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Constance

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

Constance

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Constance Hill is an 80-year-old widow living very much in her own mind— a mind that is deteriorating and creating fantasies, based on reality, that are a source of both anxiety and joy. Navigating her shrinking world with the help of her overprotective daughter and a cheerful young caretaker, Constance confronts a painful past while trying to push forward in the present.

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1

On Tuesdays, Vivian eases me into the bath and I dip my head under the water until my lungs force me to come up for air. Underwater is peaceful, pleasant, and I can pretend that I'm entirely alone. If I'm feeling imaginative, I try to picture myself young again, my skin taut and my body strong. In my underwater world, my husband Will is waiting for me outside of the bathroom, pulling on a necktie and amiably telling me to hurry up so that we don't miss our reservation. He's handsome and I'm beautiful. Addison, my daughter, is running around somewhere in the house as fast as her little legs will allow her to, waiting eagerly for a teenaged babysitter to feed her pizza and play an endless number of board games. But when I return to the surface for air, all I hear is the soft trickle of water dripping from my hair. My house is empty except for me and Vivian.

Vivian asks me if I want to wash my hair, and I nod. She opens the wooden cabinet and grabs my shampoo and conditioner, pouring the thick liquid into her palms and scrubbing them together. I crave for the days where I had any semblance of privacy. Vivian isn't as embarrassed with my nudity as I am. She runs the bath sponge over my skin without a single flinch or flash of disgust. I, on the other hand, can't even look her in the eye when she washes the places that I can't reach, the nooks and crannies that would otherwise cake with dirt and sweat and dust.

Vivian hums when she washes my hair; she hasn't yet been jaded by the concept of scrubbing the grease out of an old woman's scalp. She's pretty in that youthful sort of way— clear eyes, bright skin, healthy hair. Vivian hasn't told me much about herself, but she still seems happy to walk through my front door every day, which means she's got one of those optimistic I-can-change-the-world views that so many fresh college graduates reek of.

“Constance, can you turn around, please?” Vivian asks me. I turn to face the wall as she conditions the ends of my hair, softening my split ends as I stare at the black and white bathroom tiles. They’re faded and could use a scrubbing.

“Okay, now back around,” Vivian says. I begin to position my body back to face her, but she stops me. “Sorry, wait. Face the wall again. I think there’s still a bit of conditioner in your hair.”

I sigh and begin to turn like I’m on a goddamn merry-go-round, my toe scrapes up against the tub drain, and that’s all it takes for me to say: “Jesus, Vivian, could you make up your mind?” I hear a slight intake of breath and I feel bad that I said anything. We soak in an uncomfortable silence for the remainder of my bath.

Even though I can’t bathe myself because my daughter is afraid that I’ll slip, fall, and promptly die, I’m allowed to get dressed by myself. Vivian leaves the room to give me privacy and I change slowly and carefully, relishing the time alone.

Today, it’s warm outside, and although I probably won’t ever step a foot outdoors, I pick out a floral dress and begin buttoning. The small roses lining my collar bring a certain gaiety to my step, and I decide that the flowers pair well with some cherry colored lipstick. But when I begin to apply the lipstick, my hand starts to tremble and I scrawl over my skin instead of my lip and I sigh and wipe everything off. I search for a cardigan to match my dress. My pink sweater is stained in the front again so I have to settle for my purple one.

When I leave the room, Vivian gives me an unconscious once-over and smiles in approval. “You look very nice,” she says.

“Thank you,” I reply.

Vivian begins to make an omelet for an early lunch and my stomach growls. Mealtimes are one of the few moments where I don't despise having a caretaker. I won't tell my daughter, Addison, this; I still hold on to a sliver of hope that she'll decide a caretaker is unnecessary and all of her unfounded fears will dissolve into thin air. I can hardly cough without her wondering if I've come down with a bout of pneumonia.

"Mom, if anything ever happened to you, I couldn't forgive myself," she told me when she first pitched the idea of a live-in nurse who was more attached to me than my own shadow. I negotiated down to a caretaker who visited six days a week, twelve hours a day, providing that I spent my Sundays with Addison attached to my hip.

Vivian does a wonderful job caring for me, but when my daughter told me she'd found the perfect candidate, I expected a middle-aged woman who might make an interesting conversation partner. Vivian's profundities come to an abrupt halt at what we're having for dinner, whether or not my hair needs to be washed, or if my knees are feeling okay.

Vivian places the omelet in front of me and the steam fogs up my glasses. She sits at the table with me. I place my napkin in my lap and sit up a little straighter.

"Is the omelet too hot?" she asks as I take a bite. I shake my head, my mouth far too full to respond. She picks at her own meal, and it's quiet for a moment until she suddenly snaps her head up. "I've read a book you might like."

I wait to chew until I answer, hoping that she'll follow my lead. "Oh, really?" I ask.

"I have it in my bag. I'll give it to you later."

"What's it about?"

"Well, it's sort of a fantasy. It's this queen, and she falls in love with a dragon..."

