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April 8, 2018

Parts of Women

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a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

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Over the span of thirty years, three women—a mother and her two daughters—are forced to coalesce and coexist through their distinctive secrets and personal struggles. The years fly over and through them as if cast through a kaleidoscope, leaving both the reader and the characters with the impression that each woman is on a continual quest to discover the other, attempting to scale the tangled web of familial ambivalence that strings them together.

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For my friends, who have listened and read and supported me—it has meant the world.

For my parents, Adam and Rebecca Stocks, who have taught me everything worth knowing.

And, lastly, to my sister, Courtney. May our future be brighter.

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PART ONE

SISTERS

SLOANE

April 24th, 1995

In the handbook no one had yet written about how to divorce her husband of four years and maintain a sense of self, Sloane thought there should be an addendum. It would be titled, “Surviving Moments of Small, Crippling, Arbitrary Sadness—For Dummies!” or “Resisting the Stereotype: Tips on Staying Fit, Fun, and Sane During the Dissolution of Your Marriage.”

The thought came after her shift at the hospital, resting her forehead against the worn steering wheel, a loose thread on the collar of her scrubs tickling her neck. It was a fruitless thought, the self-help book. It was something her therapist, if she had one, might reprimand her for, might say was halting her processes of “healing” and “forgiveness” and “self-mercy” by allowing her to hide behind jokes. She straightened and focused on the afternoon which was steeping, saturating itself into evening, casting shadows over the parking lot. She would be late again and Eva would silence her apologies. The world would continue on its nebulous and labyrinthine path. Switching gears, the engine sputtered and she turned onto the freeway, trying to think productive thoughts.

She was test-driving coping mechanisms as if she were shopping for a car in which she could package, compartmentalize, and transport her life toward a new, shiny happiness. Her wisecracks about her recent husbandless-ness suited her just fine but her friends and coworkers grew increasingly vocal about their concern. She tried journaling but, saddled with single motherhood, resolved to write whatever snarky thoughts came to mind on yellow Post-It notes. They were plastered around the house like an exhibition of her insecurities. Sometimes dust stuck to their adhesive strips and they twirled to the floor, but she would re-secure them with glossy tape and smooth their corners as if she were massaging away her anxiousness.

She experimented with fonts, colors, sizes. Melancholy thoughts about brewing half the amount coffee in the morning were scribbled in angled, crimson red; owning too many clothes hangers was written in cursive; stepping in the neighbor's dog shit and using his old, abandoned toothbrush to clean her shoe—large, black block letters. Her young daughter, Reese, was just beginning to read and would sometimes strip them from the walls to sound them out while munching on apples in the morning. She would trace the letters with her tiny fingernail, looping and scraping, the paper rustling against her touch. Sloane was unsure how to handle her questions about meaning and pronunciation. They felt inappropriate despite the catharsis of watching the house sprout with yellow, square freckles. She began to lie, hoping to protect them both. Her personal low was convincing Reese that alimony was a type of deli meat sold in the Midwest. Two months in, she ditched them, went back to her old devices. Not all change could happen at once.

It had been Eva who noticed it first, the taut rubber band circling her wrist. Sloane had come home from the hospital ready to swap roles as usual—whoever didn't have the day shift babysat their toddlers, would leave for the evening rounds once the other returned home to feed and bathe them. It was draining but it was cheaper than daycare—when Eva plucked it against her wrist while she sipped on a glass of wine.

“And this is supposed to be?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Sloane said. She downed what remained in the glass. “Fashion.”

“Fashion?”

“Like an accessory.”

“Right,” Eva said, unconvinced, but Sloane refilled her glass, changed the subject. She explained eventually when she kept forgetting to remove it before returning from work and Eva’s relentless questioning wore her down.

Years ago, before the marriage, before she had even met Derek, she had read an article about how to break bad habits. You would wear a rubber band on your wrist for twenty-one days straight. If you caught yourself breaking whatever habit you were trying to kick then you would snap the rubber band against your wrist and switch arms. Every time you pulled the band and swapped it over, the marathon began again. Back then she was still waiting to hear back from nursing schools, spending most of her time picking up weekend shifts at the elderly home near her apartment, watching reality TV while her patients burped between scoops of pureed potatoes and microwaved mac and cheese. She adopted the method and stopped biting her nails, never forgot to floss, ensured the lights were turned off every time she exited a room, paid her rent early. Then she met Derek during that trip to New York and so commenced the next era of her life. A steady stream of attention manifested and she was imbued, drenched in it, his charm and infatuation, the elusiveness of his fascination part of the fascination itself, and the urge for self-improvement faded as it does in those early days of romance where all things have the haziness of a spring garden, where things are misty and opaquely rosy and each lover has not begun poking holes in the other.

Soon enough he started to take notice of the little things, the things about her that were innate and frustrating. He would make an ordeal out of sitting with her at the dinner table and speaking very seriously as if a massive calamity would fall upon them if she refused to acknowledge the gravity of the situation—the situation of her bothering him, she guessed. Embarrassing him.

She could tell that's what it was: embarrassment. She could tell it really bothered him. Scared him, maybe. His greatest fears were secondhand embarrassment and unproductivity. This is what he had told her, anyway, on their fifth or sixth date, an anecdote she clung to as fact. So she dug through the kitchen drawers and slipped the rubber band back on her wrists. She whipped and rubbed and snapped herself back into submission. A friction burn crept over her skin, then healed, then returned, then healed again. She thought it a sign of her triumph. It was a testament to her commitment.

Talking to herself was one of her worse ones. Her mouth would move and stammer and babble of its own volition, gnawing into others' silences, but nothing topped the television. During their engagement, stuck in the limbo between finishing nursing school and waiting for interview callbacks, she was clocking six hours of screen time, sometimes eight if Derek was running late at the office. She became obsessed with wedding documentaries, sitcoms, talk shows. Anyone and everyone mentioning the "w" word had her immediate attention. Dowries particularly fascinated her. She imagined wheelbarrows full of chickens and spotted cows, chests of jewels tumbling between their hooves and claws, the stockpile threatening to topple over as a sweaty, ailing father dragged it through the streets. The dust from the road would kick up into his eyes, the grit still purging with his tears on his daughter's wedding day.

Derek called her codependent.

"You just like how dramatic it is," he said. "Things with us are simpler than that." He would tug his tie loose and stroke her fingers, which were wrapped around the remote, but still watch with her for a while. The women twirling in pinned dresses in front of their whimpering friends, and the lavish spreads of meats and bread and cheeses, and the photo booths, and the garish receptions. He scoffed.

“Can you believe there are people who actually believe this will make them happy?” He would kiss her hand and glaze over the flashing commercials. She never responded but he never pushed for an answer. Regardless he would stay, fall asleep in her lap, spit drying at the corners of his slack mouth. Their endearing evening routine.

Eventually the rubber bands became her party trick, her vanishing act. The small things that made him tick disappeared. No longer did she eat directly from the peanut butter jar or wear shoes on the carpet. All it required was a flick here, tug there. She put grating, unattractive habits into a black top hat and out she pulled a husband with no complaints, complete with a fluffy white tail and a rubber band dangling from bucked teeth.

He knew what was best for her and she, him. This is what he implied during their arguments, and if she loved him then she had to believe him. Their happiness was their business because their happiness was inseparable. For her entire life she had withstood the surge of pressures to change, change, adapt, shrink, and for her entire life she remained incessantly herself. Somehow, for him, she justified it.

But then the baby came. No pile of rubber bands could restrain the flood that followed. Old habits, new habits, loads and loads of traits that she never requested and Derek never agreed to tolerate suddenly overtook her and she was so vivacious, so protective, tough and powerful in ways people had mentioned and complimented her for but never so intensely, never with such totality. She felt relentless and was relentless and slowly, slowly, the stunning realization came, the epiphany that together they had mounted a precipice and apart they would fall from it. So much silence. So much muttering to herself in the empty bedroom.

Eva was watching pay-per-view and drinking a Red Stripe on the huge, green velour couch she nicked from the neighborhood donation bins last year. Matías, Eva's son, lay in the corner amongst a fort of throw pillows, sleeping with a little pout. Sloane headed straight into the kitchen and Eva turned the TV off, followed her in and wordlessly handed her a bottle of water. The remnants of the cake from Reese and Matías's joint birthday party from the previous weekend sat on the counter. Two number "four" candles were propped up by a plastic fork, both lopsided and smothered in blue frosting. Sloane swiped her finger through a pile of crumbs, licked it from her knuckles.

"I switched shifts with Marie, before you make a comment about being late. She called a couple of hours ago, so no big deal," Eva said. She gestured toward the ceiling. "Reese is in bed upstairs. Went down without a peep."

"So she only cried for twenty minutes instead of thirty?" Sloane asked.

"Fifteen, actually, both of them. Out cold."

"Is this the part when you admit you slipped Ambien into their milk?"

"Vodka in the spaghetti. I just told them it was a fancy sauce," Eva said, and Sloane raised a forkful of cake into the air like it was a glass of champagne.

"Make me a bowl," she said and dunked the cake into her mouth. Eva snorted and grabbed herself a slice. The kitchen simmered with the noises of their soft chewing.

"You seem distracted," Eva said. She pointed to the rubber band on Sloane's wrist with the tip of the fork. "That thing again?"

Sloane scratched at her wrist, stuffed the band in her pocket in a failed attempt to appear nonchalant. "Habit," she said and shoved more cake into her mouth.

“Ironic,” Eva said and raised an eyebrow. “What’s it now? I thought you were gonna give it a rest after the last time with the—the cursing in front of Reese or whatever.”

“I called someone an asshole at the bank the other day, so that one didn’t work out too hot,” she said. She twirled her fork over the cake, watching lines bloom across the thick frosting. “This time I dunno. I’ve been thinking.”

“About Derek?”

“No.”

“Really?” Eva asked.

“Well, yeah, I have, but that wasn’t what I meant.”

“I know he came over last week. You can tell me about it.”

Sloane hardened slightly. “Not fair.”

“Not judging,” Eva said. “Care to fill me in?”

“I’d rather not. It’s predictable.”

“How predictable are we talking?” she asked. Sloane’s silence sufficed, but Eva pushed anyway. “As long as you didn’t fuck him.”

“I don’t wanna get into it,” Sloane said.

“Okay. Fine. So you fucked him, to be clear.”

“Saying ‘fucked’ makes it sound so much worse.”

“Because we’re such prudes,” Eva said and rolled her eyes.

“I didn’t not fuck him,” Sloane said. She rubbed her face. “I dunno. It was a mistake. A big one. We fought, and it was bad, and . . .” she tossed the fork into the cake like a javelin. “The locks are changed. We’re done for good.”

“Damn, alright,” Eva said. She moved to clean up the cake and patted Sloane’s shoulder. “So you were thinking about Derek but also about something else.”

“Isn’t that good?” Sloane asked.

“I guess it depends on what the something is.”

Sloane glanced at the floor. “I’ve been thinking that I’m a shitty mom.”

Eva made a sound like an incorrect buzzer. “Sorry. Try again.”

“I hit Reese at dinner last week.” Sloane paused and absorbed the puzzled stare Eva threw at her. “Okay, I didn’t hit her, but I thought about it very briefly.”

“Everyone thinks about hitting their kids. It means you care about her.”

“You think about hitting Matías?”

“He’s too sensitive for all that. You look at that kid the wrong way and he crumbles,” she muttered.

“Well Reese thinks she is the boss.”

“And where do you think she learned that from?” Eva asked and laughed.

“She was just whining for juice and—and—and she wouldn’t just shut up, and suddenly I was standing over her and thinking ‘slap her. Slap her and she’ll stop.’ How is that caring? I mean the custody hearing is in, what, two months? I’ve got a meeting with the lawyer tomorrow to discuss the best way to try and get custody and here I am taking swings at our toddler.”

“Only thinking about it, to be fair,” Eva said, but Sloane lounged against the counter and raised her chin to prevent tears from spilling over.

“It’s not even an isolated incident. Little things. Every day. Like yesterday, I was feeding the kids lunch, and she started taking bites out of her sandwich from the middle instead of the edge

because she said she didn't want the crust. She was poking her hole through the tongue at Matías and was trying to start a food fight while I was trying to wash the dishes.”

“So?”

“And so I yelled at her and didn't let her finish eating. Which is completely ridiculous because she's four and it's not like she was given a sandwich-eating manual along with her birth certificate.”

“Of course she was. It should've been right next to the nuclear codes,” Eva said.

Sloane swiped a loose tear and crossed her arms. “It's not funny. I feel like I'm losing my mind.”

Eva reached out and hooked her fingers around Sloane's chin, hurling it upwards. Their eyes leveled. “Hey. Stop.”

Sloane shook it free. “Tell me what to do.”

“You're being ridiculous. Genuinely, actually ridiculous. Are you sure this isn't just about Derek? You can say it.”

“It's not about him.”

Eva poured a glass of water, took a sip and said nothing.

“I just feel lost. I need to get back on track. I'm grasping at straws here tryna – I dunno, find balance.” Sloane gripped at the edge of the counter and shook her head.

Eva puckered her lips, the sound echoing in the small kitchen. “Well, for starters, you could start cutting the crust off of Reese's sandwiches like a normal, good parent.”

Sloane did not laugh and Eva tensed, a web of nervousness casting itself over them. Part of their friendship required distraction and reassurance. To not laugh was to not distract or reassure,

but to confirm a dark, banal something against which all friendships are explicitly designed to bar.

Eva attempted to rouse a sense of sincerity. “I would treat this whole thing seriously if I thought there was any seriousness to it, but you’re really a perfect mother. You’re doing better than I ever did. If there’s any habit you need to break in the midst of this divorce it’s that you don’t give yourself enough credit.”

“There’s no such thing as the perfect mother,” Sloane said, but a weak smile stretched over her lips.

“You love her unconditionally. That’s good parenting.”

“Now you’re just oversimplifying to make me feel better,” she said.

“Well, simple is good. I wish things were simpler with my mom.”

Sloane released a little huff of exasperation. “Still. Simple is good for dinner parties. Or like, algebra. Parenting is the exact opposite.”

“Sure,” Eva said.

“It has to be complex. It’s inherently complex.”

“Uh huh,” Eva said, then quietly took Sloane’s hand in her own, some spare blue frosting transferring from skin to skin.

Sloane dropped her head, focused on her toes. Her narrow feet, bound in grimy, brown sneakers, looked deflated against the scrubbed kitchen tiles. She wiggled her toes, watched them strain against the fabric, knobby sprouting seeds beneath mesh dirt. Eva’s hand came into view, swinging their embrace in front of her eyes.

“Just promise me you’ll quit letting all of this get the best of you,” Eva said.

Sloane cleared her throat and looked away. “Marriage is a promise,” she said. Her mumble was hoarse, inapposite, borderline masochistic. Eva dropped her hand. It wasn’t that they were betraying each other or admitting defeat, just that, temporarily, the gap between their mentalities grew unbridgeable. So she hobbled after Eva as she gathered Matías into her arms, followed her out into the front yard where the musky night filled with the calls of crickets and toads from the levy across the road, radio static, gnats encircling stumpy street lights, all things traveling in groups and pairs. Two patches of weed daisies hugging the gap between the yard and the road, four cigarette butts broken and ridged near the curb. Hundreds, thousands of stars tinted yellow under the smudge of thin smog. Then Sloane, watching Eva lower her son into his car seat, standing in the humidity with empty and cold arms.

Eva shut the back door gingerly and turned towards her. She cocked her head to the side. “Did you say something?” she asked.

Sloane pressed her fingertips against her lips. “No,” she mumbled.

Eva shrugged. She reached out for a hug and Sloane obliged, clinging for a few moments too long. Eva pulled back but said nothing, just watched, and Sloane squirmed but held her stare. The burden to defend herself was building, and she could hear the apology echoing in her head, the familiar words, but to vocalize it would be too much. She looked past Eva into the tinted windows of the car and saw little Matías breathing, breathing so deeply. Tears muddled her vision, smearing the world into watercolor.

Something swept over her wrist, an easy pressure, soothing, like the familiar pull of the rubber band. She glanced down and saw Eva’s hand there, encircling her wrist like a human bracelet. She leaned forward until her forehead graced Sloane’s shoulder, the wash of her

exhalation misting over them both, stale sugar and beer and something lighter, more wistful.

Sloane held onto it, shaping it in her head. It reminded her of hope.

REESE

October 31st, 2001

It is not even dark yet and there are already little babies and their parents ringing our doorbell and asking us for candy (we give the babies apple sauce because of their no-tooth-ness and also because Mom caught me eating out of the candy bowl before dinner so she hid it somewhere secret until the big kids start trick or treating). Almost all of them are dressed up like tiny unicorns and witches and superheroes and stepping on their own costumes while they wobble over to our porch and ask me for lollipops with their baby talk. One of them was dressed like a chicken and when I showed her that I was eating a chicken sandwich for dinner as a joke she started to cry. Mom made me say sorry but the baby just cried even more (I told Mom she was probably very scared of my perfect bloody zombie make up but she still made me do it anyways because Mom is like that). But that was a while ago now. It is starting to get darker. I wish Dad would get here already. It feels like it has been five million years since I asked Mom what time it is but it has really only been ten minutes.

He is finally going to visit us during Halloween time so we can go trick or treating together for the first time. This year will be even better because I am officially old enough to stay up later than my bedtime and not die at school in the morning (Mom says you have to be ten to stay up past 10). Mom even said he could take our car so we can drive to the big neighborhood on the other side of town and get the rich people candies. He was supposed to get to the airport a little while ago but we think he is running a little late and that is okay because I am a very patient daughter.

It was super important that I got Dad to come see me because in art class we have a big project coming up that I need his face for. Mrs. Singh said we had to pick a person who we love

very much and do a portrait of them so we can hang them up in the lunch room at school. She told us she wanted us to challenge ourselves and so I picked him even though I do not get to see him that much anymore. But then that was sort of a problem because the truth is that I do not know my dad very well because when you get grown up like me your brain gets too busy to keep all your baby memories and so it has to throw them away to make room for things like multiplication tables. In class I kept trying to sketch his face on paper for practice but I could only remember the unimportant things like his glasses and how tall he is and the mole he has on his left ear that looks like an earring but isn't. His eyes mess me up the most so I got upset in class and just drew small black circles and focused on making them as even as possible because one time at recess someone told me that the most handsome people in the world have symmetrical faces and I know that about my dad (that he is very handsome because people always say so). But then I pressed my pen into the paper too hard and it made a hole go through the portrait's eyes and I was so upset that I started to cry and Mrs. Singh had to take my in the hall and breathe with me and tell me to let go of my perfectionist tendencies. It was even worse because everyone says that me and Dad have the same eyes which you think would make it easier for me to know what they look like and how to draw them correctly but it doesn't.

When class ended and we all left and Mrs. Singh came too and everyone was like Mrs. Singh why are you following all of us to English class like a freaky stalker. She stayed past when class started she and Mrs. Baldwin said that on top of the portrait we will be writing an essay about why we chose to draw who we are going to draw (Stefy Martinez told them it was a stupid amount of work but then they gave her a red card and she got quiet about it). So when I went home that day I freaked out to Mom and told her about how my teachers were trying to kill us all with this project and that if I did not hang out with Dad very soon I will fail the fifth grade

basically. I knew she was super mad about it even though she kept saying she was not super mad about it (she was). But it seemed okay because she said at dinner that night that Dad said he could and that I would go on to middle school with the rest of my friends like a normal person and that everything would be fine.

Mom and I made a deal that I could hand out candy and wait for Dad at the door if I worked on an outline for my essay of him before we left to trick or treat. She told me to make a list of what I know about him and that we could pick the best ones together. Here is what I know about him for sure:

1. HE SMOKES CIGARETTES BUT HE WILL ONLY DO IT WHEN HE IS OUTSIDE BY HIMSELF

His nails kind of smell like chimneys and are a little grey and I thought this used to be something that happened to people who cook a lot but then I took health class and I started to know better. His teeth are not yellow like those pictures of people in our textbooks but he does cough sometimes for no reason at all over the phone. At my ninth birthday party we all went roller skating and he kept leaving and coming back and when I hugged him he smelled nasty like sweaty socks that had caught on fire. So I'm pretty sure he just wants to hide it so I don't get sad about it and tell him about how it's going to make him die very young even though he is already kind of old (all parents are old but they are not old old).

2. OLIVES ARE HIS FAVORITE FOOD

3. WATERMELON IS HIS LEAST FAVORITE FOOD

Except for Jolly Ranchers. When I was littler we would go to the movies a lot during his visits and he would always buy a big jumbo bag of them. He would suck on the red ones and I

would suck on the green ones and we would leave the rest on our movie seats like a little present for whoever found them.

4. HE REALLY LIKES SOCCER BUT HE ALSO REALLY HATES IT

There are sometimes commercials on TV where dads get too excited and jump in the air when someone scores a goal and spray food all over the living room and couch and stuff. That's sort of like my dad except he just yells a lot at the players on the screen and doesn't like answering questions about what's going on. This year on my birthday he took me to a big soccer game and painted my face with the team colors (even though I didn't ask for it as my present it was still fun so I wasn't mad) and then he got so angry-excited about the game that he got into a fight with another dad and we had to leave early.

5. MOM SAYS HE IS VERY SELFISH

She would never tell me this to my face but I heard her say it once on the phone when she was supposed to be calling him about buying school supplies a couple months ago. I needed a bunch of blue pens and she called Dad to ask him for some (he is a banker and bankers have to use a lot of pens because they write so many checks a day) but then they yelled at each other and she called him selfish and other bad words and cried in her room afterward and I was pen-less. I didn't want to cause any more fights so I just went next door to Drew Porter's house and took some while we were playing hide and seek. I think he noticed when we sat next to each other in homeroom but it's okay because he is scared of me ever since I told him that my favorite animals are vampire bats (they are like blind flying piglets and I think it is cute even though no one else does).

6. HE DOESN'T LIKE TO SAY I LOVE YOU

This is a big difference between Mom and Dad. Mom always say I love you the same way she says goodbye because she says you can never know when will be the last time to tell someone you love them (people drop like fruit flies these days she says). But Dad just says goodbye be safe. I always say bye Dad I love you and he says okay goodbye Reese's Pieces be safe (that is his nickname for me). Sometimes he will hum a little bit like he is singing a song which usually means he is in a very good mood but he still never says it over the phone. I asked him one time why he never says it and he says it is because he thinks actions speak louder than words. That is why he is going to fly all the way here just to come pose for my project because that shows he loves me more than just sending me a picture of himself even though Mom says that would have been much easier.

7. IN THE DRESSER BESIDE HIS BED HE KEEPS A PILE OF REALLY OLD PHOTOGRAPHS

I saw it once during the only time we got to go visit him when he moved into his new house in Boston a long time ago (plane tickets there are very expensive which is why we can not go again). The oldest picture he has is in black and white and it is of my grandfather in his military uniform. It was taken when he was super young and not full of brain cancer. Attached to it with a paper clip is a smaller picture of him with a bunch of kids. One of them sits on the handlebar of his wheelchair and has a smile that is 50% teeth and 50% no teeth. My grandpa grew up in Japan and became a sergeant for the military and taught poor kids math and science after losing both of his legs during a battle. That is how he met my grandma (she taught dance down the hall) and also why my Mom got to go to Tokyo before I was born so they could spread his ashes in a river there. My dad does not like to talk about him even though he has lots of his old war medals in a box in his closet.

Underneath the picture of my grandfather is a picture of me wrapped in a big blanket. I look like a piece of gnocchi.

The one near that was of my dad and my Uncle Ken who lives in Alaska and tracks the migration patterns of fish and algae. I only got to meet him one time at Thanksgiving a few years ago and when Dad told me what Uncle Ken's job was I said it sounded extremely boring and then he put me in time out for being rude. I was there for so long that I fell asleep and did not get to say goodbye Uncle Ken I will see you next holiday season. He has a baby now. His name is Niko but my dad has no photos of him. I wonder sometimes if he looks like me but just a boy version.

There are lots of photos of his adult friends that I have never met and do not know the names of. There used to be lots of pictures of me and my mom (he used to keep a drawer in his old house too before he moved) but there was only one left when I looked on that trip. It is this one of me and him and Mom in a park sitting on a bench. We are each holding a sunflower and a balloon. I do not remember where we got them from because that is a part of my dumped-out-baby-memories but we all look very happy. My mom is hard to recognize because in the photo she is wearing big sunglasses and a long dress and her face is leaning against the stroller that is parked next to the bench like she wants to fall asleep even though it was daytime.

It is dark now. A kid from my class named Marcus just came up to our house and said he had a medical problem that forced him to only eat KitKats so I had to give him our entire supply (we only had four KitKats in the bowl and I could not hide the last one before he saw it). I asked Mom to call Dad and ask where he is and she did but he did not answer and she said he will probably be here very soon. It is a secret but I am getting sleepy and I do not know how big kids stay up so late (10pm feels extremely far away from right now when it is 8:30pm). I will eat an

apple sauce packet and see if it helps me stay awake even though the chicken sandwich I ate took up all the space in my stomach.

There are a lot of things I need to try and find out about Dad once he gets here. They gave us a rubric for questions our essay needs to answer and so I have information goals I need to complete. So for right now I would like to know:

1. WHERE WAS HE BORN
2. IS IT POSSIBLE FOR HIM TO COME UP WITH ANOTHER NAME FOR ME BESIDES REESE'S PIECES (I AM NOT EVEN ALLOWED TO EAT NUTS OR MY BODY WILL EXPLODE)
3. WHAT IS HIS FAVORITE THING ABOUT HIS JOB
4. WHY DOES HE SAY SORRY SO MUCH
5. WHAT KIND OF MOVIES DOES HE LIKE
6. WILL HE BE ABLE TO VISIT MORE OFTEN ANY TIME SOON
7. WHY WON'T HE LOOK MY LITTLE SISTER IN THE EYES

NINA

May 6th, 2013

Reese finds me on the couch, jeans undone with my hands dangling inside a box of Cheez-Its, half-focused on some animation movie playing on the TV. There's a blonde princess—are they ever not blonde—and a bunch of animals and trees and who knows what's happening. All I can think about is how high I am. That, and Taco Bell. I don't bother glancing back when I hear the front door slam because I already know it's her with her rhinoceros steps like it has to be known that her approach is both inevitable and important.

I sense the wave of criticism before she opens her mouth. Her, back from a long day of lounging in a coffee shop doing all her fancy coding research, and me, back from a half day of school in which I mostly napped, carved my lasagna into the shape of an angel during lunch, and skipped sixth period to come home and do this. She will turn toward me and draw her little breath, hold it, peer down and wonder if I'm even worth it before blurting out whatever wisdom she cannot, for the life of her, refrain from bestowing upon me. But first she will just say:

“Hey.” She scratches the corners of her mouth and organizes the stack of mail on the kitchen counter. “You're home early.”

“Yep,” I say.

“No work today?” she asks.

“Nope,” I say. “Off.”

She fiddles with the envelopes and their rustling fills the few feet between the kitchen and where I'm stretched out on the couch. I turn on the captions even though I'm too lazy to read them.

“Well, I had a super long day,” she says.

“Uh huh.”

“I’m drowning in to-do lists. They had me on five conference calls today.”

“Wow,” I say and turn up the volume a point or two.

“And you?”

“What?”

“Did you have a lot to do today? At school?”

“Yeah.” I stuff another handful of Cheez-Its in my mouth. “Tons,” I say, my voice muffled by the crackers.

“I looked houses today, too.”

I don’t say anything and she coughs.

“While I was taking breaks with work, I mean.”

“Mhm.”

“I found a nice place right on the perimeter of the Bay. The rent is agonizing, as I expect, but it sort of excited me to think about the move. Could be sooner than I thought.”

“Cool, yeah,” I say, and she speeds over me before I can ask if it can be made even sooner. Like right-now sooner.

“I have gotten so used to being back home with you and Mom. It will be strange to leave again.” She clears her throat. “Did you need help with your calculus homework again?”

“Nope.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I say. Is it possible for someone to be such a tight ass that it constipates their attitude?

“So, the test went fine?”

I sigh obnoxiously and hope she’ll get the hint. “Yep. Went great. Trying to relax now.”

Reese hums. “Alright. I’m going to do a little more work before starting dinner,” she says.

“Just make sure you clean up the kitchen before Mom gets home from work.”

“Yeah, okay,” I say.

“She will be home in like fifteen minutes. She texted me.”

“Yeah, well, I’m busy, so I’ll do it in a second.”

“I’m not sure watching ‘Tangled’ while eating Goldfish counts as being busy.”

I look down. Fuck. I thought these Cheez-Its tasted weird. I’m way too high for this.

“Hello?” Reese says, still rummaging around with the mail, not bothering to look at me.

“Jesus, I heard you, alright? I’ll do it in a minute.”

“That’s what you always say,” she mumbles, just loud enough to insure I don’t miss her audible reminder of how annoying and inconvenient I am to her as a human being. She doesn’t say that, exactly, but she doesn’t have to.

After all these years I figured I would’ve learned to cope. My entire life has been the same grating cycle of Reese surpassing expectations, being all the things daughters are supposed to be, then morphing into a nagging, relentless thorn digging into my side when I don’t follow behind her and get with the program. I say “my entire life,” but it’s not like I remember much from when I was a baby, anyway, and maybe that’s why I can’t find it in myself to redeem her. There’s no proof of her ever being anything more than a huge, looming shadow under which I’ve failed to photosynthesize. How people see her as anything more than an entitled bully is beyond me.

The likelihood of her being a total monster since the dawn of time isn’t liable, but I’m not entirely convinced she hasn’t paid off people to pose with her in photographs and act like they’re friends so she can market her normalcy off to unsuspecting victims. I see beneath her layers. I

dream of the day when Mom comes home and catches her using that condescending tone on me so I can leap up and say look! Look at your dutiful daughter being a downright bitch! I'm the victim here! I've always been the victim here! She's too good of an actress for anyone to see her transform, but I see it. I know what she's really like when I call her out on her faux niceties and she realizes she can't hide anymore.

She slouches beside me on the couch with a bundle of mail in her fist. I hear a blade sliding against paper. An envelope lands in my lap.

