That shame was too great. She had to do something, so she closed her useless umbrella and threw it in her backpack. Kana took out the cheeseburger wrapper and began folding it. It was a slower and more difficult task in the wind and the rain, but huddling behind the man's large figure helped her to fold her favorite animal.

She finished just as they arrived at her house. She poked the foreigner to let him know that she would be leaving his company. He turned back to look at her and she

offered him the paper crane that she folded from the wrapper. As he took it from her, she stammered out a *thank you*, turned bright red, and ran into her home.

After taking off her shoes and saying hello to her mother and grandparents, Kana ran to her bedroom and dropped her backpack by the door. With her nose pressed against the window, she watched as the foreigner held up one of his hands to cover the small gift safely tucked in the palm of the other.

Winter, Nearby

Holding Rupert, the teddy bear, by its arm, Jimmy walked through the hallway to the closet under the stairs. The only way he reached the doorknob was on his tiptoes with his arms outstretched. He wanted to take out the new green rain boots he had received from Grandpa on his fifth birthday. He pulled down a thick blue coat by the sleeves—only a few more inches before he could reach the hanger—and red mittens to protect his fingers from the cold of the woods. Today was one of the last days that he was allowed to play outside because winter usually meant staying inside with his mother by the fire. The white blanket that smothered every living thing was beautiful, yet dangerous. His mother had slipped on that pretty ice one time and fell into very cold water, so she no longer ventured out on winter days. Jimmy knew he had to be careful, so he made sure every little button on his coat was fastened and went out into the backyard, closing the back door behind him and holding Rupert close to his side.

Miranda's petite hands were powdered with flour. The kitchen smelled of winter stew, a sign that Christmas was near. Jimmy's mother roasted lamb along with the hearty stew. Her wedding ring lay on the windowsill as she cooked. It had been a while since she last wore it because with Neil gone for business trips almost every week, she didn't feel the need to wear a heavy reminder on her finger everyday. The ring reminded her of his lack of phone calls, her one mug of black coffee in the morning, his empty space next to her in bed—the growing silence between them. She had become so accustomed to not wearing the ring that when he did come home, her fingers stayed bare. When he had asked why she didn't wear the ring, Miranda lied about it being too

snug for her finger and that finding a special jeweler who could fix it would ruin its integrity. She hummed as she stirred the bubbling stew, looking outside at Jimmy as she did so. “Be careful outside and don’t run off too far now, honey!” she shouted from the kitchen window. When she turned around, the neatly folded letter was still on the dining room table. It was from James Hutchinson, the college boy next door.

Outside the air was cool and fresh. Down the gentle downward curve of the lawn towards the row of conifer trees, there was a little blue pond, nestled among the flowerbeds. It was covered in brown and orange leaves from the ancient oak tree next door. Past the pond near the end of the garden, there was a tree with a special “S” shaped trunk. A small branch broke off from it and joined the others on the ground as the wind blew by. After slipping in under its boughs, Jimmy emerged from the last groping branches of the conifers into the world of the woods. One sharp twig caught him on the soft skin just under his eye and stung, but the gentle breeze cooled and soothed his cut so he moved on.

Jimmy’s mother slowly lifted the damp towel from the bowl full of dough. She tossed the flour onto the counter and patted it down evenly. Kneading the dough out onto the countertop, she then braided it into long sections and placed it in rows on the baking pan. The stew bubbled and popped on the stove, releasing a heat in the kitchen that delighted her. Because of the coming winter, she didn’t mind spending hours inside the warm kitchen preparing dinner. After turning down the stove she placed her wedding ring in the pocket of her apron and sat down in the living room to rest her feet. She had no desire to open that letter.

Since it was nearly winter, Jimmy's father looked for ragged boxes marked "X-Mas" and "Tinsel" upstairs in the attic. The dust up there made his eyes water and his nose so stuffed that he could hardly breathe, but he had to find the Christmas decorations because he missed seeing his family's smiling faces, especially Miranda's. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his wife smile, dimples and all. With all of the travel he did for work, he felt like a visitor in his own home. He was determined to have Santa's sleigh on the rooftop, though, because nothing made Jimmy happier than seeing Santa and his reindeer perched atop the house. All Neil wanted was to be like the Hutchinsons next-door—they went caroling together, sent out holiday cards signed by every family member, even the dog, and displayed a bright, blinking sleigh on their roof the minute Thanksgiving passed. It shined through his bedroom curtains every night.

