

## **Distribution Agreement**

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter now, including display on the World Wide Web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Sarah Ilana Boyle

December 10, 2019

Holding Onto Anger

by

Sarah Ilana Boyle

Tayari Jones  
Adviser

English and Creative Writing

Tayari Jones  
Adviser

David Edwards  
Committee Member

Paul Kelleher  
Committee Member

2019

Holding Onto Anger

By

Sarah Ilana Boyle

Tayari Jones

Adviser

An abstract of  
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

English and Creative Writing

2019

## Abstract

### Holding Onto Anger

By Sarah Ilana Boyle

When widower Ben Meister signs himself up for an anger management class, the last person he expects to encounter is his former third grade teacher, Etta Barrett. While Ben is determined to better himself for the sake of his daughter, Etta—who is required by law to attend the class—is convinced there is nothing she needs to change about herself. Told from the perspectives of both Ben and Etta, their unlikely friendship unfolds into a story of grappling with loss, betrayal, healing, and how we cope when the ones who love us most disappoint us.

Holding Onto Anger

By

Sarah Ilana Boyle

Tayari Jones

Adviser

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

English and Creative Writing

2019

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my adviser, Professor Tayari Jones, for consistently providing enthusiastic and invaluable feedback, whether it was in person or from a hotel room in New Orleans via FaceTime. Despite being on sabbatical, Professor Jones made me feel important and valued as her mentee, and continued to improve my plots and characters from all over the world. I have grown so much as a writer under Professor Jones' guidance, and I cannot thank her enough for making this piece what it is. I would also like to thank my mother, Debra Hirsch-Boyle, for always encouraging my writing and for reading this thesis probably close to ten times. Her tireless work pushed me to create some of my best writing, and I am so grateful for her help and devotion to my passion throughout my entire life. A big thank you to Donna Wasserman, who has always been a phenomenal beta reader and copyeditor—her support, help, and encouragement mean the world to me. Thank you to my father and brother, Jerry and Jacob Boyle, for reading my thesis so quickly and for their endless support. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. David Edwards and Professor Paul Kelleher, for taking time out of their busy schedules to read my thesis and take part in my defense. Thank you to everyone in my life who has listened to me talk about this story for the past year—I am grateful for your taking interest in what I love so dearly and hope to do with my life. May this be the first of many acknowledgements in my career.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Ben.....	1
Chapter 2: Etta.....	7
Chapter 3: Ben.....	27
Chapter 4: Etta.....	34
Chapter 5: Ben.....	43
Chapter 6: Etta.....	58
Chapter 7: Ben.....	73
Chapter 8: Etta.....	77
Chapter 9: Ben.....	81
Chapter 10: Etta.....	87
Chapter 11: Ben.....	91
Chapter 12: Etta.....	96
Chapter 13: Ben.....	98
Chapter 14: Etta.....	103
Chapter 15: Ben.....	107
Chapter 16: Ben.....	110

Ben

*“Holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.”*

— Unknown

Ben would claim that it happened without his mind’s realizing it, that his body hopped into the driver’s seat and nudged consciousness into the back. He would say he blacked out. But it wasn’t true. He hadn’t. His focus had narrowed in and he had seen everything in heightened detail after the man pulled over to park and Ben had opened the guy’s car door—the navy, collared shirt the guy was wearing; the way it felt soft in Ben’s hands as he threw him from his car; the mole above the guy’s left eye, which twitched when he winced; the way the man had crumbled to the floor and raised his hands to block his young face. The wedding ring on his finger. They would forever flip through Ben’s mind like slides he couldn’t blink away.

And underneath it all, on Ben’s mind was Lisa. Somehow, through some set of connected wires that ran beneath the surface of the Earth, he knew this was all Lisa’s fault.

Ben was never a religious man. Seeing his daughter look at him as though he had done nothing out of the ordinary, with Lisa’s memory burning sour on his tongue, Ben closed his eyes and prayed.

---

Ben never in a million years would have imagined he’d find himself sitting at a police station. Of all the places he could be and of all the things he could be doing, he was here and he was sitting. The plastic chair at the station was stiff and uncomfortable against Ben’s back.

The station shifted with phone calls, scuffling feet, slamming doors, shouting voices. Ben’s eyes wandered to the peeling ceiling as the events of the evening pounded against his

temples. He had always wondered how the brain decides what to keep and what to discard. It all felt so arbitrary—the toy giraffe that Betsy Zimmer had given him in the second grade for Valentine’s Day, the way Joanne had sneezed and hiccuped at the same time at that staff meeting that one time, the look on Ria’s face after she had shoved him off the man. He wished he had a way to select what he would and would not remember. He wished he could pluck this up from the conveyor belt and send it down a tunnel and out his ear. The emptiness in Ria’s eyes, the way she did not yell, the cut she got from the asphalt on her left foot after losing her flip flop in the shuffle.

This will be the wine stain on the couch cushion, Ben thought; the ache in the knee when it rains, the leak in the old roof, the thing that never leaves.

Things should be going better by now. There should be a limit on how much one man can take.

“Is this anger common, Mr. Meister?”

It was either the big-boned cop or the short one who’d asked him. He wasn’t paying much attention.

Of course it is, Ben thought. I’m fucking angry. Name me a single person who could be me for an hour and not be angry.

“No,” Ben said.

But that, of course, was not the truth.

Rohan had come to take Ria back home, and she did not fight him. She looked to Ben as though Rohan were merely picking her up from the car wash while Ben waited for their car to be cleaned. She waved without a smile and Ben looked away.

He had only one important job left in the world and here he was, fucking it up. Here he was, making this normal for his daughter.

Lisa had always been a fan of the “I *never* would’ve done that” argument. She used it time and again, her all-time favorite weapon. Ben missed their anniversary once, a few years into their relationship; she *never* would’ve done that. Ben made the mistake of telling her to shut up during a fight; she *never* would’ve done that. And here, when Ben got pissed at another driver for intentionally cutting him off and he assaulted the man with their unfazed daughter sitting in the front seat—another thing Lisa never would’ve done.

Ben couldn’t stand the taste of his wife’s memory. He swallowed.

The short cop emerged from the peeling wooden door with a form in his hand. He looked at Ben as if Ben were a slug on a sidewalk. He told Ben he would be released on his own recognizance and shoved the form in his lap, dropping a pen so that it bounced from the flimsy paper and clattered to the floor.

“Was that necessary?” Ben snapped, but the cop took a domineering step forward with such a challenging expression that Ben bent over in submission to pick up the pen. People who abused the tiny strands of power they’d been given always had a special place in Ben’s palms, where anger trickled like small rivers in the divets of his skin. Instead, Ben closed his fingers around the pen and pressed so hard into the paper that he made a little tear in the left line on the “M.” He tried to slide the slip of torn paper back into place, the cop’s eyes on him like hot stones. Eventually, Ben ripped off the hangnail piece of paper and gave the form back to the cop with a hole in the M, his quiet yet resounding “fuck you” to the Westfield police department.

Along with the form, Ben was given a \$100 fine.

Ben took an Uber back to his parked car and when he put in his key, a Miley Cyrus song came on full blast. It was a CD that Ria had made him for Father's Day called Daddy & Ria's Tunes. Every other song was a song for Ben; the others, songs for Ria. It was a mix of Elton John, Broadway show tunes, The Beatles, Taylor Swift—as incohesive as anything, yet it was Ben's favorite CD. He listened to it even when Ria wasn't in the car. They had been going out for ice cream in honor of Ria's finishing 5th grade and scream-singing along to the CD. In that moment, alone with just the sound of a Ria song, Ben wanted to collapse into himself. He slammed his palm against the small black knob and the car melted into silence. The streets were shadow-lined and quiet tonight, a few cars parked in front of a few houses with their mirrors pushed in. Normally, Ria and Ben would comment on houses as they drove by them. There was the house with the round tower that looked like a palace, the house with windows that everyone could see into, the ugly house with the crooked window panes and the peeling grey paint. Ben noticed none of them. He barely noticed anything until he pulled his car into their one-car driveway.

The main door was open so Ben could see into the storm door. Rohan was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking from a mug and watching TV.

When Ben walked in, Rohan stood. Neither spoke.

“Where's Ria?” Ben asked.

“She went to bed an hour ago,” he replied.

“She went to bed?” Ben said, shocked.

“Yeah, she seemed really fine. She was her normal talkative self in the car, she sang along to some songs, offered me those lemon cookies you guys made, and then she put herself to bed.”

Unbeknownst to Rohan, this was just about the worst thing he could've said.

“Thank you for tonight, Ro,” Ben said, shaking his friend's hand.

As Rohan left, Ben found himself walking upstairs and standing at his daughter's closed door. It was decorated with a giant lavender R and plastic white beads that jangled whenever you walked through her doorway. It was one of Ben's favorite sounds to hear, the little beads in the morning when she woke up before him, the little beads when she ran into her room to put on her leotard for gymnastics.

Ben pushed open her door and nudged the beads aside. Ria had a little frog nightlight next to her bed that glowed faintly and made the room feel cozy and warm. Her bed was pushed up against the corner by the back window, and Ben watched her stomach rise and fall beneath her pink quilt.

He sat at the foot of her bed, brushing a strand of her hair away from her mouth.

Ria jolted up.

“Sorry,” Ben whispered as Ria wiped her eyes and blinked quickly.

“Are you going to jail?” she said softly.

“No, sweetie. I'm okay, everything's okay.”

“Okay.” Ria put her head back onto the pillow to go back to sleep.

“I'm sorry about tonight, Ri,” Ben said. “I had really been looking forward to our ice cream date.”

“We can go another night,” Ria muttered into her pillow.

“Thank you for being so great, kiddo,” he said. But Ria didn’t respond. Feeling defeated, Ben patted his daughter’s leg beneath the quilt and left her to sleep, walking down the stairs slowly so as not to make too much noise. His daughter was all right, unrattled by this potentially traumatic evening. He should be relieved. He hadn’t ruined her.

And yet.

A part of him reached up to her, a part he thought had long since withered. It snaked up the stairs and took hold of her ankles, tugging, pulling her back to him and back to a time where he wasn’t such a screw up, where his daughter would be horrified if he ever were to do what he had done tonight. A time when she respected him, when she never would have expected this.

Ben lowered himself to the kitchen table, adjusting the bowl of fake lemons in the center that Lisa had bought many moons back, and he made a vow. A vow to make things right, to look this dormant demon in the eye and spit in its face. To make himself better. He looked up to the ceiling, at the spiderweb cracks and dots, at the spot where his daughter must have been wrapping her small body in a bed of blankets. And he promised to do better.

He would sign up for anger management. That’s what he would do. He would find a local class and he would go to it and work hard until he was a new man, until he could know for sure that he hadn’t created a red and boiling normalcy for his daughter. That’s what he would do.

## Etta

It was a Thursday afternoon when Etta Barrett pushed a man in front of a moving vehicle. Well, not a moving vehicle, *per se*; a crawling vehicle, a barely-rolling vehicle. And pushed was a strong word, as well—at 76 years old, Etta could hardly push a twig. It was more like a gentle nudge.

That was what Etta told the officer. That was what she told the judge and her lawyer and everyone who asked her about it. It didn't matter. She ended up with two weeks of anger management. Two! For all she knew, she'd be dead in two weeks.

But Etta took the blow in stride because she knew not only that she would've done it again two, three, even seven times over, but that she would have done far worse. She was, after all, defending Cecile's honor. It had always been like that—Etta with her back to Cecile, arms spread like wings ready to block anything the world might throw at her sister.

And it was worth it, to see that asshole knocked down a peg. And knocked over.

Cecile, on the other hand, was not impressed. She buried her face in her hands as Etta pushed through the swinging wooden doors of the courthouse.

“Oh, take it easy, C,” Etta said. “It's not like I'm going to jail.”

“But you could have,” Cecile blubbered. “Over something so *stupid*.”

Etta couldn't help herself; she loved like a grasping fist. Despite Cecile's seniority, Etta was her protector. Growing up, she would yell at their mother for scolding Cecile and sneak Cecile chocolate biscuits when she wasn't supposed to have dessert. She would claim responsibility for mistakes Cecile had made, like the time Cecile threw a softball into the window of their tan Chevy in the driveway. It was something that their mother noticed, a certain

expression she'd get on her face where her lips flattened and her forehead sprouted thin, branch-like wrinkles.

On more than one occasion, she'd said to Etta, "Your sister can take care of herself. You have to live your own life, Etta."

Perhaps it was just in their nature, something about their souls that begged to fit together this way. Etta's was the overflowing cup, Cecile's was the one half full. This was how it was, and Etta knew that nothing her mother said could change it.

When a girl from school named Patricia called Cecile a cow in junior high, it was Etta who snuck out at night and threw eggs onto Patricia's front door. When Cecile broke her ankle in volleyball, it was Etta who brought her meals in bed and changed her ice pack. When Cecile insisted on applying only to Harvard, it was Etta who secretly sent out applications to Penn, Princeton, and Cornell, and Etta who comforted Cecile when her inclination had been right and Cecile was rejected from Harvard. So of course it was Etta who was in charge of Cecile's healing after Steven passed away. And of course it was Etta who went after the first man to hurt Cecile after Steven's death.

Etta still remembered when Steven first asked out her sister. 18-year-old Cecile had come home one Friday evening, slipped away to her bedroom, and put on a beige dress. Cecile had never been one to date or even pay much attention to boys at all. Her world was internal. She loved school and studying and working hard, and all the rest of it that wound up other girls like dolls was just noise to Cecile.

So when Cecile put on that beige dress and began brushing her hair in front of the mirror, an object to which Cecile rarely gave notice, Etta instantly knew something had happened.

“Where are you going?” Etta asked from the doorway of Cecile’s room. Etta’s Friday night plans consisted of baking cranberry walnut scones and watching “I Love Lucy” with her parents.

“I have a date,” Cecile said.

It was as though she had just announced, *I’m growing a tail*.

“You have a date?!” Etta shouted.

“Shhh.” Cecile ushered Etta into the room and shut the door behind her. “Don’t fuss about it.”

Etta jumped onto Cecile’s cream-colored comforter and snuggled into the pillow as she watched her sister.

“But this is a big deal!” Etta said. “Why didn’t you tell me!”

Cecile shrugged, turning back to the mirror and running the brush through her dark waves. “I didn’t want it to be big. It isn’t.”

“Who is he? How did you meet him? How did he ask you out?”

“His name is Steven.” Cecile’s lips turned up slowly and she cocked her head at her own reflection. “He practices basketball in the other half of the gym when we have volleyball practice. And he just came up to me one day and told me I was the best one on the whole team and that I should spike more.”

“Hmmp,” Etta muttered. “Unsolicited volleyball advice. Not a strong start, Steven.”

“No, no, no, it wasn’t like that! It was sweet.”

“So then what?”

“He told me I was pretty and he asked to take me to dinner and a movie.”

“Wow, wow, wow. Well, you’re not wearing that.” Etta jumped off the bed as a puzzled Cecile looked at her dress. Etta pulled a flared white skirt, a pale pink blouse, and a hot pink sweater from her own closet. She grabbed her eyeshadow palette, mascara, and rouge, and a white barrette.

“Here,” she said, laying the outfit out onto Cecile’s bed. “Put that on.”

Cecile’s face scrunched up.

“Just try it!” Etta said. “Come on, quickly!”

So Cecile quietly obeyed, taking off the sack-like beige dress she’d had on and yanking the slightly too-tight skirt over her hips.

“You don’t think it’s too much?” she asked, again checking her backside in the mirror.

“You look amazing. Sit.”

Cecile sat on the bed and Etta opened up her eyeshadow palette.

“Etta—”

“Shh. Close your eyes.”

Cecile exhaled and closed her eyes as Etta dipped her brush into a sparkly tan eyeshadow and began gently sweeping it over Cecile’s lids. As some eyeshadow flaked below Cecile’s eyes, Etta blew on her cheek to scatter the little particles. She brushed the mascara wand over her sister’s eyelashes, watching them darken and grow like vines beneath her fingers.

“Smile,” Etta whispered. And Cecile smiled while Etta applied rouge to her cheekbones.

“Open.”

And Cecile opened her eyes. As she did, they glistened.

“What? Gosh, Cece, you can’t cry right now, I *just* did your makeup.”

“I know, I know.” Cecile patted beneath her eyes with the side of her pointer finger and shook her head quickly. “I just...I should be doing these things for you, you know.”

Etta kneeled on the bed behind Cecile, pulling half of Cecile’s hair back and clipping it in place with the barrette. She placed her chin on the top of Cecile’s head and the two looked at themselves in the mirror. How different they were, how strange that sun and moonlight could ever go so well together.

“Let’s face it,” Etta whispered. “If you did these things for me, I’d look terrible.”

Cecile pushed Etta from her back with a snort.

“He’s gonna be here soon!” Etta shouted, squeezing Cecile’s shoulders. “Put your sweater on.”

“Okay,” Cecile replied, nodding and sliding into the hot pink sweater.

“You’ll do great, CeCe,” Etta said. Cecile smiled through the mirror.

Steven arrived five minutes early and walked up to the door like a proper gentleman. He was lovely looking—dark hair, a strong jawline, an enormous smile. He shook their shocked father’s hand and promised to have her home by 10:30.

After he left, Etta’s father turned to Etta and pointed to the door, utterly dumbstruck.

“Did you know about this?” he asked her.

And Etta shrugged, tucking a secret smile into her lips and heading into the kitchen to bake scones and make a ham sandwich, just in case Cecile was too nervous to eat anything on her date and came home hungry.

Steven started coming around a lot after that night. He would come for family dinners and to do yardwork for the house and even to tutor Etta in algebra (though Cecile was, of course,

more than capable of helping—she simply wanted Etta and Steven to get along). And Steven appeared to want that as well. He seemed to recognize Etta’s clout with Cecile, a sort of power no one else in the family had over her. Etta was the top dog, the one to impress. And Etta remembered the precise moment Steven had his breakthrough—when Etta was finally old enough to drive the family’s relatively new Chrysler with the manual transmission and, since Cecile was stressed with her Harvard application, Steven offered to teach Etta how to drive it. When Etta got behind the wheel and turned to Steven for initial instructions, he just pursed his lips and stared hard at the gearshift as though it were an equation.