"You got mail from the high school. It's probably about lunch money," she says.

"I just refilled my balance last week after my paycheck hit," I say, focusing on the screen. So much color.

"About graduation dues then, maybe," she says.

I mumble something in the affirmative and feel her remove the letter from my leg when it's clear I'm not gonna open it. Money, money, yeah. My brain fuzzes over. A wild streak of yellow stretches across the screen as Rapunzel—everyone keeps singing her name for no apparent reason—rolling down a hill and trilling like a bird. How do they get her hair to look so shiny and magical? Like a real-life Pantene commercial. Except I guess digital animation is the exact opposite of real life, so it wouldn't really make sense to have her as the face of a campaign for real women's hair. But little girls would dig it. Yeah, they would eat that shit up. Kids can't afford to buy their own shampoo, though—they've got no money. Plus don't all kids use that no-tears stuff until they're like five? We did. Smelled like strawberries on meth. I kind of liked it, which makes sense considering the meth part. Rapunzel is now belting her heart out while her tiny lizard boyfriend chills in her fruity hair, and I'm wondering when she's going to kiss him so

he turns back into a prince or whatever. Reese is being quiet. Reese is never quiet. Why is Reese being so quiet?

I look over and there's a letter curling back into its creases on her lap, the envelope torn and open on the couch cushion. She holds the letter in her hands but doesn't read it.

"So? What is it?" I ask. She gets up and walks into the kitchen.

"What?" I ask again, turning to watch her go.

She props her elbows on the stained kitchen counter and drops her forehead in her hands.

"Nina," she says. Her voice is soft. I can barely hear her over the television.

"What?" I say, turning down the volume. "If it's lunch shit I'll just front more, I didn't think it would run out so fast."

"I thought we talked about this, Nina."

"Talked about wh—" I stop. Pause the TV. I didn't think my counselor would send literal, physical mail about it. Little medieval if I do say so myself, Barbara. I turn around to sit on my knees and watch her and she's holding her chin in her palms like she is struggling to face me. I can only see her profile against the cherry cabinets and the low light of the afternoon.

"Did you know about this?" she asks.

I swallow and press my mouth together.

"Nina."

"Yeah, I knew."

"And what? You just thought it would go away? Two weeks left in school and you thought they would just let you skate by?"

"I mean, I didn't know how to say anything. They literally just told me about it."

"What, today?"

“No. I don’t know.”

“This is dated from over a week ago.” She turns to me, the letter limp in her grip, but scowls and looks away.

“Okay, so I knew about it. Jesus. I knew about it and I didn’t say anything because I didn’t know what the hell to do, okay? Sue me.”

“It is not about me, Nina, or even the grades. Mom and I warned you about what it would be like to try and make it without at least a diploma.”

“Just say it,” I say.

“What?”

“Just say what you need to say. That I’m stupid, that I don’t listen.”

“You are not stupid,” she says, pushing her fingers through her hair.

“But you don’t think I listen to you and you don’t think I care,” I say.

“You don’t listen. I want you to care, but every time Mom gives you the opportunity to fix it or I try to give you advice, you just fight us, and—”

“Well, maybe I don’t care.”

She’s got that look, the one screaming that she was always right about me, her brow all forward and tensed. She groans and curses and if I closed my eyes she would sound exactly like Mom. Both of them merging into one huge, grotesque titan with two heads, showering me in their mutual, unending disappointment and beating me into the earth. Mom. God. The guilt trip that awaits me when she gets home. Reese avoiding eye contact may be her version of mercy, but Mom, not a chance.

Reese braces her palms on the counter, stretching, but I can see the strain of her back muscles, the tension of her neck constricting, and I wonder how close she is to detonation, to letting the words fly. The buzz is officially killed.

“I’m sorry,” I say, empty-handed and empty-headed. “I’ll fix it.”

“Mom already got the graduation invitations sent out. What are we supposed to tell people?”

“It’s not like my own high school’s gonna kick me out. I can talk to them. They’ll let me fix it.”

She picks up the letter. “The masthead says ‘final notice.’”

“Who cares? If I go in there, I can—”

“Save it. For this once, please spare me.”

I sink deeper into the lounge chair. “So I fucked up. Can’t you just get used to it by now?” A rush bolts through me and I toss a throw pillow on the ground. “Look at me.”

She does, snapping, fuming but still, and we stare like that for a minute before I reach for the Goldfish carton and storm to put them away in the pantry. I can’t see Reese from behind the pantry door and I sit there choosing: anger or shame, anger or shame, which instinct is the right one. My brain is flooded and I am sluggish, half-drowned and struggling for air, and my thoughts are blurring.

I march over to the opposite counter and lean with my arms crossed. I glare at her, but she keeps her eyes down like she’s choosing between her options, too, and—maybe Reese will just kill me, actually. We will stand in the kitchen together, bending closer as we yell, and she will finally knife me like she’s probably dreamed of for years. Mom will come home to my bisected body in a pool of blood. Reese will cower with that innocent look in her eyes, pleading for understanding, clutching the weapon to her stained chest. How romantic. They could dance over

the mess, or just Reese, and then Mom would have her committed and she would waltz herself down the halls of the loony bin. Reese, finally free of her petulant failure of a little sister, and Mom of the both of us and me of them. Who would be more relieved?

All our years together at each other's throats, all the fights, it makes it hard to remember the good times. People love to reminisce about the past, about the old times, we were so happy in the good times, they say, and jab each other and cry while smiling because they are never beyond reconciliation. Not with us, though. It gets so intense here, it makes me claustrophobic. I have to roam the streets after arguments just to prevent boiling over. When Mom dropped the bomb that Reese would be returning home for the couple of months between finishing her master's and relocating for her new job, I thought it would be the end of me. It wasn't bad, at first. For a while we seemed to genuinely tolerate one another and I thought, oh wow, all we needed was time apart, but then she started it again. That voice . . . The way she looks at me. Like I'm so impossible. I won't pretend she is the only one capable of being an enraged, malicious tyrant. I don't lie that blatantly, even to myself. It's not even that I'm incapable of stooping to her level—I know how insufferable I can be—but she starts it. She pushes and pushes and what am I supposed to do? Sit back and take it while she sits there and bats her eyelashes?

There was this one time when I was twelve where I thought it would be funny to pull a prank on Reese. She had embarrassed me in front of some kid I liked on the bus, who knows now, but I snuck off while she was tutoring some kid in our living room. She was dating this kid, Omar, and he did yard work on the weekends for the neighborhood, was the type to walk grannies to the grocery store and stuff. He was preening the neighbor's bushes and stripping the ground of weeds when I skipped over from our house. He pulled his head phones out of his grime-covered ears and I sat with him in the yard, all serious, and told him I thought she might be cheating on

him, but I couldn't give him a name because that would be disloyal, obviously, which he must understand. He nodded and looked dejected. The next day she came home from school and throttled me. I really thought I was gonna die.

Reese isn't the type to get mad. She'll tear people down psychologically all day, will put up a grin to soften the blow, but she would never lay a finger on anyone. That day she punched me hard, square in the mouth. I thought I passed out or lost a tooth or both. A thick rip of blood sprouted on my upper lip and slid over my chin. I knew it would never happen again a second after the shock passed. I lay on hardwood clutching my swelling jaw and she sank to her knees, her eyes so filled with horror that for a moment I thought she had actually killed me and I was watching on from the afterlife. She cried there, on the ground in front of me. Sobbed like nothing I had ever seen besides in movies. I didn't even know she was capable. She looked so weak and small.

We didn't speak for four weeks after that. It was the most suffocating month of my life.

She is stalking the kitchen in slow circles. I push myself from the counter and cross my arms and pretend I don't notice the hoarseness creeping into my voice. "What do you want me to do?" I ask.

"This is not about what I want," she says.

"It's always about what you want," I say and scoff. "It's about you and Mom and what you want me to be."

"We want what is best for you."

"How would you know?" I say.

"Is it really so unlikely that we just love you and want to help you?" she asks.

"You don't care about me. You don't care about what I want."

“We care about what you need. We want to see you succeed.” She begins to pace and mutter to herself.

“Then stop setting me up to fail,” I say.

She begins to retort, but the low moan of our garage door opening hums through the house. Our floorboards creak with its force. For the first time in a long time, I fill with searing panic, icy in my veins.

We look toward each other. A mask falls over Reese’s face. Any sign of vulnerability is tucked away. She lifts her chin high.

“So.” Her pause is dramatic, calculated. “Are you going to tell her, or should I?”

SLOANE

August 13th, 1995

He knocks on the back door and I let him in without looking at him. It feels vaguely symbolic, like staring down the barrel of a robber's gun before they can aim, pull the hammer, and level eyes as the bullet clicks into place. Then they're caught in that purgatory of finality, the victim and robber, forced to surrender to the moment and the romance. Putting away the dishes, I select a new fantasy to distract myself, one where the weight of my rehearsed speech isn't taking shelter in my large intestine. One where Derek can't tell that I'm avoiding making eye contact. One where life is a movie scene in which we could cut, cinematically, to the moment when the shock of my announcement plays over his face and the whole screen blacks out and everyone is left in eternal suspense. The glasses tinker as I push them into the cabinet, one by one. He keeps his distance. There is no gun and there is no kissing.

Our conversation moves into small-talk before the baby monitor ruptures with the sound of Reese tossing in her bed. We both tense until the noise subsides. He catches my relieved stare and their eyes are identical, the same black, black intensity. It keeps me up at night, wondering if she will turn out just like him—her father's daughter.

“Does she like the new bed?” he asks, relaxing.

“Yeah. She's adjusted by now.”

“Oh. I didn't think about that.”

“About what?”

“I just thought it would be like an instant upgrade. Bigger bed, better sleep,” he says and scratches the nape of his neck.

“Well, the growing pains passed.” I gesture at the quiet monitor. “I think we’re fairly smooth sailing at this point.”

He hums, nods. “The bedspread was too much, though, wasn’t it?”

“She is more of a dragon person than a princess person,” I say.

“Resistance is futile, I know,” he says.

“It’s soft and yellow. Two of her favorite things.”

“Managed to get something right, then?”

“Somehow,” I say, but it’s overly bitter, so I try and smother it with a smile.

He crosses his arms and shrugs. “Maybe I should start showing up dressed as Big Bird to rack up some bonus points.”

“Or maybe you could just start showing up.” I think it but don’t vocalize it. I can’t. Not here, like this, in our old kitchen, on scorched earth. He clears his throat to cut the lull in conversation and glances around as if he heard me thinking.

“She started school this week, right? How’s it been so far?”

I shrink back and fiddle with the silverware drawer. “Yeah. They started the kids with a half day on Friday so they could ease into it. Tomorrow is her first full day.”

“You torturing her with bus rides or did you work out carpool?”

“She likes the bus,” I say. “She begged for it. She’s already made ‘big kid’ friends, she told me.” I duck out of the room and return with her little name-tag her teacher pinned to her bag. Her name is written in permanent marker with overly cute curly-cues on a laminated, cartoon butterfly. Derek rubs his thumb over the bug’s grin.

“God,” he sighs. “So fucking fast.”

I nod, retrieve the name-tag and pin it back on her bag. He is still there when I return, palm frozen and upturned in the air like he's studying the grooves and calluses.

"Did you get any photos?" he asks.

"A few," I say.

He stitches his lips together, licks to separate them. "Do you think you could mail me a few copies?"

"Picking up scrapbooking?"

"Just for the office, to hang up. Since I couldn't make it to town in time to see her go."

"Right—sure." I move toward the sink but there are no more dishes to wash, dry, unrack. "I'll order a couple extra," I say, trying not to sound deflated. I face him. He opens and closes his palm a couple more times, lifting it as if he intends to signal a transition, but withdraws and balances it on the back of his neck. I wait.

"I'm actually thinking about visiting my Dad soon, going to the river again," he begins. "It's been a long time and I've got some extra vacation days saved up."

"Alright," I say, my intonation half a question.

"I'd just be hopping around Tokyo for a couple of weeks around Christmas time. Doing some soul-searching, sort of, you know."

"Okay," I say.

"Well, I was thinking—you might let me bring Reese along?"

"You thought I might let you bring her to Tokyo with you?"

"She'd have a blast," he says. "I know it's asking a lot, but I do want to point out that I am asking."

For years we have danced like this together, this tango of permission and tolerance, with our alternating personas. Jealous boyfriend, ambitious crush, loving fiancé, budding parents, anguished. He dips me and I twirl and the needle lifts from the spinning vinyl record as we part, backs turned in defiance, as adversaries. The spell is shattered and we are left to our opposing desks to sift through our divorce paperwork with our dance shoes retired to their old shoeboxes. Now we reunite to present our final act: the doting caretaker—father is too generous a word—clad in his silver armor fighting his malevolent ex-wife, disguised as a gorgon, as she bars him from rescuing his young daughter from her high tower full of suffering, assured suffering. I have tried to be anything but this person, this monster that Derek has decided I've become. I have resisted the tired, overdrawn narrative of our relationship. Whenever he reappears in our lives and stands in front of me as he does now, looking sorry, there is the familiar tug of cloying guilt in my chest, the sound of drums in my ears as he slides his hand into mine and we dance again. The spotlight irradiates his begging stare, his arrogant carriage reduced to a slump, all parts of him feigning vulnerability and asking for mercy. It forces me to wonder, with my old, shedded skin balled up in my palms, ready to be worn again, if he has always been right about me, if I am codependent and that is the real reason things are as they are, because I am incapable of handling the truth about myself.

A pulse of energy jolts in my abdomen and I cough, caught off guard. Derek moves to touch my back, asks what is wrong, but I shrug him off and move to brace against the kitchen counter. I imagine the old skin in my hands like a silk robe, slipping between my fingers and untangling into fraying ribbons to collapse in a heap on the floor. My stomach lurches again and I slip a hand into the pocket of my sweater, rubbing.

“I don't think taking Reese to Tokyo is a good idea,” I say.

“Are you feeling alright?” he asks. “Maybe we should talk about it later.”

“She’s too young to go. I don’t feel safe letting her go so far without me there.”

“Slo,” he says and steps forward, but I push myself into the other corner.

“She’s gotten really attached these past few months. She cries every time I have to leave the house. It’d be too hard on her.”

“If it’s not about having her around for Christmas Day, I can move the days around. I bought flight insurance when I got the tickets.”

“You already bought them?” I ask.

He hesitates. “My boss mentioned we had a new client there and I couldn’t pass it up.”

“It’s not even a vacation? You want to bring our daughter on a work trip halfway around the world.”

“I want to show her her roots,” he says. “Kenji’s going to be there with his kid. The timing works out perfectly.”

“No,” I say.

“You’re really not going to let me spend time with my own daughter?”

“It’s not up to you.”

“Oh great, great. Just throw the sole custody thing in my face again.”

“Like how you throw the fact that you have to pay child support in mine?” I ask.

“So we’re going there now?”

“No one is going anywhere, especially not Reese, with you, to Tokyo,” I say.

He throws up his arms and scowls. “I ask you for one favor—one. I just want to spend time with my daughter.”

“You could’ve spent time with your daughter all summer, but you didn’t. You packed your shit and holed up in your cave in Boston and hardly even called. You just want to take her now so you can distract her with a fancy trip and hope she forgets about all those months of not seeing you.”

“It’s not like I work this much because I enjoy it. I’m not happy being kept away from her.”

“No one is keeping you away from her but yourself.” There is a tightening creeping up my throat, from anger or from nausea I’m not sure, but Derek is pacing, pacing, nearing closer to me with every small circle he makes in the cramped kitchen.

“You’re so impossible,” he says.

I bury my face in my hands and breathe through the waves of indigestion.

“I don’t get to call the shots out here, Sloane,” he says, his whispers as harsh if he were screaming, the static of the baby monitor still buzzing in the corner of the kitchen. “They say ‘jump’ and if I don’t hurl myself in the air with all I’ve got then they’ll drop my contract before I even get to make an excuse.” He points a finger and jabs just shy of my sternum. “You don’t get to punish me for doing what I have to do. You don’t get to keep me away from my own flesh and blood just because you’ve decided you’re fed up. I don’t care what the damn judge says.”

The stone of the rehearsed speech stirs in my gut, roused by the sharp pains slicing at me, portioning me into bite-sized pieces. I feel it stretch into my throat and puppet me through the motions.

“I’m pregnant,” I blurt through my hands. The particular pressure of my mouth delivering the words, the subsequent stillness, pushes me out of the flowing tide of sickness and I can breathe, the stomach pains quieting.

He is still. He is spluttering.

“I’m pregnant, Derek,” I say again but softer.

“I heard you.” He sighs and slinks over to the far wall, sinks to the ground. His gaze is far away.

I found out after dropping Reese off at Eva’s. I was half-conscious while taking the test, head resting my knees as I waited. When I saw the time on my watch and realized how late I was for my morning shift, I shoved the stick in a Ziploc bag and dropped her off with my toothbrush hanging in my mouth. I kissed her goodbye and sped off, Eva waving with a puzzled look on her face as she led Reese inside. Digging through the glovebox in the hospital parking lot, I was full of terror and beauty and hope but for what I wasn’t sure, for which answer. I tilted the stick in its plastic bag to ensure it wasn’t just the glare, but the result was the same no matter the angle of the sun: two blue lines, side by side. A mother of one becomes a mother of two, just like that. Another little girl or boy. Another Reese. Or—my heart sank in the humid heat of the car, sank further as I crossed the parking lot and clocked in for my shift—another Derek.

During my lunch break, I drove to the Riverwalk, overwhelmed with the need to be solitary but seen. I brooded—there’s no better word for it—among the duck shit and the bread crumbs and the brown exhaust curling over the trailing ferries, consumed with a thing unlabeled. My vision blurred over the passing boats and their gushing steam, the turbulent wheels flinging water into seagulls’ eyes. I felt the soft, pliant skin of my stomach, still flat, felt a phantom kick tapping against my palm like a foreshadowing ghost. Instinct spread me out on the concrete in order to accommodate the content and horror and ambivalence wrenching my limbs into taffy. I think I cried. But I saw in the swollen clouds the answer. The shape of a child’s eyes full and

bright, creasing upward with luminous wonder, honey-almond, blushing cheeks, a little girl, but this time she is not his but mine. Entirely mine. My exact copy.

The heat of the cement seeped into my bones and pooled into my stomach where I grew, grew, nurtured, loved a ball I knew was only nails and nerve cells and a pudding brain but felt like a child, curly-haired like me, freckled maybe like her big sister and my own mother who I only barely remember, or soft-spoken and tall like people I've always admired but never befriended. Part of it was hope, I knew, that a child could patch the fallen bridge between Derek and I, could remind us of what love we had dropped along the way and teach us to reconcile. The other part was beyond that, sliding into an idea of what it would mean to abandon this baby and return home to Reese's curious, devoted eyes and think of a future beautiful thing that was lost out of fear. I had never been so occupied with the poetic while laying there on the ground, vines of optimism winding through me as if everything was and always would be shrouded in blossoms, the weight of the world turning molten and filling me with wild congregations of hummingbirds and crystallized sugar and finely-milled glitter and all things even vaguely wonderful, including unease.

I made my peace with myself on the ground amongst the crushed rocks and bird feed, and again on the drive home, and again, a million times, listening to Reese ramble over dinner. I molded bubbles into wings on her back during her bath and watched sleep take her and thought of her eventual excitement. It was easy, then, to push aside the apprehension of telling Derek. It's easy now, too, with the facts of everything floating between us and knowing, for once, that there are no more secrets.

"It's mine?" he asks softly, breaking the long pause.

"Yes," I say. He nods.

“I thought we used a condom,” he says, then laughs. There is only the sound, though. He does not smile. “Guess it doesn’t really matter.”

“We were wasted and exhausted. It was after Reese’s birthday party.”

“I remember,” he says. “I was driving home after, thinking . . .” The words go unvoiced.

“I’m just telling you as a formality,” I say. “I don’t expect you to do anything.”

This stirs him. “What? What do you mean?”

“No child support, no whatever. It was the right thing to tell you, so I told you, but it doesn’t need to be more than that.”

“You don’t even . . .” He gestures at my belly, its shy bulge covered by my oversized sweater.

“Reese doesn’t know yet. I wanted her to get adjusted to school first.”

“Can’t you just get an abortion?” he asks.

I shake my head, try to be patient. “I’m keeping the baby, Derek.”

“Another kid,” he mutters.

“It doesn’t change anything,” I say.

“It changes everything.”

“No. It’s just me this time. I’m doing this. I want you to know that this is not your problem.”

“It’s not about it being my problem. It’s about it being my kid. And if it’s my kid, then it’s my problem. It’s our problem.”

“It’s not, I promise.”

He rubs at his tear ducts and he looks fragile, small, childish. He groans and it is half my name, half gibberish. He rises from the ground and I walk towards him. I rest my hands on his

upper arms and he is tense, panic seizing his face and making him heavy, the dam nearing a breach.

“It’s fine,” I say. “Everything is gonna be fine. All I ask is that you don’t punish me for doing what I have to do.”

He shakes his head at my quote and hot breath washes over my face. He tries to gather himself, stretch into someone taller, braver, but he slumps and passes his fingers through his hair, knocking my arms from him.

“I can’t,” he says. He turns from me and stalks into the living room at a sloth’s pace, clutching at his head, whispering to himself. “I can’t, I can’t . . .”

For a while he just sits in the car, hands still on the wheel. When he turns on the engine at first I think I imagine it, like my brain has filled in the gaps, but he is there and then he isn’t, the night slithering in to fill his void. I squeeze into bed beside Reese and hold her small hand in mine, imagine how I will tell her about her father’s impromptu return back to Boston, how I will protect her idea of him, how I will protect her idea of me. I wonder how she will remember today, the day before she found out she was no longer alone, if she will remember at all.

Nina is born on January 10th in the middle of the night. Eva pushes past the staff with her badge shoved in their faces and coaches me through the twelve-hour labor. On the birth certificate there is a space under the word “father.” It stays blank while I rest at the hospital, after we return home, when Derek surfaces to ask if he can resume visits with Reese and meet the baby, when he holds Nina for the first time like she is cloaked in fire and blood and poison and apologizes to me in a whisper. The paper sits snug in a file, the space still blank. Maybe it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, but I don’t mind and as the years crawl by, neither, it seems, does he.

REESE

February 19th, 2008

“Where are we going?” Reese asked.

“Wherever we go, I want pizza for dessert afterward,” Nina said.

“I told you, stop trying to convince people that dessert pizza is real food,” Reese said. She kicked the driver’s seat from where she reclined in the back. “Does Mom even know about this?”

Her father scowled and wiped the dust she left behind. “Watch the leather.”

“Is Mom meeting us?” Nina asked.

“Of course she knows about it. She has work. I thought I’d just check you out from school myself.”

“So she is meeting us?” Reese asked.

“Maybe later,” he said.

“She lets me make dessert pizza. I made her try it and she says it’s not that bad.”

“Your mother eats anything covered in chocolate, so I don’t know if that’s helping your case any.” He turned to Nina, patted her head when he noticed her dejected expression.

“I’ll call her,” Reese said. She sat up and reached over the center console. “Her boss will let her off early for lunch if she asks.”

Her father snatched the phone before she could get her hands around it. He looked at her through the rearview.

“Business phone. Sorry, honey.”

Reese’s glare narrowed. “If she knew you were coming then why didn’t she tell us?”

“So he could surprise us, stupid. Duh.” Nina squealed as Reese’s kick skimmed her headrest. She turned around and punched her older sister in the calf.

“Hey, knock it off. At least watch the seats. I need to return this rental in one piece.”

“You still haven’t told us where we’re going,” Reese mumbled. She stretched across the seats again, held strands of her hair up to the sky and observed the different shades, the chestnut and soot and muted blacks. The sky was cloudy, curious.

He reached back to pat her knee, but she shrank away.

“You’ll see. You’ll like it.”

Nina brushed the dials of the radio. “Can I turn up the music, Dad?”

“Sure,” he said, his eyes still trained on Reese in the rearview. She turned over, pressed her nose into the seat. “Play whatever you want,” she heard him say.

Nina shook her awake when they arrived and parked. Walking up to the admissions counter, a giant tyrannosaurus rex hung over the woman who sold them tickets. She pressed a purple stamp of a velociraptor onto the top of Reese’s hand and grinned, her teeth oddly round. She caught up with her father and Nina, who were already entering, bending beneath the fake jungle foliage clouding the front doors.

“Aren’t we a bit old for science museums?” she asked him, glancing over the lobby. He shrugged as Nina hopped off to toggle with an interactive screen explaining the Mesozoic era.

“They’ve got all sorts of stuff.”

“The last time I came here was on a field trip in middle school.”

“Nina is in middle school. Plus there’s a movie theater. It’s IMAX.”

“What’s this about?” Reese asked, crossing her arms and standing in front of him.

“What? I can’t fly down and surprise my daughters?”

“It doesn’t sound like you, no.”

“Consider it a late Valentine’s gift.”

“You never called Nina back on Christmas, you know. She even left a voicemail.” He ogled her. “If we’re speaking about holidays, is all.”

“I told your mother I was traveling that whole month,” he said. He frowned but shook it off. He gestured at the expansive museum. “What exhibit do you want to go to first? The woman at the desk said they just opened up the butterfly garden.”

Reese snatched a brochure from him and flitted through the pages. “I think I’ll catch one of those movies.”

“Which one? Nina said she wanted to watch the tropical storms documentary.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “You two can go ahead.”

Her father cocked his head. “I didn’t fly all the way out here to spend time with only one of you.”

“I’ll catch up,” she said. “She will want you all to herself, anyway.”

“Should I buy you popcorn?”

“I’ll be alright.”

“Reese,” he called as she walked away, but she only turned to her sister, who was staring at them, and vaguely smiled. Nina waved and beckoned their father over, stealing his attention. Reese took the opportunity to head to the movie theater. Her father called out a warning for her to be careful. She nodded without turning around.

The film was short and already fifteen minutes in, but Reese settled into an empty seat, propped her feet up before the toddler in the row below reached up and touched her ankle. She moved down and focused on the massive screen. A shaky camera crew followed a tall man as he traversed through the dry wilderness of an Egyptian desert. He was tracking a locust migration, set to hatch and fly free any day. Another man narrated, his voice ominous and heavy, discussing

the threat of dehydration and the ambling mammals of the savanna. They showed a montage of the locusts' destruction, entire harvests crumbling under their beating wings and hopping. She thought of them with mild fondness, finding cuteness in their wiggling antennae, until a sequence of their molting began. She exited, wanting to pout but pretending to be above it

She assumed her father and Nina were deep in the midst of some skeletal remains exhibit. For a fleeting moment, she considered searching for them, but then dug around in her purse for the boxy cellphone her mother gave her for emergencies. There were only a couple of minutes left for the month that she had not spent sneaking phone calls to her friends on the weekends. She called her, but no one picked up. She called again, no answer. No minutes left. There was nothing left but to move to the lobby to suffer, surrounded by families, and wait.

She surveyed them all as they trickled past, all of the couples with their tiny replica children. Each cohort had two parents, a mom and dad for holding hands or reading a screen aloud for better comprehension, hovering, talking under their breath, one rubbing the back of the other or wiping a child's mouth. Everywhere, tenderness and boredom, normalcy.

Opening and closing her flip phone, staring at the small, square screen, the situation and its specifics grew stranger. Her mother was not coming and her father was not mentioning why. Not that grown, divorced adults needed to hang out, but a surprise was so unlike him. Their phone calls had been weekly when she was a child, sometimes more often, and now she could not remember the last time she had gone home from school and heard the ring of her father's incoming phone call, the little signaling trill. After a time, she stopped expecting it. She felt she knew the inevitability of it, their distancing and eventual separation, and she had known her father to be a bit childish, anyhow, so sensitive too during those times every year or so when she swallowed her pride and confessed her pain to him, her pain of abandonment and the erratic

sensation that maybe he had never truly wanted her, and he and her mother had been too young when they had her, before they realized a child could be difficult thing to raise but harder to love . . . He often cried, or pretended he was on the verge of doing so. There was no exact moment that came to mind, she insisted, during the handful of times the subject of their fading relationship was ever breached, where the lines connecting them diverged. He relentlessly referenced the Halloween years ago when he was stranded on a plane after another incoming flight had lost a wheel on the runway. He and the other passengers were held for four hours, roaming the cabin without any ability to contact their loved ones, until the flight was eventually canceled and they were returned to their gate. He would exclaim: it wasn't my fault! See, that wasn't my fault, and you blame me for that. Reese would shake her head and insist, again, it was nothing, it was nothing still even now, but her father was determined to point fingers and cite his innocence.

She would not pretend to know what his unwillingness to parent was about, but she tried not to make it about herself. It was never about her, somehow, his fatherhood. Loving him, even as fiercely as she did, could not propel him into action or bring him back home. When she was young, she learned this, nursed it intimately, filed her hope down into a pearl of hard maturity and shrewdness that she did not want but was destined to carry in her pocket like cursed treasure. But still she had loved him in her quiet, loyal way. She saw him as a sort of forlorn creature, misunderstood, a young abandoned buck in a forest lapping at a mossy stream and mewing for his mother. Each time he failed her, she curled into the corner of her bed, passed her blanket between her hands and thought on tangibility and proof, considered the weight of evidence. He would fail and swear it had nothing to do with his efforts, that it was merely the world that wanted them kept apart, and slowly he fell out of her favor. The blind spot in the logic she touted

like a shield cleared away. Her perception of him was stark and painful and her childish love mutated into an injured pity.