As Jimmy walked in the woods, he listened to the sound of the wind in the trees and the crunch of his boots on the brown leaves underfoot. He knew there were more leaves to play with since the wind picked each leaf off the trees. He skipped and jumped on layers of leaves with Rupert wobbling back and forth in his hand. To avoid further rips in his favorite teddy bear, Jimmy placed Rupert next to a tree trunk before throwing armfuls of leaves up in the air. As the leaves cascaded down his face and shoulders, he imagined them to be wet snowflakes. Just ahead of him, two mossy stones caught his eye—they were large, green, and fuzzy to the touch. He picked up his teddy bear, rubbed its paw against the soft green moss, and told Rupert how beautiful the woods were before the heavy, white snow blanketed everything and mother forced

them to play indoors. After constructing a little fortress made of twigs, the two were tired from their adventure. Jimmy rested against the rocks with Rupert and shut his eyes, staring at the nothingness in the darkness of his eyelids. The leaves rustled loudly around him, drowning out all other sounds. He thought about his mother cooking and his father at home and how dinner was going to be warm and soothing in his stomach. But as Jimmy daydreamed, there was a strange scuffling sound nearby.

Upstairs in the attic, Jimmy's father pushed aside the Christmas boxes to explore the ones heavily sealed with tape. There were boxes filled with Miranda's old clothes and shoes, squeaky dog toys from their first puppy together, and a purple trunk filled with things from their wedding and beyond: a cake topper, leftover wedding announcements, *It's a baby boy!* announcements, photo albums of various shapes and sizes, and an unopened bottle of champagne from their honeymoon. There were videotapes of their vacations arranged in chronological order. The tapes stopped just two years ago, when he was promoted at work. He thought his success brought more stability and happiness to the family, but money only bought a more spacious house; it did not replace the times he had carried little laughing Jimmy on his shoulders at Disneyworld. Although the corners of their wedding pictures were crimped and torn, he placed a picture of him and Miranda kissing in front of their tall, white cake in his front shirt pocket. When Neil flipped through the photo album of "Jimmy Growing Up," he found that most of the pictures were just of Miranda and Jimmy. All Neil wanted was to find that Santa sleigh.

Emerging from deep inside the forest, the tall, thin man walked quietly towards

the boy who lay beside a mossy stone. He wore black shoes five sizes too big, pants with holes, a coat with too short sleeves, and a monocle with a broken lens. His beard had a few dead leaves stuck in its tangles and he held a small blanket that reeked of damp mulch. The man stopped in front of the boy hugging his teddy bear and looked down at him with his dark eyes and a large grin. “Nice teddy bear you got there, kid.”

Miranda looked out the half-frosted window and watched as the leaves glided off the trees’ branches and scattered across the damp ground. The teakettle whistled for attention, so she walked over to the stove to pour herself a cup and warm up her palms against the mug. She thought about Jimmy growing faster and more intelligent with each season. She thought about Neil growing old and too frail with each day; she had married a much older man at a young age. She thought about Neil’s laugh and how it had changed over the ten years they had been together. It had something to do with her, Miranda knew. One time when Neil had come home and embraced her, he had told her she smelled different. She had lied and said he’d been gone too long and that she’d changed perfumes. Miranda sipped her tea to try and think of different times. She had had an affair just a month ago. She knew what the letter said and did not care to read it.

With unwavering eyes and a voice deep and serious, the tall, thin man said to the boy, “What’re you doing here in the cold woods, little boy? Better run home before the weather gets you first. Winter is no friend to people like us and trust me, I know a friend when I see one.” He took off his monocle and winked at the boy. “What’s your name, kiddo? You look like someone I know...”

Surprised, Jimmy stood up quickly and ran away from the man in black. He ran through the woods knowing that the man was following, talking to him with every step. Jimmy felt Rupert's arm slowly tearing apart stitch-by-stitch, but all he thought about was running away from the tall stranger. The sound of the man's voice reverberated in his mind, reminding Jimmy of the kids during recess who ran around singing songs about him and Rupert getting married. He tried to trick the tall, thin man by running past random bushes left and right, but the man seemed to know his way around the woods and was catching up to him. Jimmy thought he was running on the path home, but every bush became stranger as he ran deeper into the woods. He only felt more terrified as Rupert's arms gradually fell apart at the seams.

"What's your name, boy? That's all I'm asking," the man said. With arms wide open, the tall, thin man smiled. "See, I won't do you any harm. I've just seen you around the woods a lot, exploring with your little buddy there. I just want to know your name. Need a friend to talk to, you know, because it gets lonely out here. All I have is my trusty blanket, but there's only so much you can do with it... at least it goes wherever I go!" He lifted a brown, ragged cloth that had frayed edges. It was probably large enough to cover a small child. "Looks like you're holding on to something special, too. What's your story, kiddo?"