“Switch with me,” he said. So Etta got into the passenger seat and watched in awe as Steven played around with the pedals of the car and fiddled with the gearshift. Suddenly, the car lurched backward and Steven cursed, shoving the gear in the opposite direction as the car stumbled out of the driveway. With clumsy yet entirely certain motions, Steven got the car to roll (albeit jerkily) up the street at a snail’s pace.

Etta burst into hysterics.

“You’ve never driven a manual car before, have you?” she asked.

“Not once,” Steven confirmed.

“Why on Earth would you offer to teach me, then?”

Steven shrugged. “I figured it couldn’t be that hard.”

That was the moment that Etta gave Steven her silent blessing to take away her Cecile. A man who would confidently get into a car he had no idea how to drive for Cecile must be worthy.

They were married a year later. And he had loved Cecile in all of the ways that Etta hoped he would, in ways that let Etta pull the covers up to her chin and fall asleep at night. He

had loved her right up until, nearly 60 years later, he had fallen ill. Stage four pancreatic cancer gives you ample warning. Like a considerate robber who turns up in the middle of the night and says, “Just so you know, I’ll be breaking in and stealing from you twelve Wednesdays from now.” You get time to plan, time to tidy up the house so everything is good and ready for when the robber turns up.

But even with time and notice, there are some things for which you simply cannot plan. For Cecile, it was the pain of losing Steven. For Etta, it was watching Cecile lose Steven.

Toward the end, when Steven was in one of those remote-controlled hospital beds in their home, Cecile would call Etta to come sit with Steven when she went out to run errands. She didn’t want Steven to be alone for a single moment, and though Etta offered to do the shopping for them, Cecile insisted that Etta wouldn’t know the exact right brand of soup or air fresheners to buy. Plus, Etta had a hunch that Cecile lived for these moments away from Steven, her little slices of indulgence when she could remove the mask of illness from around her mouth and take a breath. Maybe alone in the soup aisle she could pretend that Steven was healthy and well, cursing while trying to fix the flickering lamp upstairs.

So when Cecile called, Etta would come, even if she were in the middle of a meal with Arthur. And Arthur never bickered. He’d simply nod and say, “I’ll wrap up your dish, dear.” She’d go and she’d hold Steven’s shriveled, mole-covered hand so her sister could go pick out the right brand of soup. And as Etta did, she allowed herself to picture Cecile’s life after Steven, daring still to paint it in bright colors rather than the beige toward which she knew Cecile would err. Cecile would find someone new, Etta dreamed, someone who wasn’t as wonderful as Steven but who was still gentle and loving and warm. They would go golfing at this New Man’s country

club and play bridge together on Thursday afternoons. She pictured Cecile and New Man drinking tea on a verandah by the beach, getting a rescue dog and saying things like, “Oh, we don’t know what breed she is, she’s a rescue.” She pictured their life, knit tightly together and sweet like a lemon drop after a big meal, something simple and whole that would fit neatly into a picture frame. She savored the taste of the idea, focusing on it hard as Steven coughed beside her. A man who wouldn’t die before she did, a man she could love and love and who’d never leave her like this.

In the midst of one of Etta’s fantasies, Steven gave her hand a mild squeeze. He lacked the energy by the end to do most things except lie down and occasionally smile, so this came as a shock to Etta.

“Steven?” she whispered.

He squeezed Etta’s hand again, urgently, as though these pulses were the language he needed Etta to understand.

“I’m going to make sure she’s okay,” Etta said firmly, looking into Steven’s glassy and vacant eyes. “I’m going to make sure she gets herself out of bed and still volunteers at the soup kitchen and keeps the house clean and fresh. I’ll even bring her flowers, okay? I’ll make sure she eats well and takes walks out in the sunshine and, when the time’s right, I’ll make sure she finds a good companion so that she’s not lonely. Okay?”

Steven squeezed his eyes shut. His face began to contort, and large, lopsided tears started to drop from his eyes.

“Oh, boy, I didn’t mean to upset you,” Etta stuttered. “I’m sorry. Don’t think about that right now.”

But Steven shook his head.

“Thank you,” he croaked in a hoarse and weak voice. “That’s what I want.”

Steven’s limp hand slipped from Etta’s grip and landed on her thigh. Etta flinched, jumping back at his accidental touch before reminding herself that it was Steven. Bringing herself back, Etta gingerly picked his hand up from where it dangled beside her leg and brought it up to her lips and kissed it softly.

“You’re a good man, Steven,” she said.

And Steven just looked at the ceiling from his bed, his eyes still wet, his oxygen tube shifting as he breathed. After a long silence, he began to smile, his expression lost and hazy but somehow bright.

And he said, “Everyone’s here.”

They were the only two in the whole house.

Etta’s chest burned as she held onto Steven’s hand. This wasn’t normal. Steven had yet to be nonsensical. There was no way this was a good sign. She should call Cecile.

And yet.

Cecile said goodbye to Steven every time she left the room. She had said everything she could ever want to say to him; they knew how much they loved each other—was one last moment really worth the pain of watching the person you love die? Etta knew that if she called her sister, her sister would run to Steven. And Etta couldn’t do that to her.

So Etta didn’t call Cecile. Though her gut told her this might be it, Etta stayed holding his hand and stroking his arm.

“It’s okay,” Etta murmured, kissing Steven’s thin skin on his hand. “It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay...”

Steven passed away twenty minutes later, before Cecile had a chance to get home with the groceries. And Etta wept into his still shoulder, feeling the loss as though it were her own Arthur, feeling every sliver of the storm that was about to hail down on her sister.

\*\*\*

When Etta was in the soup aisle months after Steven’s death, she couldn’t help but feel a pang thinking of her sister buying that specific soup for Steven while he died at home. Etta picked up a can of split pea soup, wondering if this was the brand that Steven liked. She hated that she didn’t know.

Etta picked up some fresh produce and turkey as well as a new flower bouquet then headed over to Cecile’s house. She unlocked Cecile’s black front door with the key that Cecile kept under the pillow on the porch swing and found her sitting at her round kitchen table with a cup of coffee and the paper. Etta made a beeline to the brown, wilting flowers on the island, pouring the murky flower water down the drain and filling the vase back up.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” Cecile said from the table, removing her rectangular glasses.

Etta unwrapped the cellophane from the daisies she had just bought from the store and snipped off the bottoms of their stems, laying them gingerly into the vase and sliding the vase back onto the center of the island.

“I was at the store and figured you could use some food,” Etta replied, unloading the bag.

“I don’t know why you bother with flowers,” Cecile added. “I really don’t care about flowers.”

“Well, I care.” Etta gathered the cluttered mail into a pile, flipping through it to make sure Cecile wasn’t leaving any bills unopened. “It adds a little life to this place again.”

“No one sees this place but you, Etta.”

Etta sighed. But as she flipped through the letters, she noticed a little business card sitting beneath the stack on the island.

“What’s this?” she asked.

Cecile looked up, and her face flushed red with recognition.

“Oh. That’s nothing.”

“Gregory Davis? Who’s Gregory Davis?”

“He’s no one! Just a man I met.”

“You met a man! You met a man and you didn’t tell me?!” Etta dropped the mail and raced right to the computer in the living room.

“Goodness, what are you doing?”

Etta wiggled the mouse on Cecile’s computer. She pulled up the internet and typed the man’s name into the computer along with the name of his painting business and hit “images.”

“Cece!” she yelled into the kitchen. “He’s handsome!”

And he was—kind eyes, a warm smile, greying but full hair.

“Oh, Lord, Etta,” Cecile grumbled.

Etta went back into the kitchen and sat next to her sister at the table.

“So what? Did he ask you out? What happened?”

“It’s nothing, really,” Cecile said, looking down. “We met at the soup kitchen, he was painting the outside of the building, and he asked me to coffee on Saturday.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I’m not going. I told him no.”

Etta’s mouth dropped open. “Well why on Earth did you do that?”

Cecile leaned back in her chair. “I’m not ready,” she said.

“Cece, if it were up to you, you’d never be ready. You’d sit around here feeling awful for the rest of your life.”

Cecile shrugged and looked down into her lap.

“Look.” Etta lowered her voice and leaned in closer. “This doesn’t have to be your next husband. He probably won’t be. If you don’t like the man, you never have to see him again. But your life isn’t over just because Steven’s is. You know that’s not what he wanted for you. I just think you should be open to the idea that you can both miss him and try to be happy.”

Cecile’s face scrunched and she raised her hand to the base of her nose. Instinctively, Etta pulled a plastic bag of tissues from her purse and handed them to Cecile, but Cecile waved them away.

“He does have a nice smile, doesn’t he?” she whispered.

Etta nodded.

“He does,” she said.

Cecile breathed out and looked at Etta through solemn eyes.

“All right,” Cecile said. “Why not.”

“Good girl.” Etta patted Cecile’s wrist. “Now go call the man and tell him you’ll be there, then get your things. We’re going shopping.”

Etta took Cecile downtown and bought her a new yellow blouse for coffee. On Saturday morning, Etta took Cecile to get her hair blown out at one of those fancy salons with the black leather chairs. After Cecile's dark hair was straight and lovely, Etta sat her down for makeup. She put eyeshadow across her sister's eyelids and rouge onto her cheeks, blowing on her skin to scatter the particles that fell beneath her eye. Cecile reached out and held onto Etta's open hand, holding on as though each movement of Etta's brush caused Cecile pain.

"You're going to do great," Etta promised. "You look beautiful, C."

Cecile nodded.

"Will you come?" she asked.

"On your date?"

"Not at the same table. You can sit somewhere else, somewhere on the other side of the shop. Just if I need you."

Cecile looked at Etta with such desperation and intensity; how could she say no?

So after a quick lunch at Salad Works, Etta walked Cecile over to the Spotless Cup thirty minutes early and sat her down at a table right by the front door so that Gregory wouldn't miss her.

Etta ordered herself a green tea, took a seat at one of the high tables by the back window on the opposite side of the coffee shop from Cecile, and, together, they waited. They waited as tables turned over and the line for coffee grew and shrank. They waited as the last few sips of her green tea lost heat. They waited as her body began to fill with a strange density, as though sand were accumulating from her feet up. With each man who came into the restaurant, Cecile would look up with curiosity and hope before looking back to the floor. Eventually, Cecile stopped

looking and kept her head down in her lap. It wasn't until a young man asked Cecile if she was using the other chair at her table that Etta shoved her pale green mug across the table in disgust, stormed over to the man, and snapped, "How about you mind your own damn business?"

And then Etta took Cecile's hand, helped her up out of her seat, and they left the Spotless Cup in shame. The moment they reached the sidewalk, the tears started.

"Oh, Cecile," Etta said softly. "I'm so sorry."

"I feel so stupid," Cecile said, her makeup smearing and running colored streaks down her cheeks.

"I cannot believe he did this. What an ass!" Etta grumbled.

"That's all right." Cecile extended her hand for a tissue as Etta sifted through her purse to find one. "Really. It just wasn't meant to be."

But Etta knew her sister, and she could see the depth of her humiliation around the corners of her eyes. She could see the disappointment, the embarrassment, everything she shouldn't be feeling sewn into every line in Cecile's skin. How deeply it stung, to be spurned by a man who had presented you with a beacon of hope.

As they reached Etta's car, Etta smacked her open palm against the driver's window. She hit it once, twice, three times, her skin seething. While a part of her questioned if Cecile had gotten something wrong, perhaps the time or the day or the location, her ribs and the soles of her feet knew that this Paint Man had stood Cecile up. In one last pathetic effort, Etta cast her pride aside and dug out her phone from her pocketbook.

Fuck it, she thought, sometimes you have to give the picture a little push to get it to fit into the frame. Things rarely just slide into place.

“Do you have his business card on you?” she asked Cecile. Cecile tipped her head skeptically.

“I don’t think—”

“Just, let me.”

So Cecile gave Etta the card and Etta called him.

And he did not pick up.

Etta listened to the rasp of his mature and well-broken-in voice apologize for his having missed her phone call—not hers, specifically, but all calls that resulted in hearing this message. He wasn’t available right now, he explained, he would call back at his next available moment. Bullshit. But as the phone beeped, Etta sat in silence, staring at her dark and warped reflection in her Honda window. She wanted to scream into the phone. She wanted to ask him where he got off, standing up a new widow. She wanted to say, *how dare you? How dare you come into Cecile’s life at such a vulnerable and pivotal moment and indent her the wrong way?*

She didn’t do that.

Instead, she breathed; four long and low breaths, counting as she exhaled, before removing the phone from her ear and clicking it off. Makes sense, she thought, that the first thing she would find in the new sewer of Cecile’s Steven-less life would be a rat.

“I don’t have service,” she lied to Cecile. Cecile shook her head, forcing a smile and getting into the car without a word.

Etta drove Cecile home in silence. As they reached Cecile’s house, Cecile turned to Etta with a sad expression.

“I don’t need you to do everything for me,” she said.

And the words carved into Etta like ice.

“I was...just—”

“I know,” Cecile said, her tone short and leaking with frustration. “You mean well. I appreciate it, I do. But I didn’t need this right now. I thought this date was a bad idea and I was right to have thought that. It was too soon and you shouldn’t have pushed me.”

Etta sat there with her mouth open, and, somehow, saw the anger sitting beside her as the complete and total fault of this Paint Man. Cecile had no idea how lucky she was to have Etta, shielding her at every turn. How dare Paint Man make her take that for granted?

“Thank you for going with me,” Cecile whispered before getting out of the car and walking into her home.

Etta promised herself, as she drove home, that she would try to let it go. That she would step back and let Cecile simmer. And she thought that would be the end of it, one painful and bitter Saturday afternoon. But four days later, as Etta was bringing her groceries to the car from the Stop & Shop downtown, there he was, the wretched Paint Man, talking to a woman as she put her bags into the trunk of her car. She was fairly sure it was him, but to be certain, she called out,

“Gregory!”

And the man turned.

Etta was a woman with a level head and a cool demeanor. Ask anyone. You could put a pot of water onto Etta’s head and place her in the most stressful of situations and that water would not boil. But something about seeing the buttoned-up, kind-eyed man who ended up being such a devil in the place where she purchased her carrots, talking to another woman after leaving

Cecile sitting for hours like a goddamn fool—something about that just didn't sit right with Etta. In fact, it sat in her palms, flaring so hot and golden that she had to clasp both of her fists closed. Etta would defy any stranger that they wouldn't have done the exact same thing for anyone they loved, had they been in her New Balance sneakers.

“You piece of rancid shit,” Etta growled between her teeth and dropped her grocery bags onto the asphalt. Her carton of blueberries cracked open and blueberries rolled all over the place. An apple tumbled out of the bag.

Paint Man turned his head to Etta and, in confusion, his dumb mouth dropped open like a fish. Etta savored that look on his face—that eyebrows-up, skin-flushed, red shock. She savored it like it was the last bite of a juicy filet, chewing slowly and letting the flavors dance across her tongue. And Etta swore a hand appeared behind her—an open-faced palm, shoving hard into her upper back. Each finger of the hand carried a hint of disappointment, anger, bitterness, loss, all dueling against one another to create a jolt within Etta. She ran her gaze all over Paint Man's face as though she were trying to cleanse him. And then she lurched forward and gave him a solid push.

Now, Etta wasn't particularly strong, so Paint Man didn't fall to the ground; he merely stumbled back from the force of Etta's shove. Unfortunately for Etta, a car had just pulled into the parking lot and was rolling along in search of a spot. As luck would have it, the car kissed Paint Man just as he was stumbling back. The nudge of the vehicle knocked him off his feet so he was lying with his too-large-for-his-body feet facing Etta on the asphalt.

The woman with whom Paint Man had been previously fraternizing—a middle-aged, dark-haired woman with giant, too-white teeth and an expression that made it look as though she

were trying to complete a complicated math problem—ran to his aid as though he'd been shot. She yelled for a doctor.

The person in the car got out. She was young, maybe 17 or 18, and her skin was the whitest thing Etta had ever seen. She stood, motionless and speechless, with her two unsteady hands holding onto the open car door for balance.

Paint Man stood a moment later, his hand dramatically clasped in his mistress' hand, and he brushed off his slacks with big hand motions. He looked at Etta with eyes she could not read, like when you mix too many bright colors and they turn into an ambiguous brown.

“Who the hell are you?” he yelled, his face bright red.

Etta held his gaze.

“That was for Cecile,” she seethed.

The 17-year-old driver finally spoke, her voice high-pitched and frail.

“There's been an accident.” She was on the phone.

“Oh, brother,” Etta muttered. “He's fine! He's standing! Accident, my ass.”

But people don't often care about the culprit's opinion after she's pushed a man into a moving vehicle.

The mistress helped Paint Man into the passenger seat of her car, just so he could “sit down and rest.” How quaint, the problems these people think they have.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” the mistress snapped to Etta, taking a domineering step forward. Her breath was sour and aggressive. Something about this woman's anger and brashness awakened a sort of levity within Etta. This woman reminded her of a backseat-driving child.

So Etta just smiled.

“Careful,” she said with springs under both syllables. The mistress furrowed her drawn-on thin eyebrows. Confused and seemingly intimidated, the woman stepped back to the car and rubbed Paint Man’s slender shoulder as she spoke softly to him about whether he had any substantial aches or pains. The 17-year-old pulled her car into an empty spot to get out of the road and wiped caked-on black makeup from beneath her watering eyes. Her hands trembled as she sat in the front seat. “Oh boy,” Etta muttered to the poor girl, bending over and picking up the produce that she had dropped. She lifted a handful of blueberries and brushed them clean with her blouse. She picked up the apples that had rolled away and put them back into the shopping bag, fishing out a particularly shiny green one and offering it to the crying girl. The girl shot her an alarmed expression, shaking her head and turning away from Etta. Shrugging, Etta placed the shopping bag into the blanket-covered trunk of her car and took a purposeful bite out of the shiny green apple.

And then she waited, as the sirens crept closer, the young girl wept, and the Paint Man acted like an infant, melting in the arms of the bad-breathed mistress.