Looking on him that first summer, when she felt it—she was fourteen and he had come down for a short weekend that turned into a single-day visit, and they would stroll along the piers. She stood almost at his height and remembered gazing on him with lovelessness for the first time. The first time, and it was summer, and it hurt more because that was their cherished time for hopeful reunion when she was younger and would yearn for the end of the school semester so there were fewer excuses for busyness and forgetfulness. Nina was tugging at his arms and shrieking as he limply chased her around the docked boats and Reese felt a wide nothingness spread into the edges of her chest. He hugged her goodbye when her mother picked them up in the late evening and she hardly squeezed back. He pulled away and stared at her, there was a twinkle in his eyes, but she missed any semblance of connection he was attempting to stir because she could only think of how he had grown visibly older, how he was looking so weak and like a lonely old man. She imagined what he was like back in Boston living in his own world. She imagined him as one of those men who drank foamy macchiatos in pristine coffee shops and made imposing chatter with young baristas, making them visibly uncomfortable. She imagined him like a practical joke and blinded by his own arrogance and success and convinced, completely convinced, that he was doing his best. Maybe he was, she thought. Maybe this was his best and maybe that was not enough and never would be and maybe that was just how things were.

Nina would allow none of it. Reese made the mistake of voicing her poor opinion of him once over dinner with their mother and her sister screamed through hot tears. She decided it was best not to speak of it anymore and her mother agreed. They were fighting so much, anyway,

every snide comment not without its returned insult, and it was slowly killing her mother, she knew, to watch them scrap like street dogs, mutilating one another over non-issues, things that were really less than nothing. So Reese let her sister glide in her fantasy even though it sickened her. Nina was a dreamer and it took everything, even her mother's persuasion, to coax Reese down from the high horse she typically mounted and marched onwards to inform everyone of their reversible plights. She bit her tongue even when it drew blood. Nina would learn on her own time, her mother had said.

Eventually they returned, approaching from a gaping exhibition exit covered in faux vines. Her sister clung to her father. She stopped in front of Reese, who had been lying down, and prodded her cheek.

"Reese is so lazy," she said, turning to their father. "Literally all she does is sleep. Did you know that?"

"I told you to quit poking me," Reese said.

"Your sister overworks herself," her father said.

"No she doesn't."

"Let me know how you feel about being poked every time you get a day off from work and you're trying to take a nap."

"I'm not working until after I get out of school," Nina said.

"Have you told Mom that?"

"I'll be too busy hanging out with all of my friends to work. I won't be a lonely nerd like you."

"Uh huh," Reese said. "And how do you plan to pay for all the gas you'll need to drive to meet these friends, exactly?"

Nina shrugged. “My friends will give me money. That’s what happens when your friends actually like you.”

“Can’t the two of you just be nice to each other?” their father asked.

“No,” they both said, then laughed separately.

“I don’t understand teenage girls,” their father said, joking.

“I’m not sure that’s the issue,” Reese mumbled, but her comment was overwhelmed by Nina’s declaration of her hunger.

They walked to a plaza of chain restaurants next door and took a booth at a burger place. Their father pressed for Reese to sit beside him since she had gone solo during their museum visit. While he was reading the menus, his phone vibrated against the pleather cushions.

“Who’s that?” Nina asked, snacking on complimentary fries.

“Just work stuff,” he said.

“Everyone works so much,” she said, but drifted off.

“You can answer it. We don’t mind,” Reese said.

“It can wait.” The phone rang again. Then again. Derek reached to silence it.

“Seriously, just answer it,” Reese said.

“It’s fine. It’ll stop in a minute. Why don’t we focus on eating together?”

“I want nachos,” Nina said.

The phone buzzed. Reese rolled her eyes and grabbed it from the space where it sat between herself and her father. “Do Blackberries have a silent mode?”

Her mother was calling, but the buzzing stopped before she could answer. His screen showed a bubble: eleven missed calls. The notification was floating atop a photo of a woman and a young baby, smiling. Strung around them were her father’s arms, his lips pressed into the

infant's cheeks. At first she thought it was an old photo of her and her parents, some sort of relic, but the woman was a stranger, and the baby looked more like him than she ever had with almost a complete resemblance.

"Who was that?" she asked. He ignored her, muttering.

"Whose baby is that?" she asked, peering closer to the picture on the screen.

He tore the phone from her hand and cursed. "Always sticking your nose where it doesn't belong," he muttered, slamming his thumbs across the keyboard and composing a text message, to who she was not sure. Their waiter approached the table, pulling a pen from behind his ear.

"Have we all decided?" he asked. Nina babbled her order and pushed the empty basket of fries to the edge of the table.

"I'll take whatever your special is. No need to fill me in on the details," Derek said while finishing his typing. The waiter reluctantly scribbled on his notepad. He turned to Reese.

"Miss?" he asked.

She stopped glaring just long enough to offer the waiter the tightest, albeit kindest smile she could manage. "I'm feeling a bit sick, actually, so I think I'll just take water for now."

"Are you alright?" he asked. "We do have some soups?"

"I'm okay, but thank you," she said.

"Give her a bowl," her father said. The waiter looked back towards her.

"Really, I'll be fine, but thank you."

"It's just impossible for you to do what you're told, isn't it?" her father snapped.

"I'll come back in a few minutes and check back with everyone," the waiter said.

"Please don't come back until you've got the food," Derek said and held out the stack of menus. The waiter nodded and took them. "Don't forget the soup," he added.

Reese waited until the waiter was out of ear shot. “Very classy taking your disrespect out on the waiter.”

“Don’t talk to me about disrespect.”

“Guys?” Nina asked, borderline whimpering.

“You seem to be the expert on it,” Reese said. She gestured to the phone. “Why don’t you show her?”

“Don’t start with me. I came down here to have a nice day with the two of you.”

“It seems like you spare them plenty more than a day at a time.”

Derek slammed a fist on the table, his fork clattering. “I told you I’ve had enough of this conversation.”

“Were you going to tell us?” she asked.

“This is not the time or place for this conversation.”

“Then when is?” Reese looked at her little sister, cowering on her side of the booth.

“If you would have just minded your own business,” he said.

“Then what? You could keep lying to us?”

He kneaded his eyebrows and threw his hand back against the wall, the kind mask withdrawn. “I always told your mother that she spoiled you too much. She was always telling you how smart you are and then one day—I told her one day, watch out, Reese is going to go around poking her nose into things and then she’s going to fall into a cactus face-first. And look what you’ve done now.”

“This really is low, even for you,” Reese said, reclining into the booth seat.

Her father fumed. He moved forward and glared down at her. “You’re going to keep your mouth shut. For once, you’re going to keep your mouth shut. This isn’t your business.”

“You guys are scaring me,” Nina said, hiccuping and beginning to cry.

“I need to call Mom,” Reese said.

“I came all the way down here to see the both of you. We went to the museum, which you decided was beneath you, so now we are going to sit here and enjoy this meal together or so help me—”

“Either you let me call Mom or I’m walking out of here,” Reese said. She twisted towards him. “Lose me or both of us,” she said, nudging her head at Nina.

He bared his teeth and held out the phone. She pried it from him, he grabbed her and said, “This stays between the adults.” She stormed from the restaurant. Nina released a startled wail and Reese heard her father hushing her as the glass doors of the restaurant floated closed. When her mother picked up the line, her answer almost immediate, the anger and worry spilled from her with incessant questioning, inquiring whether Derek had seen their daughters because she hadn’t heard from them all day except for two missed calls from Reese’s emergency line, and if he was involved, she swore, but then halted when Reese started to sob into the receiver, just calling out for her, “Mom, please, come get us. I need you.”

She lowered the passenger seat to its most severe recline when she climbed inside her mother’s SUV, with no desire to watch the fight unfold. Her mother was shrieking how dare he, how dare he take the kids from school and not even bother to ask or mention he was coming, and he was yelling back he had the right to do what he needed to do in order to show his daughters he cared, and Reese buried her face into the crevice between the seat and door and turned up the radio. Nina pressed her small nose against the car window and followed the entire ordeal. She looked away when the police showed up, requested by the restaurant staff to break up the argument and escort them from the parking lot. Reese sat up when their mother entered the car so

she could secure her seatbelt, but when she turned around to remind Nina to do the same, her sister was glaring at her with her lips squeezed furiously together, betrayal and malice trembling in her eyes.

NINA

July 7th, 2006

Nina stared open and wide into the water even though the chlorine stung, diluted the world into a foggy soup and befuddled her navigation. She bumped into the other middle schoolers from the neighborhood, the girls in one corner and the boys in the other, gossiping about each other. She muttered close-mouthed apologies while underwater, but they paid little attention to her as she swam around like a juvenile, blind dolphin. The sunscreen slipped from her soaked body like clouds of spring dust, lost in the crystalline pool, the iciness of the water encasing her. The speakers propped against the lifeguard's chair were crackling with strain—the middle of summer was draped over them, the lull in an era, and Nina wound around in the undercurrent.

Face obscured by the shadow of an umbrella, Reese's eyes were shaded and undetectable beneath her sunglasses, but Nina sensed her cautious watchfulness. She tried to catch her at vulnerable moments, leaping from the pool wall into a backflip while she was not looking. Reese would catch her sometimes and Nina would sink her mouth beneath the water so her sister missed her mischievous laughter. She flipped and walked on her hands and careened between lap lanes and other bodies, waiting for Reese's grumpy complaints from where she sat near the deep end. The lifeguard on duty chuckled, too, sinking in and out of naps. Nina spun through her sister's periphery, humming.

Reese kept a towel slung across her lap. On it was the faded print of two pineapples, each with their own straw, sipping from a shared piña colada. She rested her open book on her chest, obscuring the emphasizing shadows that fell over it. Fidgeting under her sunhat, barefaced, her legs were crossed and pulled towards her. She found her perch when they arrived and refused to

move. Nina pulled herself onto the pool ledge and taunted her every now and then, but she would just ignore her, press the text closer to her face.

Exiting the pool when she noticed Reese turn away to speak to a small family who swarmed the small table near their chairs, Nina snuck up behind her and wrang out her drenched hair all over Reese's torso. The water sloshed onto the pavement. Her sister shoved her away with an impatient kick.

"Go on, Nina," she said. "I'm not in the mood."

Nina stuck out her tongue. "Who comes to the pool just to sit in the shade the whole time?"

"Me, clearly."

"But it's hot out. Can't you come play?"

"I'm too old to 'play.' Go ask one of the other kids in the pool."

Nina gestured toward the snoozing lifeguard. "I could ask him if we could get the floaties from that old shed."

"Don't," Reese said. She adjusted her towel.

"Quit being so mean," Nina whined.

"Go on. You've only got half an hour left anyway."

"But we just got here like five minutes ago."

"Adult swim is in thirty minutes, so if we stay past that then we'll have to be here for like another two hours, and that's not happening."

Nina glanced towards the lifeguard. "I bet he would let you swim if you asked."

"I don't want to swim."

"Isn't he in your grade?"

"Thirty minutes, Nina. Go on."

“You’re so freaking boring now.” She twisted her face and scoffed, more playful than crude.

“All you do is stay in your room.”

Reese pulled the book back toward her face. “When you get older you’ll be just as boring as me.”

“If I had a little sister, I would hang out with her whenever she wanted,” Nina said.

“Go to the kiddy pool. Plenty of kids you can adopt.”

Nina bent over and tugged at the towel, exposing Reese’s stomach. Her sister ripped it from her hands and held it to her chest.

“Not funny.”

“What?” Nina asked. She pointed to herself, her slight love handles, her sunburnt shoulders and flat chest and knobby knees and bare, hairless calves. “Everybody is in a swimsuit. No one’s even looking at us.”

Reese shook her hand and let her gaze drift to a strip of browning grass at the edge of the pool’s gate, black metal gleaming in the afternoon heat. “Let’s just go home. I’m tired.”

“No, please. Just swim with me for this last part. Please, please, then we can go home. Just for like ten minutes.”

“I told you I don’t feel like swimming.”

“Please,” Nina begged. She whimpered and lay over Reese’s body like a dejected puppy. Reese tried to push her off but could not, the dead weight of her too much, and broke out in frustrated laughter.

“You feel like a giant walrus.”

“I’m a baby whale. You have to protect me before a shark eats me.”

“What if I’m the shark?”

Nina rolled off her sister and jumped in the pool. She thrashed and cooed.

“Help me! The sharks are gonna get me.”

Reese rolled her eyes but obliged, rising painstakingly from the chair. She took her time to gather her towel around her waist and sit on the ledge, waiting until the lifeguard looked the other way before tossing the towel back toward her chair. She braced for the chill and sunk in deep. Nina cheered and clung to her neck, tugging her hair, laughter overwhelming her feeble protests.

They humored one another with a game of tag, then racing, then lounged on the steps entering the shallow end of the pool. Reese indulged Nina with gossip of high school, which would begin in a few weeks. Nina floated along the length of an itchy floating tube, enchanted and listening and bobbing atop the dimpling liquid surface. The lifeguard’s chin hovered over them, his head circling the circumference of the pool. He blew the whistle and called for the kids to get out. As Reese and Nina slinked out of the manufactured waves, he lingered on them, looking over his shoulder as he descended from his tower. Nina saw the shutter fall over Reese’s calm, amused expression. She abruptly shrugged off the story she was telling and quickened her pace back towards their towels and bags.

Nina skipped between the wet footprints Reese left behind as they trekked to the showers in the nearby clubhouse. Women and their small children occupied all the showers, sinks, stalls. Nina found a single, open space in the back corner, didn’t miss Reese’s annoyed sigh.

Waiting for the spigot water to warm, Nina doodled geometric patterns on the steam collecting on the curtain. Reese was tensing, insecurity creeping over her shoulders, hardening the smooth cycle of her motion as she covered every inch of her body with thick, fragrant soap,

as if hiding. Nina blew a palmful of bubbles onto Reese's shoulder, but her sister just glanced at it, did not bother to remove her arm from her chest and wipe it away.

An inch worm of isolation borrowed into Nina's gut, sparked a sense of discomfort which she did not recognize, not in a way so intimate, never before. She lathered soap over her obliques and pushed the suds down her peach-fuzzed legs and wondered if, somehow, she had caused this sudden fissure cracking the trust they always nurtured together.

"Are you okay?" Nina asked. Reese just nodded, turned around to face the shower wall.

Nina stared down at her own chest, touched and prodded the absent, unnecessary flesh, the small nipples like afterthoughts in an unclear center. Her eyes fell down to her unclipped toenails in shame. She trained her gaze on Reese's back, attempting to salvage a question that could override the moment. Somewhere in the shadows of the muscles there was buried a solution, beyond the valleys of scarred lashes that were born but invisible, throbbing whenever Nina tried to sew the hole that had breached their relationship. It was like pressing the hilt of her thumb into a soft bruise marring the skin of an apple, the little blue pit, the flesh souring and spoiling, the whole of it ruined and destined for discard. Steam billowed between them, pilling droplets on the tile, the murky curtain rolling and curling and separating them. She asked for the shampoo and Reese kicked it over without looking back, refused to face her, and Nina felt it, the sharp soreness like rippling muscles around her chest—heartbreak. She juggled the feeling in her head, shaping it like sticky mud, attempted to tidy it, but smoothing the edges did nothing to calm her.

She looked at her sister, at the rising steam, tried to trace the beaten path of Reese's emerging distance over the summer months and navigate the crossroads bisecting their previous understanding, their closeness. There was the moment in the pool, the safe space. There were the places they had always played together and smiled, but they were preceded and followed by this:

the hollowness and the vacancy of space, the sense of gravity, shifting. Something pulling them, stretching them, each an end, a polar opposite to the other.

In her periphery, something hovered, a speck on the plane of her vision. Nina noticed the unkempt triangle of hair curling in a patch at the apex of Reese's legs as she moved to adjust the temperature. She did not want to notice it, the reminder of the changes, physical and mental, that had occurred. She did not want to look at it or make it more than what it was, but it forced the reminder of their sprawling binary—big sister and little sister. She wondered if the world would ever allow them to be equals for more than a few moments.

Nina dropped her wash rag and picked it up again.

"What is that?" she asked. The echo of the shower walls trimmed her voice of its anxiety, morphed it into a sound of mild distaste.

"What is what?" Reese asked.

Nina pointed to the mound of hair. "That. Why's that there?"

"It's normal," Reese said, turning back to face the shower stream. "It happens when you hit puberty. Mom gave you the talk already."

"No she didn't."

"Oh?"

"She just talked about like, condoms and STDs and stuff. And periods."

"Yeah, well, there's body hair, too."

"Does it always look like that?"

Reese paused and reared back a bit, bumping into the wall. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Like that?"

Reese signaled she did not understand.

“It’s kind of weird,” Nina said. She ducked her head under the stream of water, but Reese slapped her on the shoulder.

“It’s not weird,” Reese said, harsh, but with an overtone peppered in insecurity.

“Sorry,” Nina mumbled. “I didn’t mean it like that. You don’t need to freaking hit me.”

“Yeah, right, because it was meant to be a compliment?” Reese swiveled and reached for the towel. She stormed out of the shower. Nina heard the slam and click of a nearby stall.

The falling water grew hotter. Her elbow knocked the lever into a sharper angle when she pivoted to watch Reese leave. She mumbled another apology, mostly to herself, but touched the flesh of her protruding mouth as the need to cry surfaced. The drawbridge standing between the present and the reconciled future was raised, unusable, and she stood there, sniffing softly with her hand posed on the hilt, expecting a solution to a problem she could not fully understand.

Nina stockpiled her memories for evidence she knew Reese would demand if she were to climb into the car, hair still soaked and dripping, and point out the tension budding between them. Her older sister would demand proof in the hard-lined, defensive way that defined her. How had she changed? How had she been different as a person, any more or less than herself than she had always been? Any less of a big sister? Could she name a single instance when Nina had come to her with a request and she had failed to uphold their tenured connection? Had she ever given a reason for the lack of trust? And Nina would not, of course, could not supply specifics. Gesturing wildly at what was merely semantics, notions of feelings, a goose chase to pinpoint the fact of their emotional separation—it was the most she was capable of and it would never be enough. Not for Reese, who required concreteness, who subsisted on facts and sniggered at Nina’s dreamy disposition. In her outstretched palms would droop ribbons of premature feelings, their colored guts spilled and unzipped like scrambled, broken rainbows,

neither obviously connected nor distinct, and Reese would gawk, insulted by Nina's audacity to accuse her without substantial reason. There was nothing left for Nina to do. What would remain for her, she who could not yet understand how to articulate the nebulous, how to characterize the ephemeral, wistful body enclosing things simultaneously unspoken and known, their problems more like gusts of winds than solid obstacles, fragrant with the hushed stories they encased but still made of air. So she dressed herself and climbed into the car where Reese was already waiting. She said nothing.

She consulted her mother with little success.

"Your sister is going through a lot of changes," Sloane said. She patted Nina's head. "One day you will understand. Just try not to take it so personally."

This only solidified Nina's helplessness. In the beginning, she cowered when Reese grew more outwardly vicious, lashing out and arguing, even harboring a new nerve to backtalk their mother and stomp around the house. Nina observed quietly and with deep fear. While watching National Geographic reruns one night, the reverberations of her mother and sister's arguing trickling from upstairs, the sleek coat of a wild panther slinking through the jungle triggered a connection in her brain. Nina stalked Reese like the cameraman stalked the big cat, tracking her movements and adjusting accordingly. The more she clung to her sister's side, though, the more vehement the rejection.

Forced to get creative, she schemed ways to become a necessity in Reese's daily life. She hid her razor, her tampons, her bra and underwear—only a few at a time to reduce suspicion—mixed their socks together so they would be forced to pick through them. She peacocked around the house, blatantly available for inquiries about the random, tiny inconveniences, but Reese just

huffed and tore through cabinets and under beds until she she required. Rarely did she pause to request Nina's help. Mostly she chastised her for meddling with her belongings.

“Keep your shit to yourself,” her sister would say, hurling an object Nina had left in her room while watching her type away on the computer a day or two before. Nina would duck and bite back with a retort, but harbor a bit of joy for the acknowledgement. At least she was not completely forgotten. Still, the iron fortress that was erected between them grew taller and darker. Nina bristled in her isolation while Reese left the house more frequently. When she was home, she constantly talked away the afternoon on the landline until their mother came home from work, yet never had anything to say when Nina attempted small talk at dinner. She began harshening her pranks, anticipating the acerbic sting of her sister's patronizing glare.

At lunch, months into the new school year, the small group of bubbly blondes from her homeroom shuffled in beside her with a collective sigh. Nina picked at the dried, shedding skin encircling her thumb nails. She pretended not to listen to their grumbling while waiting for her own friends. The girls detailed their weekends, which were loaded with tribulations. One girl with elaborate braids recounted the details of her own sibling rivalry, a surprise birthday party that had ended in a spiteful cream pie to the face.

“She's so annoying. I wish she wasn't even my sister. Why couldn't my parents just have gotten a puppy instead?”

Nina stifled her chuckle and silently agreed. Only later, collapsing into the frigid prison of her desk, her teacher's lecture a heavy melody in her ear, did the dread of her new disdain for Reese flutter over the skin of her throat, a python constricting its next meal.

SLOANE

June 22nd, 1997

She let him tag along—for this one vacation, she said, the girls tugging at the cuff of her jacket as she tried to sip her coffee. Derek laughed as droplets spilled onto her shoes. Reese screamed and Nina mimicked her, both of them overjoyed with their success, which had finally come after weeks of begging that their father be allowed to join on their first family vacation after Eva and Matías were to bow out. Nina smacked her chubby hands together and teetered unsteadily while her older sister skipped circles around the three of them, jumping on Derek's back, everything shrill and delightful.

Sloane meandered on it, their only vacation for the summer, gone, their only vacation as three, now burdened with a fourth. But the girls were pulsing and eager, insisted sleeping with him the night before their departure, and even though it was silly it made her cry seeing them that way, cuddled up against his ribs, feeling adrift and a little jealous and like life was not changing for the better after all. She cried into one of Nina's onesies while they smacked their lips and dreamt.

Rising in her was the pressure of suffocation, of smothering. Already Derek was looming, overshadowing, sneaking behind her to double-check the packed luggage and the budget she had calculated and the itinerary, doubting her. She fought with herself about whether she should relinquish control. She thought of what to say, how to say anything. Ultimately, on the plane to San Diego, the girls sat with lollipops in their mouths with surprising calm. She watched Derek fumble over their seatbelts and hoist the diaper bag into the overhead bin and soothe Nina's worried coos as they approached take off. Sloane resolved to nibble her complimentary cheese and crackers instead of offering help. She slid her sunglasses up her nose, stared out the window

as the gap between the earth and themselves grew. Reese lay her head against her shoulder. She patted her daughter's head and braced herself for the oncoming landslide.

Navigating co-parenting was a dingy boat on which she was barely gaining her sea legs. After Nina was born, Derek came to her and pleaded for a real second chance. Not with her but with the girls, Reese still murky on the details of the divorce and asking questions about his location at random intervals. The narrative of an emotionally abused young wife didn't quite fit her circumstances, she thought, and she had no desire for resentment, no place for it in her budding, honest attempts to raise two strong women. He had leveled with her, stared at her with earnest and despite their past how could she deny him what was undoubtedly his? Only partially his, technically half his, but still.

She mined herself for patience and followed his lead to the hotel. She reluctantly unpacked while the girls smashed their faces against the room's sole window, absorbing the Pacific. Nina glanced over every few moments to ensure no critical moves from her big sister went unnoticed or uncopied.

They walked a couple blocks before stopping at a seaside cafe for popcorn shrimp and french fries. Nina licked ketchup off of every item, soggy starches strewn across the table. Reese fed her the piece of lemon draped across the lip of her unsweet tea, cackling at Nina's sour expression, but the baby quickly caught on. She would giggle along after the shock passed and lean in for another taste, appeasing her sister and her parents and the surrounding tables, soaking in the smiles and attention. Their waiter tapped Derek on the shoulder and commented on how beautiful his family was. Sloane watched him clam up, nod in a way that was almost pained.

At Coronado Beach, where they strolled with their bloated stomachs, ducking in and out of the pier's widening shadow, the girls mutated into mermaids, hermit crabs, lighthouses, single

flip flops searching desperately for their lost other half. Their hair grew so stiff with grit that Sloane and Derek had to dunk them upside-down in the oncoming waves, their tiny feet flailing toward the sunset as they shrieked and gasped between laughter. Several rounds later, when Sloane's shoulders felt close to molten and the interest in the game expired, the girls buried her in the expanse of the white beach, pretending to tuck her in for a good night's sleep. Derek hung back as the children worked together, even constructing her a pillow as an afterthought, although most of its intended stuffing found a way inside her ear canals. Seeing the tans materializing over their cheeks, their grins so broad they were forced to squint to see their completed masterpiece, it was impossible for her to mind.

They unearthed her. Reese squealed as Sloane plucked sand clumps from her swimsuit.

“Daddy's turn next!”

He lay down on the beach and forced smiles as the girls covered him. Sloane funneled sand around his toes half-heartedly, monitoring his interactions with them while simultaneously berating herself for her inability to relax, to let go. She kept her head down, focused on his ankles and the wash of the tide nipping at her crouched heels.

With sundown near they relocated to higher ground. On the pier, eating soft serve, Sloane helped the girls spot dolphins leaping on the horizon. A hunched woman beside them offered to take a photograph for them as Sloane spun the dial on her disposable camera. Derek hung near the middle of the pier speaking to some fishermen, so Sloane just turned back towards the waiting woman, circled her arm around Reese's skinny shoulders and pressed her lips against Nina's cheeks. There was only the flash and the warm pressure of her daughters' bodies and the brackish air. There was only connection. Fibrous, expansive, universal—a nervous system of

moments that could only be remembered when looking out onto the ocean and recalling the fact of one's smallness.

The day at the zoo was less romantic.

"They've got me in a corner, Slo," Derek said. She was bouncing Nina on her leg while brushing kinks out of Reese's hair.

"If I'm not in on this meeting then I'm out of consideration for the new project and that's new year's promotion out the window," he said.

She leaned over and sipped water from a straw, side-eyeing him.

"I know it's supposed to be a vacation, but I've got to take this call."

She tapped Reese on the back to indicate she had finished tying up her hair. The girl bounded off to the window, resumed her playing with her miniature dolls.

"Do what you have to do," Sloane said. She draped Nina over her shoulder and began burping her. She rose to follow Reese to window. "Just stop calling me that name."

After rummaging around in the closet, he handed Sloane the diaper bag, packed to the brim with snacks, and two small lunch bags. She stared confused as to how he had made them without her noticing or where he would have retrieved the supplies. He smiled and touched her hand.

"Trust me," he said. She shoved a pretzel into her mouth and called for the girls, hoping a ride on the empty luggage cart would deflect from her weak assurance that their father would meet them at the zoo in the afternoon. She scratched at her hand, tried to claw away the memory of his fingers on her skin.

The giraffes were larger than Reese imagined and Sloane remembered, but they were beyond what Nina could apparently conceive. She shrieked at the sight of them, voice clamoring even higher when the zookeeper performing a feeding demonstration thought it would be helpful to

lure a young calf close to the enclosure's fence—"two babies!" he chirped into the mic—and prompted Nina to feed the hopeful calf a bundle of leaves from her palm. Reese tugged on the zookeeper's pant leg as Sloane tried to soothe her sister. He kneeled down, his mic feed carrying her tiny voice over the loudspeaker.

"Please stop touching my sister. You are being very creepy and she is scared."

Sloane reassured herself that plenty of six-year-olds probably got their families escorted out of safari exhibits, albeit for different reasons. Despite the multitude of distractions, their tour of disrupted joys continued. Nina cried at the flamingos, the peacocks, the armadillos, and the komodo dragons. The red pandas were too jumpy while the koalas were too slow. The poison dart frogs were too dormant and fluorescent. The leopards made her literally shit her pants, an unpleasant heat radiating over Sloane's supporting forearm. Reese hushed Nina the best she could, which mostly meant scavenging the diaper bag for snacks before Sloane could swat her away. She pushed rice puffs and strawberry slivers into Nina's small palms, the highest point she could reach, but the baby just sent the food flying. A glob of applesauce slid down the thick glass of an albino alligator's cage, its snout hovering above the water, stalking its descent. With the peak of the day came the peak of her exasperation. Unpacking the lunchboxes, she discovered Derek's mysterious foods must've been ordered from the hotel kitchen, everything swaddled in perspiring cling film. She unwrapped a sandwich and almost audibly screamed—he had forgotten to mention Reese's nut allergy to the staff.

Beyond the heat and the ten-dollar nachos she was forced to buy and the borderline animal abuse—Sloane noted that she, too, was technically another mammal subject to the day's torture—the only available exit forced a trip through the gift store. The cashier, cracking her gum against

her teeth while she watched Sloane count change. Her daughters loudly fawned over their new, stuffed neon hippos. The cashier deadpanned over the whirling of the printing receipt.

“The world is just godless, isn’t it?” she asked. Sloane hoped the clang of coins hitting the bottom the tip jar counted as an acknowledgement.

Overcast skies flooded in on the drive home. No afternoon beaching meant snagging a gallon of ice cream from the gas station across the street in order to prevent a tirade or two. Once their hotel room clicked open, they rushed immediately inside with the gallon in tow and posted up by the window to watch the beachside storm.

“Is Daddy still working?” Reese asked. Nina gobbled happily as her sister spoon-fed her oversized scoops of chocolate, pointing out particularly intimidating waves as they crested onto shore.

Sloane unloaded the remnants of the snacks from her bag and shrugged. The spare key was missing from the bedside table. “I’m not sure, baby. He probably went to get something to eat.”

“Will he be back soon?”

“I’m sure he will.”

“When?”

“I don’t know, Reese.”

“Can I call him?”

“We don’t know where he is right now so there’s no way to call him.” Nina moaned distastefully from her perch on the windowsill, rubbing at her head. Sloane walked over with a roll of paper towels.

“You shouldn’t feed her so fast,” Sloane mumbled, tugging gently on Reese’s wrist. “You’re gonna give her brain freeze.”

“Sorry,” Reese said. She took a clumsy scoop for herself. Sloane wiped the chocolate ring coating Nina’s lips and felt Reese’s eyes on her.

“Can we have another baby, mama?”

“Hm?” Sloane turned the napkin on Reese, wiped at her chin. “I just bought you a brand new toy at the zoo.”

“Not a doll kind of a baby. I mean a baby baby.”

“A human baby?”

“A Nina baby.”

“You want another Nina?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because I love Nina and I want more of her.”

The baby shrank back from Sloane as she reached for her and tried to duck her head into the gallon of glistening dessert. Reese pointed and laughed as if to affirm her suggestion.