In the attic, Jimmy's father coughed and swiped at the cobwebs that collected in the dark, damp corners. He sat to relax his joints and breathed slowly before he continued to push away more boxes. Out the small window, the oldest Hutchinson son,

James, threw a football with his father. Neil watched the perfect spiral go back and forth across the lawn. With a little girl by her side, Mrs. Hutchinson walked out to the lawn with a tray of drinks and the family smiled at one another. Neil clenched his fists until his knuckles were white. He didn't have time to play ball with his son, let alone talk to him for more than a handful of minutes. His mind was as cluttered as the attic. Traveling from London, to Dubai, to Moscow, or to Vienna left Neil with constant jet lag and a large void in his life. Whether it was a business meeting in Shanghai or a quiet Thanksgiving dinner at home with the family, he felt himself a tourist, a stranger, and a nomad. It must have been coincidence or some sick fate because when he arrived home those very few times, Neil always saw the Hutchinsons outside together on their porch, rocking in their personalized chairs, probably talking about trivial things like the clouds in the sky. Out of the corner of his eye, there was a box labeled "Odds & Ends." Inside were track trophies from years ago when he first met and fell in love with Miranda. He blew the dust off his gold trophy and wiped the bottom plaque with his thumb. It was more than just odds and ends to him, so he crossed out the words with a marker and wrote, "Memorabilia" on the box. Wishing he could run as fast, jump as high, laugh as hard, or feel as free as in his earlier days, Neil started to cry.

Jimmy no longer heard the sound of his rain boots crunching on the leaves, the whisper of the wind in the trees, or the scrambling of the little woodland animals. When he shut his eyes to escape, images of wooden desks in the classroom where he had taken a math test last week and the orange rope that he and his mother had used for their classroom's jump rope competition flashed up under his eyelids. Jimmy opened up his eyes and the man panted above him. His breath smelled of dirt and

garbage, reminding Jimmy of the family's favorite Labrador that had died a few months before. With dirt on his nose, leaves in his hair, and an odd furriness around the edges of his face, the man reminded Jimmy of a creature that he talked to in his dreams. Through his filthy demeanor, however, the man's eyes resembled his father's—dark, but green near the middle. “My name is Jimbo,” he said shakily. The sun began to set, releasing a muted glow. The moon snuck above the sun to welcome the nighttime sky. Jimmy feared the night's darkness; he gripped Rupert so tightly that the stuffing flattened out in its arm.

There was so much dust in Neil's throat that he began to cough and choke on the air around him; his allergies were acting up. The dim lighting up in the attic gave his eyes trouble; he could not find a way out from the thick, dusty air enveloping him. He hurried to the small window for additional light. Neil was forced to watch the Hutchinsons enjoy each other's company. He tried to crack the window open for fresh air, but it was painted shut. Remembering his stay in Tokyo and the coffin-sized hotel room he had slept in, Neil slowly breathed in the stuffy air and lay down on the attic floor to try and relax. In six different languages, he counted down from ten to clear his head. If he didn't find Santa's sleigh for Jimmy, the Hutchinsons would win again.

“Jimbo, hm? What a funny name your parents gave you. Maybe it's because you're a funny little kid. Do you know where you're going, though, kiddo? Because I sure do and I can show you the newest and best places to hide from everyone, even where your little friend Rupert can't find you.” The man smiled. “I'll always be here to guide you when you're out in the woods, Jimbo. Does your little teddy friend help you

do that? I'll stay with you through every season.”

Miranda heard a series of thumping noises upstairs in the attic, but was distracted by the oven calling to her. The bread was a golden brown and the roast bounced back gently when she poked its surface. She took them both out of the oven and let them rest on the counter. The stew simmered on low heat. The untouched letter still teased her from across the room, so curiosity led her over to the dining table. Her hands shook as she held James' letter; there was nothing in her ears but the sound of paper unfolding, crease by crease.

Jimmy lay still, mouth agape. Looking at him up close, Jimmy noticed a long scar across his jawline that reminded him of Rupert's own stitches when the neighborhood dog chewed him up. He asked Rupert a question in his ear, but he was also frightened and had no advice to share. At school he had never liked talking to anyone other than Rupert, so the kids always teased him for taking his teddy bear everywhere. The kids had said he was too old and even the teacher said so herself. Like his special fortress in the woods, Jimmy had his own place underneath one of the slides where he and Rupert told jokes to one another and shared lunch. This was not the playground, though, so Jimmy had to say something to this strange man because Rupert wasn't going to help. He didn't understand why his teddy bear was so quiet and scared when he needed him the most. After taking a deep breath, he looked directly into the man's eyes and thought of those few nights his father had tucked him in—he rarely saw his father's eyes up close. Jimmy's father felt as much of a stranger as this random man, and this man was just looking for a friend in the forest. Jimmy counted

down from ten in his head and said, “I want a friend, too. I need a friend to help me get home from here,” he said, his voice growing louder, “Can you help me, please?” The air grew colder and it raised the hairs on the back of his neck, but he was proud of himself for talking to someone other than his teddy bear.