Two weeks of anger management. For *one* stupid nudge in a parking lot, for a woman who was fighting for all women everywhere who have been screwed over by a man. Etta would often think back on that moment in the parking lot, when she ate an apple as the chaotic world murmured and hummed around her. So certain she would be untouchable. So certain she had done nothing wrong. And for Etta, she would always think that. Because, for Cecile, she would do it all over again. For Cecile, she’d do much worse.

“I bet you’re the only woman over 75 within a 500-mile radius of here to get in trouble for assaulting a man,” Arthur mused as they walked out of the courthouse after Etta’s case.

Etta chuckled, taking a breath as Arthur smiled and looked away.

“You’re glad I did it,” Etta said to Cecile, who was still sniffing and catching her breath. Cecile shook her head, but Etta could see the whisper of a smile by her lips.

“Let me drive you to your classes,” Cecile said.

“Deal,” Etta said.

## Ben

They said Lisa's body thought Ria was a virus. They said Ria was being eaten slowly, chipped away like marble. They gave Lisa an emergency c-section, which Lisa had been adamantly against. "I will not be cut open," she lamented, "I will not, I will *not*."

They cut her open.

Lisa was in such a panic that the doctors had to sedate her. As she slipped under a tornado of drugs, Lisa said she kept her eyes on Ben. She said she watched them lift out her insides and place them on the table beside her through the lenses of the sunglasses Ben had been too shocked to take off.

The baby came out a bloodied, pink, old lady raisin. Its arms bent and wrinkled, its face contorted and somehow too large for its puniness.

"Why's it so small?" Ben asked.

They told him she was missing a great deal of blood, that they needed him to consent to blood transfusions immediately.

No one had told Ben this might be a possibility. They had told him about the morning sickness and moodiness and the torrents of pain when the baby came, but they hadn't told him about the hideous, wrinkled person who would be dying the moment she was born. They hadn't told him how much he would love her the second she came out and how that love would crack when they said *transfusions* and *missing blood* and *incubation*. It was like watching someone balance his heart on the tip of their finger.

Ben looked to Lisa, his partner, his rock, and she weepily smiled up at him, the sedation leaving her uncharacteristically calm.

Ria was taken to another ward to undergo transfusions, Lisa still wandering around her own medicated mind. It was just Ben, the dying girl, and the incapacitated wife. His first taste of fatherhood without Lisa was more bitter than he could have ever imagined. Walls of weight formed behind his eyes and shot up and down his spine, and Ben could do nothing but melt against the wall to the floor.

He stayed like that, on the floor, feeling like a puddle until Lisa came to. She blinked at him and he picked himself up from the floor to hold her hand. Because he told himself, no matter what he was going through, Lisa had been through worse in the span of the last few hours.

He held Lisa's hand tightly, her entire forehead soaked in sweat and her eyes wet and foggy. She closed her hand fiercely around Ben's and looked dead ahead, her mouth flat and locked.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"What?" he said, lifting their hands to his lips and softly kissing her knuckles. "Why on Earth are you sorry?"

"I messed it up, I messed her up." She shook her head, closing her eyes and jutting her lip out. "I did this. I didn't love her enough."

"What are you talking about? Lisa. Lisa."

She still wouldn't look at him.

"Lisa," Ben murmured. "Don't even, for a second, don't."

"I'm already a terrible mother. I knew this would happen."

Ben knew that this part of Lisa, this part staring at the wall and carrying the weight of the universe at the nape of her neck, was as out of his control as was their dying baby. So he kept her

hand to his lips and stared at her as she stared at the wall, shaking his head over and over, hoping he could somehow instill into Lisa just how wrong she was.

“She’ll live,” Ben said quietly. “She’ll be okay, Lis. You didn’t get a good look at her but she’s tough. And once you meet her...you’re going to be an *incredible* mother.”

Lisa didn’t smile.

Lisa was too weak to go see Ria in the neonatal intensive care unit when she came out of surgery. She sent Ben down alone. In all honesty, he didn’t want to go. He didn’t want to see what Ria would look like and he didn’t want to leave Lisa.

But Lisa demanded it. She said he was not to leave their child alone after the traumatic first few hours she had spent out of the womb. She said, suck it up, I was just cut open, you can walk yourself down a flight of stairs to our daughter.

Ben walked himself down a flight of stairs to their daughter. The nurses pointed him toward a small, clear box with two large holes on the side that looked like something that should be housing baby farm animals.

“She’s not in there,” he said, mostly to himself.

“She is, right inside there,” the nurse behind him said from over his shoulder. “You can put your hand in, if you want to. It’ll be good for her to have some gentle physical touch, after what she’s been through.”

“I can put my hand in?” Ben’s heart was already quickening. Shame wrapped itself around his neck like a lead cape. He didn’t want to touch her. He wanted the nurse to tell him he couldn’t, that she needed to be left alone. That touching her might hurt her.

“After you clean your hands, you sure can! Right through here.”

The nurse handed Ben a bottle of Purell and, with a forced smile, Ben pumped a dollop onto his hand.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

Then Ben approached the weird glass contraption slowly and there she was, lying on her back with her arms and legs bent like pipe cleaners. She had tubes coming out of her arm and stuck up in her nose.

“Go on,” said the nurse.

With great trepidation, Ben slid his hand in through the hole in the box and out toward the tiny person. She suddenly jerked her body sideways and her angel-hair fingers grabbed the tip of Ben’s ring finger.

“Look at that,” the nurse whispered next to Ben, smiling down.

“Look at that,” Ben echoed.

He was able to take Lisa down to see Ria in a wheelchair the next day. He rolled her right up to the box and said, “Look, there she is. Say hi to Hannah.”

Lisa peered in from the side and looked with a blank expression.

“That’s her?” she asked, tipping her head to the side. “That’s...her?”

“That’s her,” Ben said. Ben had already been down a few times to visit her throughout the previous day. He had spoken to her all about Lisa and their home and he repeated her name, over and over, Hannah, Hannah, Hannah. “Hi, Hannah girl,” he whispered.

“Can I touch her?” Lisa asked quietly.

Ben nodded. “Yes! Yes. You can reach in right through that hole there.”

With an unsteady hand, Lisa reached toward the box that held their daughter and slid her finger in. Just as she had with Ben, their baby grabbed Lisa's finger. Ben watched a sparkle of light flash across Lisa's face as she smiled and teared up at the same time. Through the fountain of emotion, Lisa shook her head.

"What?" Ben asked her.

Lisa shook her head harder. Her cropped hair was greasy and matted but it still moved with her head. "She's not a Hannah," she said, leaning her cheek closer to the incubator.

"Oh—"

"She's not a Hannah," she repeated.

"We were going to name her after your dad," he said gently, the way you'd coax someone from a ledge. "It's such a pretty name."

But Lisa kept shaking her head, hard, tipping her head and smiling at the baby. She wiggled her finger and Ria's hand followed.

"I know what we were planning," Lisa said. "But what were we thinking? How can you name a person you've never met?" She turned her head to look at Ben. "How could we think we could plan for this?"

And she was right; no matter the number of legal pads or informational books or Target receipts, there are some things you simply cannot plan for.

"Ria," Lisa muttered.

"Huh?"

"Ria. Short for Miriam. After your grandmother."

"Are you sure?"

“That’s her name. Don’t you think?”

Ria.

Ben brought his face next to his wife’s, looking at the child with the big eyes covered in tubes.

“Ria,” he said. The baby stared back and Ben’s entire chest filled. “I love it.”

Lisa looked at Ben and suddenly kissed him more forcefully than she had in a while, using her left hand to grasp onto his shirt. She pulled away, pressing her forehead to Ben’s and smiling so wide, Ben could see all of her teeth.

“Look what we *made*,” she gushed.

“Ria,” Ben whispered.

After twenty-some-odd minutes, Ben tried to get Lisa to go back to her room to rest—but Lisa wouldn’t leave. She stayed with her cheek against the glass, murmuring so softly to Ria that not even Ben could hear what she was saying. She stayed until the nurses forced her to leave, pulling her in her chair from the incubator.

Ben slept in the chair beside Lisa that night, though neither of them really did.

Somewhere in the rolls of non-sleep in the poorly darkened and inadequately silent room, Lisa reached out a hand and took Ben’s.

“She’s gonna be okay,” Lisa said, trapped between a statement and a question.

“She is,” Ben assured her.

“I’ve never been this scared in my life,” Lisa whimpered. Ben felt her fear trickle through his chest, his stomach, his thighs.

“I know.”

Lisa gave Ben's hand a firm squeeze.

"It's not your fault," Ben said. Through the dim light, Ben watched Lisa scrunch up her nose and sniffle.

"Then why does it feel like it is?" she said.

They looked at each other for a little while longer, and Ben remembered thinking he had never loved her more than he loved her right in this moment, before one of them closed their eyes and fell asleep.

## Etta

Robert had never been fond of the Tilted Glass.

It was one of those funky places back when Etta lived in New York where you had to go inside a pizza place and then back down a set of stairs off to the side. It was dark and far too packed with round tables. Even the stage was cramped. And it was one of Etta's all-time favorite places to go.

She took Robert once. He refused to go back.

"I feel like the entire room is assaulting me," he'd grumbled.

Etta never said a word when he dragged her to all those Yankees games. She sat on those hard, plastic, sticky seats with the sweaty men screaming and staring down her shirt. She used the putrid facilities and ate the tough hotdogs and came home smelling of beer and fried food for weeks. Because that's what you do when you love someone.

But Etta didn't say any of that.

So she would leave Robert home and go with either some other teachers from her school or with Cecile. This particular night, Etta went with Cecile.

"No Robert tonight?" Cecile asked Etta, her voice light and unaware.

"Not his scene," Etta replied. They were walking in the pizza parlor, the room steaming and aromatic from the baking crusts. They squeezed their way down the narrow staircase with the tall, steep wooden stairs until the lights dipped off and the room drizzled with smoke.

Cecile got them a table with high stools in the center of the room and wiped it down with some tissues. Etta went to get the first round.

The band on stage was mild and mellow, the lead singer more whispering into the mic than singing. Etta was drumming her fingers on the bar waiting for the bartender to bring her drinks when the man next to her let out a low, throaty chuckle.

“Nice rhythm,” the man said.

“Not interested in your judgment, thank you,” she replied starkly, turning her back to him.

“I didn’t mean to upset you, really.” The man drew closer. He smelled like wood and honey. “You have nice rhythm. You do.”

Etta swiveled to get a better look at him.

Arthur, her Arthur.

Tall but not in a way that made him feel domineering. Neatly combed dark hair, always off a little to the side. Boyish cheeks, an unencumbered smile. A pastel shirt with a crooked bowtie. Slouching, just a little, to bring himself closer to her level.

Look, it wasn’t love at first sight. Etta didn’t believe in that. But he certainly made her stumble in a way that Robert never had.

She cleared her throat and smiled softly.

“Have you lost your words?” he ventured with a sweet, slanted grin. “Here are some: why, yes, handsome stranger, you can buy me a drink.”

“I’m...”

“Arthur.” He put out a confident hand and held Etta’s like he could squeeze the entire month of July out of her skin.

“Etta,” she said. And then, “I’m not available, though, so don’t take my telling you my name the wrong way.” Etta remembers watching the levity in his face slide.

“Oh,” he muttered, his gaze falling to his shoes. “Duh. Of course you aren’t. He’s a lucky man.”

Etta nodded, drawing her hands together on the bar and lacing her fingers into one another like a little cage.

“Where is he tonight?” Arthur asked after a moment of silence.

“Oh, he’s just at home.”

“He’s at home?”

“He’s at home.”

The bartender placed the two drinks down on the counter—one sidecar (for Etta), one Manhattan (for Cecile). Etta handed him cash.

“So, you like it here?” Arthur asked. She looked back over at him and his cheeks were flushed.

“I love it here,” Etta replied.

“Hmm. So you love it here and your boyfriend is at home.”

She stood frozen for a good minute before she tucked her bag beside her breast and her upper forearm, freeing her hands to grab the two drinks.

“Let me.” Arthur made a move to take the sidecar from her right hand.

“No. No. Don’t.”

In the shuffle, a bit of liquid sloshed from each of the glasses in Etta’s hands. She blew air quickly from her mouth.

“Sorry, sorry. I’ll...you go ahead.” Arthur slid into a stool at the bar and did not turn around. Etta stared at his back, at the way his shoulders leaned a little forward, the way his head tipped down. She wanted to know every chair he had ever sat in, every shirt he had ever worn. If he were any other man, she wouldn’t have paid much attention. But he wasn’t any other man. He was Arthur. And she wanted to slip into the seat next to him and feel his hand squeeze the month out of her again.

“Need help?”

Cecile appeared behind Etta with a sweet smile, reaching out and taking one of the drinks. Her gaze flickered to the man next to Etta, turning to Etta and smiling. Etta shook her head, floating through the murmuring people and placing the drinks onto the table.

“That took a while,” Cecile said, sipping her Manhattan. “I like this song. This band is nice.”

But Etta was only half listening, her focus still on the man a few yards behind her at the bar.

“Yeah, I just—you know what, I’ll be back.”

So Etta found her way right back to Arthur and sat down on the stool next to him.

He looked over at her with a sly expression.

“Say it,” Etta said.

He raised a daring eyebrow.

“Say it. I’ve been with Robert for seven years and we *live* together and he never does anything with me that I want to do and he still won’t talk to me about marriage. Say it.”

Arthur stopped smiling. “I think you just did,” he said.

“Fuck.”

And she *never* swore in those days.

She ran her fingers through her hair. “How’d you know?” she asked quietly.

“I see you here all the time,” he admitted. “And I figured you were either available or not happy. Tonight was just the first night I actually got the courage to talk to you.”

Arthur had a quality. An untouched snow quality that made Etta want to slam both feet down hard.

“So tell me what to do,” Etta challenged. She watched his lips scrunch and his head cock, his eyes glancing nervously away. Around them, the bar swirled with music and glass and laughter, but their little slice of the room was still. “Honestly. I don’t know what to do.”

Arthur tapped his pointer and middle finger on his glass, a habit for which Etta would one day scold him.

“You know, for Christmas last year, want to know what he got me?” she asked.

“Oh boy,” Arthur muttered.

“A notebook. You want to know why?”

“I’m afraid.”

“So at the end of the day when I come home with stuff to complain about, I’ll have a place to put those thoughts. You know, instead of talking to him.”

Arthur scratched his head but didn’t say a word.

“So what I did was come home each day and sit somewhere so that I could see him and I’d write all the reasons I was angry at him that day.”

Arthur took a long sip of his beer. “I bet that notebook filled up real fast,” he commented.

Etta chortled.

“It seems to me you do know what to do,” he said. “I think you’ve known what to do for a while.”

Something in Etta’s throat shifted. Like getting smacked in the face with the rotting fish you’ve been avoiding in your fridge for too long.

“It’s just...” she paused, letting the sand in her brain settle. “I feel like I’ve lived in the same house for years and years and am just now realizing that I spent too much money and there are termites in the floors and the roof is falling in but...but it’s my home, you know?”

Arthur then motioned to the bartender for a pen. He took the napkin from beneath his beer, smoothed out the wrinkles, and wrote down his phone number. He handed it to Etta with a tucked-in, modest smile.

“A house is just a house,” he said. “And that sounds like a shit house.”

Etta looked down at the napkin in utter disbelief. He was coming onto her, despite knowing that she was with another man.

But it wasn’t like that.

Well, let’s call a spade a spade, it was like that. But it’s like the difference between putting ketchup on a burger and ketchup on chocolate cake. That moment, that combination, that gesture—it was right.

“When you get your life together,” he said. “If you want.”

His handwriting was tiny but clear, and he put the little lines in the middle of his sevens. Etta would come to learn that phone number so well, memorized like a childhood nursery rhyme.

He gave the bar two solid hits with his hand and, with another smile, he got up and was swallowed into the swarm of people.

So there was Etta, alone at that bar, not thinking of more ways that she could fill an I Hate Robert notebook but rather thinking of making a new one, a Why I Want to See Arthur Again notebook.

Well, that's not fair, she never hated Robert. She liked him a great deal. But she was also sure people didn't mind peeing in a hole until they invented indoor plumbing. Things change; standards change. We believe ourselves unable to walk until one day we are able. In that dark and humid underground bar, from her squeaking and slanted stool, Etta stood. And as she made her way back to Cecile, she became overwhelmed with the notion that she could no longer be there; that her shoes were suddenly bursting with hot coals and the only way to rid herself of them was to run—up the narrow staircase, through the pizza parlor, over subway grates and gum-covered streets, all the way up to the 27th floor. To Robert.

“I need to go,” Etta yelled to Cecile over the music.

“Go? Now? We just got here! Why?”

Etta sighed, too flustered with the big crowd to explain.

“Come outside.”

“But our drinks—”

“Then stay,” Etta said. “I'm going. I'm sorry. I need to.”

And as Etta turned to leave the bar, Cecile followed her up the staircase and outside.

“Etta, what are you doing? Why are you leaving?” she asked, a light mist beginning outside.

“I need to break up with Robert,” Etta said. “Right now.”

Cecile’s face dropped. “What?” she said. “Why?”

“Because I’m not happy with him!” Etta said, realizing how right it felt to say it. “I’m just not. He isn’t good for me, C.”

“But you’ve been with him for so long,” Cecile said, her lip beginning to pout. “You’re so in love.”

“I’m not, that’s what I’m saying,” Etta insisted.

Cecile wiped at her cheeks, a combination of rain and tears thoroughly wetting her skin.

“That’s awful!” Cecile said. “God, what if that happens with Steven? What if he just falls out of love?”

“Shh.” Etta pulled her sister into her chest, rubbing her back and smoothing down her hair. “This is different. He won’t, C. He won’t.”

“I can’t believe it’s just ending, after all this time,” Cecile whispered.

“It’s going to be okay,” Etta told her, pulling away and rubbing her thumbs beneath Cecile’s eyes. And the more she said it, the more she was certain. “Hey, hey. It’s good. This is good. I’ll take you home, okay?”

Cecile nodded. So Etta took her hand, hailed a taxi, and rode to Cecile’s with the city blurring in the rain-dotted window, Cecile’s head on Etta’s shoulder.

“Will you be all right?” Etta asked Cecile as she walked her up the steps of Cecile’s brownstone. Cecile nodded.

“I love you,” Cecile said.

“You, too,” Etta said back.