“We can’t have another baby right now, sweetie,” Sloane said.

“Why?”

“We just can’t.”

“That’s stupid,” Reese said.

Sloane rounded on her. “We don’t talk like that.”

“But that’s stupid. I want another baby.”

“Well when you get older you can have as many babies as you want.”

Reese brushed her hair from her round cheeks, the runny chocolate on her hands fusing with her freckles. “Is Nina gonna be the last baby ever?”

“I don’t know,” Sloane sighed. “We’ll just have to see.”

Reese slumped into her seat and dropped the ice cream spoon, its clang reverberating through the room. “But that’s not fair. Daddy said we could.”

Sloane halted. She sank down to kneel at Reese’s eye level. “He said we could what?”

“He said we could have a baby,” Reese said after a few moments, suddenly shy and sad. She carved a frowny face into the ice cream drippings on the windowsill. “He said we were gonna have a baby brother . . .”

Sloane said her name but then stammered, glanced away to knead her aching eyes and collect herself. When she turned back there was that glow beneath the dark cloak of Reese’s irises, like coals surrounded by abiding flames.

“I don’t think anybody is having a baby anytime soon, sweetie,” she managed.

“Because Daddy doesn’t live with us anymore?” Reese asked. The tiny embers in his eyes flickered. Imagining what Reese might know, might have inferred, made swallowing in the quiet of the room overtly tense, noisy. Her perceptiveness alarmed Sloane, as if she operated somewhere beyond, an all-knowing being who acted the part of a sprouting, curious child in order to avoid attracting attention. Every now and then Sloane would glimpse something weltering and wise peeking out from inside of her. She was baiting, encouraging, forecasting, like she knew.

Reese reached out to touch her leg. The air between them settled and simmered. Not quite tension but still uneasy, uncertain, vulnerable. Sloane sat in the adjacent chair and outstretched her arms, face scrunching into a dimpled smile, and Reese clambered onto her lap, looking small and frail and less wise. Sloane gathered oblivious Nina in one arm, not wanting to squish her, but full with the urge to shield herself and her daughters, to don them like little pearls.

Petting Reese's head, bug spray and smog clinging to her scalp, Sloane hummed nonsense notes into Reese's knotted hair, thought it was better than a confirmation about the sad status of her broken marriage or a nascent reassurance about things she did not know and could not promise. Reese plucked at the thin fabric of Sloane's beach dress and hummed, too. The room swirled with their dissonance and harmonies. Nina pursed her lips, flourishing their senseless song with percussive babbling.

They relocated to the bed and Sloane began to doze. Through the gaps in her closing eyelashes, Sloane saw Reese point to her, tiny neck bobbing with emphasis. She was teaching Nina how to make a pinky promise. Most of the sounds were lost on Sloane's exhausted mind. Her focus faded in and out on Reese's trumpeted lips, over enunciating her dedications, coaching Nina through them, the baby occasionally erupting in affirmative screeches. Reese would fumble after her sister's curled fist, showing her the gesture again and again. Nina blubbered back immediately after her sister's corrections, tone deep and serious. Their pinkies clasped with a little guidance and jostling. Reese leaned her forehead against Nina's, whispering to her in the dark, like she was relaying all of the poignant secrets born in her head.

Late that night, Sloane shuffled to the bathroom and found a note stuck to the roll of toilet paper.

Sorry, work emergency. They put me on a last minute flight. Call me when you get back.

With love,

D

She flushed it with the rest of the waste.

Emerging out of the short hallway, Reese lay awake blinking heavily, roused by Sloane's movements. She smiled up at her mother, limbs strewn and upturned, sleeping in the opposite direction of Nina. Sloane rubbed her eyes and chuckled and wondered if she had imagined the entire tender moment, dreamed it, maybe. She shrugged it off and bent down to kiss her eldest on the cheek.

Leaning over to check Nina's diaper, she tried to lift the baby from the bed, but Reese suddenly jerked in reaction and whimpered, half-asleep again. Sloane tried again, slower, noticing one of Nina's arms lagging behind the rest of her slack body. Her hand was shoved deep into Reese's twisted curls, her pinky hooked around a nest of knots.

REESE

November 4th, 2012

Reese wandered around the vacant penthouse floor of her dorm. She discovered an attic door ajar, misty light streaming in from a clouded window. She relocated her morning routine there, ate her oatmeal and filed her nails, listened to the voices contorting under the floorboards. A few lawn chairs, boxes, an antique dresser, and some lamps were strewn across the floor, as well as various knick knacks, like a collection that a janitor had nonchalantly, every few years, added to until a small pile of lost relics formed. She ignored her to-do lists and spent all afternoon reorganizing the attic furniture while drinking cheap white wine with the windows open, the sweet smell of rain wafting inside as the sunset broke, and with it, a small strain of sadness that planted itself deep inside her lungs. It followed her as she strolled through the space, sipping and humming, aerating her blood, mingling with her buzz. An alarm clock from the floor beneath broke through her meandering and her face clenched as she the grating noise reminded her: she was supposed to call her mother during dinner time.

The semester had come and swallowed her up. Preoccupied with doing the bare minimum, eating too much takeout, rinsing and repeating—the promise of weekly phone calls home were reduced to weekly group texts, then just singular, direct communications, for fear of unintentionally alienating Nina with talk of college and nebulous successes. By the end of November, when the asphalt no longer radiated the warmth of the daytime heat, the updates between herself and her mother became even less frequent. No one seemed to notice, or mind.

There were always notifications, though. Doctor appointments on the Google calendar, Nina's tutoring schedule, forwarded emails from the financial aid office, tagged Facebook posts that she barely read. Her phone would buzz against her desk in the middle of her lecture and she

would skim each new bubble, like she was watching an ant colony erect an empire in front of her, without her help or consideration.

Sometimes Nina would send stand-up bits or funny photos of tangential things. Reese thought her sister might be lonely with her rogue attempts to reach out and form connection, or maybe she only wanted to feel remembered. But Reese never had anything to say. A thumbs up or a smiley face always did the trick. And then, “how are things?” or more often, “How’s Mom?”

Nina kept the responses tailored, uninformative. She was either detached, disinterested, oblivious, or busy, or maybe some combination of all four. Part of Reese hoped that she and Nina would get a little closer once she left home—maybe she had been the obstacle all these years after all—but there were no clear indications one way or another. They bickered and fought at home, sometimes went too far, but they mostly floated around one another like planets on parallel orbits. Reese wondered where she fit into the equation—as Jupiter, or the asteroid belt, or some neglected moon.

She called her mother the next day, after her economics seminar, sifting through her contacts as she navigated her way through the aisles of seats. It rang six times before Sloane answered.

“Hi, sweetie, what a surprise.” Her mother’s voice was so small and raspy.

“Hey, hi, sorry I didn’t ring last night. Slipped my mind.”

Her chuckle bubbled through the receiver. “It’s alright, Reese, I know how busy you are these days.”

“It’s no excuse,” she said.

“It’s not an excuse. It’s a reason. And it’s a perfectly good one,” her mother countered.

“I’m not sure that’s the point, but alright,” Reese said. There was a little sigh from the other end. “But listen—I was thinking of coming home early for Thanksgiving. Maybe a week or so.”

“Oh?” Sloane asked.

“Yeah. My exams are all early this semester so. I have some extra free time.”

“Oh, well, baby, that’s wonderful.”

“I thought so,” Reese said and smiled to herself, sort of tired.

“But I’m not sure that’s the best idea this time,” Sloane followed up, tone slowing. “You know I can’t wait for you to visit, honey. But things are gonna be a little crazy around the house.”

Reese slid down to the floor and crossed her ankles. Other students stepped around her and didn’t say a word. “Is there some kinda party going on that I forgot about?”

“No, no,” Sloane said. “I’ll just be traveling a lot before Thanksgiving. And Nina’s pretty insistent that she needs the alone time, so.” She paused. “But you know you’re welcome to come around, even if it’s just to blow off some steam. Although admittedly things haven’t been too quiet around here recently.”

“Are you guys getting into it again?” Reese asked.

“No, of course not,” her mother replied, voice a bit firmer.

“I was just asking.”

“I know. But there’s nothing to worry about.” Fatigue entered her voice again. “You just focus on school. We’re holding down the fort over here.”

Reese heard the rustling of bedsheets from the other end, shame suddenly filling her, as she knew she must have woken her from a needed nap. Her mother muffled a groan as she twisted and turned, the receiver crackling a little as it rubbed against the pillow.

“Did you cover another night shift?” she asked, soft but incredulous.

The shrug slunk into her words. “Needed the extra cash. Stocking up for holiday stuff. You know how I am this time of year.”

“I know,” Reese breathed, licking her lips. “Well, I’m sorry for waking you over something so small. I’ll let you get back to sleep.”

“Oh—Reese—don’t be sorry. I love hearing your voice, you know that.” She settled into her sheets and yawned. “You know I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Reese said, but let the phone linger against her cheek. She stared out of the large window in front of her where a cardinal hopped among the fallen tree leaves. It circled around the trunk of a particularly barren oak, rummaging around the foliage for worms. Diving into the cresting leaves, it withdrew multiple times, beak empty, before turning and staring in Reese’s direction. It cocked its head and chirped, its mouth narrow and pale, but she could hear no sound.

She returned to the attic again.

Romance banked on the shores of her brain, hijacked the carefully honed autopilot upon which she had become so dependent these past few months. But only there. In the attic. Mingling with the clusters of dust, little universes of hair and dead skin and particles of things that used to be whole but now were not. And she related to them. And she hated that she related to them. Conglomerates, Frankenstein’s abandoned others, mismatched puzzle pieces melted together into stars of fuzz and grey. She lay on the splintered hardwood and flicked and blew them across the room. They would take flight for a moment, floating, but never left the box of the attic. To remove them and carry them into the world outside the attic would shatter the rosy fantasy. But then neither would she, she liked to pretend every few minutes—she would never leave the room

again. Her future was forfeited for the vegetative, dirty torpidity of the attic no one knew or saw or touched. Like she was sinking into its walls, into its unvoiced secrets and its past.

She required herself to rationalize. She needed to complete her natural methodical cycle to problem solve, but there was no clear issue clogging up the vault made for storing her traumas, solved or in progress or plateaued but present. Vacancy mystified her. She was abandoned and without an access code. No cause revealed itself; no problems made themselves known. Things just were. They just were terrible, just were exhausting, convoluted, overlapping even though they also weren't. She just was sad. All the time. She just was composed of different things suddenly, not of molecules and nerve endings but of millions of tiny, throbbing question marks with their canines biting deep into the walls of her body. She just was and things just were—fast, then slow, then full then empty but then all of it, all of the time. Nothing strung the floating continents of her together anymore, the disappearance of a securing glue she never noticed until now, when it had gone and no one in her vicinity seemed to have a bit to spare. Or maybe she just didn't know how to ask.

She toyed with the idea of calling her mother again. She pictured herself clutching the speaker to her slanted mouth and with prideful, rehearsed words: "Mom, I think I should see a therapist." But the sound of her mother's heart snapping like twigs, splintering as if run over by the tires of a truck—the noise echoed and mocked. And it would be, just like she would be whatever she was now until she wasn't anymore—the destruction of the wooden, rope-tethered bridge on which she and Sloane depended for frolicking between each other's internalities. It would be demolished. Utterly and completely cut at every link. The silent promise to champion the life her mother never fulfilled, had sacrificed in order to raise her two daughters, reduced to another broken pact. How could Reese wave the white flag when there were no enemies on the

horizon? No obvious danger. Just the feeling. Just the anxiety of the world being as it was and she being as she was. It wasn't a question. It wasn't an option. Surrender was unthinkable. The thought of it alone: forbidden. But incredibly sweet, like ripe cherries painting her lips wet and crimson.

The urge to destroy something, to force resistance into release, gnawed on her like fragments of bones caught between a lion's teeth. If she was going to break a pledge, if she was going to burn a bridge, she knew it could not be with her mother. She couldn't even properly formulate the idea. And so it would have to be with herself.

Her father had given her the slip of paper years ago. She kept it, its underbelly scrawled with a phone number she wasn't sure still worked, hidden in a box of letters and notes from relationships once meaningful that had since turned sour. She had never managed to part with them. Whether they were fond tokens or foreboding reminders was to be determined. She smoothed the curled paper into her palm, its body crimping with the nooks of her own. She dialed and breathed and imagined how the edges would tarnish and flake away if she lit it up with flames. She breathed and listened and breathed and listened.

An assistant answered. She called herself Jenny and Reese saw her with orange hair, a button nose.

"Do you know the extension of the agent you previously spoke with?"

Reese talked calmly, full of solemnity. "I forgot it, I think. Lost somewhere in my email."

"Could you tell me the agent with whom you're a client?"

She thought she blacked out but Jenny hummed with recognition as her father's name tumbled from Reese's lips.

"I'll forward you right away, Miss . . . ?"

“Daisy,” she blurted, reaching for any name. Later, she remembered it was the name of a hamster he bought her once for her sixth birthday, but they returned it because it had bitten her while they played.

He didn't pick up. At first she got redirected back to Jenny, who forwarded her once again to her father's machine, which then beeped and instructed her, with a voice that sounded as much like her father as it did not, to leave a message with her name, contact information, and reason for calling, and then there was just the vast empty air of the open line beckoning for her to declare her presence. But all she could do was exhale into the receiver. The message dragged on for over a minute before the call closed itself. With the click of severed line, she snapped back into momentary alignment. She scoured the room as if she had just woken from a dream, the rickety furniture and dust bunnies and muddled sunlight newly unfamiliar.

She bolted from the attic. She never went back.

NINA

May 6th, 2013

They waited until their mother changed out of her scrubs and fixed herself some green tea to say anything. There was the routine sensation of an impasse, of insurmountable land. Nina perched on a stool, picking her nails at the kitchen counter, while Reese sat in a twist on the couch. Sloane stirred a spoonful of honey into her mug as she looked from one to the other. The distance between them, cardinal points on a triangle, amassed in the stagnation.

“So which one of you is gonna tell me what I just walked into?”

Nina kept her head down, body rigid and hunched. Reese focused on Nina’s back, head uplifted, cavalier, like she was waiting. Sloane motioned toward her eldest for an explanation, but Reese opened her palm back to Nina. The invisible string sewing them together pulled taut and Sloane tiptoed to the head of the dining room table, quietly calling for Nina to sit.

Teaspoon clinking against the inside of her mug, she lightly kicked Nina once she slouched into the adjacent seat. Her daughter did not glance up, picked at her jagged nails.

“What’s up?” she asked. Nina did not budge. Sloane set the mug to the side, clasped her hands together and supported her chin. “You can tell me if something is going on.”

“Yeah, I know,” Nina whispered.

“And so?”

She hunched over and braced her forearms against the worn wood. “I got some news today.”

“Bad news?”

“It depends on the way you look at it.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t tell you,” Nina said. She sniffled and brushed her nose.

“Why?”

“I just can’t.”

Her mother paused. “Are you pregnant?”

“God, no,” Nina breathed, a laugh clouded with exasperation.

“Did you get busted for something? You selling meth now?”

“Mom, no. Jesus.”

Sloane shrugged. “Then it can’t be something bad enough for the two of you to get this bent out of shape.”

“At least those problems have solutions,” Reese muttered from her spot on the couch.

“Sorry, I’ll just go ahead and abort my brain, then,” Nina said, seething.

“You could donate it to science. They could tell us why you have the inability to use common sense,” Reese said.

“Whoa, you two—quit.” Sloane leaned in her chair to grab Reese’s attention. “If you’ve got something to say, then you can come over here and we can speak like a family.”

“I have nothing left to say.”

“Impossible,” Nina deadpanned.

“Knock it off,” Sloane said.

“Now you want me to speak? What happened to me not understanding you?” Reese asked.

“I said it’s not possible for you to have nothing to say. I never said you would be right.”

“That is why you don’t want to hear what I have to say. You know I am right.”

“We are not doing this, girls. Not today. Not again.” Sloane pointed at Reese. “Get your ass over here so we can have an adult conversation about whatever is up with the two of you.”

Reese walked over, struggling to maintain her apathy. She sat on the other side of her mother, cheeks flushed with irritation. Sloane made a big deal out of inhaling, noisy, clutching her cup between her hands.

“Now,” she said and sighed. “Who wants to tell me their side first?”

“This is so pathetic,” Nina muttered.

“If you’re going to be a brat about it, then your sister can make her case first. Is that what you want?” Sloane asked. She emphasized with gentle thrusts of her cup in the air. “Dr. Dubois says there’s no point in resuming group therapy until we’re open to listening to one another.”

“I would say to tell that to the one who has that problem, but she won’t listen in the first place,” Reese said.

Nina rolled her eyes. “Bite me.”

“What happened?” Sloane asked, nudging Reese.

“It’s not my place to tell,” she said.

“Of course, now you want to play good cop,” Nina said.

“This is not a game. This is real life. There are consequences.”

“If one of you doesn’t quit beating around the bush, I swear —”

“I’m flunking out.” Nina faced Reese. “Happy?”

“Why on earth would I be happy about that?” her sister asked.

“Wait—wait a second. You mean school? High school?” Sloane asked.

“Yeah,” Nina said. She pushed her hair behind her ears.

“You flunked out?”

“Flunk-*ing*. Present tense.”

“Shut up, Reese,” Nina hissed.

“Reese, give it a rest. But you,” she pointed to Nina, “you better start explaining.”

“And what am I supposed to say? I messed up?”

“That’d be a good start,” her mother said.

“Great. I fucked up, Mom. Surprise.”

“I thought we worked this out with your counselor months ago.”

“Yeah, me too. I guess they changed their minds.” Nina shrugged.

“Did you fail a test or something? What happened?”

“She can’t fail the test if she did not bother showing up for it,” Reese said.

“Would you shut up already?” Nina asked.

“Reese, quit it, Christ.” Sloane smacked a soft fist against the table. Reese straightened and nodded, mumbling an apology.

“Just tired of it,” she added, brushing her nose with the back of her wrist.

“We’re never out of options,” Sloane said. “Right?”

Nina and Reese traded glimpses. Nina sighed. “They said it’s too late. Final warning, so there’s no turning back.”

“Which means?” Sloane pressed forward.

“It means I’m toast.” Nina lay her palms out. “I’m officially a drop-out.”

“Not graduating is not an option.”

“There are no more options, Mom. It’s just how it is,” Nina said.

“I didn’t bust my ass to raise the both of you just for you to get this far and not graduate. You will walk out of that school with a diploma.” Sloane paused. “If they won’t let you this time around, you’ll just have to stay back and finish another year.”

“Mom,” Reese rasped, as if the comment stung her as much as Nina.

“I’m not going back there,” Nina said.

“What makes you think that?” Sloane asked.

“It’d be mortifying. Everyone would know and I’d never live it down.”

“Then you should’ve thought about that before you decided to goof off.”

“I wasn’t goofing off,” Nina said, eyebrows knotting, expression deepening with incredulity.

“We’ve all got jobs in this house. I go to work, your sister goes to work, and you go to school. You slacked off and now you’re going to have to put in overtime to make everything alright again.”

“Am I not being humiliated enough? Now you’re going to punish me, for what? Just to say you had the cherry on top?” Nina asked, voice thickening as tears pilled along her lower lashline.

“I think I have a right to be disappointed in you,” her mother said.

“You should be supporting me. You should be helping me.”

“Wonderful. Here we go again—you did something wrong and you don’t want to accept responsibility for it.” Sloane leaned back. “You’re just full of surprises today, aren’t you?”

“Mom is just upset,” Reese said, voice level. Her tight annoyance melted into the keen, deferential firmness she usually maintained. She snuggled into her seat and her preferred role as the mediator. Nina bristled, certain she knew what side her sister would bet on—the winning one.

“Stop talking to me,” Nina said.

“I am only trying to help,” Reese replied.

“I don’t want your help. Stay out of it.”

“You need to calm down. Nothing productive will come out of this if you’re worked up,” Reese said.

“I don’t want your fucking help, Reese.”

“Don’t talk to your sister like that,” Sloane said and leapt forward, knocking the mug from the table with her elbow, a tide of steaming tea spilling onto the floor. She rose to snatch paper towels and mumbled under her breath.

“You two think I never have any idea what I’m doing, but I do. Just because I don’t want to turn out like you doesn’t mean I’m clueless,” Nina said, raising her voice.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Reese asked.

“No one is talking to you,” Nina said.

“We are all talking together,” her mother called from the kitchen.

“I’m not talking to Reese. All she does is put words in my mouth and twist the few I manage to get out.” Nina swiveled to stare at her mother and gripped the top of the chair, knuckles paling. “You never believe me. It’s always Reese, the perfect angel who can do no wrong, and then me, the resident fuck-up. You only protect her because you don’t know what she’s really like when you’re not around.”

“Nina, enough.”

“You should set up cameras. Then you’d see.”

“That’s enough,” her mother said.

“If you want to take it out on me, then do that, give Mom a break,” Reese said. She grew quieter. “You’ll upset her.”

“I’m not the one hurting her. You are.”

“Both of you—please—just fucking—stop.” Sloane flailed her arms in the air and yelled. Nina and Reese froze, stared. Exhaustion deepened the frail lines scratching through their mother’s face. “I can’t even hear myself think.”

The strain of the room beat down on them, pressing until they flattened like crushed flowers, reduced to smashed petals of tangled, familial ambivalence. Their mother rubbed her eyes. Reese hugged her knees, shell closing, becoming more insular, and Nina, rattled, crammed to capacity with the scraps of spliced emotions. Fury led to guilt which led to self-loathing and then yearning for liberation, for life somewhere else, anywhere else, where she could be welcome, understood, wanted without prerequisite adjustments to her identity and habits. Every fiber trembled with the most potent flurry of sentiments, but she sat still, chest heaving. She felt the vessel of herself once again, that body of hers, which hijacked the logic and calm she had attempted to mine, leaving her with no barriers or boundaries or defenses separating her contempt and lazaretto and desperation. A cocktail human. A malformed brain. A useless child, a worse sister. A terror to herself. She was on trial at the dinner table. Her mother and sister the lawyers, cool and suave, herself the judge, but she sentenced herself years ago, and she brewed there, committed for life to a destiny of star-crossed happiness, even though the deed to her freedom lay wrapped, invisible, in her hands.

Sloane walked back to her seat. She reached across the space between her daughters.

“I don’t understand why it always boils down to a screaming match between the two of you. But I need you both to try, for me, to settle down. Talk to each other. And just try to listen.” Immenseness dampened her pleading.

“I’m so sick of talking about this,” Nina said, echoing her mother’s broken tone. “I always try to do what you want. Isn’t it obvious at this point that it’s not going to happen?”

“We won’t allow you to give up on yourself,” her mother said.

“Why is it always you and Reese? Why, no matter what, is it the both of you versus me?” Nina pulled her arms tighter across her chest. “This is me, Mom. This is really me, really

flunking out of high school. I couldn't do it and I don't care. I'm sick of waiting for things to change."

"You should care," Reese said. She was soft but resolute. "You can do better and you know that."

"I don't want a pep talk. This is really it. This is how I feel. You guys are trying to shove me into a box that I don't belong in. It's time to get realistic."

"Realistic?" Sloane muttered. She shook her head. "You think this is being realistic? You're talking about high school like it's just growing pains. This is your future."

"Yeah, and realistically, my future never should have been about college." Her sister and mother both groaned and shifted in their seats, and she perked up, anxious. "Listen, I've got my art, right? My portfolio shows my worth just as much as some stupid diploma that I barely managed to get. Artists don't need that kind of stuff."

"I can't do this," Sloane said, mostly to herself. Her eyes slipped shut. "I really don't think I can talk about this anymore."

"How are you going to get your foot in the door? Have you been networking?" Reese asked.

"No."

"Any connections? Do you know any artists in the city? Have you seen any of the galleries?"

"No. I haven't gotten to it yet." Nina huffed and swiped at her drying tears.

"How are you going to do it, then?" Reese asked. "We don't need a presentation, Nina, but if you don't want to finish school then you have to have some sort of back up plan."

"It doesn't matter if I have a plan or not. You don't believe in me either way."

"We do believe in you, Nina. That's the point," Sloane said, throwing her back against the chair and sinking.

“No, you believe in the person you think I can be. You believe in a person who doesn’t even exist. Who might never exist.”

“I think what Mom is trying to say is you have potential, and we want you to expand on that potential and make a life for yourself,” Reese said.

“‘Mom’ knows exactly what she is saying, and she is saying this conversation is horseshit,” Sloane said and ground her teeth. “You had one thing to do, Nina, just one: graduate. Now what are we going to do?”

Reese moved to chastise their mother when Nina released an explosive sigh. “None of this would’ve ever happened if Dad raised me.”

Bird calls trailed in from the back porch, hovering over the staunch silence that followed her assertion. Reese’s jaw dropped partially and Nina could see her teeth glinting in the lamplight like fangs. Sloane raised her head. There was a betrayal blooming.

“What did you say?” her mother stammered.

Nina did not repeat herself. With no option but to stand and withstand the audacity of her words, she took root in her seat, held firm.

Reese shifted. “Nina, you need to apologize for that.”

“Why?”

“Do not play dumb. Apologize to Mom.”

“Why? It’s the truth. You want me to lie to her?”

“Take it back and apologize, now.” Reese was razor-sharp, her conciliatory edge dulled and abandoned.

“You know what? No. I’m not sorry. I say sorry constantly, and no—for once, I refuse to apologize for telling the truth. You guys have tried to make me think he was a monster for years,

but it's only because you knew I'd be happier with him and that pisses you off, because if I was with him then you wouldn't be able to make me into your little puppet. But I'll never be that person, the one you want me to be, and I'm never gonna be, so you might as well give up and move on."

Sloane braced her hands on the table. "Nina, we've talked about this."

"You're really doing this?" Reese asked, the fight gone from her eyes.

"So he moved on, boohoo. You just never got over it because you thought you were Daddy's little girl only to find out you'd lost out to his new kid," Nina said. She leaned closer to her sister. "You know what? I don't blame him for trying to keep them hidden. Look at how fucked up we all turned out."

"This is not about him," Reese said. "It is never about him. It is not my fault if you aren't willing to believe me when I tell you I cut him out of my life."

"Stop acting like it was your choice. He didn't want you." Nina pointed at her sister and laughed. "Why would he? All you ever did was ignore him and then blame him for all of your issues. But somehow I'm the one that can't accept responsibility, right?"

"I never . . ." Reese said, but let her words die.

"I should just go and live with him. Dad said Amy used to paint as a hobby, anyway. And Koby is five now, I could be there to watch him grow up, and finally have a sibling that actually bothers to be nice to me."

Reese laughed, forceful, shaking her head. Her rage melted to disbelief.

"Your father made me feel very small," her mother said suddenly, each word dropping between them like stones. Crow's feet crinkled at the start of her temples. "He decided he didn't

want to be part of our lives a long time ago. I tried my best to parent for both of us these last few years, and I'm sorry if you feel like it hasn't been enough."

"Well, it hasn't." She gnawed on her lower lip while her sister and mother watched her with appalled faces.

Reese's voice was harsh and full of air. "Do you feel better now? Now that you've taken a bat to us? Do you feel like you are finally becoming the person you are supposed to be?"

Nina shoved back from the table and bared down on her sister. "Maybe if you weren't such an evil bitch, he wouldn't have abandoned us."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, Nina," her sister said, moving to stroke their mother's back as she began to redden. "Tell yourself that if it makes you feel better. It's never been about him. We will be here, waiting, when you grow up and realize that."

She walked away, her steps reverberating on the wooden staircase above her sister and mother who folded into each other, slumped in paralyzed shock. Huffing on the other side of her slammed door, Nina darted into action. She thrashed through her disheveled closet and blindly tossed clothes into a pair of empty duffle bags. She did not see red because she could not see anything at all, just the flashes of cotton and rayon. She tripped on shoes, cursed, fell into a heap and wailed, but picked herself back up when she remembered the looks on her mother and Reese's faces, the image augmenting in her mind. She gathered her things on her bed and heaved like a bull.

Looking at the door, she thought of leaving, of the world beyond the door pulsating and drumming, calling to her, its magnetism, its inaccessibility, its otherness. Passion rushed through her body as she reached for her laptop, determined to find a road map that led beyond the forbidden, beyond the prison of her brain and into a future full of silky candlelight.

She found her father's profile and sent another message, another piece to stack atop the pile of unanswered updates she had sent him over the past several months. She bought a Greyhound ticket with the little money she had left over from her last paycheck and tossed her duffle bags over the tilted banister supervising the front door. Reese caught her as she fled down the stairs.

"What are you doing?" she asked, rushing after her, but Nina did not spare her a word or a glance. She kicked the duffle bags through the open front door, one of the sides tearing a little at the seam, the ripping cacophonous in the foyer. Reese swarmed around her, questioning her, but Nina ignored her and grabbed food from the fridge for the road. She stalled when she noticed the keys missing from the small ceramic bowl they kept on the counter.

"Where are the car keys?" she asked.

"You're not going anywhere."

"Where are the car keys?"

"Nina, calm down."

"Did Mom take it?" She stalked into the kitchen, toward the fridge where a Post-It hung under a magnet of kissing frogs, fluttering under the stream of air conditioning. "Did she say where she was going?"

"That's from this morning. She probably just left to get groceries."

Nina grunted and tore the note from the fridge, tossed it on the counter.

"If you are coming down here just to throw a tantrum then go back upstairs," Reese said.

"I need to borrow your car for something." She scoured through Reese's purse, which sagged on the counter, but her sister snatched it away.

"Have you completely lost it?"

“If you’re not going to tell me where Mom is or help me get out of here, then get out of my way,” Nina shouted.

Reese hoisted her purse onto her shoulder and snagged a bottle of water from the fridge. Downing it like a flaming sword, she winced as the chill slid into her. She tossed the empty bottle into the trash and stalked into the backyard, not bothering to follow Nina as she jogged out to the driveway.