As Miranda held the letter open in her hands, she caught a whiff of the warm, sweet air and the chicken scratches on the page blurred into a gray matter. She loved the smell of bread—it reminded her of sitting by the fireplace with Neil and Jimmy, of drinking hot chocolate and nibbling on soft bread, and of laughing about nonsensical things. She hoped tonight would be the same, so she folded the letter back into a square and threw it in the trashcan. She wanted to love Neil like she did before his promotion had flown him around the world, but she couldn’t stop thinking about how James was merely footsteps away when Neil was often hundreds of thousands of miles away. Her affair with James had started and ended so lustfully. Sometimes she wished it never had ended. He was so young, kissed like he actually cared for her, and told her she was *sexy*—something Neil never did.

Adapting to the thick, dusty air, Neil crawled along the floor on his elbows and knees to avoid moving more aggravating dust. He watched the dust rise and settle with each breath and movement he took. He made sure to take deep breaths and keep calm when he moved around the attic, but Santa’s sleigh was nowhere to be found. Moving back to the old trophy box, Neil put on his track metals, one by one by one. The weight of the metals was heavy.

“I sure can help you, Jimbo, but it comes with a cost. You know that little friend of yours, Rupert, you say? Well, I’m in need of a loyal companion in the woods, too. Especially when winter comes around and everyone stays indoors. I talk to people during the day when they go on their nature walks, but when night comes, the forest clears out. It’s a scary place if you’re not careful. So if you help me out, Jimbo, I’ll help you find your way home! I know the safest and shortest route out of here,” the man said. “Just trust me, kiddo, as your new friend and all. Who knows, you may think you’re knee deep in the woods when you’re really not.” The man put on his broken monocle and looked up at the sky. Nighttime was fast approaching as the moon became clearer.

With no one yet around, Miranda looked at her distorted self in the teakettle’s reflection and removed her red apron, revealing a gingham dress that hugged the soft curves at her hip. Focusing on the teakettle, Miranda slowly unzipped her dress until it fell on the floor. Her breasts sagged in the silver reflection and her left leg looked fatter compared to the right. *Sexy*, he said. She was enchanted by the word. Miranda poured herself another cup of tea and redressed herself. The wedding ring fell from the pocket of her apron, but she didn’t notice.

As the sun slowly sank in the sky and the birds stopped their chirping, the autumn wind faded into the brisk winter air. All of the trees shook what leaves they had left and swayed back and forth in unison. Although Jimmy was scared of the creeping night sky—especially without Rupert by his side—he still climbed, crawled, and pushed his way through layers of foliage to follow the man through the woods. As soon as he

recognized the two soft, mossy stones from earlier that evening, Jimmy realized that the man, now with Rupert, had become invisible among the trees. A cold gust of wind chilled his little fingertips under his mittens as he touched the furry moss one more time before winter took over. Jimmy ran the rest of the way back home, hungry and empty-handed.

Miranda cleaned off the table for dinner. James had told her that her skin was soft and warm against his own and that her lips were wet and lush. She trembled at the thought of having James over when Jimmy was at school and Neil was at work. A plate slipped through her fingers and broke into small blue pieces across the wooden floor. Only when she swept the floor of the mess did she come across her wedding ring in the dustpan. The diamond shined in the midst of broken ceramic pieces, food crumbs, and dust bunnies. She looked at her hands; they were dry and wrinkled. She licked her lips; they were dull and cracked. She wasn't *sexy* like James said she was because she was a mother and a wife. She had an urge to wear the ring on her finger, but it did not budge past her knuckle. She went over to the sink to rub soap on her finger, but it did not move any further. Her lie to Neil wasn't a lie at all; it had really been too long since she'd worn the ring. Miranda wept as she set the food on the table for dinner.

With the gold and silver metals from his early athlete days dangling on his neck, Neil held onto his track trophy and reminisced about the times when he had eaten three cheeseburgers guilt-free and ran miles around the park. Now he was limited to travel-size toothpaste, overpriced whiskey on the plane, and severe indigestion from eating each country's 'specialty.' Hearing the laughter of the Hutchinsons next-door, he

moved closer to the small attic window and imagined the family he could've had if he didn't accept the promotion. Neil didn't find Santa's sleigh; from the attic, he brought down boxes of tinsel and ornaments.

Jimmy walked in from the back door with a big grin on his face. He already made sure every little button was unfastened and ran through the hallway to the closet under the stairs. The door was cracked open. He kicked off the new green rain boots he had received from Grandpa on his fifth birthday. He took off his red mittens and his thick blue coat. Today was the last day that he played with Rupert because winter meant staying inside with his mother by the fire. The white blanket that smothered every living thing was nearby, Jimmy knew. His friend in the forest said so, too. He was ready for stew, for warm fires and hot chocolate, for those special days his father came outside to the woods with him, and for the winter air to creep into the cracks of his windows at night.