Etta kissed her sister on the cheek and then walked the seventeen blocks home in her heels. She was hardly afraid of the drunk men she passed along the way. She was too determined to even feel the fatigue in her feet. So she went home and she told Robert she was done and packed herself a quick bag. She ended up back on the New York sidewalk, the humidity puffing her hair and the lights smearing her vision. Though the air was potent with car exhaust and pollution and urine, Etta breathed it in with all the love in the world. She found her way to the nearest payphone. And with nowhere to go and nothing to lose, she called the number on the damp napkin that she would soon know by heart.

## Ben

Ben watched Lisa pull a stiff barrette from her matted hair, smooth it over with her hand, and slide the barrette back neatly into place. Ben had been filling out paperwork at the kitchen table and a 7-year-old Ria was asleep upstairs. The Capital One credit card bill sat in the center of the table and stared at Ben with fire eyes.

“You’re home late,” Ben commented.

Lisa nodded, running her pointer finger over her unsmudged pink lipstick and rubbing her lips together. She opened the fridge and the yellow light folded around her body.

“I left you a plate of chicken, if you want it,” Ben said. “It’s on the top shelf.”

“Thank you.”

He watched Lisa unwrap the cling wrap from the plate and stare at the chicken blankly.

“There are capers,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“I hate capers.”

Ben placed his black pen down. “All right, so pick them out.”

“I have never liked capers, Ben,” Lisa muttered, her eyes washed over and her voice strained. “Why don’t you *know* that.”

“I forgot. Ria likes them.”

Lisa stared at that plate of chicken with ferocity.

“If you’re gonna pout about it, I’ll make you something else,” Ben said flatly, though he did not rise from the table. Lisa rolled her eyes and snatched the plate from the island and slammed it onto the table.

“It’s all right,” she said.

“Aren’t you gonna heat it up?” Ben asked

“No.”

She speared a caper with a fork and slid it onto a napkin, without looking at Ben. Then she speared another. And another.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I just had a long day.”

This was the last moment that Ben loved his wife simply, in the way he always had. In this moment, when she was in a bad mood, when she looked as if perhaps he were on her last nerve as she tackled her chicken caper by caper. This was the last moment she was the Lisa he had always known and trusted.

Ben couldn’t point to a moment in their marriage where things started to get hard. It wasn’t like they hit a patch of ice and their ship suddenly sank. They still had great nights, fun dinners out where they would split a bottle of wine and then send weird meals or glasses of milk to strangers at other tables. Or moments when Ben would hide Lisa’s floss so he could hear her yell from behind the closed door,

“Benjamin Meister! Why are you a child!”

Or those times in the middle of the night when Lisa would get cold and snuggle right up against his back, holding him like they were both children and this was the simplest, most complexly intimate they’d ever be.

But sometimes things were just off, out of sync. Apart from the few fights here and there where Lisa would accuse Ben of doing things she *never* would’ve done, there was nothing wrong, per se; nothing they could point to as the clear problem. There would just be some nights

where they sat in bed together and did not speak, or Lisa would go away for a night to help her brother with his new baby and she wouldn't text or call at all while she was away. Many times, when Ria wasn't in the room, they found they didn't have much to say to each other anymore. And it wasn't like the early days of their long-term relationship when the silence was accepted and comfortable; rather, it dripped like honey and left them both feeling sticky and unclean. There were days, Ben could admit, where his marriage felt more like an obligation than anything else.

But he never expected to find what he found when he opened their Capital One bill—a \$14 bar charge at the Short Hills Hilton. There were no other suspicious charges for the whole month—just this one, lone charge that just so happened to coincide with a night that Lisa was supposed to have been staying with her brother in Connecticut. The moment he saw it, he knew what it was. Even though he held onto hope that there was a reasonable explanation, a part of him knew.

Ben was aware of the possibility of what might happen when he started his next sentence—the chance that when he opened his hand, the butterfly in his palm might fly away.

“So,” he said to his wife while she picked at her chicken, “our credit card bill came.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. And there was one funky charge on there.”

“Oh? Did you call Capital One?”

“You know, I haven't yet. I thought you might know something about it.”

Lisa looked confused.

“What was it?” she asked.

“A bar charge at the Short Hills Hilton on a night you were supposed to be with Nick.”

Lisa froze. He watched the woman he had laughed and danced with, the woman who didn't care when she got cake on her wedding dress, the woman who once yelled at a man for speaking to his son in an unkind way—he watched her flawless, angular face freeze. That was when his soul dropped.

“What?” she said.

He wanted to turn off his eyes. He wanted to take back the question and scrub away his own realization with bleeding fingers. He wanted to go back to Lisa's outburst about her apparent caper aversion. But even the caper outburst was tainted; because guilt is the gum on the bottom of the shoe.

Lisa put down her fork slowly. Any frustration and bitterness that she had been mindlessly flinging to Ben melted off her. Her spikes were down; she was belly-up, and as Ben watched the color leave her cheeks, something left from his as well.

\*\*\*

Ben had met Lisa at Emory his second year, on a night he'd decided to leave a Kappa Sig party early and alone. He was the sort of sobering drunk that comes only when you're by yourself and outside in the cooling air. As he meandered down Eagle Row past the frat houses humming with motion, he noticed a girl sitting on a stone ledge with her heels kicked off and her feet tucked beneath her, her head in her hands. She wasn't sobbing loudly by any means, but her whole body shook while Ben's went completely stiff.

Earlier in the night, Ben had eaten a doughnut and crumbled up the napkin into his pocket. Remembering this now, he removed the napkin, tried to rub out the wrinkles as best he could, and tapped the girl on the shoulder.

“Are you all right?” he asked, extending his hand with the still-wrinkled napkin.

The girl looked up. Her eyes were sparkling with sadness, old makeup rubbed on her cheeks. Her lips were full and smeared, perfectly pink. Her blonde hair, long at the time, was down and crossing in a thousand different directions at the top of her head.

She said nothing—she just sat there looking ahead as though she didn’t even see him. Uncomfortable, Ben stood for a moment with his mouth hanging open. Then, he nodded and gave the girl a tight-lipped smile.

“Okay then, feel better.” And then he turned to go.

“Wait,” the girl said. She wiped her eye with the side of her hand. “I’ll take the napkin.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure.”

The girl inched over to the left, keeping her eyes cast on the road but seeming to open the spot next to her for Ben. Hesitantly, he took it. He handed her the napkin and she further smoothed out its wrinkles before dabbing beneath her eyes.

People walked by them on the road, laughing and cursing and dancing. A few tripped over the girl’s shoes, kicking them toward the street and breaking into a torrent of hysterics.

“You wanna talk about it?” Ben asked finally. He watched her profile, noticing the bump in her nose and thinking how uniquely beautiful the side of her face was.

“Not really,” she replied.

“Okay,” Ben said.

“He didn’t mean to do it,” she said softly. “It just happened, you know?”

“What?”

“Nothing.” She exhaled, brushing off her cheeks with her thumbs. “Someone just...fucked up a little.”

“I’m sorry,” Ben said. Lisa laughed and raised her gaze to the sky, tipping her head as though she were reading the stars.

“You’re sweet,” she said. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“Maybe it’s for the best. Maybe he’s not supposed to be in your life.”

“I don’t know if I believe in that ‘supposed to be’ shit. If I leave him, it’s because of him, it’s because of what he did.”

Ben chewed on her words, astounded by their shape. “That’s fair,” he commented.

“I just don’t know if I can forgive him,” Lisa said.

“I think forgiveness is overrated,” Ben noted. “Honestly. I mean, I don’t know what he did, but I know there are plenty of people who wouldn’t have done what he did, you know? Why keep someone around who treats you worse than other people would just because you’ve already invested time in him?”

Lisa seemed to think about Ben’s comment for a moment. “Well because everyone screws up, right? You can’t just drop people every time they mess up.”

“You know the situation better than I do,” Ben said. “That’s just what I think.”

Lisa reached over and scooped up Ben’s hand. Her skin was rough and calloused but her hand fit well in his and she squeezed him so strongly that he felt it in the soles of his feet.

“Thank you for stopping,” she said.

“I’m sorry your crying was the reason I stopped,” he answered.

A bit of her hair dropped by her face and a breeze carried over a tropical coconut smell.

Ben breathed in.

“Lisa,” she whispered.

“Ben.”

Ben never brought this moment up again to Lisa in the multiple decades of their relationship. He never asked her what this guy had done. Lisa was always private about her past—Ben didn’t even know how many people she had slept with before him—but he didn’t really see the point in knowing that information anyway. He didn’t want to think about who she was before him or how other guys had hurt her. He cared only about who she was now, who she was when she came into his life and stayed.

\*\*\*

For a while, Ben couldn’t bring himself to look at Lisa in the light of their kitchen. Instead, he looked down at the array of poorly written contracts that tired and uninspired realtors had thrown together because they had to. He stared at small grammatical mistakes and fragmented sentences, at blocks of unnecessary language that were there solely to add bulk to the document. And then he stared at their credit card bill, their life neatly laid out in charges. There was the charge for when they had gone out as a family to Linda’s Tavern for Ben’s birthday, the night he and Lisa had bickered about who had broken the garbage disposal and the night they’d had unexpectedly passionate sex and fallen asleep tangled up in one another. The trip to Target for new kitchen pots and a dress for Ria and lightbulbs. The spontaneous venture to Dairy

Queen, the many coffees Ben would bring home for Lisa from Starbucks, electric bills to light up their home. All of it, everything, tarnished by a quiet Hilton charge right smack in the center.

When he couldn't bear to look at these papers in front of him anymore, Ben looked back at his wife.

Her face was in her hands.

"What's going on, Lisa?" he finally said in the same way you would ask a child standing next to a broken lamp what happened.

"Oh, God." Lisa's words were muffled in her hands. "I knew it was a mistake the moment it happened."

She began to sniffle and exhale loudly, wiping her eyes with the heel of her palm.

"Fuck," she whispered, shaking her head and keeping her eyes down. Staring at her, all Ben could think about was how beautiful she was—so beautiful that Ben could never really touch her. Loving Lisa had been so easy, once. It had come to Ben more naturally than anything he had ever done as though it were something his soul had been waiting to do.

Now, loving Lisa felt like trying to drain the ocean.

Ben placed his hand gently onto the bill, spreading the two creases from where the paper had been folded in the mail.

Then he slid the paper across the table to his wife.

"I think I need to not be in the same house as you tonight," he said calmly. "Maybe you can go stay at the Hilton."

"No," Lisa croaked, her face streaked red and wet. "No. No. No. We need to talk about this."

“No,” Ben replied. “You don’t decide what we need anymore.”

“But we have to talk about it so we can work through it and—”

“I don’t want to know.” Ben began to gather his papers into a stack, hitting them against the table so that they all collected into one, neat pile. “I don’t want an explanation because I know there isn’t one. There’s nothing you can say to make this better.”

“I’m not gonna leave,” Lisa whimpered. “I’m not leaving.”

Ben let out a strong exhale and dropped his head.

“I’ll sleep on the couch, if you really want,” she said, “but I’m not leaving.”

Ben saw the resolve in her expression, the heels-in-the-sand fixation that let Ben know she wouldn’t budge. Even when it was the one thing Ben asked of her after she threw their marriage into the fire, she wouldn’t budge.

“I’m going upstairs,” Ben said. “Frankly, I don’t care what the hell you do.”

Lisa remained sitting with her cold chicken as Ben walked quietly up the staircase so as not to wake Ria. To assess what he was feeling at that moment would be tantamount to trying to taste each individual component in a smoothie. But one of the prime feelings that was lacking for Ben was anger. He was not angry. There was no red in his vision, his body did not pulse, his blood didn’t run thick and hot through his arms. Was he hurt? Fully. Was he confused? A great deal. Devastated? Frustrated? Disappointed? Discouraged? Sure. But when the love of his life tossed a wrench into their moving wheel, Ben was not angry.

He got himself into pajamas. He shaved and washed his face and brushed his teeth. He even flossed.

It wasn't until he had turned off the light and gotten into bed that he heard the soft sounds of feet climbing up the staircase.

And then Lisa got into bed beside him.

The two stayed in bed, staring at the same ceiling. He listened to the sound of Lisa's breathing, her quiet and steady breath, and he couldn't help but love her still.

She reached out a hand and took his.

"Will we get through this?" she said in a nervous and uneasy voice. This was the last thing Ben wanted to talk to her about. Even in the wake of what she had done, he wanted to ask her if she wanted eggs or pancakes for breakfast tomorrow.

"I really don't know," he said.

"Well when will you know?"

"I don't know."

In the darkness, Ben could feel Lisa nod.

"All right," she said. "I can live with that."

For the first time since Ben had opened the Capital One bill, he felt something bite at his eyes—a mild sting, an unsharpened knife kissing his eyelids.

"You didn't even say you were sorry." Ben's voice cracked.

"I am," Lisa sputtered. "I am, I am, I am."

She rolled over so that her cheek was by Ben's neck. She gripped her hand onto his jaw and squeezed it tightly.

"I'm sorry," she said into his skin. "I'm *so* sorry, Ben. You never would've done this."

Ben was quiet, knowing full well that Lisa was right. He just couldn't bring himself to say it. He thought back on what he had said to his wife about forgiveness the night they'd met. About the time and love and energy he had invested, about whether finding someone else who wouldn't do this to him would make it all better. About the overwhelming depth of forgiveness, about whether he had enough rope and strength to scale it.

"Just because I need time to think about this doesn't mean I'm going to forgive you," he said.

"I know," Lisa said again.

"I feel like you think it does." Ben sat himself up straighter, pushing Lisa off his body so that he could look at her when he said this. "I feel like you think you can do anything and I'll just take it."

"I don't think that."

Ben nodded, but it was hard to believe anything Lisa was saying right now. A mere hour ago, she was prepared to pick a fight with him about the dinner he had made for her and continue living this meticulous lie she had created. Expressing remorse after getting caught was like pouring a glass of water into the ocean and claiming you had contributed to the sea.

And as much as Ben knew he didn't want to know, he could not help himself from asking.

"Why did you do it?"

In the darkness, he watched Lisa bring her hands back up to her face.

"Don't do that. I want to see your face."

After a few moments where Lisa refused to move, she lowered her hands back down to the covers.

“You didn’t deserve this, Ben,” she said desperately. “Please. Tell me what to say to fix this.”

Ben didn’t reply at first, and Lisa dug her nails into the back of his neck and started to kiss him just below his jaw. Ben squeezed his eyes shut and tried to rewrite everything he had just learned so that he could somehow trick himself into wanting her.

“You love me,” Ben said.

“I love you,” Lisa said.

“You won’t do it again,” Ben said.

“I won’t do it again,” Lisa said.

“You’re sorry.”

“I’m *so* sorry, Ben.”

“It meant nothing.”

Lisa fell silent.

“Lis?”

She rested her cheek onto Ben’s chest and pressed down hard.

“Lisa.”

She lifted her head and looked away from Ben.

“It didn’t. It meant something.”

Ben’s chest tightened.

“I’m sorry. I know that’s not what I’m supposed to say right now, and I want to be honest with you so you know I’m being honest when I say I love you and I want *you* and it was a mistake. But it didn’t mean...nothing.”

Ben covered his face with his hands.

“I just wanted to feel close to someone again because I just haven’t been feeling that with you. And—”

Ben moved to his side of the bed to get Lisa to stop talking and she, defeated, retreated to hers.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

They were quiet again for a while, listening to the sound of their clocks ticking out of sync with one another. Ben thought about falling asleep with Lisa beside him for the next few decades. Then he thought about never sleeping with her again. Neither option tasted particularly palatable. So he thought about just sleeping in the same bed with her, just for one more night.

And that’s what they did. They slept on opposite sides of the bed, Ben and the woman who both broke and had his heart.

They slept this way for two weeks. And every night, Lisa would ask him how he felt. And every night, he would tell her that he still did not know. She would tell him she loved him, she wouldn’t do it again, she was sorry. But all Ben could think about was how she would have kept this secret and gone on lying to him, had she not accidentally charged a drink to their card and had he not noticed it.

And then, one morning during the third week, Lisa didn’t wake up at all. It was a freak cardiac arrest that happened in the middle of one of the nights when they were sleeping on

opposite ends of their bed, while their marriage was resting on the edge of a cliff. Ben thought the one thing he had was time, time to figure out whether he could work through this, time to figure out how Lisa would fit into the rest of his life. In that moment, when Ben realized that some exterior force had made the decision that he was supposed to make; had robbed him of his person whom he loved and about whom he didn't know how to feel—in that moment, Ben became angry.

There was still a closet on the left side of their bedroom that, even four years later, Ben couldn't bring himself to touch. It housed a vast array of blouses and skirts and formal dresses; slacks, tank tops, flowy summery skirts. Sometimes, Ben would sit inside the closet and close the door so that he was fully enveloped in his wife's essence—her smell, her style, her being. He would let it circle his feet and snake up his skin until whatever beast Ben harbored in his chest awoke. And he would miss her and love her and hate her terribly, a taste of every single fragment of every possible outcome that Lisa and Ben never got to live out.

Ben didn't touch a single thing in their house—he'd put the pillows on the bed the same exact way that Lisa used to, he'd lay out a clean paper towel every week onto the fruit drawer in the fridge, he folded the napkins into triangles when he set the table.

He kept that moronic bowl of fake lemons.

And sometimes, when Ben was doing work at the kitchen table or grabbing himself an apple, he could blur his own vision and pretend Lisa was grumbling about capers from behind him or reading to Ria upstairs. Those moments weren't particularly sweet—they were far from it, in fact—but they tasted familiar, and for that, Ben didn't touch a thing.

On the day he signed himself up for anger management, he didn't fully believe that was what he needed. He thought it would be like putting Neosporin on a bruise. But it felt like doing something, and when he slid the proof of his enrollment under Ria's door the night he assaulted a man, he dared to feel hopeful.

## Etta

This was how it was on a Wednesday—something baked, something starchy, something green, a glass of wine for each of them. Etta and Arthur alternated the cooking, as neither was particularly fond of it, and Etta made it clear from the beginning that she wasn't about to do something she wasn't fond of just because she was a woman. Wednesday had always been their special dinner night, as it was a way to celebrate getting through the middle of the week. They had both long since passed retirement and yet they still made a point of having Wednesday dinners.