The afternoon was quiet, a pale sunset settling over the slope of their suburban street. Swaths of pine trees, the sweet cooling air carrying the world’s fragrances around her pounding head, a stray cat curled around the base of their mailbox with its belly swelling and depressing. The street was dotted with cars but their own was gone, the garage door ajar. She could hear the metallic, cheerful beat of Bollywood music from one of their neighbor’s monthly dinner parties. By comparison, their house was reticent and full of enmity, their driveway empty. No one could say when her mother would return from her undeclared errand and the adrenaline was quickly leaving her. She squished her duffle bags together into the corner of the porch and retired back to her mattress with nothing to do but wait.

SLOANE

December 24th, 1989

They were standing on the subway platform, Sloane hovering near Alondra, close to clinging, feeling foreign and adrift. She had come to visit her friend at her cramped studio in New York where Alondra had relocated after their graduation over a year ago. Sloane bought a train ticket on impulse. She thought it would be a wonderful surprise, but it had already been two days and Alondra was looking increasingly bored and far away, distracted, like she was only ever listening for her turn to speak. She stared at the tracks with crossed arms while Sloane rambled.

“All I’m saying is if people went to Vegas and there were no casinos, there’d be riots,” Sloane said.

Alondra cracked a bubble in her gum, the pop echoing briefly over the platform. “People enjoy casinos. The whole point of them is to entertain. If there were no rats in New York, no one would be worse off,” she said. The gum rotated over her back molars, cyclical and entrancing, a lump in her cheek which Sloane was monitoring almost like a metronome.

“Where’s the proof of that, huh? Rats probably eat a whole load of things no one even knows about. They could be saving New York and no one would even know,” she said.

“Rats are vehicles for disease,” Alondra said.

“But so are humans.” Sloane arched her back, made a point of seeming relaxed. “All I’m saying is that a promise is a promise. And if I’m promised I’m gonna see something, then I wanna see that something,” she added and knocked the wooden beam of the subway platform for emphasis, hand landing squarely onto a piece of chewed gum. She shoved her hand in her coat pocket and hoped Alondra hadn’t noticed, but her old friend had.

“Including promises that you’ll see rats? Street rats?” Alondra asked. She scratched where her glasses pushed back her bangs and watched with bated disgust.

“Yes! Yes. Streets rats and everything else,” Sloane said.

“And so if I promise that I’m going to kill you if you don’t drop your obsession with seeing a subway rat? Then what?” Alondra asked.

Sloane prodded Alondra, a string of gum leaping from her fingernail and attaching to her friend’s coat. “Bury me with them. Make me their queen,” she said, but Alondra didn’t laugh or return Sloane’s sheepish, acquiescent smile when she noticed the elastic green thread between them. Sloane turned away and focused on the dirt caking the subway tracks. The wail of a violin echoed from the other side and a cluster of people were mingling under the dark silhouette of the archways parting them, headed in the opposite direction.

A flicker in her periphery made Sloane jump, but it was only a cigarette near her boot, fallen from Alondra’s withdrawn pack. Her friend rolled her eyes, tossed it onto the tracks and lit another.

“I read on my train over that they’re doing a vote on banning those smoking cars here,” Sloane said, quick to move on. She looked girlish and hopeful while waiting for Alondra’s response.

“More likely that they’ll die trying,” she said.

“Don’t you think it’s sort of inevitable?”

“I think it’s unconstitutional,” Alondra said. She let her wrist rest against her chest, the faintly blue smoke curling around her jaw like flanking petals supporting a darkened, chilly rose, crimson and sweet with rot. “Besides, no one here listens. The whole system’s become a shit hole.”

“Well I think in this case functioning lungs may outweigh the Constitution,” Sloane said. “If it’s so bad why don’t we just taxi?”

Alondra turned on her, severe. “Nothing outweighs the Constitution.” She puffed on her cigarette, brooding, bundled in her thick coat and stacked scarves, hunched into herself like a gnome who had been disturbed.

“What a scary, scary lawyer you’re going to be someday. Law school has made you so serious,” Sloane said and chuckled.

“Well at least it didn’t make me dull,” Alondra said. “Don’t you realize—don’t you know—” but halted and smoked. Sloane ignored her, knowing she didn’t mean to be cruel or hoping so, and she was busy laughing to herself, anyway, imagining Alondra in judge’s robes and a colonial white wig with a giant doily knotted beneath her chin, chain-smoking in the bustling New York street like some displaced Founding Father.

The tunnels filled with their train’s screeching approach and smothered her chuckles. Sloane saw Alondra’s tight reflection in the shuttering, graffitied windows, and let her worry inflate and linger a little more, the worry that she had been wrong to assume her friend would be thrilled by their spontaneous reunion rather than inconvenienced, that they could replant old flowers in new dirt. A column of ash sprouted from Alondra’s deep breath and she flicked the butt of the cigarette onto the tracks, took Sloane’s hand, stood through the flood of dismounting passengers. Sloane allowed herself to be pulled onto the train car, rubbed the remnants of the gum that stuck to her nail into a miniature elastic ball, her body humming.

It was Christmas Eve—Christmas Eve in New York. It was something Sloane had turned around in her dreams, a sphere of clay, malleable, taking shape. Alondra had carted Sloane around all day like a child dumb with wonder, had tolerated the lines at Wollman, the rink

crowded with people falling like rogue missiles in their already precarious path. She preened in the reflection of the buildings at which Sloane oohed and aahed, and Sloane was grateful, stole many empty moments in conversation to tell her so, and Alondra had smiled or trained her attention on whatever cup or food or cigarette she held near her mouth as if she were hiding although not quite shyly. Sloane thought maybe she had embarrassed her friend. The horror of it, of inserting herself into a new environment if only briefly to spend time with an old girlfriend, if only as a light fantasy, and be interpreted and reduced to a person considered impressionable and—well it hurt the same no matter how many times she thought it—embarrassing. So when they had finished their ice skating and rested on some benches overlooking the rink, the noon sun pressing, Sloane reached and grasped Alondra's knee. "We should go out tonight, have fun. I want you to show me how you're getting on now up here all on your own." Her friend was quick to grin and it filled Sloane with an apprehension she hurried to squash. She had never been easily swayed by the need to impress, but she longed for validation, or a thrill, or guidance. Alondra rushed the remainder of their day, did not slow until they finally strutted into the station all painted and primped.

Sloane gripped a steel pole while Alondra took a seat and she watched the train doors slide closed. She felt that the unfolding evening could only end either in unmitigated disaster or a new, revolutionary degree of happiness.

In school she and her circle of girlfriends would have meandering conversations about what kind of people they believed they were. Big people. Capable people. Women who were noticed even in grocery stores, in lines or in passing. They were going places, lathering and being young. They were impossible to miss. This was the protective universe they erected around themselves, five of them in total, each tip of a single star, Sloane and Alondra adjacent to one another and

then the others, Tessa and Yasmin and Genevieve. They nourished one another, grew together and then apart, their first jobs scattering them like discarded matter in different directions, stretching the star and threatening implosion. It was quieter than that, though, quieter than Sloane really wanted. It was not a cosmic detonation but a silent and distant death, achingly typical, still a dwindled glow above them like a phantom guide, a carcass memorializing the brilliance of the friendship they had nurtured but ultimately let die, vacant upon inspection, the outline smearing into a supernova.

She shuffled behind Alondra as they disembarked the subway car and wondered if she had been foolish to simplify her instinct to come, to deny the fact that the tenderness between them had been lost and was in need of rediscovery. Alondra strode with heightened confidence and sureness and turned each corner with a sharp pivot of her heel and what was Sloane doing here after all? Struggling still to find the site of her oncoming glory and floundering, constantly floundering, especially compared to Alondra who was making strides, living in New York of all places. She had been the only one able to keep up with Sloane all those years. She loved them all like sisters but with Alondra there was the little underlying strain of competition, sometimes teetering into malice but invariably steeped in admiration. Never had she considered a day would come where she would flank Alondra as they slipped into the waiting crowd outside of a club, the lines of people branching and throbbing like veins, and stir in her inadequacy. She had never been dumb enough to rule out the possibility of her falling from the parallel pedestals on which they had thrived the past few years, but then had she? Had she been so wrong and misled?

Alondra turned and stilled—Sloane must've had a peculiar expression—and asked if she was alright, the purple and red strobe lights pouring from the club's expansive windows tinting her friend's brown eyes into glossy rubies, vampiric. That sacred, sonorous, warm sphere of trust

orbited briefly over her sense of isolation, eclipsing, and Sloane nodded and took her hand and let herself be lead toward the mouth of the club with reluctance, the image teasing her, the image of her broken on the ground, staring up at her friend alone on her podium, the sole victor.

Two bouncers punctured the muddy, stunted maroon carpet meant to lead them inside. Alondra pivoted away with a wink to present her ID to one of them while Sloane peered up at the other, not much taller than she, but impending, full of ink, analyzing the little encrypted text of her life on a card. She barely whispered to him, “don’t let me in,” but he continued scanning, seemed not to hear her. He placed the card into her retracted hand but released slowly, studying her, maybe thinking she was too young, or maybe brewing over her words and considering how to react. Then he withdrew and motioned toward the door. Before she could say anything else he mumbled for her to move on, reaching for the next ID. She tucked tail and walked to where Alondra waited at the entrance, wishing she had pleaded with him to bar her from entry, be unreasonable, help her. She glanced at his back, black shirt clinging. She longed for home.

Alondra stuffed a beer into her hand and Sloane smeared the foam between her lips. She thought of chaos. Everywhere the crowd was writhing. Skin brushed her skin, left it tinged with sweat and glitter. Alondra threw her head back, a lime between her teeth, the citrus throwing a light spray over them. Her friend laughed and screamed and twirled, apparently in her element. Alondra dragged Sloane’s limp body over the expanse of the crowded dance floor. She tried to loosen up, let the bass shoot through her legs and spiral her hips, close her eyes and allow the club to siphon her energy and disperse it through the drumming, cloudy air. But the door coaxed her to glance back, its gravity like a thick cord wound over and through her ribs, pulling at the boney cage encasing her organs, soft vulnerabilities, fear, leaving her a little breathless. She had an acute craving for someone or something to call the room to action, to distract, open an

opportunity for her to slyly emerge and part the crowd and then—and then—nothing. Or something? A move that would make her stand out, be noticed or carried away. Alondra slapped her shoulder and laughed but she could see her eyes roaming, too, scanning the room for any turning faces, and she knew it was what they both wanted, to draw the room and be magnetic. To cause a scene. She wanted the bar-goers to glance at her and double-take and remember her in their accounts if a fire were to break out or a rally were to strike over some nonspecific but insurmountable threat. “That girl,” they would say to the overbearing police officers, “with her huge hair and her smart eyes. She was there. But I never got her name.”

Alondra locked eyes with a prowling man, nearly faceless in the flashing dark. She drifted away but held up an “ok” sign with her fingers, questioning, and Sloane nodded before excusing herself to go out front. Alondra tossed her box of cigarettes at her over the few bumping heads that separated them and Sloane fumbled with the box between her palms, feeling like an imposter.

She avoided the bouncers’ gazes and found a curb at the edge of the club’s entrance within the little fenced gate separating those permitted inside and those still in line. Drunkenness slackened the pretty faces of the crowd, all of them smooth-skinned and luminous in the night. She pulled out a cigarette and it perched between her lips, unlit.

A man sprawled beside her although he hadn’t asked and she hadn’t invited him. She spared him a look, gently denied the lighter he offered. He chuckled and blew smoke behind her ear, coughed a little in the freezing air. “You here alone?”

“No,” Sloane said, tugging her jacket around her chest, “just came out for fresh air.”

“Right, and I’m just out here for the view.”

Sloane ignored him. Prodded the end of the cigarette with her tongue, damp paper and smoke.

“What’s your name?” the man asked, scooting closer.

“Emma,” she said.

“You don’t look like an Emma.”

She turned, sized him up. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I think you’re lying to me,” the man said. He propped his pack of Marlboros in his front pocket and winked at her.

Sloane looked back toward the club’s entrance and wondered if she would be better off heading back inside watching Alondra twist tongues with some man in the bump and heat of the party. Bodies flurried by, interruptions in her vision, and she noticed through the current the bouncer from earlier staring directly at her. She felt her face shift, in what way she wasn’t entirely sure, but the bouncer tapped his coworker on the shoulder to whisper something in the taller man’s ear, then began walking over.

There was no verbal warning necessary, apparently. He tapped the man next to her on the shoulder, who had edged closer to her and was mid-attempt to brush her thighs with his thumb. The man wordlessly rose and walked away, backwards, challenging the bouncer’s glare before slinking away into the bubbling crowd on the street. The bodyguard extended his hand toward Sloane, but she didn’t take it.

“Thanks, but I had it handled,” she said, a little gruff. He smirked and ducked like he was bowing to her.

“No doubt. I was more worried about him than you,” he said. “Just trying to minimize bloodshed.”

“He would’ve deserved whatever I did to him.” She crossed her arms and knotted her fingers in the fabric of her coat.

“Without a doubt, boss,” he said, still smiling, tucking his hands in his pockets. He jutted his head toward the door. “You look about ready to jet. You want me to go grab your friend you came with?”

“It’s cool. I’ll just wait it out.”

He raised an eyebrow. He tapped the tip of the cigarette hanging from her mouth. “What’s this supposed to do? Make you look tough?”

“Not even,” she said. “Don’t need to look tough if I am tough.”

“You look tougher without it,” he said. Sloane was souring but then saw the squint of his smile, his eyes morphing into dark commas, full of warmth and maybe a tinge of fascination or challenge, and her defense abated just slightly. “You sure about your friend? The only thing standing between you and your bed is probably her, and I’m offering.”

Sloane exhaled, the hot air pirouetting in the navy night. She squinted, but he just laughed, squinted back, like it was all just a friendly standoff.

“Okay,” she said, testing. “That’d be nice of you.”

“Okay,” he said, mirroring her tone and body language. He looked ridiculous, charming. Sloane felt herself simpering. “I’ll be back,” he said, then spun around on his heel and walked toward the club. He clapped shoulders with another bouncer who slid into his previous space by the door and was settling into a hardened persona, crossing his arms—maybe a shift change. Sloane wondered at the time.

When he emerged again several minutes later, Alondra was not with him.

“She said to say that she’d meet you back at her place soon and to just catch a cab back.”

“Got no key,” she said.

“She hide a spare anywhere?” he asked.

“Beats me, I’m only here for a couple days,” she said, then bit her tongue, thinking it may have been a bad call to give out such information. She shuffled, her short heels jostling the spare rocks kicked up from the gravel by bar-goers. “I mean, I can find my way back. She’s got a roommate.” It was true, but she hadn’t met them yet since they had spent so little time at the apartment. She could only make enough noise to wake someone and hope for the best.

“You ought to call and make sure. We’ve got a phone in the office upstairs,” he said, gesturing.

Sloane tensed. She crumpled the unlit cigarette between her fingers and tossed it on the ground.

“What?” he asked.

“How am I supposed to know you’re not gonna go all Ted Bundy on me?”

“No way to know for sure,” he said.

Sloane’s eyes narrowed and she waited, pretending not to be amused, though she was a little.

“Besides, I’ve only killed one person so far.” He snorted, then coughed when he realized she was serious. “I’m kidding.”

“I know,” she said. She looked out onto the street for a cab or for an alternative choice. She thought about trailing this man back into the club, through dim hallways, into a cramped space.

“But really, I can either get your friend or you can call her roommate. As long as you get back safe,” he said.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

He roused and raised an eyebrow. “Who’s asking?”

“My friend’s roommate, probably, in about ten minutes when I tell her about the bouncer who let me borrow his phone,” she said. “Before stalking me and killing me, obviously.”

“So, what you mean is: because you need to know the name of your savior?” His chin rose, the light gliding over his angled face. His eyes were sharp and almost black but provoked a sense of safety in her, like slipping her hand between the bars of a fox’s cage to stroke its muzzle, an excitement like barely-contained danger.

“Exactly,” she said, coy, pressing through her emerging smirk.

“I’m Derek,” he said. He shook her hand.

“I’m Sloane.” He leaned towards her and then away, her body nudging forwards an inch. He laughed—with her and not at her. She felt the difference.

“And if you’ll excuse me,” he said, hooking their fingers together. “I believe I’ve got a mission to complete.”

REESE

September 8th, 2010

The wind is acrid and stains the bed of my nails and carries notes of tar, liquor store clearance rack, maybe some of the mythical poison used to transform turtles into pizza-gorging, mutant samurai. Marjorie laughs as I mumble the thought into my cup. Throbbing around us is the deep, shitty bass of a fraternity house party, the chaotic, warbling shuffle of small talk, and then, rounding the corner, laughter like chiming bells. A tall boy ducks over Marjorie's shoulder. I have seen him around but do not know his name. The laugh lingers on his mouth, in the crevices of his dimples. He is still familiar but evolved beneath the dim fogged lights.

"They were ninjas, not samurai," he says. Marjorie raises an eyebrow at him, this invader.

"The show. They were ninjas. It was in the title," he says when we do not react.

"Were you eavesdropping on us?"

He presents his palms in surrender. "I confess. I just couldn't let facts go unchecked."

Marjorie and I exchange looks from over the rims of our cups.

"I know they were ninjas. I was just being pretentious," I say.

"Would you call that a hobby of yours?" He asks.

"Being pretentious?"

"Well, not scrambling the occupations of fictional sea animals, obviously."

"Because that would be worse, obviously," I say.

"Obviously," he says. He laughs, I laugh. The menu of situational characters unfurls in my head and there we land—bull and matador, archer and target.

The cramped foyer almost parts to allot space for him, his sprawling shoulders and proud jaw and sheer atmospheric mass. I pin myself to the metamorphosing walls. Marjorie takes her cue

and hangs back, striking up conversation with some girl from our Anthropology class with purple lipstick. Her eyes do not leave us.

“It is part of the package, I think,” I say, sipping. “We’re all here, being assholes, just living up to the full potential of our liberal arts education.”

“I concede. I forgot all about the Douchebag Aptitude Test that went along with our Common App essay.”

“Must have scored low, then,” I say.

“Not at all. Eightieth percentile.”

“What a relief.”

“I am for sure a certified, standardized asshole.” He steps closer and turns his ear toward me as if my muffled laugh arrives on cue. A muscle from his neck protrudes just slightly and I know that he knows. And not just that—I know, too. He is so painfully aware of himself, of the exact points where magnetism meets charm, how to pose and when to smile. He is loaded and ready to aim and I stand there, lips wilting over my wine, debating whether I should step away from the bullseye or paint a red stripe across my forehead.

Something beyond his profile catches my eye. The way the shadows are falling and hugging him and collecting under his lower lip.

“Have we not met?” I ask.

“Have we?”

“I’m almost sure I know you.”

“It’s a big campus.”

“You are not wrong.”

“Maybe we have a class together?” he suggests.

“I don’t think so,” I say.

He beams. “I’ve got it—of course it’s you.”

“And who am I?”

“You’re at that coffee shop a lot, aren’t you? Over by the bookstore.”

I narrow my eyes. “Yeah, sure.”

“That must be it,” he says. He swirls his cup and drains the last dribble of beer.

“Must be,” I say. I suck on my teeth, taste the drying wine.

“It’s loud in here,” he says suddenly, although it is not a lie. He grasps softly at my wrist.

Maybe it is asking for permission, maybe it is the illusion of tenderness. It disgusts and enthralls me. Aversion, bitter on the back of my tongue, then desire in the space just below my diaphragm. He is looking at me as if questioning and I slip into it, the thought—his eyes would look so nice if full of surprise, or want, or the afterglow of orgasm. I let him lead me to a room. Marjorie’s hand clutches mine as I pass and I squeeze back to reassure her. I wonder if that will make the situation any less trustworthy.

This is the fracture in the cemented glue holding my experiences together, my biology. On the day-to-day, I keep my head down and mind my business and I walk fast and nobody gets hurt. I do not do what I am told but I do what is inferred, expected, what I should. Not because I am afraid to speak up but because I am not foolish enough to believe anyone is willing to listen until I’ve usurped them or proven my worth. My mantra: no distractions. My tagline: men are distractions. My philosophy: men are beyond distractions. They are worse. They will waste my time and strip me down and make a stuffed head out of me, will polish my scales and horns and hang me next to the other monstrous, beastly, strong women they have disarmed and lashed. He will do these things, I am not bullshitting myself into another potential pathway, but then again, I

feel the hiccup in my skepticism as he shuts his bedroom door with his foot. He levels with me and I think: you are not in control, Reese, you are in the deep end and the only flotation device in sight is your integrity. But time moves slowly and I do not move at all.

I lower myself onto the nearby futon, abandon my jacket on a dresser that is only partially sticky with spilled beer. I let him apologize for the pungent smells of boys and weed and sour vodka that cling the walls and furniture. I smile because I am polite but also because there is a protocol to keep. The roles are assigned and now we are here, but then he's fiddling with the aux cord and pretending to sit on my lap and laughing again and his face, it seems so familiar and I cannot place it, it is vaguely there in my head, itching, and the wine is warming and buzzing, he is grazing my thigh with his knuckles and I wonder: who is the prey. Who is the predator.

I am trained for this. Endless internal monologuing and advice sessions to my girlfriends has solidified me as the grumpy sage trapped in a young woman's body. Yet in the cramped heat of desire burlesquing as intimacy, I am helpless. Or—that isn't true. I am perfectly capable of rolling my eyes at this man who will probably hurt me and and join Marjorie in the hallway instead, but I do not. I know in this moment I am no better than my friends, all of them, clinging to me in lamplit rooms on weekend evenings with their phone volume up but silent nonetheless. I am no better than anyone who submits to the temptation, to the beguiling limbo of social exchanges that do not warrant the label of "friendship" or "relationship." Reaching between us, illuminated by the flickering light seeping from beneath the door, our bodies adrift from the quivering crowd on the other side, I grip the paint brush. I drag the red line across my eyes. The hairs tickle my nose.

For a few minutes he tries to facilitate conversation. Where am I from? What is my major? What are my parents like? The more we talk the more uneasy we both become and the more

certain I am that we are nearing the edge of a cliff. Another push would send us tumbling. It dawns on me that the humor in the hallway was a spell, now quickly fading. His lips are nicely shaped. They would look much better closed.

His kiss is wide and wet at first, like a windshield wiper, his tongue carelessly sliding back and forth. I bite and he adjusts eventually. His moaning—too abrasive. His groping—too clumsy. His head—promising, but sloppy, rushed. I am bored within minutes, staring at his freckled ceiling, and I push gently against his chest and climb over him. I take him in my mouth and throat and give the shame rising in me a subsequent shove. Sighs flow from him and he is pliable, vulnerable and reduced to a toy, reduced to what he really is, just a child, but am I really better than him as I hover here and pretend—and then it is over. He comes and hesitates before kissing my mouth. He calls me a car home and does not look me in the eyes. Walks me to the sidewalk. Descending the brick steps while clinging to the railing, I realize I cannot remember his name. Marjorie sends a text message requesting updates but all I can manage is a thumbs up emoji.

I mumble an address to the driver and fall asleep, tracing the stitches in the leather seats. When I wake up, the driver is shaking me with hands tensed in fear. Her nails catch on the threads of my shirt and I shiver. Outside the window, the glow of street lamps are warm rather than garish. There are stars, visible stars. I am far beyond the perimeter of the cityscape and my campus. My gaze falls on the porch of my mother's house, the overgrown morning glories and untamed poppies. The driver taps my shoulder and gestures for a form of payment. \$141.73 for me to lie on the plush grass of my childhood lawn and gorge on the sight of stars for the first time in weeks. There is Cassiopeia and Orion and Canis, big and small, and then just me. Not twinkling, unaccompanied, hazy and too drunk. A phantom soreness lingers below my navel. I

brush the button of my jeans with my fingers and my tears are still hot when they drip down and pool in my collarbones.

I do not know how long I stay there. I do not know how long I sleep. As dawn breaks, there is a nervous hand on my inner arm and I wake to see Nina leaning over me, dark curls twirling down and blocking out the bleaching sky. The robins nesting in the ledge above the porch chirp to one another. Around her nature begins to stir. She is like a swallowtail and a raven and an angel all at once. Last night lingers in her tangled lashes. Her palm is still warm from sleep where it circles on my forearm, a little balmy.

She tucks her head under my chin. Finches teeter around us, searching for seeds. In my head I whisper in hushed tones that I am alright and hope she can hear me, feel it. The boy delivering newspapers pauses in his pedaling. He aims for the edge of the lawn, far from our heads. He says nothing but spares a few glances. Morning grows from placid to clement to glaring.

“Did something happen to you?” Nina asks. The question feels sudden, is sudden.

“No, not really.”

“You can tell me.”

“Why do you think something happened?”

“You only come home when something happens.”

“That’s not true.” I do nothing to stop the sharp defensiveness of my voice.

“Okay,” Nina says, sounding like she is shrinking but snuggling deeper into my collarbone.

“So what happened?”

She lets a beat pass.

“Was it a boy?”

I shift my hand where it rests on her upper back. I can't lie. But still. "What makes you think that?"

She shrugs, dirt grinding into her pajamas. "You kinda smell like one."

"Oh. Sorry."

"It's okay." She looks up towards me. "So who was he?"

"No one." My swallow is loud even in my own ears.

"Have you talked him before? One of the guys who live at your dorm?"

"No, it wasn't really like that."

"When did you meet him then?"

"Like nine hours ago. At a party." I fidget. "Or maybe before. I don't know."

"That sounds . . ." she drifts. Rubs her eyes and yawns. "That sounds kinda fun," she says.

"I don't think it could be called fun. It was just fine."

"What about him?"

"The same."

"Not fun, but fine?"

The lightening sky pushes down on my face, forcing my eyes into squinting slants. I turn my face away from it, away from Nina, a reflex.

"That's a good way to put it," I say, my face screwed up and brushing the grass. "Not fun. But fine."

"Why not fun?" Her hand, resting on my stomach, balls into a soft fist. "Was he mean to you? Did he hurt you?"

The cynic in me, the pantsuit-and-stilettos caricature metastasizing into my person, spinning thoughts into judgements and instincts into game plans, mounts the stage and clasps the mic in

her hand. Limelight reflects from her sleek hair. But I dart to cut the electricity, the whole smoky club of her domain going completely blackout. Rendered mute, she stomps her heels against the stage. I clutch the mic to my chest, resolute, a headache flaring behind my eyes as the cynic hammers at the bars of her cage.

Nina may be a lot of things, but most of all she is young. Fourteen and vulnerable to anyone because she craves trust, the give and take. Her security binds to her quota of confidants. Because she may like secrets too much and she may believe too easily and too eagerly, but no utility lays in illuminating all of the subdued, cavernous ways in which men had and would alter me, damage me, and her, too, eventually, all of us.

On the surface, the boy from the party had done very little. A girl and boy get drunk in a poorly lit space. The girl and boy almost fuck in a poorly lit space. The boy walks the girl to her cab because he is a gentleman. He congratulates himself for his chivalrous nature by sleeping for thirteen hours, waffles for breakfast.

But the girl, if she had been sober enough, would have been transfixed on the passing street lamps while she struggled for consciousness in the backseat of the car, the boy's face manifesting itself in the few dim yards between the lights of the highway. The girl would feel the ghost of his hand gripping her hair, swirling rat's nests at her nape, on her breasts, clumsy and firm, pinching her until she grunts but not stopping to ask if its good or bad, inside of her, searching and roaming with disregard for the carved paths of the men who came before him and left behind scorched earth. The boy traverses anyway, passing his torch too close to the walls, over the engraved autographs of those who came before him. He does not wonder if some are fresher than others, the areas around their names tender with inflammation. The snap of his blade's withdrawal echoes through the girl, everywhere.

The girl, in the car again, the passing street lamp bringing a moment of lucidity, flickers with clarity. The boy returns as the car passes the light, the night silhouetting his shoulders as he slides his boxers over his thighs. With the hunger of his body laid dormant, the rest of his passion is sheathed. He is unarmed, soft, waiting for the girl to cover herself, too, and follow as he leads her down the stairs, their new selves uncertain how to navigate the After, strangers hobbling down an old staircase and separating in the dark. The girl will think of the boy, then berate herself for thinking of him, because she entered his room on the condition that she would use him for loveless sex, which was a lie, and now it is her civic duty to see the lie through until the end. The cynic and the saint who live inside of her brain will tear her thought processes apart, tugging her along the sliding scale between hating the boy for his proud posture and wanting to love him for it, to redeem him in her own mind and in the eyes of the world. As if it is watching.

But Nina does not know the girl and is only just forming acquaintance with the world. She knows the “real” me, Reese, only, the grating big sister, nagging and judicious. At least in me, there is something at which she can gawk, face upturned. There is upward momentum. Meanwhile the girl stands firmly on the ground by Nina’s side, rubbing her prickling arms in the dark.

“He did not hurt me,” I say. I force myself to bear the brightening sun and turn back towards her. “He can’t hurt me.”

She nods, her chin biting into the soft pit above my collarbones.

“Do you like him?” she asks.

“No,” I say, mostly sighing. “It’s complicated.”

“How? Does he have a girlfriend?”

“No.” Another pause. “It’s complicated because it’s probably really simple. But my brain keeps trying to convince me that it’s not simple. And that’s the complicated part.”

She says nothing for a few minutes. The heat of the world builds, slow. She twirls a lock of my hair between her fingers.

“Mom misses you,” she says in a way that sounds like she means something else.

“I know. I should come home more.”

“Can you?” My scalp flares as her nail snags in my hair. “It’d make her really happy.”

“Maybe,” I say. “I can’t make any promises, though.”

“I know,” she says. She drops my hair onto my chest. “It’s okay.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

“It really is okay. We don’t have to talk about the not-okay part,” she says. “It’s the only thing we ever talk about.”

I do not thank her because it is unnecessary and unprecedented and it would tarnish the thin mesh operating as our safety net, cradling us on this morning, on this lawn. Just the stirring of the day through us, through the pinpoint where her face slumps against my skin, is enough. We cling to that and buoy together in the grass.

Pressing up from my body, a small pop releasing when her cheek separates from my shoulder, Nina brushes the hair from the crown of my head away from my face. She arranges the locks on the ground and sighs, but I am too foggy to decode. She wordlessly walks back into the house.