Telephone

The house is heavy with the footsteps of many family members: the Miller's from Arizona and the White's from Louisiana flew in a couple days ago. Even the Brown's and Patterson's next door and the family dogs are here together. With such a large gathering, however, the house still feels empty and cold. Grandma drapes a shawl around her shoulders and greets everyone who walks into her home. She hasn't seen such a sea of black in one place since her husband left some years ago.

The hat she wants to wear—the black one with the little veil and a rose—is in the basement somewhere. Her granddaughter Alice follows her down. She wears a new black jumper with matching patent-leather shoes and skips down the stairs with a smile. Grandma reminds her that everyone has to leave for church soon, so she shouldn't get dirty.

The hat is where she expects to find it, in a box near the old and awfully inefficient furnace that has under-heated her home for decades. She hates the thing, but the family insists on keeping it for its added character—her children grew up with the furnace for too many years. When the house is full of chatty adults and little grandchildren running around during the holidays, no one ever notices how the furnace didn't do its job. Today the adults whisper quietly to one another and the children play with marbles in the living room. Knowing this, Grandma slowly turns up the knob on the furnace and walks over to the pile of storage boxes. While she moves away boxes to get to her hat, Alice finds some old clothes in a box nearby and tries some of them on. She stops wrapping a fake-fur scarf around her neck and drops a pink purse to point to something else.

“Grandmama, what's that?” She points at a black and metal rotary telephone.

Grandma wipes away the dust, holds it toward Alice and says, “Do you mean this?”

She nods vigorously and asks, “Can I play with that toy?”

“It’s not a toy, it’s a phone, honey. You can talk to other people with it.”

“A phone? Why does it look different from mommy’s?”

Grandma considers the phone an heirloom, a relic, a totem of an earlier age that Alice can’t understand, but it is impossible to say no to those curious eyes of hers.

“It’s from a long time ago,” she says, “where there was no screen, buttons, or games like the phones you see now.” She blows off more of the dust. “To call someone, you just put your finger into one of these holes and pull all the way around to here.” She demonstrates and the two listen to the click and whir. She does it again so that it whirs around once more.

In the days when there were only rotary phones, the time it took for all those clicks and whirs could be delightfully maddening. There were those moments where she couldn’t wait to break the news to her maid-of-honor, or to invite family and friends to her brother’s wedding, or to call and talk about the new baby.

Alice points to the phone. “Can I hold it?”

Other times, the slow deliberate act of dialing was a blessing because it bought her time to think of what she was going to say and how she was going to say it. The click and whir of the phone was a necessary sound that broke the silence. If she lost track and dialed a single wrong number, she tried again from the beginning. Sometimes this was intentional. Sometimes, she dialed merely to hear the sound during quiet, sleepless nights.

She hands the base of the phone to Alice, who clasps it to her chest with both hands. Grandma lifts the receiver and puts it against her own ear. “See, you listen here and talk into the bottom. It’s not that different, is it?”

Alice sticks one finger into the dial, waits a moment, and gets on her tiptoes to say *Hello? Hello!* into the phone. She struggles, but still manages to hold the heavy base of the phone in one arm as she tries to speak into the receiver from a distance. Realizing her mistake, she uses her free hand to take the receiver from Grandma and puts it against her little ear.

Alice shouts into the mouthpiece, her lips against the black metal. “Hello!”

Then, in a tone Grandma recognizes as her own daughter, Alice’s mother—a tone of bafflement and joy—Alice says, “Hel-lo-oh? Is anybody there?”

Before Grandma can say anything back, the receiver slips from Alice’s grasp and falls to the concrete floor, just missing her patent-leather shoes. A faint ding echoes off the basement’s cinder-block walls and startles Alice. She steps back while hugging the phone’s base and pulls on the receiver by the cord until it falls to her hands. She holds it up to her ear again, but looks up and shakes her head, “No answer, Grandmama. Why not?”

“Well, it’s not plugged into the wall, silly goose. Let’s see what happens when we give the phone a little power.” Grandma carefully takes the telephone’s main wire and plugs it into a nearby phone jack. “Try again, Alice.”

With Grandma holding the base, Alice picks up the receiver and holds it against her ear. She pokes her fingers into the holes and giggles with excitement.

“What do you hear, honey?”

Alice's face loses her rosy glow and slowly pales in the dim light of the basement. She puts the receiver back onto the base and looks back at Grandma with a pout.

Grandma smiles and kisses her on the forehead. She pulls the phone's cord out from the wall and places the phone next to the collection of other old appliances. "It's okay honey, don't be sad. Sometimes, Alice, things are too old and broken to work like they once did."

Sitting there on the shelf, the rotary telephone blends in next to the bedside clock with a broken screen, the blender with lost blades, and the rusted iron. After putting on her black hat with the little veil, Grandma picks up Alice in her arms and squeezes her tight. Uncle George's voice echoes from the top of the staircase, telling them it is time to go to church, but they ignore him for now. Together they stare at the shelf of dusty odds and ends as the silence surrounds them.