The Wednesday before Etta's anger management, it was Etta's turn to cook. She was baking a salmon with a honey glaze vinaigrette. Arthur was reading the day's paper, something he didn't have the energy to do in the mornings.

"Oh, look," Arthur chimed from the table. "Tracy LaMott died."

"Who?" Etta asked as she basted the salmon.

"Tracy LaMott? Come on, the woman who nods off in church and snores."

"Oh, Jeez," Etta grumbled. "Why'd you have to tell me that?"

"I thought you'd want to know! Besides, you would've noticed her absence the next time we went to church."

"Stop reading the obituaries. Set the table."

Arthur folded up his paper and placed it on the island. He bent over slowly, removing two placements from the lower cabinet and bringing them into the dining room.

On Wednesdays, they ate in the dining room.

Etta brought him a plate.

“Thank you, dear,” Arthur said.

Etta sat at the head of the table, handing Arthur a fork.

“Looks lovely,” he said.

The salmon was overcooked.

“Tell me,” Arthur started with a mouth full of salmon and potatoes, his glasses slipping down his nose as he chewed, “how are you feeling about your anger class?”

Etta shrugged. “It’s a few hours of my life. So be it.”

Arthur looked nervous, chewing before putting down his fork. “Look, while we’re on the subject—”

Etta rolled her eyes. “Don’t.”

“What!”

“I can already tell I’m not going to like what you’re about to say so don’t even say it,”

Etta stated.

“Etta—”

“Don’t make me eat this in the living room!”

“Just maybe use this time on Saturday to think about—”

Etta plugged her fingers into her ears like a child and looked in the opposite direction of Arthur.

“—how you can’t plow down every person who wrongs your sister! I know she’s especially vulnerable right now, which makes you extra sensitive—”

“Sensitive!” Etta hit her hands onto the table hard. “Don’t call me sensitive, you *know* I hate that word. What’s it to you, anyway? I made my choice, I’m facing the consequences, and hell if I wouldn’t do it again.”

“I’m simply offering you some feedback,” Arthur said calmly. “Cecile is tough enough to deal with her own problems.”

Etta swallowed. “Her husband just died, Arthur.”

“Well would she do this for you if—”

“Stop.”

“Look.” Arthur took Etta’s hand and traced his thumb along the center of her palm like he always did. “It’s sometimes hard for me to see you care about someone else so much more than you care for yourself.”

Etta looked at their joined hands, at Arthur’s wedding band on his left finger that had colored with age. She couldn’t imagine ever eating dinner at this table alone on a Wednesday night, or looking at her own hand and not seeing his right near it. Arthur was right in more ways than he knew.

And right now, she couldn’t hold his hand.

“It isn’t up to you,” she said finally, withdrawing her hand and eating another bite of the overcooked salmon.

“All right,” Arthur said with a nod. “I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“Eat your salmon,” Etta said.

Etta

Anger management, day one.

Arthur made Etta scrambled eggs and toast for breakfast on the first day of her class. He even packed her a little brown bag with some pretzel sticks and a water bottle.

“Have a good day at class!” he yelled from the door as Etta rolled her eyes, getting into Cecile’s sedan while she idled in the driveway.

“Have fun at your golf event!” Etta yelled back to him.

“Are you nervous?” Cecile asked in a timid voice as Etta pulled down her sun visor mirror and applied another layer of pink lipstick, blotting it with a tissue from the plush tissue bag that Cecile kept in the space above the glove compartment. She fluffed her stiff, silver hair and adjusted her earrings.

“Please,” Etta scoffed. “This is going to be absurd. I’ll replay episodes of *Cheers* in my head to pass the time. Don’t worry.”

Etta wasn’t being honest. To be completely frank, Etta Barrett was upset. She was mortified that she had to attend a class for people who were violent barbarians. She was pissed that she would probably be the oldest person there, and most likely one of the only women. On top of all of this, she was just good old vanilla-and-rainbow-sprinkles embarrassed.

But Etta never would’ve let Cecile know this. In general, Etta wasn’t the type to let others know she was anything but unaffected. And she *especially* wasn’t about to let Cecile know. Instead, she smiled at her sister with such conviction that Cecile nodded and backed out of the driveway at a snail’s pace.

Etta turned on the jazz station and cranked up the volume to 26 and rolled down the windows to let the sun in. Maybe they would have some good snacks at the meeting, Etta thought. Maybe she would treat herself to a doughnut or a muffin, one of the big-topped ones with lots of sugar.

“Oh, it’s really crowded,” Cecile commented as they reached the Westfield municipal building.

But Etta noted the commotion downtown. The bustling main street just a shout away from the municipal building downtown was roped off. Giant bouncy castles filled the streets along with tents, steam from hot stoves, and strolling people. Instantly, Etta’s bones ran cold and her chest became heavy. More than anything, she didn’t want Cecile to notice.

“A lot of angry people, I guess,” Etta said.

“Please be good, E,” Cecile said as she pulled up in front of the municipal building in Westfield.

Etta laughed.

“Have a little faith!” she said back with a smile.

Cecile reached over and held onto Etta’s wrist briefly with a sad expression before unlocking the passenger door for Etta to get out.

“It ends at 1:00, yes?” Cecile confirmed.

“1:00, yes, ma’am,” Etta said.

“I’ll meet you right here.”

Etta waved, but Cecile wasn’t looking—she was too focused on pulling away from the curb with the extreme caution with which she always did everything.

“Who the hell holds an anger management class on the same day as the town parade?” she grumbled to herself. As Etta started to make her way up the little hill to the building, a man shouted after her.

“Ma’am! Ma’am!”

Etta hated being called ma’am.

She turned to see a young man approaching her with a sheepish smile. He was fairly tall and far too skinny for a man, in Etta’s opinion. He had brown stubble that looked too grown in and terribly scratchy, and Etta felt bad for whomever this man would be kissing when he went home.

“You might...you should check the back of your skirt,” he said, his face pink and his eyes too shy to look at her.

“My word,” Etta stated. She spun around and, sure enough, the bottom of her green dress had somehow ridden up and was tucked into her bloomers. How neither Arthur nor Cecile noticed was beyond Etta. Perhaps it just happened as she was getting out of the car. Etta gave the dress a good yank so that it dropped back down to her ankles. Embarrassed, she turned to the man and said, “You shouldn’t have been looking. It’s indecent.”

The man’s mouth dropped open in shock. “It was fairly impossible not to notice. I figured I should tell you before more people saw.”

“I can manage my own garments, thank you,” Etta snapped. The man looked at her hard as though she were an optical illusion that he was trying to figure out. Then, his eyes lit up with recognition.

“Mrs. Barrett?” he said.

“What?”

“It’s Ben, Ben Meister.” The man stuck his hand out and smiled his sheepish, goofy smile. “You were my 3rd-grade teacher at SPF. I grew up in Scotch Plains.”

Etta paused, tipping her head in surprise and trying to place his face. “Oh. I had so many students.”

“I know, I figured. I had you in ‘85.”

“That’s very nice. It’s usually a good thing if I don’t remember you, means you weren’t one of the ones stirring up trouble.”

“Ha, I’m sure. So are you—”

“Hate to cut you off but I’m late to an event,” Etta said.

“Oh, yeah. I have to get going as well. It was nice seeing you.”

“All right,” Etta muttered. She was pleased that this interaction was over. This man made her feel uncomfortable and she did not want to be near him any longer.

The man smiled and raised his hand before turning to go into the very municipal building where Etta had to go. She paused and waited until he had disappeared behind the door, counted to twenty, and then she went into the same door.

The anger management class was on the third floor, and the damn building had only stairs. Etta wasn’t in bad shape by any means, but she was older than she once was and her hips weren’t accustomed to walking up multiple flights of stairs one after the other. She had to take the steps slowly, holding onto the railing and grimacing. She paused on the landing between the first and second floor, catching her breath and massaging her legs. So far so good, Etta. Dress

issues, an annoying man, no elevator. Etta checked her watch. It was already 10:07. How the hell had it become that late?

Etta hoisted herself up onto the last landing as she reached the third floor. She followed the signs to room 304, which was just off to the right. The door was propped open with a doorstop and she could see rows of those stupid tiny desks that were attached to the hard navy blue chairs. She could already feel her back screaming. As Etta poked her head into the classroom, the first person she locked eyes with was Ben, sitting in the front row in the dead center.

“Oh brother,” Etta muttered to herself. She quickly looked away before she could see Ben’s reaction. She looked instead to the left side of the room where there was a giant metallic desk and a bigger woman with a light pink t-shirt, dark brown hair in a low ponytail, and lovely tan skin.

“Welcome,” the woman said with a sickly sweet smile. She gestured to the room with an open hand. “Pick a seat anywhere. And let’s try to be on time next time.”

Etta squeezed her eyes closed and let out an audible breath. She stood stationary with her pocketbook in her fingers dangling by her knees before opening her eyes. She didn’t care for this condescending behavior, not one bit. But she didn’t need the class’ first introduction to her to be one of Etta’s snarky comments, so she took a steadying breath and walked slowly with her chin up to a seat in the very back. The class was mostly empty, only about seven other people (all men except for one, unsurprisingly) in the room, which could fit probably 30. A few people in the class turned to look at her in a manner that they probably thought was discreet, but Etta saw

each set of eyes that flitted to her. She silently cursed them all. Much to her dismay, the room didn't even have a table for complimentary refreshments.

"I know I've already said this," said the woman at the front of the room, "but I'll repeat myself for anyone new who may have come in." Etta disliked the woman deeply already. She was not fond of people who took the passive-aggressive route. "My name is Dora and I'm really glad to have you all here with me for the next two weeks. We're going to be working on getting to the root of what makes us angry and finding ways that we can work to lessen these reactions and express ourselves in more effective, less destructive ways. We're going to be doing a lot of group work so you'll get to know each other fairly well, and I want you all to know that this is a safe space to really release everything you've been dealing with in your lives. Nothing that gets said in this room will leave this room, got it?"

*For the love of all that is good and holy, somebody turn this woman off.* Etta put her fingers to her temples. The prospect of spending another minute in this classroom suddenly made Etta want to climb right on into Steven's casket with him.

"We're gonna start with some partner work," Dora said, "and since we have an even number of people, we should have no trouble pairing off. Go ahead and find a partner."

A rush of memories from Etta's grade school days flooded back as she quickly scanned the room for a partner. She watched a few people around her begin to partner and before she could pose an alliance with the only other woman in the class, Ben approached her desk with the same sheepish smile.

"I feel like this could be awkward but it doesn't have to be so we might as well lean into it," he said, taking a seat down next to her. "What do you say, partners?"

“I can’t, I have already agreed to be partners with—” Etta glanced to the woman who was already sitting down with one of the men. She looked to her right desperately, but it seemed everyone had already found their matches. Etta chewed on her lip. “All right, that’s fine, I guess.”

She felt Ben staring at her as she looked to Dora for her next instruction.

“Did I offend you?” Ben whispered. “I am sorry, if I said anything—”

“Shh,” Etta replied with a finger to her lips, gesturing to the front of the room.

“We’re just going to start out by introducing ourselves to our partners and saying a little bit about why we are here,” Dora explained.

Etta stayed looking forward with her arms stubbornly crossed. She again felt Ben’s nervous stare as he crossed his hands in his lap and began to kick his foot anxiously.

“Please don’t kick,” Etta said. Ben stopped. They sat quietly together for a few moments before Etta said, “Well?”

“Oh, sorry, I thought you were...okay. Well, um, I’m a single dad and I got into a little altercation while I was driving which...was not something you want to happen in front of your daughter so I’m here to try to manage my reactions a bit better, for her sake. And for my own, I guess, but mostly for her.”

“A little altercation? What’d you do?”

Ben blushed, running a hand across his hair like a child. “You know, the guy had cut me off and kept slamming on the brakes and slowing down at yellow lights so I would miss them...just one of those supreme assholes...I, um, roughed him up a bit.”

“Just because he was being obnoxious on the road?” Etta asked. “You didn’t even know him?”

Ben frowned, his eyebrows knitting together. “I lost my temper.”

“All right,” Etta muttered, crossing her hands together on the desk.

“How about you?”

Etta bit her lip for a moment before shaking her head and saying, “I don’t wish to share.”

Ben’s mouth dropped open. “That’s the whole purpose of this exercise! I just told you mine.”

“That’s very nice for you,” Etta replied.

Etta could feel the frustration and anger radiating from Ben like a bad smell.

“This is bringing back memories of being in your class,” Ben said under his breath. Etta’s whole body tensed.

“What does that mean?” she snapped.

“I think you know.”

“How dare you.” Etta leaned in, lowering her voice but increasing its heat. “I was an excellent teacher. I had the best-behaved class of anyone in the school.”

“Yeah, because everyone was so damn afraid of you,” Ben said.

“Jesus, you’re one to talk, assaulting a man just because he braked a few times in front of you.”

“Okay, you know what, maybe we should switch partners.” Ben stood and stomped to the couple in front of them and tapped a large man with a baseball cap on the shoulder. “Excuse me, sir? Would you mind taking this lovely woman to be your partner?”

The man turned to look at Etta. He was all sweaty and his face was red and blotchy.

“What’s going on?” Dora walked over to Ben, peeking from behind him to peer at Etta.

“I just think we aren’t the most productive of partners,” Ben replied with his smile.

“All the more reason to work together,” Dora said. “Let’s leave the other groups to themselves and see how we can work with one another.”

Dora dragged one of the absurd desk-chair hybrids up to Etta so that she was facing them both. She sat with her legs crossed and her fingers laced over her one knee and stared at Etta as though she were Etta’s mom.

“Now, what’s going on here?” she said.

“She’s refusing to participate,” Ben snitched.

“I’m sorry I’m not itching and dying to be here,” Etta said.

“Why do you think you’re here?” Dora said softly, looking at Etta.

“My name is Etta,” Etta said.

“Etta,” Dora repeated. “Why do you think you’re here?”

“I’m here because I’ve been made to be here,” she said.

“Why do you think you’ve been made to be here?”

Etta looked at Ben. He was leaning forward, staring at her intently as though she were an injured bird he’d found on the sidewalk. She glared back at him, wanting more than anything to take his hand and ask him, genuinely, what it was that had made him so insufferable.

“Look,” Etta said firmly, turning her attention back to Dora. “I’ve been made to be here and I am. I will not be pressured into doing anything I don’t want to do.”

Dora blinked.

“Etta,” Dora said, “you must participate for me to be able to sign off on anything, do you understand? I need to see real effort from you if you want me to say you’ve completed this course.”

So Etta shot Dora her prettiest smile and batted her eyes and said, “Well, then, I guess I’ll just have to put in some real effort.”

“Talk to your partner,” Dora stood up. “I’m not going to sit here and babysit you.”

Etta watched as Dora made her way back to the front of the classroom, stealing glances back at Etta as Etta grinned her biggest grin before she turned back to Ben.

“The court made me come here after I nudged a man into a moving vehicle,” she told Ben.

“You *nudged* a man into a moving vehicle?” he said.

“I nudged a man into a moving vehicle,” Etta repeated.

Ben nodded, pursing his lips. Etta could tell he had some smart comment to make but whatever it was, he swallowed it down.

“What, um, prompted that?” he asked finally.

“He stood up my sister,” Etta said. “On her first date since her beloved husband of many years passed.”

Ben’s eyes widened.

“Huh,” he uttered. “Well, not saying that was the right solution, but—”

“He had it coming,” Etta said.

Ben chuckled. “I suppose he did.”

Dora made eye contact with Etta from across the room and smiled.

“Okay,” Dora announced, “we’re going to regroup.”

The rest of the class was spent discussing why people get angry, the triggers that tend to set people off, and the warning signs that their bodies give them that they are losing their tempers. It took everything in Etta not to roll her eyes every time anyone opened their mouth. It was a joke that Etta had to be here. There was a difference between unreasonable anger and defending the people you loved. Etta never would’ve pushed a man who had hurt her into a vehicle. She just wouldn’t have. She wasn’t unreasonable like that.

Class finished at 12:00, much to Etta’s surprise—she had been under the impression that it was a 3-hour class.

Etta made her way to the front of the classroom and poked Ben in the shoulder.

“Isn’t class supposed to let out at 1:00?” she asked.

Ben shook his head.

“12:00. That’s what was on the website,” he replied.

“Oh, my word,” Etta muttered under her breath. “Great. I have no ride. All right then.”

She would have to call her sister to come get her early, since Arthur had his golf event, and hope, for once, she picked up her phone.

Etta watched Ben’s face scrunch up before he smiled softly and awkwardly excused himself to leave.

Etta pretended to fumble through her purse as the rest of the class cleared out so that she could, without being noticed, get her papers signed. She approached Dora with hesitation as Dora collected her papers.

“Need me to sign something?” Dora asked.

Etta looked down as she extended her hand with her document.

“You know, the more you put into this, the more you’ll get out of it,” Dora said as she scribbled her name onto the page. “You might find you’ll actually learn something and it might make your life a little better.”

“I don’t think the areas of my life that need to get better could possibly be fixed by you or this class,” Etta said frankly, grabbing the paper from Dora the moment Dora lifted the pen.

“Thank you very much.”

And Etta left Dora at her desk to hike back down the many steps to the first floor. But when she opened the front door, she found Ben, sitting with his back to her on the front step.

“Oh brother,” she muttered.

## Ben

Ben had been more than ready to zip away from class and not interact again with Mrs. Barrett until the next class (and even then, he vowed to make a quick connection with any other person so he didn't have to partner with her again). But when he stepped out into the warm summer breeze, he couldn't help but think about the poor woman upstairs who had no ride home. How could he leave? What kind of person would he be if he pretended he didn't have a clear and easy solution to Mrs. Barrett's problem? If he had left the erratic old woman to fend for herself?

So he sat down on the steps outside of the municipal building and he waited. It didn't take Mrs. Barrett too long before she burst through the door behind Ben in a humph and muttered something to herself upon seeing Ben sitting there. She had her flip phone pressed to her ear and moved it away from her mouth to speak.

"Did you wait for me?" Mrs. Barrett said sharply.

"I did," Ben replied, standing up. "I just thought I would offer you a ride home."