I learn the boy’s name when he brings his computer into the library desk for repair during my shift. It is Matías, but he goes by Matt and says it feels more comfortable. I am certain he is the childhood friend I barely remember but my mother sometimes mentions when she opens up

about the early days, the days before the divorce and the fights, before the move. Maybe he realizes it, too, but he says nothing about it. When I see him on campus I make a point to smile to distract from the sensation of something inside of me chipping away like withered marble.

Marjorie and I attend more parties. We drink more bad wine. I donate half of my clothes to a local shelter. I perfect my recipe for banana pancakes. I experiment with watching porn, but abandon it when it makes me nauseous. I take a bus home for Thanksgiving and hug my mother at the station. Nina looks at me over the hulking, golden back of the turkey, but swallows her words with her asparagus. On New Year's Day, I make my annual list of resolutions and donate it to the art club's paper mache supply. I adopt a goldfish and name him Mateo and he dies, three months later, when my roommate forgets to feed him while I road-trip to Denver. I bury him in the center of an ant pile, where the colony is already feasting on a bumble bee.

NINA

January 29th, 2017

“Work call,” Nina said lamely, sneaking into the dining room, although no one was paying much attention to her. Younis intersected her before she could sit down and withdrew her chair, whispering, “Where were you?”

“We were wondering what you had gotten up to,” Lizzie, his mother, said, wiping the wine and lipstick from her mouth on a disposable napkin.

“I thought I heard someone talking in the pantry,” Geoff said, chuckling the way she imagined oblivious fathers were expected to, elbowing her tenderly before bending over the table to fret over the perfectly manicured dinner. Lizzie nursed a bottle of Merlot with leisure, surveying the complete table.

“Her boss always has her doing something insane,” Younis said, passing out rolls. “What was it about this time?”

“She was flambéing something and she didn’t know how to turn off the fire alarm,” Nina said, cheeks full of bread.

“I have awful luck with flambéing,” Geoff said.

“Younis told us you were a gallery assistant?” Lizzie asked, turning to him with accusation.

“I am. That’s how we met—he was helping us design our new gallery space.”

“He mentioned that,” Lizzie said.

“She’s more of her life assistant,” Younis said.

“My boss is just a little batty. Sometimes she needs a little extra help,” Nina said, and Lizzie tightened her smile.

“The negatives of getting older.” She poured wine into everyone’s glasses. “Manners,” she said simply when she got to their side. Younis straightened and removed his elbows from the table top.

“So what horrors has Younis told you about us?” Geoff asked.

Lizzie cleared her throat. “We feel like we know so much about you already. I can only imagine what you’ve heard.”

“Besides the mass murders, nothing too out of the ordinary.” Younis’s nervous chuckle folded into the clattering on knives and forks. Nina changed course. “He did mention lots of siblings.”

“Six kids is less of a nightmare than it might sound,” Geoff said.

“We like to think of it as a blessing rather than a curse, especially considering.” Lizzie arched her brows as sipped.

“That’s not what she meant,” Younis said.

“I just meant I had a hard time growing up with my sister. I couldn’t imagine having to deal with five of her.”

“I had seven brothers myself,” Geoff said, using his steak to dot seven points in the air.

“All of our kids were just so grateful, it probably distracted from the overcrowding. Given our circumstances. I’m sure he’s told you,” Lizzie said.

“Just say ‘adopted,’ Ma.”

“You know I can’t stand using that word.”

“One kid from each country in the Arabian peninsula,” Geoff said, like he was announcing a trivia fact.

“We’re like collectibles. I told them I’ll do Central America next to keep up the tradition,” Younis said. He and his father exchanged winks.

“I’m sure you won’t have the same problems we had,” Geoff said and patted his back. Lizzie ignored them.

“It’s sort of heartwarming when you think about it,” Nina said, trying to scrape together a good impression. “I’m sure it made a huge difference having siblings who understood where you came from, besides just being adopted.”

“Their cultures are very distinct,” Lizzie said.

“Ma. We know.”

Geoff brushed crumbs from his lap. “I need something stronger. Should I grab Butterscotch Schnapps or peach?”

“People probably conflate your culture with other East Asians all the time,” Lizzie said. “I’m sure it’s exhausting.”

“Eh,” Nina began, but then corrected. “I mean, sure. But we’re both pretty whitewashed, honestly, so I try not to take it too personally.”

“You must mean yourself and your sister?”

Nina, reluctant, nodded. Geoff mumbled about butterscotch and bananas foster to himself and left the table. He patted Nina’s back as he passed.

“I think I fit into that category, too, to be fair,” Younis said, plucking at his knit sweater. Nina laughed with him, but Lizzie pushed her greens around on her plate.

“Well, I’d like to think otherwise,” she said. Nina thought she was pandering, acting dejected. “But we don’t see color in this house, anyway,” she finished, then smirked into the kiss Younis pressed onto her cheek.

And with that the past hour was erased and replaced with standard, fulfilled expectations for what normal, familial intimacy, the kind captured in freeze-frame on excessively lustrous magazine covers, was meant to look like. Geoff rejoined the table, plate stacked high with an elaborate, caramel-topped ice cream and a rock glass of liquor. Nina was transfixed, maybe partially alarmed, by how easily conversation slid into other topics with tenderness. Every motion, every opinion, so light, and suddenly, in response to her little jokes, laughter with gradually less hesitation. She sank back, recognizing as the dinner streamed into dessert, that his parents were far less concerned for the quality of their new relationship than for Younis himself. She knew he kept busy and away from home; he told her once, on their third date, after making out on the kitchen floor while the shrimp scampi began to burn, that she would understand the ambivalence required to love them after they finally met. Watching them fawn over him, morphing beyond the apple of their eye into a full cornucopia, she felt something between them was bound to spoil, but quickly tucked it behind her infatuation. She answered their courteous questions, ate her mashed potatoes with measured slowness when the focus was elsewhere.

They worked their way through all of the Merlot and two additional, sweeter bottles Geoff pulled from the cellar. Lizzie watched Nina as she tended to the dirty dishes.

“You have such dainty features,” she said. Nina couldn’t help her surprised scoff.

“As in fragile?”

“As in pretty.” Lizzie flexed her fingers against the granite and glanced at Nina’s hands, as if comparing. “It makes me wonder . . .” but she pressed her lips shut and deferred to drying the freshly washed plates.

“Makes you wonder?”

“It’s silly. I just got ahead of myself.”

“It’s okay, I’m curious.”

Lizzie shrugged and ruffled her thick, slanted bob. “It just made me wonder about the future, about the two of you.”

“Mhm.”

“About grandkids. I’m sure he’s told you why we had to adopt.” She gestured to her body as if it were a broken, rusted machine. “We were lucky that they accepted our applications at all.”

“It’s a long way off, definitely,” Nina said.

“We always hoped he would get lucky the way we never did, but naturally, I have my concerns.” Her thought faded off like she wanted to provoke sympathy.

“He stays pretty healthy,” Nina said, tilting her head as she scrubbed a stack of bowls, hoping he would round the corner and carry his mother away.

“I just wonder if you two might end up in the same position.” Lizzie brushed Nina’s shoulder. “Not because of age, obviously—you’re both still so young. But your frame . . .”

Nina, unsure of what else to do, reached out and pulled her into a weak hug. “I understand,” she said, although she did not, the stepping stones they had established toward comfort, crafted and planted during their brief dinner, now demolished. She became aware of her body, her body that Lizzie thought would fail her, the way it moved in her clothes, and she excused herself in order to let the offense simmer away.

In the basement, with its glossy wood floors and elaborate bar, she curled into a loveseat, juggling a pool ball in her hand. Pinned all over the walls were framed photos of the family with various combinations of the six children, all of them grown and beautiful. It was difficult not to compare. She felt alienated despite the mental preparation she had done, gleaning from Younis’s stories about his childhood that, comparatively, they were like a modern Brady Bunch while

they—there were no examples. They were broken. They were on the mend but so slowly, like—her drunk brain fumbled for an image—sloths performing surgery.

Younis loved the past, speaking of it and learning from it. He related most of his present life to his upbringing and happy childhood and when she agreed to come to dinner and meet his parents, he demanded her to thaw some, to open up about her own family, a topic she avoided beyond the eavesdropping she knew he did when Reese called her every so often, several hours drive between them and years of unconfessed things.

She scrambled for a harmless anecdote and settled on a repetitive theme over a specific argument. They had done chores and fought and she lashed out and called her sister names, and she made her feel unintelligent and trivial, and the rift between them deepened and pushed the dagger further into their mother's heart. Apart from herself, she recounted the vague details, aligning them in whichever way seemed most coherent, but it only began to bother her when she saw Younis melting and crumpling, growing sad, until eventually she was splayed out on the couch, catching her tears in her hands. "We act like strangers but we don't know why," she said between gasps, smothering her face into a pillow.

"What about your mom?" Younis asked her, seeming torn between pressing for more details and holding her through her meltdown. "She must know what it is that started all of this. I bet she knows how to fix it if you just ask."

A barrier broke. Nina allowed herself to be held and wilted into the broadness of his chest while he floundered, uncertain what he had said wrong. Her limbs grew soft and shaky and her cries strangled, and it was there, with his hands grasping her slackened body, his quiet assurances that things would be alright dousing her like buckets of ice water, where she revealed to him the day of her deepest shame.

SLOANE

May 6th, 2013

The bump between the street and parking lot jostles me into a small panic of awareness. What am I doing here? Night is falling over the park and if I leave now there's the risk of park patrol locking the gates behind me, and then I'll be stuck, but then I snatch the key from the ignition anyway and saunter onto the gravel path that dissects the rolling, grassy hills. I rub my palms against my thighs, wiping away the clamminess. I'm still in my sweats from where I came home and changed, before the fight.

I find a break in the pasture to sit and recollect. I've heard stories of people revisiting old homes, wandering through their frameworks like ghosts, smudging their fingerprints on the walls and windows. Coming to the park felt right. There was a small stretch of years when we would skateboard here together. I would drag Nina behind on a string while she wobbled on her roller blades because the mechanics of the board scared her. She was convinced she would last longer on separate wheels instead of a sturdy piece of wood. When she fell the first time and scraped up her palms, she did not cry. Just got back up. Reese high-fived her.

I never thought I would come back here on my own and lounge on the trimmed grass amongst the rows of spring daisies, the little stepping stones by the creek shimmering like sea glass. Polished, cared for, this artifact of nature, a fragmented Eden amongst the stacked suburbs. It all sounds and feels so contrived, but there is a veil of harmony covering the treetops, falling over me and everything like mesh, like soft breathing. I nestle on the border of where the wet soil of the creek bank gives way to the tight, plush grass. I pluck one of the daisies, a fresh bud, and twirl it between my fingers like a rolling marble.

There should be a word for the bizarre, gilded glow that coats the world after a fight. The brief window of mixed shadow and light where invisible things reveal themselves and climb out from tree roots. I pluck tapered petals from the daisy and I should be thinking about the fight, sorting my thoughts out, but the only thing on my mind is the forest and the past. It must be six, eight years since then, since those summers. It is difficult to decipher if the past was really all that wonderful or if the memories solidify and the better aspects rise to the top like cream over milk, and they absorb the vintage quality people search for in their knick knacks and decor and clothing, dipping into the nostalgia. Not that I'm separate from the craze, or anything. We keep an old bookcase in the corner of my room for the sake of mementos, checkpoints of time that I can hold in my hands and contemplate their weights. Picturing it in my head, the rows, I can imagine the newest addition—one of Nina's paintings, a prototype she scrapped before moving onto a larger canvas. There is a purple goose that was shot down, heart oozing blood, limp over the sand dunes of a marbled desert. Reese's diploma is next to it in a clear folder, one of the corners blocked by a modest print of her first prom dress, all red, looking so womanly. Is that even a word? Is that a way for a person to look? Womanly. Like a lion sunbathing on a rock in a sunbaked field, strong, at peace. The rest of that shelf is filled with small, sentimental things—a tiny, miniature clay sculpture of the three of us that Nina made in pottery class, back when I kept my hair short; a "get well soon" card she made for Santa when she realized he didn't really exist; a baseball signed by Reese's teammates from her brief stint with little league baseball. Nina's senior photo, the amber of her eyes, twin pennies, her face so relaxed and careless and beautiful. It is selfish to wish, but if there was a way to suspend her in that purgatory of ease, to dismantle her worry . . . Before I left I grabbed it, stared and wondered how to make her happy, how to show her how smart she is, how to let her bloom on her own but in the right way.

When I was young, I was like her. Free will was all I wanted and for so long I thought it was all I had. Nothing could stop me because I wouldn't allow it. It's what got me through the pregnancies, both unexpected even if they had their own special circumstances of support and love. Reese, born in that lake of passion in which Derek and I swam and drank for the first few years, then Nina, with all the furious, bitter thoughts, the loneliness and the stark, contrasting support from Eva, from all the women I worked with, helping me along until we gathered our feet again and relocated. When they grew into their own, when they walked and carried themselves as fully-realized, tiny humans, I noticed how I had neglected my own power. I surrendered to the surf of passing years and yielded to the floods.

I told myself I would be more than just a mother and—maybe it was here, at the park, maybe it's what drew me, if I'm being lenient and optimistic—I knew I had let myself run astray. But I would like to think I adjusted, turned off the autopilot. I conceived, nurtured, protected. It was simpler to regiment their lives and expectations than my own, to focus on formulating their destinies for greatness and teaching them to wield themselves like keen, precise swords. Both of them, scrawled with their own embellishments. Reese, hellbent on integrity and success, but lost without praise, and controlling. Rigid, moralistic, stubborn, but beneath it, warm. Kind and delicate, though she would die before she let anyone see it.

And Nina. I tug a strand of grass from the ground. She is magic, diffused magic incapable of capture and so many other words, but they all feel unfair.

Maybe it is the coward's thing to grind my tailbone into the grass and still wonder after over two decades if the choice to share my body with another human, to mold myself not only into a house but into a home, to grow hearts and legs and brains and toes, was not necessarily the wrong decision but even a fair one, or one of paranoia of betraying some distant future version of

myself who felt flooded with misplaced, untapped maternalism. It's cruel to say, but—if I would have been better off. Not financially or physically, but something more inherent, more internal, like destiny. As if I were to walk into an art exhibition of my life with faceless portraits of us posted on all the walls, drawing us in the rusted cranberries and oranges and mossy greens and browns, intertwining and overlapping, and I were to punch the square center where my nose bridge should emerge just so under the gradient shadows and watch the stretched canvas erupt around my wrist, and on the other side a universe, an alternate universe where among the convening galaxies I left Derek in the parking lot outside of the bar, where I roped myself out of love, where I had an abortion. Where I went back to school and got a degree in physics and slugged my way through academia and sipped too much coffee and landed a job conducting experiments and stayed up late indulging myself, and I do more yoga, and I'm painfully self aware, and I still talk to my cousins and buy their children little ornate onesies with spongy pocket money, where I have more to write on holiday cards than apologies. Where I am simultaneously more and less out of touch, where I perform tasks people never expect of me and sometimes fail uncharacteristically just to reinstate the foundational fact of my life: that no one and nothing can ever tame me but myself.

But then I fell in love and succumbed to the universe's most salient and efficacious trick, and I thawed under the kisses and reassurances and curled in my sheets and rubbed my stomach in slow circles. From there life became a montage launched into hyper speed, and I lay there for months, rubbing and tracing as my body stretched and ballooned, as I felt roots grow through my head and feet and anchor me into the opposite poles of the cosmos as if I were becoming opalescent, as if I were a heavenly planet with halo rings of pebbles, a garden encroaching on the banks of trees and perimeters of fences and through cracks and holes, a flock of migrating birds,

a mother, the world itself. On the graph that charts the expanse of things internalized I am a data point, an asymptote advancing toward the happiest and saddest moment of my life, the plane of experience ever-widening. The only outliers in the data are two northern stars glinting on the edge of the mappable expanse, miles away from the median, the birth of two little girls, swollen and shrieking, their cries resonating in the hospital room, bright and almost intelligent. And I think: there is nobody left but them. And I think: I am nobody except for who they are.

In those moments where I was lucky enough to steal away a few quiet minutes, watching them hover over the edge of their toast and pluck away the crust, the crumbs dancing down on their school shirts like fairies, I let them and just stared, sipped from my mug and saw in them, those little girls who were a part of me, equal composites to a whole, the needle and thread that could stitch the fissure back together. I jump from the sleep I was perfumed into and and I take the needle and I loop, loop until I sew myself back into my body, my body that is once more mine, is once more a haven for a sole individual than a vessel, not outrun or downtrodden but retired, humbled, complacent. I sat there with them in the kitchen and in the park, in a flurry of snipped, strung moments, and saw them burgeoning into themselves entirely. And myself, too. We no longer bled together into a smear. We were not planets or the moon and stars or nursery rhyme symbols, or ethereal, otherworldly spirits, but ourselves. The simple, solitary bodies were were born into and grew into, juxtaposed.

I grasp the stem of the broken flower and I flush with a little glow of silliness. Feeling fuzzy, twirling it between my fingers. I slide the stem into my pocket and head back toward the car, strolling backwards, the soles of my feet and the rustling of the gravel forming a proud cadence, the sun descending further into twilight.

Brimming and restless, I rip a corner off a piece of the owner's manual and jot thoughts down, shove it back in the glovebox, pull out onto the highway. Flipping through the radio, I find that the only station without commercials is classical and I crank the volume all the way up. They announce it as Korsakov's *Scheherazade, Opus 35*, and I curve and bank around the cars, imaging an orchestra of sweeping violins and piercing French horns and the luring oboe all flanking me, serenading me as if subtling my ride back home. I am resolute. I am ready to repair things or maybe damage them more, or just sit with Reese and Nina on the rug in silence as we embrace each other, trembling but unified.

PART TWO
DAUGHTERS

NINA

May 7th, 2013

The door swings open and two officers, one flanking the other, tip their hats to me. Sweat stains spread on the undersides of their arms, the morning hot and heavy with summer dew and gusting into the house. They ask me to bring the oldest member of the household to the door. I frown and consider cocking my head, saying, “what if that’s me?” but it’s early and they look well-meaning as far as cops go. Reese fumbles downstairs in a massive t-shirt, mismatched socks, a lopsided bun barely containing her jungle of hair. She invites them inside, rests against the doorframe and watches as they remove their boots with little grace and stack them along the foyer walls. She asks me to make coffee, but once I’m in front of the machine I realize I don’t know how it operates. I trail behind her instead as she and the police officers walk to the dining room table, keeping close. She doesn’t say anything.

One of the officers chews the corners of his peppered mustache while sifting through a stack of pictures and files he removes from a manila folder. The other bumbles through some preliminary small talk, strokes his forearm with suspicion, like he’s sizing us up, like he’s familiar with our faces, interrogating us for our biographies and ticking off boxes.

“And you’re . . .?” the speaking officer says, ogling me.

“Karina Tanaka,” Reese interjects. She taps my hand and I can see her skin practically rippling with worry. “She’s the younger one.”

“I go by Nina,” I mutter, not sounding as resilient as I wanted. The officer with the mustache smiles weakly.

“And your father? Mr. Tanaka? Is he around?”

Reese doesn’t spare a glance. “No, he’s not. It’s just the three of us here.”

“And when was your mother home last?”

“Yesterday. She left around dinnertime. She didn’t really say anything.” She knots her fingers together.

“Did she leave a note?” the officer with the file asks. His voice is raspy, as if he used to smoke a lot, or maybe still does. His nails are stained and I wonder if they’ll mark up the papers. He’s holding towards himself as though we’re starting a round of poker.

Reese shakes her head. “No. She runs a lot, around town after work.”

“To relieve stress,” I add, then shrink back. They all look towards me, then away.

“Did she say she was going anywhere specific?” He copies Reese and laces his hands together, places them on his lap.

“No,” Reese says, “I just assumed.” She takes a little gulp and presses forward. “There was a bit of an argument beforehand, when she got home. I thought it made sense that she would go run to clear her head. She took the car, so I thought the park, maybe.”

“What sort of argument?” the mustached officer asks. He taps the files into line.

“Just family stuff,” Reese says.

“It’s important for us to have context about this sort of thing,” the other officer says.

“It was about me,” I say, squeaky. “I was having problems at school.”

They both nod like they understand. I resist the urge to tell them they don’t. Reese’s silence speaks for itself.

The older officer peels a photo from the stack and slides it forward. It’s Mom’s old photo from nursing school. She looks young, bright, rushed but happy.

“Can you confirm you know who this is?” he asks. Reese stalls and gawks, jaw hardening.

“It’s our mom,” I say. I reach to touch the edge of the photo, but the officer slowly places it back into the pile.

“And could you confirm your mother’s name for us, please?” I wait for Reese to say something, but she’s still stuck on the empty spot on the table where the photo was. The polished wood stares back.

“Sloane,” I say, rubbing my mouth. Something on it stings, like I had eaten chilis or let the skin dry out and crack. “Sloane Lattes.”

“Her middle name?” the officer asked. I hunch a bit.

“I’m not sure,” I whisper. They don’t look at me like I should be apologetic, but it fills me anyway. “Christine, I think,” I say, but the words are barely audible as they trip from my mouth.

“What’s this all about?” Reese asks, face still downcast.

“We’re just trying to gather information, Ms. Tanaka.”

“And I’m asking you, what for?” She shifts to glare at the officer with the stack of papers.

The policemen exchange looks and sighs. I brace myself, or try, but there is no true preparation. I think of the Greyhound ticket. I think of the sunset over the driveway.

Back in third grade we would have “students of the week.” Every person in class got a turn, and on Thursdays, one of our parents would come in and give a little show-and-tell about something interesting they knew. Typically it was about their childhood, or their careers, or overcoming some huge obstacle. Mom did a little presentation about nursing. She even brought in the old feral cat we used to feed on our back porch, Lucky, even if it had nothing to do with her job, because I kept bragging about my cat with one eye and half a tail and my classmates demanded proof. It went well enough from what I remember. This one kid—Malcolm—his father came in and gave this whole speech about cars. He raced F1s back in the day and ran his

own mechanic shop after he busted his leg during a bad trial run before a big race. It's not that I thought it was the most fascinating thing in the world—maybe it was the way his voice rose and fell, maybe it captivated me—but the facts he told us always stuck in my brain. We played a mini-Jeopardy at the end of his presentation and I won first pick of the cupcakes he had brought for the class, my fingers ripping at the taped paper box. He snuck me a spare one once class was dismissed for the day and as I walked home and I repeated the facts he had told us in my head like a hamster on wheel, peeling the away the cupcake wrapper.

Brake failure only causes five percent of automobile-related deaths. At least that's what Malcolm's dad told us back then. Usually it's easily managed. If there's a bump or squeak or jump, it doesn't take a genius to sniff out the need to drive over to a shop. But when a car is in the hands of another person, say, a team of young kids fresh out of high school trying to piggy back off of a superstar F1 racer's rise to fame, and they hit the track to practice, circle round and round and round, only to realize when they're banking the biggest curve in the track for the thirtieth time that their brakes are sinking all the way to the ground and they head straight into the wall. Suddenly their practice laps become their last laps, and their leg is crushed into a billion pieces, and they're lucky to only come out with a concussion and bleeding eardrums. Because then they're one of the select few, like Malcolm's dad, whose brake fluid shits the bed and leaves their pipes bone-dry and still walk out alive.

Instead let's say the driver has a daughter. Two daughters. But one in particular, here, who drives the family car around and doesn't say anything when the brakes feel a little spongy, sink a little farther than normal, half because she can't shell out the money to fix them and half because she genuinely forgets every time she stops driving for more than five minutes. The driver isn't dressed like Malcolm's dad, decked out in a helmet and full body pads, because they're not a

professional sports car racer. They're just a woman, a mother driving back home from wherever she was, probably listening to ABBA way too loudly and screeching off-key while tapping the worn leather wheel. She's soaring on the highway, ideally with a heart full of light and release and forgiveness, and she's going into a turn but it'll be alright, she thinks, until a Pontiac in the other lane drifts too close and she jerks over to compensate, misses the curve by a foot or two, goes bumping and flying across the grass slope and presses her foot so hard against the floor she feels like she's gonna burst through the carpet, shove her ankles straight into the soil. But she doesn't. She presses and presses but she can't stop it because there is nothing to stop, just free-flowing air and the brake pedal flat against the car floor, and she hits a flourishing oak tree head on, and she feels no pain. I hope she felt no pain.

People are soft and cars are hard. People are soft and trees are hard. People are so, so soft, and sometimes they're coated in a mean, terse shell even though they're actually well-meaning and love their daughters very much, but it will always melt under the grind of clashing metal. Organs like warm balloons, skin like sheets of cashmere, hearts waiting to be punctured and collapsed. The human body is just a plush bag of vulnerabilities begging for disaster. It is unreliable. It fails people, who are bursting with so much emotion that they're destined to pop no matter what, no matter when the end appears. The body fails us. The body cannot protect us and people, destined to be encased in our pliable, fragile, weak cages, cannot protect each other.

This is what I tell myself, anyhow: that I couldn't have protected Mom from flying through the windshield at sixty miles per hour even if I wanted to.

But god, I want to. I've never wanted anything more in my entire life.

I was a cynic, or am even still. I thought people who described experiences with wide berth and no detail were just lazy. I thought disassociation was a hoax meant to punch a vacuum into

space for the rest of us to fill with our sympathy and pity so the person in question could rob us blind when we eventually turned the other way to give them time to “grieve” and “have some breathing room.” But the door shuts on the officer’s backs and it’s like they were never even there despite the grueling, two-hour question-and-answer. I try to hold their faces in my mind, cup my hands in front of me and recreate them in the air like a shapeless sculpture, but it’s like stroking peach skins, fuzzy, round, cyclical and unending. Nothing manifests. I sink to the floor with my back propped against the windows tossing light into the foyer. I touch the handle and trace its warmth to reassure myself it wasn’t a dream.

I can see Reese through the foyer, sitting on top of a low bookshelf behind the couch, her hands braced on a stack of vintage almanacs Mom snagged from a craft market last week. She wanted to tear out the old botanical pages and frame them, hang them along the staircase, bring some nature into the house without forcing plants to suffer from her natural affinity to kill all houseplants, she said. Mom’s old backpack—the only thing that survived the wreck—droops torn and scrambled by her hovering ankles. Inside are tattered papers, a burnt water bottle, and a melted bag of rubber bands, the seam still intact. The officers handed it over before they left, but neither of us had the energy to dig through every crevice, to find her wallet and look at her license picture and make it real.

Even though there’s natural light everywhere, the morning just beginning to stretch, the area around Reese is dimmed like an ailing halo. She looks like she’s aged ten years over the past hour and a half. If I squint my eyes it blurs the splattering of freckles, skews her eyes to seem a little fuller – she looks just like Mom.

Here’s the truth: there’s nothing romantic or sentimental about sitting on the floor while watching your big sister rapidly dissipate into a pile of forlorn shreds of herself. It’s like the

moon gets stuck in an eclipse and casts the whole world in darkness. It's like the story of the ugly duckling but backwards. I used to think she could withstand anything. Now, if I were to crawl over and just push her, nudge her with my finger, she would let herself fall and splinter.

It's almost sacrilegious to witness. If Reese is anything she is a titan. She is ruthless. If she was in a comic book she would steal all the moments reserved for stalking up during the boss fight, her foes slain all around her, so she could slowly push opaque, scarlet glasses up her sloped nose while making dead eye contact with the enemy, then withdraw her sword. The utter graveness of her personality never turns off. She is in or out, investing or ignoring, end of story. She is sort of a dictator and sort of a pundit but she is strong. This I have admitted at the very least. Now she is stooped, she is covered in shadows and she is confirming what I have always known: beneath her armor of diligence is an armadillo without its shell, exposed and bound to rupture under the slightest squish.

I say this like I'm better, somehow. There's nothing easier than pointing fingers, but self-awareness doesn't soften the satisfaction of pushing the blame onto someone else. Besides, I can feel it coming. I can feel the guilt in the back of my head like it's charging. An aneurysm or a seizure ready to strike me and lay me on the ground and make a martyr out of me, but then, can the guilty still make sacrifices?

I drift away from Reese and peer into Mom's tiny office. It's more of a storage room with a desk as its gravitational center, but she likes the cramped space. She says it feels like her stress was drained from her body and used to paint the room, which pressures her to work until, whenever she wants, she leaves and mentally clocks out of her responsibilities. I never know what she's up to in there or why she would voluntarily subject herself to more projects, but it keeps her busy. Sometimes I'll use the state of the place against her whenever she starts barking

at me about lack of work ethic. She'll carry around a little cloud of embarrassment for the next few days, drawing the shades whenever she's hulled up in there. It isn't quite surrender, but nothing with her ever is.

From my spot on the floor I can see through the windowed door and into the connecting entrance on the other side of the office that faces the kitchen. The shades are down. I think about her pulling back the blinds just enough to show a sliver of her face. She would wink and I would hear her laugh echo from the kitchen and into the foyer, arching over the sights and smells of dinner on the stove. The movement in the back of my head starts up again, like I'm—being tickled. Being pinched or punched. Everything stings. Flashing stings, burning, and then a cool wash, then nothingness. I'm swaying. I'm dizzy. I'm . . . fine. I'm fine.

I slide my eyes over towards the narrow, stout hallway that separates the kitchen and the foyer, and Reese is still there in the opening looking half-liquefied. I reach up and touch the handle again but it is cold. I feel like I'm going to vomit.

I do. Doubling over, my stomach unfolds onto the wood floor and tears mix with the bile. Another flash—Mom, heavily powdered, enclosed in wood, in a coffin destined to be closed with finality and never reopened. My head throbs and I vomit again, the puke spreading and splashing onto my hands. Reese's bare feet pad against the ground, coming towards me, then her knees hit the floorboards a few feet away.

"Tell me when you're done," she says.

I spit. "I'm done," I say. The pile quivers under her reverberating footsteps. I lurch away as my stomach flails.