Under the Pillow

He sat in his favorite armchair, the winged one with the high back that stood in the corner by the window, covered in worn green velvet and faded from too many years of sunlight.

The war had been a terrible time. Frightening, but exciting too. Somehow, with the possibility of death hanging over them every single day, he had never felt as alive as he had during the war. He and Edith had been young, and deeply, passionately in love. Not that they hadn't been in love later, too. They had been lucky, the two of them, finding in each other true love, the one that lasts forever and ever, 'till death do us part. Even after that, he now knew; death had not put an end to his love for Edith. During the war, when he had permission to take temporary leave, they had made love in the street. His back grazed against the rough stonewall and Edith's legs clung to his waist, their mouths feverish with the frenzied excitement of youth and danger.

Their boys had been so little then, blissfully unaware of the risks and perils of surviving a war, thinking it was all the greatest of games. They were forever getting themselves into terrible scrapes. He smiled now, remembering the time they had found some gunpowder in the corner of the courtyard, set it off, and burned off all their hair and eyebrows. He hadn't smiled then though—he dragged them back by their ears and Edith gave them each a good, sound slap on the behind.

He shifted slightly in the chair, struck by a jolt of sudden recollection. The gun was still in the house, the old one left over from the war. Where was it? Had he stashed it in his desk, or in the garage, or under the spare bed in the attic? He might have cleaned and oiled it again already. Where was it now? It was terrible the way he forgot

things these days; he was certain he had put the gun somewhere, he just couldn't remember exactly where.

He leaned on his stick, struggling to get up. He wanted to find the gun today, right now. He wanted to hold it, wanted to touch the smooth, cold metal, and let the memories come flowing back. He wanted to relive those happy, yet dangerous days. He limped over to his desk and opened all the drawers one by one. It wasn't there.

If Edith had still been here, she would have remembered where he had put it. Edith, his darling Edith, so brave and courageous, always up for anything. He missed her contagious laugh and the way she suddenly came up and embraced him from behind while he was working on one of his carpentry projects: all of the kitchen chairs, jewelry boxes, and birdhouses he built because he loved hearing her tell him what strong, capable hands he had. He missed her singing, her sweet, clear voice ringing throughout the house as she went about the household chores. All of that was gone now and the house was silent.

He went into the garage and opened the cupboard where all his tools were kept, the tools he had cherished so much, but couldn't use anymore because his old, wrinkled hands shook so much that he wasn't sure if he would hit his finger or the nail. He looked over the shelves and smiled in relief. Here it was, his hammer. The wood handle was cracked, so he carefully pulled it out and walked slowly back to his armchair. He sat down with a sigh of satisfaction.

He had slept with a gun under his pillow for six years after the war. Except for those nights when he'd been away or hadn't been able to come home for some reason, his darling brave Edith kept the gun in the pocket of her dress during the day, and under her pillow at night. He wanted to make sure she and the family were protected.

Suddenly he heard footsteps echoing through the silent house, startling him from his reverie. He gripped his hammer tighter.

“Who is it?”

“Surprise! Just wanted to stop by and say hello.”

“You scared the bejesus out of me! I need to take back my house keys from you boys.” He laughs. “Look at what I found, son.”

Ryan walked over to where he was sitting. “Your hammer. I sure miss those times. You taught me a whole lot with that thing.”

“Yeah? That’s good. With all those hours I spent sweating in that garage with you, I’m glad you grew to become such a strong man.”

“Thanks, Dad,” he smiled and tapped the hammer in his palm. “Need anything around here? Every time I visit there’s something that’s itching to be fixed.”

“Just because I’m old doesn’t mean I can’t fix things on my own. Don’t you worry.” He took the hammer back from Ryan and placed it in his lap. “Do you remember where I put my gun from the war? You know, the one that I used to protect your mother and brother and uncle from the Germans?”

He thought it only natural that Ryan was taken aback by that comment because young people these days weren’t used to handling guns, or even to seeing them about the house. It was probably a good thing, too. They went to universities and to parties and didn’t worry about guns and bombs and Nazis. Even though he was now a man, and a father, Ryan could never understand what his own father lost during the war.

“You don’t remember, Dad? You gave it to me when my first son was born. For protection, you said.”

“Oh. Well, do you have it with you?”

“No. It’s locked in a safe at home.”

“Times sure have changed, haven’t they? Your mother and I used to take turns carrying that thing around the house, even with you little boys running around... Damn, do I miss her,” he sighed.

“I miss her, too.” Ryan gently patted his father’s back.

The sun started to set behind the armchair, erasing the pale shadows on the ground.

“It’s about that time, son. I need to take my medication and head to bed. Tell the family I say hello and best wishes, okay? Thanks for visiting your old man. Come by anytime. You know I was joking about the house key.”