Mrs. Barrett's eyebrows lifted at Ben's offer, her face softening. "That's kind of you," she said. "That's all right. I'm calling my sister."

But after a moment, Mrs. Barrett cursed under her breath and pulled her phone away to dial again. They both waited, Ben looking at Mrs. Barrett while she looked pointedly away at the street.

Upon receiving no response again, she went to dial another number.

"Let me drive you," Ben said. "Really. It's no big deal."

Ben watched Mrs. Barrett consider this, scratching her short hair. "You shouldn't have to," she replied. "I wasn't very nice to you."

Ben laughed.

“No, you weren’t, but it’s the right thing to do. And maybe you’ll be a little nicer to me next time.”

Mrs. Barrett shrugged. “We’ll see,” she said. “All right. Thank you.”

“I just have to make one call first,” Ben told her. Mrs. Barrett nodded as Ben went to call Ria’s babysitter. He told her that he would be home a little later than he thought, and to tell Ria to get into her gymnastics uniform so he could take her right from the fair to practice. As he hung up, he noticed that Mrs. Barrett was back on her flip phone. “What are you doing?”

“You have a daughter,” she said. “You were supposed to go to the fair with her. It’ll take too long to drive me home.”

“She’ll understand why I did it,” Ben said confidently. Actually, it would be a great moment for him to show her that he was kind, that he did things for other people even when they weren’t nice to him.

“It doesn’t feel right to me. If I can’t reach anyone, I can just wait here. My sister will be here in an hour anyway. Go get your daughter.”

Ben tried to swallow his next offer down, but he couldn’t help himself. “We’re going to be walking around the fair, would you want to come instead of just sitting here?”

“I don’t like fairs,” she replied.

“Oh, come on! It’ll be fun. Ria loves it. If anything, it’s fun just watching her.” Ben watched Mrs. Barrett look at the street fair with what seemed to be a nervous expression, her eyes wide and glazed over.

“Mrs. Barrett?”

“Etta,” she said.

“Etta. Are you all right?”

Etta nodded, keeping her gaze fixated on the street fair. Then she turned and kept her gaze down. “I don’t like fairs,” she repeated.

“Okay. So you’re just going to sit here?”

Etta chewed on her lip and looked back at the municipal building stoop. Ben sighed.

“All right, then,” he said. “I’ll see you next week.”

And he started to walk toward his car in the Stop & Shop parking lot. Much to his surprise, as he was about to cross the street, he heard light footsteps come to a stop behind him. He turned slowly to see Etta, standing a few paces behind him with red cheeks and a determined expression.

“I’ll go,” she stated.

“Oh,” Ben said. “Great, that’s great. I’m just heading to pick up my daughter. We live about five minutes from here so it really won’t be long.”

Ben expected Etta to wait for him to get Ria, but as Ben kept walking back toward his car, Etta just kept on following him. So the two walked, Ben just a bit in front of Etta, until they reached Ben’s Toyota.

Etta got into the front seat, Ben behind the wheel. Etta pulled down the sun visor and checked her lipstick in the mirror, wiping down the glass with a tissue from her bag and picking up some crumbs from Ben’s cup holder and placing them carefully into the napkin. Ben watched her, mesmerized, as she carefully folded the tissue up into a little ball and put it back into her purse, dusting away some filth from the dashboard.

“Why aren’t you driving?” Etta said.

“I...nothing,” Ben replied, putting the car in reverse and pulling out of the parking lot. He glanced over to Etta every now and then, who sat with her purse clutched between her hands.

They were quiet as Ben wove through the narrow streets until Etta cleared her throat.

“Were children really afraid of me?” she asked. Ben’s chest burned hot and sharp with shame. Ben shifted in his seat.

“You were just tough sometimes,” he admitted. “You...you hung up one of my failed math tests once as an example of what not to do.”

“I did?” Etta whispered. “I don’t remember that.”

Ben didn’t answer.

“I’m sure I was utilizing an effective teaching method.”

“Maybe,” Ben said.

“Well I got nothing but stellar feedback from parents,” Etta insisted.

Ben turned the radio on.

“What’s the big whoop about fairs, anyway?” Etta wondered.

“They’re fun. You know, seasonal food, local vendors, games, prizes.”

Etta clicked her tongue, crossing her arms and turning to look out the window.

Ben pulled into his driveway, quite certain that he wasn’t prepared for what this afternoon was going to bring him.

## Etta

A fair; a simple thing.

The sweet smell of frying dough that clung to your hair and made the air heavy and warm, the colored tents, the meandering suburbanites. And Etta, holding funnel cake and wondering how many sweets she could buy with her remaining three and a half dollars.

She had been wearing socks with little frills on them that day. They stuck out above her black shoes and made Etta feel like the fanciest girl in the world. She'd been on a bench with her sister sitting on the other end, their feet dangling and kicking above the pavement. Cecile extended her arm and passed Etta her strawberry ice cream cone, who gave Cecile the funnel cake in return. There was nothing sweeter, nothing resembling untouched snow more than these two sisters sharing their carnival snacks under a late August sun. But, of course, these things weren't meant to stay this way; every pile of snow demands a foot. And theirs came in the form of the young man who wedged himself between Cecile and Etta on the bench.

Breathe, swallow.

He was in a white shirt, white as Etta's frilly socks.

Ben turned back.

"Etta?"

She had frozen by the wooden roadblocks separating the fair from traffic, just on the outskirts of the carnival. Ben's daughter had already scampered ahead. She couldn't have been more than 11. That's about how old Cecile was.

Etta exhaled and hiked up her dress, stepping over the roadblock even though she could have just as easily walked around it. The smoke, the shouting children, the faint elevator music all wrapped around Etta like ropes.

They were just children.

Etta ran her hands over the back of her neck.

“Would you like anything to eat?” Ben offered, surveying the tents and various food options. “Ria loves those fried noodles from that Vietnamese place here. They usually have a stand.”

Etta shook her head. She fished into her purse and found the brown bag that Arthur had packed with the pretzel sticks and water. She fished out a pretzel, focusing on its saltiness, its rough texture, its crunch.

Focus on something else, Etta. Talk to this man.

“Single dad,” Etta said to Ben as she chewed her pretzels. Ben’s daughter had run into a school friend and was trying on scarves at one of the tents. “How’d that come to be?”

Ben squinted in the sunlight, shielding his eyes with his hand.

“She passed away, actually,” he said. “Four years ago.”

“Oh.” Etta’s face colored in discomfort. “But you’re young.”

“I know,” Ben smiled. “That’s what I thought.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that,” Etta said.

Ben nodded.

“So you never remarried?” Etta asked.

“Uh, no.”

“Dated? Anything?”

“No. It, just, it hasn’t been right.”

“Hmmp.”

Ben cocked his head. “What?”

“Nothing,” Etta said.

“It’s not nothing. You’re judging me.”

“I’m just, I’m dealing with something similar with my sister right now. It just feels like both of you are so ready to give up.”

Ben ran his hand over his temple. “It isn’t like that. It’s complicated.”

“All I’m saying is it doesn’t have to be,” Etta said. “Life both ends and continues, you know. It’s been years. It’s okay to move on.”

“I’m not sure I’m so ready for that,” Ben admitted. “I mean, I haven’t even cleaned out Lisa’s closet.”

Etta’s mouth dropped open. “After four years? Oh, Ben.”

They passed a wooden bench. And Etta went still.

The man’s calloused hand, grabbing skin. Cecile, in hysterics, inconsolable for the rest of the day. Strawberry ice cream dripping all over Etta’s white frilly socks.

“I have to go,” Etta blurted. She couldn’t do this. She couldn’t talk to Ben as though everything was fine. She couldn’t be here.

Ben looked utterly confused.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“I’m sorry about your wife,” Etta said and turned on her heels to go back to the municipal building steps.

*Never again*, Etta had thought that day, throwing out her frilly white socks and refusing to look her sister in the eye for the rest of the week. She could never see her sister cry like that again. She would go to her grave making sure she didn’t. She would grow fangs. *Never again*.

Etta sat on the uncomfortable concrete and bumpy steps with her chin in her hand. When Cecile finally pulled up at 1:00, Etta got into the car without a word.

## Ben

When Ben was eight years old, he had a teacher named Mrs. Barrett who had a known reputation. When Ben's Mom would ask the other parents what they thought of Mrs. Barrett, their faces would get that scrunched up look that meant they had more to say than they were willing to and they'd go, "Oh, she's tough." "Tough" turned out to be applicable in many senses of the word. She had a loud, domineering voice, short black hair, and always wore bright eye shadows that made her look like a clown. She did not talk down to children one bit—they were adults and were expected to act like such in her classroom. She would make students stand in the middle of the class to spell words and complete multiplication tables, and once, when Ben got a 72 on a math test, she hung it on the blackboard all day as an example to the rest of the students of what not to do on an exam. She could be impatient and short with children, and it wasn't uncommon for her to make mean-spirited jokes, like the time she called a girl named Catherine "Europe girl" for weeks after she improperly guessed that multiple countries in South America were in Europe.

Needless to say, many students did not like Mrs. Barrett.

There was one day during Ben's year with Mrs. Barrett when she brought in Mr. Barrett for a presentation on running small businesses. Mr. Barrett owned his own extermination business called Barrett's Bugs and he even had his own van. He talked about how hard work, cooperation, negotiation, problem-solving, the ability to communicate clearly in writing, and even math were all important aspects of his job. Ben liked Mr. Barrett loads. He was really funny, his voice was quiet and soothing, and his hair was neatly combed over his head. Ben

wondered how Mr. Barrett could possibly like Mrs. Barrett. It was like a math equation that didn't compute.

The day Mr. Barrett came also happened to be the day that Ben's father was having an emergency appendectomy. Ben went to school a bundle of nerves, anxious and upset and worried out of his mind for his dad. Mr. Barrett's presentation on his bug business was actually the one thing that calmed him during the morning. But when recess came around, Ben's anxiety was building up to his ears. During a pickup game of basketball, Ben got frustrated and threw the ball into another boy's face.

Ben felt terrible the moment he did it, seeing this kid sit up with blood pouring from his nose and tears spewing from his eyes. He felt that sticky sort of shame that makes you want to scrub yourself with a sponge. And the kid—his name was Mika—looked at Ben as though he had just shot him.

The teachers descended upon the two boys quickly—toward Mika with tenderness and care, toward Ben with derision. When Principal Nettler was occupied during recess, which she often was, the kids in trouble were sent to Mrs. Barrett. Ben knew this only from seeing it happen to other children. Being sent to Mrs. Barrett was so well-known around the school that it was referred to as getting Barretted. It was rare for a child not to cry after getting Barretted.

On that specific day, because he decided to stay for lunch after his presentation, getting Barretted meant going into a side room by the main office with both Mr. and Mrs. Barrett. Thinking back on it later, Ben wasn't sure whether it was professional for Mrs. Barrett to have brought her husband with her to discipline Ben, but with his soothing smile and calming demeanor, having Mr. Barrett there made Ben feel much more at ease.

Mrs. Barrett pulled out the little metallic chair from the back wall and gestured for Ben to sit. He did, and he kept his eyes locked on his black and lime green velcro sneakers while both Barretts watched him with intense curiosity.

“Never thought I’d see you in here, Mr. Meister,” Mrs. Barrett said. And Ben felt himself covered in sharp and icy humiliation, embarrassment inching its way up his back and spreading across his cheeks. “Look at me.”

Ben didn’t.

“Ben, I want you to look me in the eye right now.” She brought herself down to his level, her breath hot and coffee-filled. Her presence was so strong that Ben felt her as one would feel the warmth and smoke while sitting near a fire. Ben raised his eyes. His throat was tight. His eyes met hers, her gaze barreling into him like a truck. “I want you to tell me why you did that today. I’d like to think I know you pretty well by now and I know you wouldn’t throw a ball at Mika for no good reason. So why don’t you tell me what’s going on so we can figure out how to move forward?”

Ben looked at Mr. Barrett who had his right arm clasp his left forearm as he leaned against the wall farthest from him. His eyes were hazel and inviting, and he gave Ben a small nod with an easy smile.

“My dad’s in the hospital,” Ben said.

Mrs. Barrett’s eyebrows lifted. “Your dad is in the hospital?” she repeated.

Ben nodded.

“So you’re telling me that you threw a ball at your friend Mika’s face because your dad is in the hospital?”

Ben looked down again.

“I have no patience for excuses, I’m looking for the *reason*. Now it seems to me that you threw a ball at Mika not because your dad is in the hospital but because you are *upset* that your dad is in the hospital, yes? Now, Ben.” Mrs. Barrett lowered her voice and leveled its tone straight and intense as an arrow. “You’ll be a man one day, and hurting someone else because you are upset is a rather unmanly thing to do, no?”

Ben pulled at the dead skin around his nails, thinking how much he hated Mrs. Barrett, how he wanted a sinkhole to appear in the floor beneath her feet and suck her into it.

“If you are upset, then get upset,” Mrs. Barrett said. “Cry. Like a man.”

That word, as though a switch to a faucet, set Ben’s lip off to a tremble and suddenly he was weeping, trying his best to hide his face from Mr. and Mrs. Barrett. Mucus ran from his nose like a river and he wiped it on the back of his hands.

“All right, then,” Mrs. Barrett nodded. “Good boy.”

She patted his knee.

“You’ll still need to sit out of recess for a week.”

“Etta?” Ms. Lane, the receptionist, poked her too-small-for-her-body head into the room.

“Mika’s Mom is on the line and would like to speak with you.”

“Oh, joy,” Mrs. Barrett grumbled. “I’ll be back.”

She blew out of the room and clicked the door shut, leaving Mr. Barrett alone with Ben. For a substantial amount of time, Mr. Barrett simply watched Ben without a word, but the silence wasn’t fueled by discomfort or hostility; rather, Ben sensed that Mr. Barrett was simply giving Ben his space. And then, timidly, Mr. Barrett cleared his throat.

“You know,” he said in a gruff and soft voice, “when I was your age, my father carried around this one really worn blue handkerchief everywhere he went. He’d hand it out to anyone who looked even mildly distressed, anyone he saw who might need it. It absolutely mortified me as a child, I was always begging him not to take out his hanky. Of course, now that he’s gone, I realize it was this really special thing about him. He was always so ready to take care of the whole world.” Mr. Barrett fished into the back pocket of his jeans. “I find the whole handkerchief thing a little skeezy, but you get the idea.”

He handed Ben a Ziplock bag of tissues, all folded neatly and individually into little triangles.

“I’m sure they’re taking great care of your Dad, pal,” he said.

Ben took out one of the triangle tissues and unfolded it slowly, admiring how well it had been creased. With hesitation, he blew his nose into it.

“You’re married to Mrs. Barrett?” Ben asked.

“I am,” Mr. Barrett said.

“Oh.”

Mr. Barrett grinned. “Is that surprising to you?”

Ben shrugged. “You’re different.”

Mr. Barrett smiled again, his teeth large and white and loud in his mouth. “You’re right,” he said. “She’s just so great with kids.”

Ben didn’t say a word more, but he did think, for the first time in his young life, what it might be like to be a father and to hand out crisply folded origami tissues to the whole world.

“Feeling ready to face the outside?” Mr. Barrett asked.

Ben swiped at his eyes once more with his palms. He crumpled up his tissue into the tiniest ball that he could manage and he tucked it away into the pocket of his cargo pants.

Mr. Barrett extended his massive hand and Ben took it with ease, allowing Mr. Barrett to bear most of Ben's weight as he lifted him from the chair.

"Atta boy," Mr. Barrett said as he pulled open the door to the main office. "Go on."

And so Ben went.

## Etta

Arthur and Etta had been dating for four months and Arthur had recently hired a new employee named Alex. Since Arthur was training Alex, they had to spend a substantial amount of time together. Etta kept hearing Alex this, Alex that, but Etta wasn't worried. She had always assumed that Alex was a man, especially because she couldn't even imagine a woman who would be interested in working with bugs. That is until Etta went to Arthur's apartment one Saturday to surprise him for lunch and a stunning, tall woman with dark, shiny hair and tiny gold hoop earrings answered the door.

"Oh," Etta had said. "I didn't know I was interrupting something."

"Don't be silly, you're not interrupting," Arthur said from behind Alex. "Alex and I were just going over a job that was just called in."

"Alex," Etta repeated. "You're Alex."

"Yes." Alex stuck out her hand. It was soft and delicate in Etta's hand.

"Oh, well, I don't want to intrude. Have fun."

And Etta left before Arthur had a chance to protest. Arthur did not follow Etta out. And as Etta rode down the elevator in Arthur's building, the soles of her feet burned and her thoughts began whirring through her mind like they'd been shot from a cannon. She'd left Robert for this man. She'd left behind a long-term, stable relationship for a man who was now spending his days with a gorgeous woman named Alex who, Etta could just tell, was funny and smart and whose laugh was probably dainty and sweet like a butterfly. Robert was a lot of things, but he never used to even look at other women.

When Etta reached the lobby, she resolved to wait a few moments to see if Arthur would come to his senses, realize that that interaction had been strange and awful for Etta, and run after her. She wanted him to grab her hands and tell her she was crazy, she was the one he wanted, he would fire Alex immediately.

But Arthur did not come.

So Etta took a cab home in disgust, bitter and angry and hurt.

A few hours later, Arthur called.

“I’m sorry I was busy for lunch today!” he exclaimed, his voice light and unaware.

“Want to do dinner tonight?”

Etta was sitting at a stool by her kitchen counter, looking out her window at the grey and brown buildings, utterly disappointed by Arthur’s clear obliviousness.

“Not tonight,” Etta said. “Goodbye.” And then she hung up.

So Arthur called again. Etta watched her tan phone ring and ring, eyeing it as though Arthur could see her glare through the phone, before eventually answering it.

“Hello?”

“What was that?” he asked.

“I’m just not in the mood for dinner tonight.”

“Oh.” Arthur sound puzzled and confused.

“All right then,” Etta commented, going to hang up.

“Is it because of Alex?” Arthur asked.

Etta breathed into the phone, twirling the chord on her finger. She couldn’t bring herself to answer.

“Etta?”

“I’m still here,” she said.

“Are you upset about Alex?” Arthur repeated himself.

“No,” Etta lied.