Reese wraps her hands in paper towels and wipes, wipes. The crinkle of a plastic bag fills the room, bulges with the soiled towels.

“Go lie down on the couch. I’ll bring you tea.”

“I don’t want tea,” I groan.

“I’ll bring you some tea. Go.”

“I don’t want the tea.”

She looks down on me, severe. “Well I can’t just leave you here in the foyer. You need to get up.”

I roll over and capsize on my side, watch as she scoops up the last bit of the bile. She splashes the floor with some sort of orange oil Mom uses to keep the polish up to date. Used to use? Used to use. Mom used to use it, and now we use it.

My hand stops short of Reese’s when I reach out to tap her fingers, get her attention. She turns to me anyway, tying the bag in the knot.

“Do we have to start talking about her in the past tense now,” I say. Maybe it’s tactless but maybe I want it to be.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she mumbles. She walks out back to throw out the trash.

“When will we know?” I ask.

“We have lemon or ginger. Do you want the lemon or the ginger.”

“Do you think we will feel the difference?”

“I’m putting on the ginger. Ginger is supposed to soothe inflammation.”

I heave.

“It was because you were eating all those snacks yesterday. I could tell you were stoned. You always eat too much when you’re stoned.”

I’m crying. I’m crying and there’s puke in my nose.

“Are you constipated? Ginger helps with constipation. Maybe it was the constipation and not the inflammation. I could have mixed them up.” She appears in hallway again with more paper towels. I let my head roll and stare at the ceiling, at the shitty, tacky molding Mom hates. Hated.

“We should open a window,” Reese says. She scrubs. Orange rind mixes with vomit. I might be going blind.

“I think I’m going blind,” I tell her.

“You probably need to drink some water.”

“Mom is dead,” I shout. The sentence echoes from the ceiling and bounces back onto us. I turn to her. “Mom is dead and I’m going blind.”

“I forgot to plug the kettle into the wall.” She blinks and abandons the crumpled paper towels on the floor. “I pressed the button and everything but I didn’t plug it in.”

“I can’t feel it,” I say. “How can she be dead if I can’t feel it?”

It would have happened during the crash. When her heart stopped beating at the bottom of some ditch while every other car went along its way, unsuspecting, I would have known. We both would have known. If she had died then, that would mean I’ve lived in a motherless world for hours and that can’t be possible because I woke up this morning and heard the cops knocking and felt her sleeping in her room, safe, completely knocked out. I hovered outside of the door and even thought about waking her but then I went and did it myself, ducked outside and answered the door and hoped I wasn’t getting busted for something. Hours—whole hours?—and I didn’t even feel the difference. How could I not feel the only constant thing in my life suddenly gone? I don’t understand how it obeys the laws of physics that I can exist in the world without the creator that brought me into it, probably because I know fuck-all about physics but also who cares, I would lock myself in a lab until I understood enough to rewrite the formulas of the

universe if it meant I could hear the garage door cranking open to let the floodlights of the car pour over the old storage boxes and bikes and the door to the house. To hear her key slide into the lock. But then my brain corrects itself and says, no, that's not realistic, she wouldn't come home from work until at least four. But then what then? When she doesn't come home. When she never comes home.

The truth is the truth even when it is a cliché: there is a chance my mother died thinking I failed her and that makes me want to disappear. I am selfish. I am a selfish bitch for lying here and thinking about my dead mother and wondering if I botched all of her hopes and aspirations while she lay bleeding in the gutter. I'm going to puke again.

Reese returns when she hears me retching. She holds my hair back until I scrape enough energy together to sit on my knees.

"Do you feel any better?" she asks.

"No." I spit and wipe my mouth. I check the floor and wonder if I look as much of a mess as the one I just made.

Reese knits her eyebrows. "But you can see?"

I nod, fast, and the tears start again. She holds me even though I am too weak to grab her back.

She turns to me, but it is quick, as quick as she can make it, and I think a bit of bile has rubbed from my cheek to hers before she's staring over my shoulder. "We should start making phone calls," she says. I'm slack beside her. "Her cousins will want to fly in from Washington. And her coworkers will be scrambling to get the time off."

"Okay," I whisper, hoping she'll stop.

"I don't know if she had a will. We'll have to look for it."

“Fine. Later.”

She adjusts her hands on my shoulders, twists the skin underneath by accident. “You should lie down.”

“I want to go outside.” I move to stand up from the floor.

“I can bring the pillows down from my room. I’ll bring the expensive one that the chiropractor gave me that you like to steal. It will help.”

“I want to go outside and water the plants.” There’s a vine of cherry tomatoes blooming. I saw it yesterday afternoon. I kicked up the dirt covering its roots because I was angry, angry at Mom. I should fix them.

I push Reese’s arms away from me. She stares at me, then through me, but stays on the floor.

Stumbling outside, I balance on the railing enclosing the patio. I dry heave and grip the little beams. My puke is nothing now, I feel like nothing, but the wind blows and for a second there is a little wisp of calm.

Over the edge of the railing, there is the meager patch of flowers Mom made Reese and me plant together three years ago. Maybe two. I stare at them, the petals bending back in the wind, almost grazing my toes. The whole chore was supposed to help us bond over our differences. She was experimenting with a more “homeopathic parenting style.” She made us drink apple cider vinegar in the morning and put garlic extract in our ears to prevent infections. We smelled like calzones for an entire week.

I avert my gaze. I don’t want to remember but I have no defenses.

The fight wasn’t isolated. They never were, are. I was thirteen and dumb, or thirteen and just being myself, and we were hustling through envelopes, scrawling addresses and licking adhesive

strips and sliding Reese's graduation announcements inside. The paper was glossy and reflective. In the pictures, she looked happy, free.

Mom was listing off the names—down, down, down, and then I cut in.

“Wait. Dad's not on there.”

The familiar song and dance. Two versus one. I could see them mutate into defensive mode. Reese cleared her throat.

“I decided not to send him one,” she said. I may have actually yelled at her—I don't know. Then Mom placated her with a little pat on the leg, looked at me like a foreign, pitiful thing.

“It's probably time we tell you.”

Dad leaving was an aimless, timeless event. He moved away when I was three and stayed piss-poor at keeping in touch. Reese always chalked it up to the distance when I was a kid and bothered her for explanations. I believed her, too. Then they told me about the family while we were there, cataloguing all of our loved ones on overpriced envelopes. The other family, his new wife, Amy, and the baby, Koby. Everything clicked, then, the fight from a year before after our day at the science museum, the radio silence from Dad afterwards. Not that I eliminated the spotty correspondence he maintained for a near-decade from the equation, but they hadn't even told me what happened. They didn't include me at the science museum and they didn't include me after, when they decided to sever all ties. I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that they had cut him out of my life without bothering to ask for permission.

Mom tried to be patient. “I know how much you love your father, but you and your sister never deserve to be lied to. You know I'd never want to get in the way of you and him, but I had to do what I had to do in order to protect you.”

Rounds of arguments went by and the ticking gave way to another explosion. I felt trapped. Maybe I was.

It's fucked up, isn't it, that my mom is dead and here I am reminiscing about how she scorned me, separated me from my father. It's fucked up that I'm out here on the patio thinking, what if she did that thinking it would be good for me and now she made me an orphan? It's fucked up. I'm fucked up.

I wish it was night. At least there would be a sense of metaphorical closure. But it's a blue morning sky with strokes of misty clouds, spring bleeding into summer. If I sit here long enough and let the sun bake down on me, maybe I'll dry up into a crisp and crumble away into a little pile of bones and sift down into the ground. At least I would feel closer to her.

The windows overlooking the patio rustle, the blinds stacking atop each other like dominoes falling upward. I prop my hand against the sun and squint to look. Reese stands in the window, her arm hanging on the string like it's the only thing keeping her up. She just stands there for a minute and I'm not even sure if she sees me, but then she leans forward, her forehead smudging on the glass, and the intensity of her gaze is so palpable that I feel it on my throat. I wait for her to start crying, but she doesn't, just stands there and lets her breath fog up the glass. Eventually her eyes slide close and I wonder if I left her there, undisturbed, if she would ever bother to move. As if she would stay so still for so long that would just grow into the floorboards of the house like a tree root, toes gnarled and drilling into the ground, and I could come back to the house, decades later, blow away the collecting dust settled on her shoulders, only for her disintegrate into powder and float away with my breath.

REESE

May 18th, 2013

In my head we are not interacting, the visitors and I. I'm standing at the mouth of the altar, the red tongue of the carpet pestering the tips of my heels, but in my head it is pushing me, slowly, millimeters at a time. I am simultaneously the angels carved into the church pillars, the cracks in the stained glass that paints the pews in jewels, and the severe sovereign faces of the mourners who come to touch my hand and whisper, "if you need anything, anything at all . . ." and pass on a somber smile and caress my back even though I cannot register the feeling. In reality, I am still. I shake their hands, I am gracious.

But in my head, everything is a waltz. I tremble while awaiting the next suitor, tears tense where they hover at their lash lines, and we step left-foot-change, right-foot-change, forward-step, promenade, then they dip me, cradling my flexing neck like an infant's, my hair tumbling loose and scraping the floor, and there, poised, upside down, is the sleek vase full of ash. The table on which it rests is spotted with a few gifts from Mom's coworkers and the spare family members who still kept in touch. Then the image is gone, the air evacuates my lungs and floats over us like staccato triplet sets, one-two-three, one-two-three, left-foot-change, right-foot-change.

They approach in lines, feet marching sluggishly to an invisible beat, and I hear the pluck of a cello in the back of my head at the pace of my heartbeat, like a reminder, or a crutch. Nina leans over and grasps at my elbow and in the shell of my ear I hear words like a question, am I okay, maybe I should sit down, but I rest my fingers on hers and she pulls away. My knees weaken a little but I grab the nearby pew, pretend it's just a curtsy, and the next dance partner falls in line, adjusts their tie to the base of their throat.

“If we can do anything to help . . .” they whisper, patting my wrists. My lips part to speak but they shush me, tell me it's alright, everything is alright. I want to push away but the pragmatism reigns me in, knocks my posture back into alignment.

I nod and respond to their polite condolences, ignore the fact that they are judging me, all of them, for not crying, for robbing them of the satisfaction of knowing my pain and using it to dull their own.

This is the stillest I've been in over a week and my brain does not know how to accommodate the change in pace. There was not a lot of spare time to process and mope. With funeral details to book, a cremation to pay for, announcements to submit to the paper, the lawyers calling, the social media posts, the text messages, the doorbell constantly ringing, there has not been much time for sleep. There has been a little, actually, but it was better spent doing other things, things that needed to be done. This morning I took two showers. I rewashed every item of clothing I own because the smell of casserole refuses to leave. My skin is rubbed raw against the lining of my pantsuit, but at least the sting keeps my eyes peeled open and awake. I shake another hand, allow my forehead to be pushed against another shoulder. “Please let me know if there's anything we can do to help,” they whisper and kiss my head. Just kill me, I say, but the words are lost in the threads of their dress coat.

We take our seats for the ceremony after an hour or so of greeting, nodding. I say “we,” but I cannot see anything beyond what is in front of me. I hope Nina is the small body sliding onto the bench beside me, pressing her shoulder into mine. I know she is too afraid to reach for me again. A friend from her time in school, a woman named Alondra who insisted she and Mom were very close, bumbles through the obituary, an embroidered gold cloth, crumpled and damp, balled in her palm as she emphasizes her anecdotes of how generous Mom was with her time, how

popular she was with patients, the infamy of her pies at the annual Christmas Eve potluck—according to the phone calls they had exchanged over the years, none of which I had ever overheard—how she was encouraging, altruistic, amiable, clever, zany, understanding, maternal, and inspiring, an entire thesaurus of positivities, as if Mom is going to spring up from the mouth of her vase and promote her nomination in the upcoming congressional election. I glaze over and imagine jogging on stage, taking the mic in hand. “My mother was a wonderful woman,” I would say, “but now she is dead. You can all go home now. My sister and I really appreciate you coming out to remind us of all the ways in which she was wonderful, but I can assure you we know them all, probably as intimately as we know that she is now gone. So let’s call it a day.” I’m being cruel, but it is because I am torn between telling myself that I owe these people nothing and reminding myself that it is the least I could do to sit here and lighten their anguish. I like to think it is what she would have wanted.

They asked me to speak, originally, and I almost scoffed. Not because the idea was that tactless or offensive, but because I knew I could never give this crowd the words they would need to soothe their ruined stomachs, in order to sleep at night. I would never be able to provide the remarks they might need to calm themselves when the frustration overwhelms them during their morning commute to work, in the morning smog, feeling her hand in theirs with every gear shift. Sitting with good posture and allowing the onslaught of hugs is all I can give, so I do.

Before the cremation, they led me to the backroom to show me the body. Not because someone was gracious enough to offer; I was just there to ID her before all the papers were signed. Nina waited in the lobby, unable to face the sight of everything, to move beyond knowing the new world we now inhabit and dive into it. I did not blame her and I do not now,

sitting in the chapel with the rose tones reflecting off her vase. Mom was sallow and unfamiliar against the metal table. Now she is a container.

I tried to muster up the energy for a wrenching confessional as I stared at her sunken face. Jerking the rope, I tried to heave an offering from the well carved into me, the bucket full of hurt and apologies, viscous and tar-black, but my arms gave out and I watched it fall and crash, splashing at the bottom. There was nothing to admit. There was nothing for which I could repent. There was just the vast, chilly waiting room, my dead mother and I, and dwindling minutes. My empty hands went slack against my thighs. I sank to the floor, perched on the scrubbed tiles with my forehead banked against the leg of the table. I felt suspended in space, scraping myself out of the well but failing, drowning. Some celestial strings tethered her, I hoped, to that modified woman on the table. I hoped she could hear or see me as I settled there for a few minutes, hot breath packing the room, forcing us closer. I hoped she would understand.

Logically, accidents happen. The concept of fate is, at best, endearing to me. Things do not happen for specific reasons. There is a fundamental, molecular randomness to the world, a belief etched into my wrinkled brain. The idea of free will is a scheme meant to train humans to blame ourselves for failing to meet a level of achievement that is sporadically, discriminately assigned. But still leaking from me, from the trenches that divide me into rotten, conquered pieces, there is blame, pungent with rot, and questions punishing me. What if she had driven the speed limit? It is irrelevant. Why not the other car? It is mostly chance and impreciseness and probably science. What if she had never had us? Would she be better off?

Grief is unproductive and I hate it. It slows me. It hardens me in a way that is not powerful, but claws at my instincts to linger on things and pick them apart. It makes me soft and liable and beside myself.

One of Mom's coworkers, whose name I forget, is slumped over the keys and playing piano on stage. Alondra sneaks off and out the back of the church with a scarf draped over her face. There is a violin accompaniment chiming in, and the strings are arching over us and commanding us to sob. People start. Their hiccups burst through the air like guppies clamoring for breath at the surface of a pond in the midst of a drought, or the fanged mouth of a predator.

My hands slink over my cheeks so I can hide within the sparse ocean of crying, tangential people. I fold over my own lap and block them out. Nina encircles the crook of my elbow with her grip but I ignore her. To distract myself from the music, I make a mental to-do list:

1. FOLLOW UP WITH THE LAWYER
2. CONSIDER CALLING A THERAPIST FOR NINA
3. THAW THE CHICKEN IN THE FREEZER
4. SEND OUT THANK YOU NOTES
5. EXTEND VACATION DAYS
6. PICK UP THE URN LATER
7. FIND THE CAPACITY TO FORGIVE
8. IF TIME ALLOTS — FORGET

NINA

May 18th, 2013

I wake up to the most annoying taps on the bottom of my foot. The officiator or preacher or whatever stands there, poking me with a pen, as I blink through the blinding, fluorescent lights of the church's staff bathroom.

"This table isn't meant for napping," she says. It's a little fold-out stacked with towels and little mints and fancy service pamphlets and, right now, me, in the fetal position.

"I was just closing my eyes for a second," I say. I sit up and she snatches the worn, leather Bible I was using as a pillow, holds it to her chest like a wounded animal recently rescued from a gutter.

She thrusts something at me—a tampon, its sealed wrapper crinkling. "It took a while to find one," she says.

"Thanks. I wasn't sure churches kept these sorts of things around."

"It happens more than you would think." She pauses and dusts off the Bible cover.

"Although I'm not entirely sure what you mean by that last part."

I scratch the drying lipstick crumbling at the corner of my mouth, shrugging. The wrapper swipes over my nose and I sneeze, partially on her. She stares, disgusted, and hands me one of the towels from the table.

"Sorry, Sister," I say.

"This isn't a Catholic church." She wipes the snot from her demure top. "Did anyone ever tell you why you're supposed to say 'God bless you?'"

"No." I hop up from the table. There is a faint stain like smudged rust from where my ass was. I turn to her and she is gawking.

“I’m not usually like this,” I tell her. “At home, I usually wear pads.” She snatches the towel from my hand and starts vigorously wiping the stain.

“You should go back to your sister. I’m sure she’s waiting for you.”

“Does that mean you’re gonna . . .?” I ask and gesture to the open stalls. She gawks again. “I just didn’t think you wanted to listen.”

“I’ll tell her that you are almost ready to leave, then,” she says, tossing the towel on the table as she exists. She pops back in and coughs to get my attention. Her mousy expression tenses, like she wants to be rude but is restraining. “Please remember to flush.”

I sit on the freezing toilet and I cry for no particular reason, or for too many. The whole day has felt so clinical with the car ride over, and Reese’s stony silence, and there are so many people to talk to but somehow no one at the same time and now here I am, bleeding on myself in a church bathroom, bloated from eating too much donated poundcake, snot all over the neckline of my dress, and—I reach for compartment on the wall and touch the cardboard roll—no toilet paper. I don’t believe in God, but Mom must have turned into a hell of a prankster in the afterlife.

The not-nun is leaning against the opposite wall when I leave, wiping my soapy hands on my dress, waiting for me, and I shout in surprise when I see her. She shakes her head.

“I was going to ask if you needed anything else.”

“Thanks. I managed, though.” I pause and adjust my hair, push it out of my face. “I tried to wipe up the rest of the table.”

“It’s alright. Accidents happen all the time, especially when people are going through something like this.” She clasps her hands and her nails, painted white, gleam.

“Thanks,” I say again. It’s all I’ve said to any person I’ve seen today. What else am I supposed to say? ‘My mom always hated funerals and thought they were best used as plots for corny comedy movies?’ It doesn’t really have the same ring.

“I went to grab your sister, but something occurred to me.” The woman cuts through my thoughts and starts strolling down the hall. I follow her. “She said it was just the two of you, now that your Mom passed.”

“Yeah.”

“I was afraid it was that way. I saw the news in the paper, you know. We felt so sorry for you both. Your mother helped my father, years ago, when he was hospitalized. Did you know that?”

“No.”

She smiles but it is weird. Not to put all religious people in a box, but she looks like she wants to brainwash me and is luring me in with kindness. I’m probably just paranoid. I smoked before the funeral, which probably doesn’t help, but, I don’t know, something had to give, as they say.

“My father used to be the pastor here. She was his patient when his condition got too severe for him to stay at home. She was so nice to him.” The woman sighs, reaches out to stroke my shoulder. “It’s what made us certain we had to have her funeral here, to thank her and honor her daughters.”

“It’s very nice of you,” I say. “Reese said so, too. She said she would find a way to pay you back.”

“We wouldn’t dream of it. I really felt privileged, especially, to give back.” She drops her hand from my shoulder and loops her arm around my elbow. “I spoke with her some, your sister, when she wanted to help plan the service last week. She seems distraught.”

“She likes to handle this type of stuff on her own.”

“It’s entirely understandable. Everyone has their own method.” She sighs. “It got me wondering. Is there any family I could call for you? If there was someone else around even to take care of the small things, I think it would be a big relief for your sister, and for you, too. These things take a long time to heal.”

“Like I said, Reese likes to keep personal stuff to herself.” There is that smile again, suppressed and strange, like she’s being held in chains and appealing to her captor. She’s beaming at me and my skin is crawling.

“Right, I completely understand.” We stop in front of a small door and she pushes it open, afternoon light flooding into the hallway. “Just in case, I’ve got someone who has offered to help out, if you want it.”

The light flattens and dims and in the parking lot there is a man, pointy chin lowered and sullen, with a bouquet of daffodils and pale peonies. I don’t recognize him at first, not until after he gently drops the flowers onto the hood of a car, face tight with distance and brimming with nervousness. He sees the woman first, then me. Maybe it is wishful thinking or maybe it is just the light, but there is a split second between the height of his recognition and the fall of his sympathy where a warmth colors his shielded face, something protective, or affectionate—something paternal.

REESE

May 18th, 2013

The last few mingling people trickle out, pulling on their blazers and collecting their purses, waving goodbye to me and, some of them, to Mom in her vase. The small buffet of donated foods is all but wiped away. A few spare programs litter the pews and floor, leaving the impression of a casual Sunday congregation, sins freshly purged, shuffling back to their cars and filtering into brunch restaurants, rewarding their newfound cleanliness with bottomless mimosas. I cling to the stage, swinging my legs against the platform and letting the echo grow in the increasingly empty space, until it is clear Nina is not looking for me. I dismount and search around the hallways, the rooms. Out in the parking lot, I see her close to the curb, speaking to a man in a well-fit black jacket, his fingers hugging the hem of his sleeves and toying with his cufflinks. She looks awake, almost watchful, with her hand poised to block the sun, squinting and nodding perceptively to whatever he is telling her. She sees me approaching and reaches around him to hug me and call my name, just my name, in a crippled, shrill whisper. I smell his cologne before I see his face.

There is a moment when Nina's arms lock around me, unwilling to release, but I tug harder and she relents with a grunt, looking ashamed. He is standing there still twisting his cufflinks. His face is newer and older, accentuated with mature lines, the sharp of angle of his gaze drooping, aged, and dappled hair coiling around his jaw. His hair is slick with the same fragrant pomade he has smelled of since I was a kid, that smell I used to love.

Nina touches my arm and jolts everything into motion.

"You were not invited," I say and pry her fingers off.

"Obviously I was going to come," he says.

“She wouldn’t have wanted you here and you know that.”

“Your mother and I loved each other. We—”

“Don’t.” He peers away from me to Nina, pleading, but she cowers closer to me.

“I was going to come get you,” she says in my ear.

I hand her the car keys. “Wait for me.”

“I wanna stay.”

“Wait in the car.”

“Please don’t be mad.”

“Just go.” I squeeze her hand although it gives me goosebumps, threatens to toss control off balance and release the emotions I’m barely keeping reigned. As it stands I can sense the fleeting exhaustion slipping through. She scampers away, waving goodbye to him, but he tucks his hands in his pockets and straightens like he has prepared this moment, designed it, and I am growing, inflating, the intensity encircling us like running ink.

“This is so insane,” he says in a rush. “I cried so hard on the plane that they thought I was having a mental break.”

“I told you I never wanted to see you again.”

“It’s been such a long time, Reese. When I heard—I couldn’t believe . . . Things like this don’t happen. You shouldn’t have to go through something like this so young.”

He removes a crisp envelope from his pocket. It rests on his thigh, casual, but the pressure of his thumb indents the paper, shows the strain of his hold.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to see me,” he says. He ticks the envelope upward, indicating.

“I wanted to bring you this.”

“We don’t need anything from you. If we did, I would have called.”

“What kind of father would I be if I saw the articles all over Facebook and opted not to come? I’d be a monster.”

“Was it Nina?” I ask. “Did she ask you to come?”

“She didn’t know I was coming.” He fumbles with the envelope. “People were sharing the location online and I contacted the church. I wanted to help.”

“They already sponsored the funeral. I took care of everything.”

“You’re going to need more to get through the rest of the year. Nina’s graduation is in what—two weeks? The two of you are still so young.”

“We don’t need your money,” I say. “We can take care of ourselves.”

“You’re not a kid anymore,” he says, frowning. “I know your mother wasn’t ready to leave enough behind for the both of you to handle these sorts of expenses. Put things aside and be an adult about this.” He scratches his nose and looks away for a moment, like he is being swept up in tenderness. “When my father died,” he begins, but I practically choke and he stops.

“No one gives a fuck about grandpa,” I say and cross my arms. “Today of all days you thought it was the right time to come and shove a check in my hand and ask for forgiveness.”

“I’m not here to apologize. I can’t erase our past.”

“Well, maybe that is part of the problem. You think after all these years you can show up and not even say sorry. Mom is dead, so you show up with a handful of money, and then what? Then what, Dad?”

The knot in his throat bobs, lurching, and he splutters. “Because saying ‘sorry’ would make things better, right? If I walked in here trying to make excuses then you’d just shut me out. Just like you’re doing now.”

“You couldn’t have possibly thought about it that hard since you still decided it would be a good idea to come.” I rotate to glance toward our car and Nina ducks away from the window. I shake my head. “Did you bring them?”

“Who?”

“Amy and Koby. Are they here, too?”

He licks his lips and turns away. “They left before the service ended.”

“Nice.”

“They were here to be supportive. I didn’t want to upset the two of you.”

“Five years ago, they didn’t even know we existed. I think we could have handled it if they had just stayed home.”

“Family is about forgiveness, Reese. They forgave me for what happened and so did Nina and I have been waiting for years now for you to do the same.” He bristles. “Someone needs to be around to take care of the two of you.”

A laugh actually bubbles from my throat then stalls, leaves me in a stodgy, abrupt grunt.

“You can’t possibly mean you.” He stands tall. “You aren’t serious.”

“I’ve done a lot of thinking.”

“Well stop. Whatever you have in mind, save it. You have truly done enough.”

“It’s been a long time, Reese, and I’ve made a lot of changes in my life.”

“My mind is made up and it will not change.”

“I run my own business now. I can make all the arrangements to have you guys come live with us, at least until things smooth over.” I massage my jaw to keep from screaming and he presses forward. “I can watch over Nina until she finishes out the year, help her get things ready for her next steps . . . You know how much I worry about you, how hard you work to keep

everything together for everyone else . . . Let someone else worry for a change. You can focus on yourself, on your career. I have a lot of connections.”

He offers up the paycheck again. The shakes of his extended hand lessen and dissipate. “It’s what your mother would have wanted.”

I take the check and immediately drop it to the ground. He watches it twirl. “The only thing Mom ever wanted was for the two of us to be there for one another, and that is precisely what I’m going to do.”

“Nina won’t listen to you. You must know that.”

I kick the check over to him. Dirt sprinkles the legs of his trousers.

“Considering the circumstances, it might be best if she comes to stay with me,” he says.

“What?”

“If you aren’t willing to let go, I think at the very least she would do better with someone who understands her.”

“You think you understand Nina better than me?”

“You’ll box her in.” He leans over and snatches the envelope from the ground. “The last thing she needs is to be trapped with a person who doesn’t know their own temper.”

“So now I have a temper?”

“I already looked into a girl’s school near us. They said if she completes an extra year to catch up, she will graduate with her class and be set for college applications. She already told me about her situation.”

“You think Nina is going to tolerate a boarding school?”

“She needs her father,” he says. “Clearly the two of you couldn’t do enough for her.”

“You don’t know anything about what Nina needs and you know nothing about what we have all gone through together.”

“I know enough to see that staying with you won’t do anything for her.”

“I am who she needs the most right now. All she needs you to do is get in a plane back to Boston and take your money and advice with you.”

He moves closer. “I don’t intend to take no for an answer.”

“It is the only answer I have.”

“I don’t want things to be like this between us,” he says. A warped, pleading frown mars his face. “I know I dropped the ball in a big way, especially with you, but you’ve got to remember . . . When you were younger . . .”

Alligator tears flush him red. “We used to go our daddy-daughter dates. I bought you that necklace for your birthday . . . You loved sapphires.”

“I was five,” I say. “Mom wouldn’t let me wear it because she was afraid I would choke on it.”

“I chaperoned one of your field trips.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Of course you do,” he says. “You’re just trying to prove a point.”

“The point is that you have never wanted us and I think it is convenient that you seem to now. I don’t know what you want or why, but I know it isn’t the two of us.”

“If I didn’t want you then why would I come? You need me. You both need me now more than you’ve ever needed me.”

“I have no idea what could have motivated you to come,” I say. “I stopped trying to get into your head a long time ago.”

He sours, turns slightly away as if he cannot bear the sight of me. “I knew you’d be like this. I knew you wouldn’t understand.” He curses. “I try to do you a favor and you throw it back in my face.”

“So now it is about doing me favors? I knew this had nothing to do with helping Nina.”

“Maybe it isn’t about either,” he says. “Maybe it’s about me doing what I can to make sure she doesn’t become a train wreck like the rest of you. You’re too far gone, but I can still help her.”

“A train wreck? Who? Me? Mom?”

“Oh you, and your mother, and all of those other poisonous, ridiculous women she had the two of you with constantly when you were still a baby. It was always so ludicrous to me that she would have them babysit you all day so she could work when I was right there. She could have asked for help. But no, she had to do it all on her own, and then never bothered to take the time to nurture you and sit down and give you the attention you both obviously needed. And Nina—”

“You need to leave,” I say. I can feel myself brewing with darkness. He speeds over me.

“She got left behind. You two left her to fend for herself and I won’t stand here to watch her become another nutcase. She needs a real guardian and if I’ve seen anything during this conversation, it’s how insanely unfit you are to be that guardian. You’re just—you’re exactly like her.” He seems like he is fighting the urge to scowl at the entrance of the church, where Mom lies behind closed doors, crumbled in her vase. “You can’t be trusted to get it right.”

I get just close enough to snag him by the root of his tie, and I feel his swallow against the back of my hand. His sunglasses nosedive from where they perch on his head and his eyes give way to black worry, like an oil slick laced with panic. Those eyes, those eyes which he gave me,

which were unwound from his own blood and still he betrays me, us. He is clawing at my hand and pushing away but stills when my grip tightens.