“I know. Expect me tomorrow, too. Take care, Dad.”

When the moon leaked through the curtains later that night and the house was quiet once again, he thought about how pleasant it was to sleep on a pillow with nothing hidden underneath.

At the Table Alone

You throw away the meat. The dollar-eighty-eight a pound ground beef, the boneless chicken, the spareribs, and the ham mix together at the bottom of the garbage. You throw the soggy vegetables into the trashcan: carrots, broccoli, peas, green beans, and Brussels sprouts. You pour the one-percent milk down the drain of the stainless steel sink. The block of cheddar cheese echoes in the kitchen as it slowly crumbles down the pipes of the disposal. The mint chocolate-chip ice cream, now a green liquid, follows. All the groceries in the refrigerator had to be thrown away because the man on the radio had hinted at all kinds of germs thriving on food after hours and hours without power. *It could be days before we see a spark anytime soon*, he announced. Throwing the food away is rational and necessary.

In your house growing up, you were never allowed to waste food. Your mother saved fruit and vegetable peelings, and spoiled things, to put on the compost heap in the backyard. The compost went back into the garden to grow more vegetables and especially, herbs. Your mother's favorite was rosemary and she made candles out of those clippings and the lavender that you stole from the neighbor's front yard because it was hard to grow herself. She kept the leftover meat—and the bones, those were the most important—to be used again in soup with potatoes and celery. Every night at home, you were never allowed to throw food away, not even a crumb.

The bread that was supposed to keep for weeks longer is now moldy. You once saw your father pick up a piece of Wonder Bread he had dropped on the ground. He brushed his hand over both sides of the slice to remove the dirt and then kissed the bread. Even at eight, you knew why he did that. Your sister was the reason. You were born after the war and she had lived in the time before. You did not know much about

her because your mother and father rarely talked about her. There were never any pictures. The only time your father ever mentioned her was when he described how she clutched a slice of bread so tightly in her baby fist that it squeezed out between her fingers. She liked to suck at the bread that way.

So you want to save the bread for your sister, but you also want to throw the bread away for all the times you sat crying over a bowl of plain cabbage soup your father said you had to eat. You weren't allowed to leave the table until you finished your meal, so you were always the last one at the table. *Eating would not bring her back*, you argued, *because you would still be the one at the table alone*. Your mother was always away from the dinner table when you and your father argued; she rarely ate much. She lit her candles, one in every room, walked to the bedroom, and closed the door.

The moldy bread sits on your counter, almost mocking you. You bought it with the money you received for working overtime Monday through Saturday two weeks ago. You tied the bag in the way you wanted because you earned it. Now it sits on the counter, not inside a breadbox like your mother always kept hers, because you want it that way. It is yours to throw into the trashcan.

So you throw the bread away for your sister. You throw it away for those times your father made her eat bread that had fallen on the floor. You tie the trash bag in a special bow your mother taught you the night before Hanukkah. You close the trashcan and leave it because the garbage man doesn't come for another two days.

Resting at the dining room table, you imagine your sister stopping by your place after a long day of shopping. She buys you a porcelain tea set. *You didn't have to do this, I'm too old for gifts*, you say to your sister. She places the package next to mother's lavender candles that adorn the table and hangs her peacoat on the back of one of the

chairs. She smells of vanilla perfume and early winter air. As if she is a Polish bride returning to her home, you greet her with a plate of bread and salt. The bread, for prosperity, is wrapped in a white linen cloth. The salt, for coping with life's struggles, is in a small blue bowl. You and your sister sit down together at the table, candles ablaze, and share a piece of bread, and then dip it into the salt. With a glass of wine each, both of you share good health and cheer. You hope that your sister will never know the pains of hunger or struggle. You call your mother and tell her of your sister's visit and how you both can't wait to celebrate the holidays together as a family.

In your kitchen, where such an act could be an ordinary thing, you throw away the bread because you can.

Crease, Fold, Crimp

Clanging blinds make the sun flash upon the walls of the room. A confetti of post-it notes spreads across Alex's desk. Tears bleed the ink of small notes: *Lawyer, tomorrow. Sign papers. Call Dad.*

Alex reads the first page of her diary. Nothing registers because tears burn in her eyes. She wipes her cheeks and reads about the day she stammered to Jackson, "My treat at the Dairy Queen?" and about those ridiculous torn-up jeans he always wore everywhere.