Arthur took a breath and the two sat in silence over the phone.

“I feel like you are,” he finally said.

“I was just surprised,” Etta said. “When you kept referring to Alex, I just assumed she was a he.”

“Oh, okay, that’s fair. Well the reason I didn’t point it out to you explicitly is because there’s nothing to worry about. Really. She’s an employee and that’s it.”

“Okay.”

Arthur paused again, a spiked tension floated between their telephones.

“Is there anything I can do to get you to see this is absolutely nothing?” Arthur asked.

“I’m not upset,” Etta repeated.

But she was. She was. Disappointment grew between her ribs like plaque. He should’ve told her about Alex. He should’ve run after her after she left his apartment. Her man, her wonderful man, was failing her.

“Etta.” Arthur’s voice was sharp.

And through the sting of this whole conversation, through the thickness of Etta’s resentment, she said, “What?”

“I love you.”

It was the first time either of them had said it.

“What?”

“I love you.”

The memory rested still in the air above Etta’s head in a glowing blue orb. There were days when she wanted to touch it, swim in it, immerse herself back in that moment when she could neatly arrange the different parts of her life in any pattern she pleased like blocks.

He was a good man, Arthur. A good, good man.

## Ben

Ria was reheating frozen pizza while Ben sifted through the DVR to find a good movie to watch when someone knocked on the door.

“You expecting anyone?” Ben asked his daughter. She peered up over her red glasses and shook her head, selecting a fresh tomato from their fruit bowl to put onto their pizza. She was going through a big cooking phase and insisted on making dinner once a week.

“Be fast,” she said as Ben went to answer the door. “Pizza’s almost ready.”

Ben looked into the frosted glass on the side of his door to find a blurred green figure. He opened the door.

“Ben.”

It was Etta.

“I wanted to thank you for your kindness today. I brought you Rice Krispies.”

She handed Ben an entire pan full of uncut, homemade Rice Krispies.

“Oh.” Ben examined the lopsided, rectangular, marshmallow glob in his hands and smiled. Something about the whole gesture made him sad. “Thank you.”

“Quite all right.” She nodded.

Ben looked over his shoulder back into the kitchen hoping Etta would take the hint and leave it at that. Of course, she did not.

“One more thing.” She pulled a few big white garbage bags from her purse. “I’d like to clean out your wife’s closet.”

“Uh...”

“I did it for my sister,” Etta continued, opening one of the white bags and shaking it until it expanded. “She didn’t have to see any of it happen and she’s all the better for it now. Four years is long enough. Come on, now. Show me the closet.”

And Etta pushed her way past Ben and into the house. Immediately, she straightened a couple of the photos on the wall and blew the dust away from the glass.

“Look, now’s not a great time, we’re just about to have dinner—”

“That’s her?” Etta asked.

She was pointing to a photo from a family vacation down to Key West. Lisa was holding a drink in a hollowed pineapple.

“Yeah,” Ben said reluctantly.

Etta nodded.

“Nice cheekbones,” she said.

Ria stuck her head in from the kitchen, her white apron stained with tomato juice.

“Hello, Ria,” Etta said. “Don’t mind me, I’ll just be upstairs while you’re having dinner with your father. I brought you a treat for after dinner.”

Etta smiled, nodded once, and then started to climb the stairs slowly.

“Don’t worry, I’ll find your bedroom,” she called down. “I won’t be long.”

Ria shot Ben a shocked expression. For a full minute, he couldn’t bring himself to do anything he was so stunned. When he realized that Etta had probably made it up to his room and was starting to go through Lisa’s things, his brain snapped back into action.

“Here,” Ben whispered, handing Ria the tray of Rice Krispies.

“I’ll keep your pizza warm,” Ria replied, inspecting the tray in confusion.

“Etta! Etta, please, come down, this isn’t necessary—” Ben took the stairs two at a time to find Etta standing in his wife’s closet, holding a yellow sweater.

“Hey, hey, hey! Put that down!” Ben yelled, grabbing the sweater from Etta’s grasp. “Etta, this is so inappropriate! You have to leave.”

“I’m just trying to help!” Etta spat back. “All these clothes sitting here aren’t doing anybody any favors. They could clothe a lot of needy people, you know.”

“But it’s *my* prerogative to decide if I’m ready to do that, not yours. You can’t just walk into someone’s house without permission and try to force a life change on them.”

“I just thought—”

“I know what you thought, Etta. But it’s too much. Okay? This is *too much*.”

Etta closed her mouth and stared so hard at Ben that he thought she might light him on fire. Then she nodded.

“Okay,” she said. “You’re right.”

And she handed him her empty garbage bag.

“I’m sorry for intruding.”

She took a look around the closet, at all the many shoes and sweaters and blouses. She reached out and touched the sleeve of a pink blazer, feeling the fabric between her hands and sighing.

“She had a lovely wardrobe,” Etta commented. “She seems like a lovely woman.”

“She cheated on me,” Ben said.

Etta’s eyes widened, the sleeve of the blouse falling from her hand.

He hadn't meant to say it. It was the last thing he wanted to say. He wanted Etta to leave, he really did. But something about having Etta in this sacred space, in this house of clothing that once covered Lisa's body; something about letting her see this hidden shrine made honesty flood Ben like a sort of holy water.

He had never told anyone before. He didn't realize until he told Etta how much he had been dying to say it aloud.

"Oh, Ben," Etta whispered. "What happened?"

"I found out two weeks before she died," he said. "I told her I didn't know what I wanted to do and then she was gone before I had the chance to decide."

"My word," Etta muttered.

"So I leave the closet," Ben said. "That way, when I see it, it's kind of like none of that happened, you know?"

"Hmm." Etta lowered herself to the closet floor and sat with her legs straight out in front of her. She picked up a pair of red high heels and turned them over in her hand. "You know," she commented, "my husband is a good man."

"I know," Ben replied. "I actually remember him."

"That's right." Etta smiled. "I forgot I used to have him visit the class. Well, for our fortieth wedding anniversary, Arthur wrote me a haiku for every single year that he loved me. One time he shaved his mustache that took months to grow five minutes after I admitted I didn't like it. And he always, always eats the pickles off my hamburgers because I can't stand pickles and, here's the kicker that I learned somewhat recently, neither can he."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Etta breathed in, admiring the shoe in her hand before placing it back down on the floor and looking up at Ben with a blank expression. She inhaled.

## Etta

She had found it in their bed, which she had forgotten to make in the morning—a tiny, gold hoop earring. To describe what she felt upon finding that earring would be tantamount to scaling a mountain with a plastic knife.

It burned, though. It burned her everywhere. A hole through her chest, a hole through her skull, a hole through her palm.

They had been married for four years.

She sat at their kitchen table and gripped the earring. Her brain started moving a million miles an hour, imagining every option that she had. She could throw the earring down the toilet and never mention it. She could clear her stuff out right now and move to Idaho and teach school children there. She could wait for Arthur to get home and scream at him. She could sit him down and talk about it. She could go stay with Cecile and Steven.

She did none of those things.

Instead, she stayed seated at the kitchen table with the earring in her hand and thought back on the day at the carnival. She avoided that memory like a cut on her thumb. She could be faced with the exact smells, the exact colors, the exact scene and she would avoid the memory, run from it with everything she had. But that part of her way, way down knew, that part she tried so hard not to access—that the day at the carnival with Cecile had happened and it had happened to her. That a man had grabbed her, Etta, on a wooden bench while a strawberry ice cream cone stained her skirt and socks.

In the broad daylight.

And it had been Etta who consoled Cecile after it was all over, rubbing her back and promising her that everything was okay.

Etta closed her hand tighter around the earring until it drew blood from her skin.

People can love us in destructive ways, she thought. But it doesn't have to destroy us.

When Arthur came home a few hours later and went to kiss her hello, she moved her head away and slid the earring across the table.

"End it," she said.

And she went into their bedroom before she had a chance to see Arthur react.

They bought a house in New Jersey a month later and moved out of the city.

On a Friday evening, while Etta graded homework in the new home, Arthur blurted in one breath, "I have never felt more awful about anything in my entire life."

Etta looked up from over her reading glasses. She had condensed the betrayal into an ice cube and buried it deep within her. Hearing Arthur address it so directly caused the ice to resurface. Etta shifted. "Good," she said.

"I'm sorry that took me so long to say," he added, hanging his head low at the table. "If it means anything, it happened once. Only once. I swear. I love *you*, Etta. It will *never* happen again."

Etta stared at Arthur for a long while. Her Arthur, her husband. Her good man. The ice would melt, she knew it would. And she could swallow it until it did. "I know it won't," Etta said.

And she meant it.

That was the last they ever spoke of it.

Ben

“God! Arthur cheated on you, too?” Ben said, shaking his head.

Etta smiled.

“You say it like that and it sounds silly,” she said. “This idea of cheating. It’s just such so juvenile.”

“Well, what are you saying? That everyone’s going to have affairs? That it’s just an unfortunate and inevitable side effect of long-term relationships?”

Etta shrugged. “Not everyone. I never have.”

“Okay, so everyone cheats or gets cheated on.”

“No. That’s not what I’m saying. I’m just saying that sometimes people are more complicated than the things they do. Sometimes people are better than the things they do,” Etta said.

“That’s ridiculous. The things we do are what make us who we are.”

Etta leaned her head back on one of the shelves in the closet to look at Ben. “Have you always had anger problems, Ben?”

Ben sighed.

“No.”

“Would you consider yourself an angry person?”

Ben shook his head.

“There you go,” Etta stated. “You know, I think if you focused more on forgiving your wife, maybe the other parts of your life will just follow suit.”

“How long did it take for you to forgive Arthur?”

Etta shrugged.

“Not long,” she said. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, it took time to get rid of that hurt, but the weird thing was I never stopped trusting him. The person I loved did a dumb thing, and that was that. We moved on.”

Ben shook his head, dumbfounded. “How?”

“You just do. You weigh their mistake with the person they’ve shown you they are and you realize life is too short to be angry. You know that better than anyone.”

Ben couldn’t help but chuckle.

“This coming from a woman who pushed a man into a car,” Ben said.

Etta’s mouth went flat.

“I’m sorry—”

“You know nothing about that situation,” she snapped. “That wasn’t about me. I did that for my recently widowed sister.”

“You’re right,” Ben said. “I’m sorry, you’re right..”

Etta looked away. A heaviness radiated from her.

“You know you shouldn’t comment on situations you know nothing about,” she said.

“Okay, okay—”

“That man was a monster and Cecile didn’t deserve that. And she should never have to feel like her only sister—her ally—watched and did *nothing*. Because that’s a *terrible* thing to feel. And I never want her to have to know what that’s like.”

“I get it, I’m saying you’re right! It’s different if it’s for someone else. I would’ve done that for my daughter in a heartbeat. And I’m sure your sister would’ve done the same for you”

“I should go,” Etta snapped. She reached up her hand and it took Ben a moment to realize she was saying she needed help. Ben hoisted her to her feet and she pushed by him.

“I need that pan back when you’re done,” she grumbled. “I left my address on a Post-It at the bottom, in case you want to give it to me before next Saturday.” Then she stormed straight down the stairs and out the door.

Left standing alone in Lisa’s closet, Ben found himself staring down each and every one of Lisa’s individual outfits that were still hanging up. The jean skirt that she wore when they took that spontaneous trip up to Lake George one of their first summers as a married couple, the night that Ben scooped Lisa up and danced around their log cabin to the sound of the singing cicadas. The pink blouse she had on when she won her very first case that became her go-get-em blouse. The ugly grey t-shirt, which Ben always laughed at her for hanging up rather than folding, since it had the amorphous bleach stain on the front and she would only ever put it on to clean the house or garden or cook something especially messy. The long dress she wore when she was pregnant with Ria. The yellow sweater she had on when she came home late one night and complained about the capers in her chicken on the worst night of their marriage. The sweater that Etta had picked up.

Ben pulled that sweater from the hanger and brought it to his nose. After all those years, it smelled nothing of Lisa and only of dust and small space and age. Ben noticed a loose thread at the space of the sweater and he mindlessly began to pull at it. The sweater obeyed his hand and the thread broke free of its stitch. Ben started to pull harder. The thread followed, gathering the yarn around it so the whole sweater started to clump together. Ben wanted to keep pulling, with more and more urgency; to watch the thread grow and grow as the sweater started to shrink.

With blazing bones, he wanted to get a pair of scissors and cut the sweater from all different sides, snipping and destroying and obliterating the sweater until it was an unrecognizable cluster of yarn at his feet.

But he didn't do that. He stopped pulling and, instead, ran his fingers over the tight and soft stitches. He thought of the way Lisa put on lotion at night, how she would bring him a pair of clean socks in the winter mornings so he wouldn't have to get out of bed with cold feet.

He thought of her with another man.

He thought he would have time with her, the rest of his life to figure out what to do. But maybe that wasn't the issue. What Ben needed wasn't Lisa; he needed forgiveness. He needed to forgive her.

\*\*\*

A week after Lisa's death, after shiva had ended, Ben was in bed. He hadn't slept and he hadn't been awake since she had died.

Someone had knocked at his door. Light feet tapped on his floor and someone got in beside him.

"Daddy?"

Ben remembered hearing her clearly and knowing full well that it was her. But he couldn't bring himself to move.

"Daddy, I have gymnastics." Her voice was small and sweet beside him. She sat in silence after she spoke, remaining still and watching her father in his corpse-like state.

He brought his hands to his face.

"You gotta get up," she said.

Then she reached over and plucked one of Ben's hands off his face so that she could look at him. She had already tried to put her hair up into the required bun—something Lisa used to do for her every morning—and her hair was in one massive knot on top of her head. Ben remembered thinking it was the saddest thing he had ever seen.

She wrapped her fingers around Ben's hand and squeezed it hard. They sat together like that for what felt like years.

Then, she said, "Come on. We have life to do."

And she lifted a 155-pound Ben out of his bed.

\*\*\*

Ben grasped the yellow sweater with strong fingers. He thought of Lisa with another man. He let go. The wrinkles from his grasp stayed in the fabric before Ben smoothed them out. Then he folded the sweater neatly and placed it into the white garbage bag that Etta had brought him—not to begin the packing process, not to donate, not for really any reason at all beyond feeling like that was what he needed to do. And he went downstairs to eat cold pizza and lopsided Rice Krispies with his daughter.

## Etta

Etta couldn't bring herself to drive home. Her tongue burned with the lack of truth in Ben's statement.

*I'm sure your sister would've done the same for you.*

Cecile, Cecile, Cecile.

The first time Arthur had kissed Etta had been in front of a laundromat on the walk home from their first official date because he just couldn't wait until they reached her apartment building. They had been walking arm in arm when he suddenly spun her to him and kissed her as though the sidewalk were melting. It was one of the highlights of their entire relationship.

And Etta never told Cecile. Because when she went to call Cecile, Cecile instead complained to her about some silly spat that she'd had with a coworker that was upsetting her so they spent the phone call talking about that. Cecile never even asked how the date went.

Maybe Etta cared for Cecile so much because it distracted her from just how limited Cecile really was. If Etta loved like a grasping fist, Cecile loved like a vacuum, pulling the whole world into her and giving nothing back.

Maybe Etta just had a capacity to love that was greater than Cecile's. Maybe that was just the way it was. But God it sucked. It just sucked.

She gripped the wheel until her knuckles turned white. Her eyes stung something awful and she wanted to carve a hole into her lungs to let some of the pressure out. Without much thought, Etta found herself pulling up to the little Jewish cemetery two towns over on the hill overlooking the sushi restaurant. She parked in a poorly lit parking spot on the street and hiked up the steep hill slowly, listening to the muttering cicadas and the sparks of fireflies guiding her

way. She wandered to the back right corner of the plot of land to Steven's headstone. Steven had never been a devoutly religious man—he married a Protestant without batting an eye—but the Jewish rules for death had always stayed with him. Cecile had planned on cremation; Steven refused. So here he was, alone in a Jewish cemetery with the flat graves and stones. Etta lowered herself to the ground with difficulty, crossing her legs beneath her and reaching out to touch the stone before her. Its cool, smooth texture made her hand tremble.

“Hello there, Steven,” she said. “Bet you weren't expecting me.”

She chuckled to herself, pulling her green dress down below her knees.

“Oh, boy,” she muttered. “You loved Cecile so much, huh?”

A car turned on from the base of the hill, rumbling as it pulled into oncoming traffic.

“You know, if you had been Robert, I'd have told Cecile to leave you two minutes into that relationship. And yet I stayed with him for years. Years. And Cecile sobbed when I told her I was ending it. My word. Just makes you think, you know?”

Steven didn't reply.

“I mean, you know Cecile. You were married to her. She's a good person. She is. People aren't all or nothing but she's a good person. It's just hard sometimes. I mean, anything happens and I end up taking care of her. What's going to happen if, God forbid, Arthur passes? Do I have to comfort Cecile? Is that how that's going to happen?”

Etta blotted at her eye with her hand, sighing and looking up at the tree-covered, darkened sky.

“It just makes me sad sometimes, Steven. I can't help but think about that day at the carnival and it just...it makes me so sad.” She took in a trembling breath and asked the question

that she had really come here to ask, the question that had clung in her periphery like a cobweb for so many years. “How did you do it, Steven? How did you manage her?”

Steven stayed silent. An easy summer breeze ran through Etta’s hair, but it didn’t make her feel any better. She knew it wasn’t Steven. It was just the wind.

Etta looked at the stones on Steven’s grave that they had put there during the service a few months ago.

“You know, the rabbi man told us that your people put these stones on graves to keep the souls where they belong,” she said. She twisted one stone mindlessly. “But I’m sure there’s a Heaven and I think you belong there.” As she began to lift the stone in order to toss it to the side and clear away the grave, she paused. It didn’t feel right. It wasn’t what Steven’s people believed. After a quiet moment with her hand on the rock, she decided to just move the stones a touch closer to the edge of the headstone, out of respect to the tradition.

“All right, then,” she said. “I don’t have much else to say to you, Steven. We miss you down here. Cecile especially, of course. I hope you don’t mind what I said about her.”

Etta squeezed her eyes shut when she said her sister’s name. More and more of Etta’s anger toward Cecile started to pour out like bees spilling from a knocked-over hive. The carnival was just the worst of it, getting a glimpse of exactly how far her sister could be rubbed without yielding any sort of spark, without coming to Etta’s aid.