“When I was young and angry I used to pray that you would come back to us long enough for me to yell at you about how much you hurt me. Then I got older and I realized you weren’t worth it. More than that, though, if you ever did show up again, I promised myself I would never show you all the ways you scarred me or let treat Nina the same way. You would only see the person Mom helped me become, the person she sewed back together over the years. And when I spoke to you, I told myself I would remind you of all the ways in which you made me feel worthless, because I realized all of the lies I used to tell myself, all the things I hated myself for, were really just the truths about you I had been refusing to accept for so long: that you were and still are, from the day I was born, a spineless, inconsiderate, miserable deadbeat who did nothing but turn his back on us.”

I read once that hearts breaking sound like splintering glass on cement, but distant, as if it monitored by doctors who study human emotions in a lab far away, watching for spiking decibels. Egos, though, are much louder, like those cane toads in Australia that cars swerve to hit just to hear them burst. Guts curl into the crevices of tires and stink up roads but people still veer and pulverize them. Standing here, I hear the same, obnoxious, prolonged pop of his esteem detonating. If it is possible, the vibration touches me, as if the entirety of him has ruptured, left his body, and escaped into my own.

He throws the check at my feet although I am sure he knows I will never cash it, will tear it to pieces. It is his only option to get in a last word and satisfaction coats me like varnish, his hunched back dodging between cars. A veil casts over the horizon as the heat ripples beneath his

shrinking car, fading into the trees, and I am certain: my father is an animal of vanity and fallibility and incredible smallness. I will never save him.

Nina and I do not speak until we gather the vase and thank the church staff, help clean the remaining trash. I pull into a Waffle House parking lot after Nina's stomach growls in the middle of their ride home. Nina waits until I swallow a few mouthfuls of coffee, pushing her knife through the elastic plushness of her single, butter-wet waffle, then breaks the quiet.

"It was nice," she says. "Mom would've liked it."

"She would have hated it," I mumble. "She wanted it to be cheap and quick. You even said that yesterday."

"Well," she says around the waffle, "at least we got to say goodbye." She is focused on chewing very softly. "I'm sure she would've been glad about that part."

The waitress fills our waters, which taste of faint rust and plastic, and hollers at the line cooks. She slides my meal across the table and the eggs wobble on its surface, their molten yellow faces heavily peppered and buoyant. Nina pauses with her fork poised in her grip and punctures the yolks, puckering with the most temporary joy as it floods out in tiny streams to seek shelter under the toast. My discomfort shows because she notices and withdraws. She shoves another chunk of waffle in her mouth.

"Sorry," she whispers. We are both dodging the oncoming memories of breakfast with Mom. "Force of habit."

"It's okay," I say, but it is all repetition on a familiar theme. "Thanks for all your help earlier."

She nods and swirls her waffle in syrup. "So are we just not going to talk about it?"

“Not right now.”

“What if I want to talk about it?”

A hint of a snark bunches along my nose. “Do you?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, by all means, let’s talk about it. It isn’t like enough has happened today.”

The clang of her fork against the plate does not startle me, but I can tell she wishes it would.

“I want to know what you said to Dad.”

“That is between the two of us.”

“That’s a crock of shit and you know it,” she says, not quite angry. She picks at her thumbnail. “I can handle it.”

“It is not about you ‘handling it’ or ‘not handling it.’ It’s about me and him.”

“It’s about me, too. I’m also his daughter, in case you forgot.” She reaches over and tears off a bite of my toast, smearing it through the yolk. “You left me out when it came to Amy and Koby and waited for Mom to tell me. Then you left me out about the graduation letters. And now you’re leaving me out again.”

“I am protecting you,” I say. “All I can say is that you have to trust me.”

“But I tell you whenever something goes on between me and Dad.”

“You do.”

“So you should tell me.”

“Whatever goes on between you and Dad will be your own business once you enter the real world. Then it can be your business whether or not you tell me what goes on between the two of you. Even now, I never force you.”

She pauses and scoots the half-chewed toast into the pocket of her cheek. “What’s that supposed to mean? ‘Once I enter the real world?’”

“Once you turn eighteen and graduate, whatever goes on between the two of you can be whatever you want it to be.”

“And what? Until then it can’t?”

“Until then . . .” I inhale until my lungs refuse to stretch further. “Until then, it will just be you and me, figuring stuff out.”

“You can’t make me stay away from him,” she says.

“He isn’t good for us.”

“He came to the funeral just to see us.”

“What is this fantasy you have?” I am too close to snapping. Taking measured breaths, I sip from the coffee and think about relaxing my shoulders. “He isn’t coming back. When will you accept this and move on?”

“He did come back. Today.”

“It’s because he feeds off of guilt, Nina. Like a—a—” I flail for answer and a trickle of grease flies from my fork across the table, “like a parasite.”

“He’s our father.”

“Barely.”

“He’s our dad no matter what type of dad you think he is.”

“He is barely a father. He fulfills the bare minimum required to be considered a father.”

“He is trying,” she says. “That is a lot more than anyone can say about you right now.”

“I am tired of trying for him, in place of him. I tried for a long, long time and now it is too late.”

“You don’t turn your back on you family. You forgive them.”

“Did he tell you this? He told you this while the two of you were talking in front of the car, didn’t he?” She pushes her food around her plate. “He fed me the same lines. You see?”

“What if I wanted him to come?” she asks.

I roll my eyes. “Of course you did. It would be weird for you not to. I knew what you were going to do when I saw you with that duffel bag.”

“No you didn’t,” she says, gloomy with defense. “You had no idea what I was gonna do.”

“I was there once. More than once. I sat on the driveway and wished he would drive up and come get me and rescue me so I wouldn’t have to go inside and apologize to Mom for whatever fight we just had.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Mom cut you slack on everything. You were always the favorite. There’s no way you would ever leave.”

“Mom and I just understood each other better,” I mutter. “If you had just listened to her more there would have been less to argue about. You both wanted to be right too badly.”

“Well, maybe Dad and I understand each other better.” Her heel nicks me beneath the table. A run springs over my tights. “What if it wasn’t about me having some crazy fantasy? What if he just got me like how Mom got you?”

My sigh rebounds from the inside of my coffee cup. “No one could understand you if they tried,” I say before I can stop myself.

“I hate you,” she says. The declaration is flippant. She moves to touch her teeth like she is surprised they failed to guard the words from leaving, but stops when she sees my shock. She hardens and there is a fierceness building in her.

“I hate you,” she says again. “It doesn’t matter how badly you think Dad was supposed to make me feel after he left us, because it will still never compare to how shitty you make me feel every single day.”

She shoves her plate forward for good measure. It budes against the newly filled glass of water, a small wave splashing over my breakfast, spoiling it. The water swirls through the fats and sauces and herbs, pushes them together into a swooning abstract. I sip and wince at the coffee’s heat, but cannot respond or match her, her huffing, her fists posed on the edge of the table and her nerve. I just watch as the specks of yellow bump through the ketchup-pink water, circling and overlapping. In it I see the letters, words, like alphabet soup, like calligraphy scrawled in cake icing. Congratulations! Nina hates you. Happy Birthday, Nina hates you. Get well soon—Nina hates you.

The webbed net binding us to one another is finally breached. I never thought the day would ever really come, but here we sit on a grimy diner bench, motherless, fatherless, and now, it seems, sisterless. Three feet away from each other, our feet almost touching, and yet absolutely, definitively alone.

PART THREE

MOTHERS

NINA

November 5th, 2020

When she opens the door I collapse onto her floor, facing the ceiling, my back giving way to the empty air.

“It took you twenty minutes to answer,” I tell her. She’s staring at me, upside down, but even from this angle she doesn’t seem as scared to see me as I imagined she would. She just looks confused.

“Hi,” she says.

“What took you so long?”

“I sleep heavy,” she says.

“I know,” I say. She helps me up, brushes some dirt from my shoulder and asks me to take off my shoes.

“Did you call me? Did I not pick up?”

“No time to call,” I say, almost slip as my heel springs from my boots.

“You live five hours away.”

“I was in a hurry.”

“Is something going on?” she asks and follows me farther into the house.

“I need you to do something with me.” I’m on the edge of her couch and she is standing, arms crossed, the moonlight streaking her in ghostly whites and blues. I push my sock-covered toes into the carpet, try to ground myself. Her skin is shiny and plump from sleep.

“You drove all night?” she asks, her antiquated, outrageous grandfather clock announcing the hour. It’s three in the morning.

“Yeah.”

“Where did you come from? A party? Why are you dressed so nicely?”

“I clean up sometimes.”

“You should eat,” she says. She moves to the kitchen and starts fiddling with pots and pans.

I’m still. Or I’m hyperventilating but very minorly. I smell broth.

“I can’t eat,” I say.

“Food will make you less upset.”

“I just vomited,” I say. “I vomited before I drove here.”

“Either you vomited recently or you vomited five hours ago or both, but no matter what, there’s nothing on your stomach, so you should eat. Eating always settles your stomach.”

I stalk over to hover near her shoulder and, gravely, I tell her: “I can’t eat capers.”

“I’m not putting capers in your soup.”

“I don’t know what kind of fucked up cooking you’re into these days.”

“The kind without caper soup, lucky enough for you.” She places a bowl of thin, yellow stock in front of me, mushrooms and bean sprouts and ginger shoots floating amongst freckles of sesame oil. She forces me to sit in the stool near her kitchen counter and blow the steam away and drink small spoonfuls. She doesn’t ask but I tell her.

I was curling my hair and sucking on a burnt patch of skin on my wrist where I had held my arm too close when Younis came in with a salve. He breathed on me, concentrating, and my stomach rolled. The curler clattered onto the bathroom tile and skimmed my ankle as I leapt to the toilet.

I pushed against his chest when he came to flutter over me.

I groaned between rounds—What did you eat? I asked him.

A bagel?

A bagel and what.

The bagel from this morning?

At the market?

. . . Yes?

We're supposed to be going to dinner. We're going to dinner in half an hour and you're having a snack.

It's tapas. They're baby portions.

Did the bagel have capers? You smell so much like capers. You smell like a big fucking caper.

Yes? What is wrong with you?

But I was preoccupied with heaving, doubled over, my new curls drooping and perfumed with vomit. I could hear him on the phone with the restaurant trying to extend our reservation, telling them to cancel the bouquets if they had to, that we would settle for a later time. His mother commanded to be left on speaker phone. Get better soon, dear. We only planned to be in town for this one night, I heard her say, whining. I assume she took the echoes of my retching as a concession.

Is it what I think it is? He stroked my back and knotted my hair in his palms like a charm bracelet.

No. It's because you reek.

You've been cranky recently.

I've been cranky because you've been—

Oh, can we not start, please. He paced around the bathroom. This is why I didn't want you staying on that pill that makes your period all weird, he said. Now what are we going to do.

I shoved him from the bathroom and went for a walk, told him I needed the breathing room, but really I took the car, drove with all of the windows down so the icy air could exorcise me, and now I'm here.

Reese is mostly stoic, perching on the stool beside me gently as if trying not to disperse the cushion, as if it were a painted cloud.

"What do you need me to do?" she asks.

"I swung by the drug store," I say. She grabs the bag and glances inside. "I bought ten."

"Do you even pee ten times a day?"

"I thought it wouldn't be possible to achieve overkill, in this case."

"I thought you were going to ask me if you should get an abortion."

"Should I?" We both gulp like a couple of pedantic cartoons. I blubber and she drops the bag on the counter, dismounts, encases me in her arms.

"You still have to take the test," she says, hushing me.

"I can't take the test. I don't even have to pee." Wails fly from me but she doesn't pull back. "I'm so dehydrated," I say.

"It's a good thing I have an operating sink," she says.

In the bathroom, holding my knees against my chest and curling on the rug by the foot of the tub, I listen to it fill. She adds dashes of peppermint, lavender, clary sage, and sweet orange. I know because she shows me the labels and reads them aloud when I don't pay attention, herding my brain like a dismantled flock of sheep being slowly massacred. I peer over the edge of the tub, the surface rising, like I am two feet tall or two years old.

She pulls the chair from her office to sit beside me when I climb inside. A speaker fizzes from her bedroom, a bouncy, lulling, prancing piano with a barebones snare acting as its

metronome, and she smiles when she notices my goosebumps unpricking themselves. She swishes her hand in the water, rubbing the thin foam between her fingers.

“I’ll take it before you,” she says. “Or we could try to take it at the same time, but that sounds complicated.”

“I don’t want to look at it.”

“You won’t have to. I will watch them both and you can just wait for me in the living room. You will be fine.”

She props open her bedroom doors and switches music for television. The screen on the wall flashes with a crowd of women gathered around a budding bride, her eyes glossing up as an assistant pins a flowered ribbon into her hair. Small bubbles pop around my sunken shoulders.

“It’s so quiet here,” I mumble.

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Seems lonely,” I say.

“It’s cozy to me.”

“I hate it. I don’t know how you can stand not living in the city anymore.”

“Then why did you come here?” she asks, but I don’t answer, don’t know how to, and she leaves it. “Also—it could just be anxiety,” she adds, still watching the show. We are slightly entranced by the scenes, transitioning into a wedding ceremony, an aisle lined with crimson roses and irises and buttercup flowers. “The puking, I mean. Things are getting pretty serious between the two of you. You get nervous when people are too close.”

I flick the surface of the water. “I can feel it. I can tell that something is wrong with me.”

“The last time we talked I told you it sounded like he was going to propose.”

“That was almost two months ago,” I say.

“Well, did something change? Or do you just want something to change?” I don’t know why, but the fact that she has to ask is tenderizing, makes me feel like I’ve been bludgeoned, makes me feel like I’m bludgeoning her.

With a huge breath, I fall deeper into the bath and droplets surge out, splatter onto her legs. “I never wanted this,” I declare, but my voice cracks and echoes against the tub. Neither of us seem to know what I really mean. She mutes the TV and kneels on the ground, forearms propped on the rim, a puddle dripping and forming.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I say.

“Nothing is wrong with you.” She looks at my hand where it grips my knee.

“His dad’s arrhythmia acted up again last week and we thought he was a goner,” I say in a great rush, as if a canyon were filling and pushing out a secret. She waits for me to catch my breath and when I don’t she places her hand on top of mine, on my knee. “I was watching him for this one second while Younis and his mom went to get coffees and he looked at me and he was crying and he said he thought he was going to die. And he said that he was sad that he’d miss getting to see the day when we had four little Younis’s running around the house.”

“Four sons is a bit overboard.”

“They like big families.”

“You were right. They must be sociopaths.”

“I’ve got sociopathic DNA inside of me,” I say and snivel.

“We have always had some.” She tightens our clasped embrace and listens to me surf my cresting, pitiful cries.

Between us there is a forgotten paradigm, a tight rope we have been mending and torturing and threading from our opposite ends for years, distantly, then abandoning and returning and

toying with it like a cat does yarn. In the center, camouflaged in fog, is the purgatory where true reconciliation and compromise probably live but where we never go. There might be minuscule strings stretched like floss or a tree trunk so thick that we could only reach across by wrapping our legs around it to scooting like inchworms to the other side. We are still on our opposite peaks, the clouds fluffed and looming between us, but I can see her silhouette through it even though the thought of stepping toward her makes me lightheaded, sick and too conscious of the altitude and the risk of tumbling, tumbling, hitting rock bottom, my blood spilling over stone like fresh graffiti, and committing another failure.

“You should have called me. I had no idea you two were having issues.” she says. In her stare there is immense pain barely veiled and I want to look away.

“You should’ve called me. What’re you even doing out here by yourself? I don’t even know why you moved so far. It feels like it’s a trillion goddamn years.”

“I’m just living. I’m working a lot. I’m going to Peru soon to backpack with some coworkers. I was going to tell you.”

“You’re going to Peru? Fucking Peru. You’re going to Peru and I’m pregnant in your bathtub.”

“Or not pregnant in my bath tub.”

“Can you put the volume back on? I can’t stand how quiet it is. I’m getting claustrophobic.” She does. “And don’t ask me why I came. I don’t know why I came.”

“Is this loud enough?” she asks. I nod once, harsh and singular, and we breathe back and forth.

“I should’ve called,” I say. The television flashes bright with saturated lights. The bride and her friends are eating soft serve in a photo booth. How do people look so happy.

“I should have called, too, sooner,” she says. She watches as I watch.

“I never know what I’m supposed to say,” I admit. Pressing my thumbs into my sinuses, wiping the ache, the lavender oil arches over me.

“I always have too much to say. It’s hard to keep it from becoming a mess.” Pushing up from the ground, she ruffles through the plastic bag and holds the rectangular box between her palms in the air like a floating bridge. “I will go first like I promised.”

“I can do it. Just give me a minute.” She ignores me again.

She unwraps the stick, tucks it between her fingers like a cigarette, and the sound of her peeing is so oddly soothing, the most raw, most human reminder, and the possibility of safety dawns on me. I try to shroud myself in it like a feather boa or a thunderstorm.

I drain the tub and wrap my hair in a towel and stand in the middle of the bathroom in her robe, ricocheting between the balls of my feet. When it is my turn, my footprints leave wet, shimmering impressions on the tile. She leans against the doorframe just out of sight, waiting. I take four of them just to be safe.

She lines them up on the floor between us once the waiting is over and before I look down I splutter, “Can I stay for a while?” Although there is doubt, I already know the answer, and I feel the tight rope bending beneath the pressure of my step, what feels like the first and maybe the only.

“I will sleep on the pullout,” she says.

“We can just share like the old days.”

“Very old days,” she says, not to me, and drifts down to the floor, shadows muddling her expression.

One line marks the end of each used stick: negative. For a second, it feels synonymous with being free.

Reese snags them from the floor and discards them, wipes the tiles.

“I should’ve known it was nothing,” I say. “I was just being dumb.”

“It wasn’t nothing. Now you know something else is what needs changing,” she says.

“I’m still hazy on the specifics,” I say. I reach around behind her to empty the filled cups, now unnecessary, their outsides still lukewarm, which provokes a little disgusted cough from me. She laughs and rolls her eyes, calls me childish. Her stick is apart from the others, unchecked in the corner, and I take it out.

“I’m sure things will become clearer with a little time,” she says. She notices me stop, change suspended in the air. “What?” she asks, but I am frozen. She nabs the test from me and is as stoic as ever, but starts to tremble, shaking all over. This time I am the one who hugs her, who pushes her into a chair and coaxes her, slowly, slowly, out of her armor, willing her to be brave.

REESE

January 7th, 2021

“Is he really that persistent?” I ask, tapping the tip of my nose with my pen, elbows brushing the growing piles of paper, requests, announcements amassing on my desk. Each with its own little signature, paper-clipped, like cairns littering a trail.

“He didn’t use the word ‘emergency,’ but he looks pretty desperate,” Josephine, the office manager, mumbles, poised in her stilettos despite her pronounced pigeon-toe.

“Is this an internship thing? We aren’t recruiting right now.”

“Trust me. I tried that already.” She looks behind her as if he is waiting. “He says he knows you.”

“Just let him in. I’ll make it quick,” I say, packing away the remainder of my lunch, the limp lettuce leaves dotted with milky dressing and ground pepper.

Brushing off Josephine when she ushers him down the hall, I notice first that he is long—not just tall but bursting with length like a bean stalk or redwood, litheness and a bizarre grace. He turns to Josephine when she opens the door for him and there is a scant second where it seems as if he is going to bow but continues on. He has feline features but younger energy. Keen and neat with a mouth like a doll, a carved cupid’s bow, a tiny birthmark on the tip of his nose, trim black hair.

Josephine shuts the door behind him.

“Oh,” he says before I have a chance to rise fully from my seat and offer a handshake. He is in a school uniform. He is clean, pleats pressed, but smells like public transportation, like the sun baking the street.

“I didn’t know you were married,” he says. He looks at my hand.

“Pardon?”

“Oh, nevermind.” He rushes to fold himself into the seat on the other side of my desk. “I’m sorry. I assumed. Thanks for seeing me. It took me all day to get here.”

I glance at the clock at the corner of my desktop. It is noon. He notices.

“Overnight bus. So half a day and half a night, actually.”

“I apologize—have we met before?”

He lapses from politeness and drops his jaw, a sound of wonder flooding from him. “I really had no idea you were even pregnant.”

“I’m becoming extremely uncomfortable,” I say, reaching for the drawer holding my phone.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry—“ he shoves his hand over the expanse of the desk, “I’m Koby. I don’t even know if you remember me. I just assumed that you knew.”

Josephine is hovering around the corner, peering through the glass door, and I wave her off and she patters away.

“I’m your brother?” he says. “Half-brother, technically.”

“I know who you are. I didn’t recognize you.”

“Right, because it has been so long, right? Have we ever even met, like when I was a baby? Oh—I brought you a souvenir. You know, from Boston. I wasn’t sure if you’ve ever been. Even though you can probably buy these from the store. That’s where I got it.” He pulls a can of baked beans out of nowhere and struggles to place it upright on the desk. When I do not react, he tugs on his ear, glancing out the window. “It’s BPA free, I think, if you’re worried about, you know,” and he gestures at my bulging stomach.

I grab the can and smooth my thumb over the packaging. “How did you find me?”

“So it’s funny—super funny because we had this speaker come to our school, right, at this career fair they were promoting, and this guy came in from your company, but from one of the other branches, you know, not the one here, obviously, and when I looked him up on the website and I clicked on the little icon about the executive board—you were right there. I tried looking my other sister up, Karina. Her art is so cool. Can I meet her, too?”

“Nina is traveling right now.”

“For art stuff or for something else? Does she have kids? Am I already an uncle?”

“No. Okay—listen.” I store the can in a drawer. “If this is about your father.”

“It’s not,” he says. “Please don’t call him.” It is the first thing he says that resonates, that is macerated in firmness.

“Are you here to ask for something? A job?”

“I’m fifteen,” he says.

“Do you need money?”

“I need your help,” he says, then cowers in surprise at his own announcement.

I crane over the desk, as far as my stomach will allow. “Did something happen?”

“Sometimes,” he starts, then rearranges himself. “I thought it would be better if I tried to find somewhere else to go for a while.”

“If you need help, you are going to have to tell me what for. Is it serious?”

He retreats further.

“Should I get in touch with child services?”

“Could we just go somewhere for a while?” he asks. He blushes in the least endearing way, like he is frightened. “I know you’re working, but—” he is rapidly fragmenting, breaking to pieces.

I rush to grab my bag, toss in my keys and phone. Instantly, he perks up, trying not to grin. He whispers a thank you and it is quiet, floating, dusting the flat carpet as we stroll down the hall and my phone buzzes with a text from Josephine. “Is he alright?”

“Just lost,” I reply. He waits for me to finish then holds open the door to the stairwell.

As we pull away from the drive-through, he gorges on fries, the paper bag crunching. I drive around the city for a while, unsure where else to go and uncertain how to go about getting in touch with his mother without access to his phone, but he starts to doze in the seat and my spine is screaming, knees swollen, head hurting. He is decidedly not dangerous. I drive home and brew tea while he stretches onto the couch.

He is content to babble and drink from his mug, cradle it in his oversized hold and ask rhetorical questions about the house and myself, cataloging observations and cutting in with his own hypotheses before I can answer the majority of them. He nudges the bag of frozen peas balancing on my ankles back into place when they slouch and threaten to fall. The whole of him is overgrown, prematurely masculine, and he slouches like he is aware of his own gentleness and how unwillingly it resides inside of him, his elephantine height and ruddy face encasing his chipper spirit. He squints and snorts at one of his own jokes and it reminds me of my father, vaguely, the sensation of a book on a shelf being moved and dusted and placed back, the briefest deviation from my homeostasis, and I wonder how we would look beside one another in a photograph, if our eyes curl the same way when we smile.

Gradually, shivering and cracking from his chrysalis, he divulges, the sound of him picking his nails tapping and traveling like a match against a flame strip.

“Sometimes people don’t want their kids, I think,” he says. Very carefully, he peers at my stomach, then at me.

“Maybe sometimes,” I say.

“I am one of those kids.” The correct, logical thing might be to argue with him, to point out the interference between that mentality and the plain biology that forces humans to love smaller humans, but I digress.

“Why do you think so?” I ask instead.

“Parents never talk about not wanting kids even when they grow up into people they don’t want. And I get it, I guess, they’re already born, so there’s not really anything to do about it. But there’s this whole cultural narrative around kids growing apart from their parents, right? Like we don’t need our parents anymore one day and just decide to move on without including them. But no one ever talks about the reverse.” He unfolds a blanket and covers himself and scratches at a patch in the fabric. “It’s not as uncommon as people think.”

“What about you do you think they find so unlovable?”

He keeps his head down.

“Did you fight about it?”

“No,” he says. “I haven’t told them anything. But sometimes, when you are one of those kids, you just know.”

“People show love in all sorts of ways. Maybe they have different ideas of how to show it than you do. I like to nag,” I say, an afterthought.

He laughs. “You like to nag?”

“It isn’t what I aim for but it comes out that way to others, so I learned to like it.”

“I like hair,” he says. He makes a noncommittal gesture when I turn quizzical. “I used to like having my head scratched as a kid to fall asleep. So I think I started to like doing it to others . . .” he drifts off and smirks to himself. “I’m good at it.”

“You can braid my hair if you want,” I offer.

He rallies. “Really?”

“Sure. I’m practically inept with this thing,” I say, patting my stomach, and he jumps over.

He loosens my bun and works his nails through the tangles.

“Sorry about how weird all of this is,” he says, looping strands over and under his fingers. “I don’t want you to think that, like, I think that you’re not going to love your baby.”

“I do wonder if we will get along. I wonder how different we will be,” I murmur. He hums and weaves, interlaces, pulling and pushing.

Baby books tell me many things, teach me many things; they even warn about rogue family members or estranged friends ducking up from cracks in the earth to declare old problems forgotten and participate in the community-wide baby contagion that seems to overtake everyone even remotely connected to pregnant women. What they do not tell me, but what I worry about nonetheless, is that my child may learn cruelty before they learn how to ride a bike without training wheels. My child may be a bully one day despite all of my best efforts to instill love in them. My child may know, before I even truly know, the moroseness of what awaits them in the way Koby seems to, a fate to which he insists he is bound, and they may feel like they are better off trekking hours away to a half-sister who barely knows them than confessing their hurt to me. The books warn me I will make mistakes but they do not admit that I might succumb to the repetition of history, that I might have a daughter who is my cardinal antithesis, my moral opponent, and will taunt me into a disdain or abandon me or think only of regret when she remembers me. Even if, underneath, I maintained the steady torch light of maternal love, what if I fear her or dislike her, what if I fail her. Who would write that book? Who would buy it? “You

have your own child and you have decided you hate it,” they would write, “here is what you should do: seek help. Be better.”

Pregnancy has made everything taste less, look brighter, smell worse. At the grocery store occasionally I pass through the infant aisle, staring at the shelves and shelves of remedies intended for pimpled, rash-spotted bottoms, for wiping and sanitizing and softening. I imagined filling my mouth with water, cheeks puffing out, and aiming a stream of cursory water at every image of a googly-eyed toddler stretched across a swatch of plastic-wrapped diapers. But then a family walks past or I come to my senses or I think of my own mother limping with a daughter on each hip and I swallow, breathe. I have to remind myself that I chose the journey and alone I have to nourish the fantasy, raise a human and change with them, and each day I feel the impulse to care for the kicks and rolls in my stomach churning a little more, solidifying, renovating me.

I touch his arm and he stops working. “You need to know that your parents love you,” I say. His expression is like ruffled plumage, a bird sifting through its wing feathers and then pausing when a howl is carried on the wind. “I know he can be difficult to deal with. But your mother . . .” I plead with him. “You should let me call her, at least. She needs to know you are safe.”

“They’re going to be so pissed,” he whispers.

“Probably, but they will be way more relieved than angry,” I say. He hands me the phone and resumes braiding my hair, but I can hear his labored sniffing when his mother’s picks up the line and starts screaming about her relentless worrying.

By the time Amy arrives, the winter night has claimed us. Koby is asleep out on my bedroom in the back of the house, and I’m on couch picking at the last morsels of the stale, leftover fast food from earlier. Looking rattled from the long drive, Amy shivers when I open the door, stepping inside as quietly as she can, settling on the couch beside me. She is too shaken to

explain anything beyond her concern. I don't push her. We are strangers, the kind that inspire reservation, and for as convenient or touching it might be for us to construct a common ground, we are better that way. I programmed my number into Koby's phone before she arrived. He will find me when he needs me, if he needs me.

I let them reunite in privacy but I stand guard in the hall, stewing with new protectiveness. Amy thanks me when she exits, squeezing my shoulder, and waits for him at the front of the house when he stops to hug me.

"You didn't tell me it was your birthday, also," he says, chin bobbing on the top of my head.

I draw back. "It isn't."

"Then who's that present for? On your desk?"

"Oh," I say, glancing around him, gift wrap crumpled on the desk, two picture frames and a large bow stacked near the floor lamp. "Nina's birthday is soon, but I had second thoughts about the wrapping paper."

"Does she really like grocery lists or something?" he asks and chuckles.

"Kind of," I say. "It's just a very special grocery list." He narrows his eyes, grinning.

"Use the white frame but wrap it in the sparkly paper. It'll make the colors pop."

"Okay," I say. We hug again and he pokes my belly before darting away like he's started a game of tag.

"Send pictures," he calls from the front door. "You haven't seen the last of me."

I let my arm settle on the cool deadbolt as their car lights disappear from the driveway. The chill spreads, tingling, when I move back to the bedroom to grab the note, slide it between the glass sheets and lock the frame, tracing the pale corners and massaging the faint numbness out of my fingertips. I wrap it in the glitter-flecked paper, adorn it with a bow. Pushing it against my

chest, hearing the crispness rustle, the residue of understanding in the room settles around me like flurries on a snowbank, and I feel, for the first time, spring buds sprouting seeds of forgiveness.

SLOANE

May 6th, 2013

I'm almost out the door and on the edge of running late for work when it hits me. My phone is buried in my purse, so I dart back inside and scrawl on a notepad with a purple highlighter, the first thing I see on the counter, but it runs out half way and I have to go back and snag a red pen to finish. I scramble to pin it on the fridge and jog back to the car.

N — DON'T FORGET TO PICK UP YOUR PRINTS

R — GRAB DRY CLEANING FOR ME?

SEE U WHEN I GET BACK FROM WORK

TACOS FOR DINNER

I LOVE MOST