She rips the page, then flips open her laptop: 'How to fold a raptor.' *Crease, fold, crimp, admire.* She nods. Alex chucks the bird on its first flight to the general area of the bookcase. It sinks not far from her feet. She riffles through more pages of her diary, her scribbles, her history. She pauses on the day when Jackson cropped his Afro for his first corporate job as a pharmaceutical salesman. He was still clean looking even after an impromptu love session on the revival rococo recliner. She rips the page. *Eight-point star.*

Making that star needs eight pages, preferably each of a different color. Alex rips a page of mom-asked-me-when-I'm-getting-married-again and another of traveling with Jackson to Bolivia only because she really wanted to taste coca leaf tea. She rips another page about the disgusting aftertaste of yak milk. Alex pauses and feels her fingers on the page like a blind person reading braille. Mother complained about non-existent grandchildren or marriage. She rips the page. Jackson refused to move in with her. Her best friend Lisa's wedding was a magnificent display of snobbery: glowing chandeliers, white roses, and hors d'oeuvres served by butlers with bowties.

Twisting around from her chair, she flings the weighty star. It lands farther than the raptor. She exhales, bubbling her lips. Her black braids brush away from her mouth. The words ‘Sean Mallory’ seep into view on the pale-paged diary. Seated at the table with Jackson, Sean looked crisp in his sport jacket. They enjoyed boxed wine, chicken wings, and cheese singles with Wonder Bread. She, on the other hand, appeared uninvited, bearing coq au vin and a Bordeaux wine. Jackson scowled till the last drop.

Chicken.

Little paper chickens rest upon the raptor. She plops her head on the headrest of her chair. In a picture on the overhead shelf, Jackson is yelling, raising a fresh catch of brown trout high above his head. Sean stands next to him, holding a beer in one hand and a pole in the other. Alex was never invited to these ‘men-only’ fishing trips. She only saw pictures and heard stories of their escapades.

Fish.

The sound of blinds fighting in the wind escalates into an annoying sound. She darts to the window, ignores the mailman sorting letters and slams the window shut. She crawls back to her seat. Ten paper cranes later, Jackson proposed. “Finally ready for babies, Alex.” His stubble itched her cheek, but it was fine because his hand spanked her butt. Lisa vetoed the bridesmaid designs three times. Alex’s wedding rained champagne, tears, and jasmine blossoms. Sean Mallory, in a gray tux, congratulated her with tight lips and cold fingers. “He is a good man. You’re a lucky woman, Alex,” he said.

Jasmine flower.

Cursive covers each petal. It refuses to float; it prefers the company of chickens cradling her feet.

Four miscarriages transform into four little baby cribs. She raises her eyes to the wall clock; its chrome casing like melting plastic. Without the window cracked, the air is stuffy, so it's time for a break. She caresses her laptop shut and leaves the room. Her feet slide on the hardwood floor as she moves from room to room. Cardboard boxes litter the corridor like playing blocks. She pulls out her phone and calls her father. "Yes, I'm fine, Dad...No, I don't need a therapist...Tomorrow I'm meeting with the lawyer, so I'm free the day after to move out of here. Can you help me?"

Box with lid.

In the kitchen, Alex opens the fridge and finds nothing inside but a half-gallon of milk and old Chinese take-out. Alex watches the food rotate around in the microwave. She hasn't used the stove or the oven since she and Jackson lived here together.

Just a month ago, she turned around from the stove and gasped at Jackson's head buried in the fridge. The fridge light betrayed rice flecks on his moustache. Alex smiled.

"I'm working on some dinner right now." Alex opened the pantry door to grab some spices.

"Thanks, but no need, I have dinner plans."

Alex gripped the spatula as her gaze blurred on a pan of sizzling salmon.

"I'm sorry," Jackson said. His stubby fingers softened her stony hands.

Alex returns to the room and kicks away chickens and cranes; she crashes in her seat and eats right out of the take-out box with chopsticks. Her diary is still open, so she flips through the pages of arguments, spilling crumbs in the corners.

"We can't spend so much just for an in-vitro. Our bond is enough for me," Jackson said to Alex.

Baby booties.

Small shoes made of arguments, of longing, fortify her desk. Her flowing script breaks into blocky rows in the folds. Graceful f's are stunted u's. Alex hugs her stomach, and then slides her fingers across a cold page. She shivers.

Sean yawned over the phone, "Sorry, Alex. Jackson is here... we lost track of time." Jackson took over only to add that he would be home in a few more hours.

Wrist watch.

Lisa had a daughter.

Bow.

Lisa never got divorced.

Heart.

All men cheat.

Pig.

"Jackson is a man... Why would he do such a thing?" Lisa said on the phone.

Alex sweeps her lap of paper remnants. Ten years look like tiny snowflakes across the floor.

There was an argument over adopting children. Jackson stormed out of the house. Three days passed, and Jackson was in the front yard with Sean, their hairy hands in a lover's clutch. "Sean and I are leaving this place. Together."

Sailboats.

Alex tears the rest of the pages to make boats, leaving behind a serrated stump of a diary. The wind knocks branches against the window, so she walks by and opens it, letting brisk air fill the room. After gathering the origami into a pile—twenty years are

weightless in her arms—Alex goes to the open window and drops each origami figure outside in the harsh wind, one by one.