“She’s limited, our girl,” Etta whispered. It killed her to say it. “You loved her anyway.”

The wind ruffled Etta’s stiff hair and she glanced at her watch. It was getting late. Arthur would start to worry.

Etta kissed her three fingers and placed them on the grave. She wiggled and pushed and groaned her way up to a standing position and began to head back to her car when one of the few spotlights in the cemetery caught her eye. It shone a pale, yellow light onto the grave of one Lisa Meister.

“Good Lord up in Heaven,” Etta said. She squinted and bent down closer. She died in May—Mother, Wife, Sister, Friend. Etta wondered what her voice sounded like, whether she used her turn signal when she changed lanes and if she was one of those people who put ketchup on her fries instead of to the side of the plate. “I know your husband,” she said. “And might I say I don’t think you should have cheated on him.”

Lisa’s name looked back at Etta. Etta looked back at Lisa’s name. The cicadas and fireflies looked at no one.

And then Etta Barrett picked up a stone from the ground and placed it onto Lisa’s headstone.

“There,” she said.

Ben

“Lisa.”

She was eight months pregnant and wearing lots of long, flowing dresses. She looked so beautiful to Ben during those days, with her softly flushed cheeks and her sturdy body.

But that day Ben had come home to find her bent over the toilet, her legs folded to her side, her arms clasping the seat as though she were bracing for impact.

Ben dropped his satchel right there in the doorway.

“I can’t do this,” she whispered into the toilet bowl.

This was an awful pattern with Lisa. It was like she was balanced on a beam, poised and waiting for the wind to tip her over. Ben saw it in her eyes when she held up the positive pregnancy test. He saw it in her lips when she first started to show. He saw it all over her in the bathroom that day.

Ben slowly joined her on the floor, putting a desperate but tentative hand on the top of her back. He wanted so badly to reach over and dust her off, but he knew there were some things that were beyond his control.

“You can,” Ben said. It was all he could think to say.

He watched Lisa stare at the muted reflection of herself in the empty toilet.

“Have you thrown up?” he asked.

“I will, I’m going to,” she said with absent conviction.

“No, you won’t. Look at me.”

She wouldn’t.

“You won’t throw up because you’re Lisa.” He watched her sink a tooth into her lip, hard and distracted and with vague purpose. “Because you’re loving and you’re strong and you want this child. Because you’re going to be an incredible Mom, and we’ll learn how to do this together. Okay? All right?”

“Jesus Christ, Ben, can you not be you for two seconds?” Lisa snapped, finally twisting her head to stare at him.

He took his hand from her back. Those eyes, that expression, she could make him feel like an ocean one minute and one grain of sand the next, when she wanted to.

“Well what do you want from me, Lisa?” he said, getting to his feet and moving toward her so that he was towering over her bent-up body. “How am I supposed to handle this?”

“Just leave me alone, please,” Lisa groaned.

“Why don’t you let me help you?” Ben asked. “I’m here, I’m capable, let me help you.”

She didn’t look up. She kept her chin tucked down and her face pointed at the toilet.

Ben looked down at his wife. He wanted to touch her. He wanted so desperately to reach her. He put a tentative and slow hand on her back, but she flinched and shrugged his hand away.

So Ben nodded, closed his fist in defeat, and retreated to the kitchen. He got himself a glass of water and drank it down in one full swallow.

The toilet seat clinked closed and Lisa appeared in the bathroom doorway, her hands resting on her lower abdomen.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Ben. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that. I’m just, it’s—”

Ben exhaled.

Lisa tucked her lips in and closed her eyes, her face melting into fear.

“I’m so worried I’ll fuck it up. How the hell am I supposed to be a mother to another person?”

Ben put his glass into the sink. Then he walked to his wife, still huddled by the bathroom, and pulled her into him. She leaned her cheek against Ben’s chest and he could feel her grabbing him tightly around his lower back. He thought she was probably grateful to have something physical and solid and real to collapse into.

Ben pulled away and wiped Lisa’s face with his thumbs, holding her cheeks with his hands and watching her bright eyes blink. He kissed her, the swell of their child pressing into Ben’s abdomen. And when Lisa’s fingers dug into Ben’s lower back in desperation, he knew that a part of him loved her because it felt so good to be wanted by a person who doled out her vulnerability in drops from a pipette. There was a certain absence to Lisa that kept him reaching, the hole in your gum that the tongue can’t help but try to fill. That part of Lisa that he could never get to.

Mainly, from this day, Ben remembers sleeping better than he had in months—with Lisa’s hand in his, with their baby girl shifting deep within her.

## Ben

Anger management, week two.

Parking was far easier this time, given that there wasn't a festival happening in town. Ben made his way into the stuffy building and up to the third floor, carrying Etta's cleaned baking pan in a shopping bag. Dora greeted him with a large smile and handed him a slip of paper that had a numbered list of calming strategies on it. Ben sat in the same seat he had sat in last time, glancing behind him to where Etta had sat last time to find an empty chair. He checked the clock on the wall above the blackboard—it was 9:59. She was probably just running late.

“Looks like we're still missing one,” Dora said, looking at the watch on her wrist. “We'll give her a minute. Take a look at the handout I've given you.”

Ben shifted in his chair. His stomach was alive with dread, not ready to face Etta after upsetting her last weekend. But as Dora stood and began her Week Two introduction, Etta did not come. As they started to go through point by point calming techniques, Etta did not come. Ben's dread slowly morphed to relief and then, gradually, transformed to worry. Ben knew that Etta was legally obligated to attend this class. Her absence was surely concerning. Where was she? Was she ill? Wouldn't she have called Dora if she were? Did something happen? It was 10:20 when Ben convinced himself that something must be seriously wrong. It was 10:24 when Ben realized he was the only one in the class who cared.

“Dora,” he blurted, interrupting her mid-sentence.

She paused, looking thrown. “Uh, yes, Ben?”

“Do you know where Etta is?”

Dora scrunched up her face, looking annoyed that Ben interrupted her for that. Or perhaps it was the mention of Etta's name that brought on a slight admission of distaste. She caught herself and flashed Ben her big smile.

"I do not, I'm sure she's all right," Dora said.

"Shouldn't we call her to make sure?"

"I'm not going to take time out of class just to call one student." Dora's smile was getting tighter. "She's a grown woman and it's up to her to make it to class on time."

"If you give me her number, I'll call her," Ben offered.

"I'm not authorized to do that." Dora looked at her watch again. "Now, if we'll get back to this—"

"I need to excuse myself, it's an emergency." Ben took his stuff, got up and blew past Dora, whose eyes followed him out.

Without much of a plan, Ben found himself standing in the hallway of the municipal building. For a moment, he turned and looked behind him at the class he told his daughter he would attend, at the class he voluntarily signed himself up for to be better for Ria. But, if Ben were being fully honest, he feared that Etta's absence might have accidentally been his doing. He couldn't, in good conscience, not go looking for her.

And then he remembered the pan Etta had given him with her address on the Post-It. He fished the pan out from under the bag, turned it over, and sure enough discovered her address scribbled in slanted cursive. Etta clearly wasn't opposed to the idea of showing up at a semi-stranger's house with the offer of a large (and arguably inappropriate) favor. So he would

do the same. And he had to do it fast—Ben didn't know the consequences of missing a court-mandated anger management class, but he had to imagine they weren't insignificant.

So Ben took the Post-It note, put the address into his phone, and hurried out of the municipal building to his car. The drive to Etta's awakened memories from Ben's childhood—the woods, the spread-out homes and their colored siding, the narrow and curving roads. Ben lived only a couple miles away and yet he rarely came back to his hometown.

Etta's house was a deep barn red with white shutters and a brick chimney. The house was lined with trimmed shrubs, and the path leading up to the front door was well-kept and pristine. The house looked warm. It looked loved. Even all these years later, there was something strange for Ben about seeing where one of his teachers lived. It was too intimate, a privacy onto which he didn't want to encroach.

But he had to.

Ben left his car on the street and walked up to the door. He knocked.

“Etta?”

He knocked again.

“Etta, it's Ben.”

He opened the black mail slot and tried to peek in just as the door swung open, the metallic flap slapping shut against the door.

“What on Earth are you doing?” Etta asked. She was in a bright orange shirt with jeans and sneakers, even inside her house. Ben had never noticed how much makeup she normally wore, but he noticed now that her face looked naked—smaller, less pronounced. Despite himself, Ben was relieved to see her.

“I, um, came to give you this,” Ben said, handing her the pan. “And to see if everything was okay.”

Etta took the pan and turned it over, inspecting it for damage. She nodded and turned, heading to the back of the house and leaving the door open. Ben, unsure of what to do, stood in the doorway and watched Etta open a cabinet in her kitchen.

“You’re just going to stand there?” Etta yelled. “Close the door, you’re letting the air out.”

Ben shut the door and stepped into Etta’s home. It smelled warm, like pine and mothballs.

“Have you never been in another person’s home before?” Etta asked. “Come all the way in.”

Etta poured coffee into a mug with the periodic table on it as Ben sat down at her kitchen table.

“Lactose intolerant?” she asked.

“Um, no.”

So Etta added a splash of milk and two teaspoons of sugar, stirred it with a spoon, and clanked it on the table in front of Ben.

“Oh,” Ben said, looking down at the mug of coffee that he knew would be too light and sweet for his liking. “Thank you.”

He took a sip. Etta said down beside him at the table.

“Everything’s fine,” she said. “You really didn’t have to come all the way here during class. I’m fine.”

“I don’t mean to overstep, but aren’t you legally required to be there right now?”

Etta rolled her eyes.

“Give me a break,” she said. “What are they going to do, show up to an old lady’s house and arrest her because she was tired and didn’t go to her anger management class? I’d hope the good people over in law enforcement had better things to do with their time than that.”

“Etta, I’m pretty certain it’s more serious than that,” Ben said. “Why would you want to risk that? What’s going on?”

Etta looked out the window to her backyard and frowned. Ben watched her face harden. She locked her hands together on the table.

“Nothing is going on,” she said, her tone a challenge. But Ben knew. He had lived with Lisa long enough to know when there was something a person was holding in her mouth and refusing to say.

“All right, you don’t have to tell me,” Ben said. “But I’m right, Etta. And you should come with me, even if you’re...tired.”

Etta’s eyes lowered.

“You’re not drinking your coffee,” she said.

Ben sighed and forced himself to have another sip. He looked at Etta, watching her sit in her own stubborn silence, and tried to remember what she looked like when he had her as his teacher. Her hair was darker then, and she would click her teeth when she graded worksheets at the desk during quiet reading hour. He remembered how she looked at him the day he threw a ball at that boy, as though she could peer into his mind, how she lowered herself to his level and told him to cry like a man. Despite himself, Ben felt a wave of affection for Etta, a spot of

kindness for the teddy bear that she kept on her desk, for the candy she would give to students who got an answer right, for the way she celebrated her students' birthdays as though they were her own children. Sometimes she pushed too hard. But Ben's math improved more in her class than it did in any other year—and she was the first one who had let Ben cry.

And now, here they were at her kitchen table, each as scratched and rattled by age as the other, missing their anger management class for a reason Etta refused to say.

“Etta,” Ben said slowly. “Are you okay?”

And then the strangest thing happened.

Etta Barrett began to weep.

Ben watched her whole upper half of her body collapse onto the table, her head buried into her tangled limbs. For a moment, Ben was frozen. It was as though he were looking at a small house fire and all the “what to do when there's a fire in your house” facts had left his brain.

Thankfully, as the shock settled, Ben started to remember. And instinct took over.

Without thinking, Ben stood from his seat and wrapped Etta fully in his arms, his body bent against hers. Etta did not push him away; instead, Ben thought he felt her lift herself just a little to be closer to him. Perhaps it was just in Ben's head, but he felt certain that she was accepting his comfort—something Lisa so rarely did.

And it was like finding another person who spoke your language in a foreign land.

“It's gonna be okay,” Ben whispered. “It's okay, it's okay, it's okay...”

The moment might have lasted twenty seconds. It might have been eight minutes. For the life of him, Ben couldn't tell.

Eventually, Etta lifted her head up from the table and Ben, following her lead, took a step

back. Her face flared red, and she used her pinkies to wipe the tears. They stayed silent, Ben standing and Etta sitting as she breathed loudly and looked out the sliding door. Then Etta reached her hand over and took Ben's entire hand in hers, holding all of his fingers in her grip. She shook their hands up and down, up and down, staring off as though watching some sort of movie play in the air above her, before she released his hand.

"Did something happen with Arthur?" Ben whispered.

Etta shook her head. She swallowed and closed her eyes before speaking again.

"My sister," she said. And then Etta exhaled and smiled. "You have no idea how good that feels to say."

"Is she...is she okay?" Ben asked.

Etta chuckled.

"Oh, she's fine," she said. "It's just I realized that...she's not the person I keep trying to convince myself she is."

The words ran from Etta's mouth and pooled onto the table, sitting between them and staring up at Etta. But Etta was calm now, recomposed, relaxed.

Ben breathed, unsure of what to say. "Did something happen?" he asked again.

"Lots of things happened. And didn't happen." She looked at Ben with glazed eyes, her head resting on the back of her kitchen chair. "I do everything for her and even when I'm...in danger, she can't lift a finger. She's incapable. I couldn't go to class for her today, Ben. I couldn't do one more thing for her. I couldn't."

"Okay, but going to class isn't *for* her," Ben said. "It's for you, to make sure you don't go to jail. It's to protect yourself. Not going is only going to make it worse."

“You don’t get it,” Etta whispered. “It’s always for her.”

“Why?”

Etta smiled up at the ceiling, her expression soft and pained and hard to see. “You know, I don’t know,” she said. “I seem to have lost track of that.”

They were quiet for a moment.

“You know I never told her when Arthur cheated? I knew she wouldn’t be able to handle it.” Etta said. “You know I had not a single person to talk to about that? I needed someone. I needed my sister. And I loved her too much to tell her, because I knew how much it would hurt her. But I’m tired now, Ben. I can’t do it anymore.”

Ben lowered his voice as though he were approaching a stray animal. “Listen. I know you probably don’t want to hear it but I’m going to tell you two things right now and I need you to listen. Okay?”

Etta sniffed.

“First, we’re going to get you cleaned up and we’re taking you to class today and convincing Dora to work with you to get those papers signed. Because I promise you, not going will make everything you’re feeling even worse. So that’s one. And two. You’re going to talk to Cecile about how you’re feeling.”

Etta shook her head.

“Yes, you are. You can sit here stewing in your own exhaustion and resentment, thinking there’s plenty of time to let it fade but there isn’t time for that. There’s never time for that. Trust me, Etta. There’s just nothing worse than...thinking there’s time. You told me you forgave Arthur because life’s too short. How’s this different?”

Etta wiped her nose. “They’re not the same,” Etta said. “Arthur made one mistake. That’s not who he is. This is who Cecile is.”

“Have you told her? I mean, not using those words, but have you ever pointed out to her that she’s disappointed you?”

Etta looked down.

“You can’t keep escalating the things you do for her in the hopes that she’ll one day realize it’s because you want her to do things like that for you. She’s never going to realize that. You have to talk to her. Tell her what you need from her. You love her, I know you do. You wouldn’t have shoved a man into a car if you didn’t.”

Etta didn’t smile.

“Can you do that?” Ben asked.

Etta furrowed her brow. “Can you clean out your wife’s closet?” she said.

Ben’s mouth opened and his stomach flickered to life with dread. And somehow, his own reaction surprised him. Why? Why was he so hell-bent on keeping the damn closet, after all this time? On keeping the whole house just as Lisa left it?

But Ben knew the reason. He had always known the reason. It was because he was angry at her. Even after he assaulted that man, he thought of Lisa. He was angry at the world because he was angry at Lisa.

Not just because she cheated; that wasn’t really what had made him angry. It was because it hadn’t meant nothing to her. Because people are more than the things that they do but this thing that she did meant something to her and then she died. Because he had loved her and she hurt him and it meant something to her.

And that anger is why he kept the house the same—because he just couldn't let go. But he needed to. He had to do what Etta said. He had to forgive her. And maybe that started with her closet.

“Yes,” Ben said. “Yes. I can. I will.”

Etta stared hard at Ben as though not expecting him to call her bluff. She soaked in his assertion, as though he had finally communicated the urgency of the situation by putting it in these terms. She drummed her fingers on the table then nodded.

“Okay,” she said. “All right, then. Help me up. We need to hurry.” She gave Ben her hand. He hoisted her up from her chair, and she looked at him with a flicker of something he had never seen from her—warmth. “Thank you,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said.

\*\*\*

Ben sped back to Westfield with Etta in the passenger seat, since her husband had taken the car to run errands. They had agreed that Ben would drop Etta at Cecile's house after class and Ben would spend the rest of the day clearing out the house.

Ben pulled up to his same spot in front of the building, running to Etta's side and helping her out of the car. As Etta started to walk as fast as she could toward the municipal building, Ben saw a tall, blonde woman with an angular face exit out onto the pavement. Her gaze struck Ben like a punch.

For half an instant, every nerve in Ben went stiff. Even after four years, some instinctual part of Ben believed this woman leaving the building to be his wife. And the subsequent emotion that went along with that belief was unmistakable: hope.

As the woman got closer, Ben realized she wasn't blonde at all—in fact, her hair was dark and curly and her skin was too dark to be Lisa's. They looked nothing alike. But Ben began to wonder what he would have done if, somehow, his wife were to exit this municipal building in the middle of New Jersey and walk toward him.

If it were Lisa, he would stay frozen exactly where he was. He would make her walk all the way to him and then he would hug her. He would hold her as though she were his own personal life force; he would cling to her and tangle his fingers into her hair and, despite himself, for just one moment more, he would love her.

And then he would leave. He would walk away from anger management and get into his car without looking back until he was on the road, and then he would watch as she got smaller and smaller in his rearview mirror. Maybe it would kill him to do it. But that's what he would do.

Etta turned around.

“Are you coming?” she asked. She pulled open the municipal building door and stepped back to hold it for Ben.

Ben smiled.

“Yeah,” he said. And he walked through the door.