I stop listening and let my mind wander, reminiscing about a time where I was treated like a functioning adult and not just a wrinkled, overgrown child.

~

Like clockwork, Vivian leaves at 8pm each night. For her, this is the time when any decent, upstanding elderly individual should go to sleep. I don't go to bed, but instead I slip into my room with an overwhelming sense of freedom. Every night, I feel like a teenager with the house to herself— I half expect to find a hidden bottle of booze in my pillowcase and half-smoked cigarettes in my purse.

My current bedroom is technically the guest room. My old bedroom is upstairs, on the third floor, but I haven't gone up the staircase in years. I told Addison it hurt my knees. So Addison and her boyfriend, Elijah, took all of the most important items from my bedroom and brought them downstairs. In the guest room, we created a humble shrine of my former bedroom, and I sleep there now, pretending the room is my own. Addison and Elijah brought down only the essentials— clothing, some framed photos, and a rug— at my request. I was creating a new bedroom, not trying to erase my old one. Because of this, I feel like a guest every night, a stranger to my old life. But it's better this way. My bedroom upstairs is a testament to what I used to be. My bedroom now is what I am.

When I crawl under the covers, they're cold and stiff. A shiver shudders through my core, as my nightgown is made of a thin, nearly translucent silk that can never keep me warm. I'm not comfortable and my mind begins to wander in places it isn't meant to be. My window is open, and I can see that there aren't any stars in the sky tonight. I try not to think about death, but I do anyways, and I wonder if a star is dying right now.

I turn over onto my side and stare at the white wall. It's very difficult to not think of death when every day brings you closer to it. Death permeates life, from the moment you are born in a hospital where, only a couple floors down, somebody is dying. A baby's first breaths are mingled with the final exhales of a suffering corpse, and the knowledge of this alone makes me wish I'd opted for a home birth with Addison. Instead I was forced into a dingy hospital room where doctors buzzed over me like flies, muttering about my "advanced age"—38— and how it was going to affect the well-being of both myself and my child. In those days, it was nearly a sin to wait so long to have a child. I could never be free from the glances of disapproval from nurses and doctors, who believed my choice to give birth later in life was one based on selfishness, not inability. On the day of Addison's birth, I yelped in pain while the nurses told me to push. Nobody paid any attention to my husband, who sat in the corner of the room trying to stay out of everybody's way, unaware of the fact that he had less than a decade left to live.

I sit up and get out of bed, switch on the light, and walk over to my bookshelf, which stands right next to the window. I stick my nose up to the screen. Outside seems unpleasant, and because of this I know it is not going to be a good night.

I've lived in this area for my entire life. Savannah, Georgia, is a picturesque city with plenty of rich history, horse-drawn carriages, and colorful townhouses. I was born here, in the Isle of Hope, a small suburb tucked away in the corner of Savannah. I married here, and, as I often remind my daughter, I will die here. This is my community; this is my home. I know the trees, I know the sky, I know the smell of the nighttime. I'm not often afraid—

—except for nights like tonight, when the tree branches are tangled and menacing, the sky is starless, and instead of the pleasant sharp scent of the cool night air, the sickly odor of dry dirt

and dying foliage assaults my nostrils, forcing me to step back, shut the window, and crawl back into bed. I have forgotten to get a book.

I close my eyes and pray for sleep. It doesn't come.

2

The weekend comes quickly and before I know it, it's Sunday morning and I'm waking up to an empty house. If I want to, I can go for a walk or make myself breakfast or even give myself a bath.

Addison calls me mid-morning, just as I'm sorting out my weekly medication. "I was thinking we could do brunch today," she says.

"We do brunch every Sunday," I remind her. "What's the point of planning such a routine event?" Like any self-respecting Southerner, I take Sunday brunch as a given. Will, Addison and I used to go to the diner every Sunday after church for a hearty meal. The diner was the place to be— everybody who was somebody would be there, chowing down on fatty grits and mile-high flapjacks. Even though Addison and I stopped going to church after Will died, we never cut brunch from our schedule. But we started venturing out into the city for our brunches— we couldn't stand the looks of pity we'd get from the locals.

"Well, maybe one day we won't do brunch," says Addison. "Maybe we'll decide to go for a walk, or you'll have already eaten breakfast, or just skip straight to lunch."

"Skip straight to lunch!? I wake up at six in the morning, Addison. By the time lunch would roll around, I'll have starved to death." I pour myself a glass of water and grab my morning pills. Little white pills, blue pills, pink pills.

She sighs. "Not funny, Mom. I'll be over in thirty."

Addison hangs up and I smile at the phone. Knowing my daughter, she'll be at my house in 20 minutes with a bitter frown if I happen to be running late. It's best to get a head start getting ready.

I've only just grabbed my pocketbook when the doorbell rings. She's 15 minutes early.

"Coming!" I call. I hear Addison's feet tapping. "Hello, dear," I say, opening the heavy oak door. Her face stretches into a shiny grin at the sight of me, and she pulls me into a hug and begins to talk at a mile a minute.

"On the way over I made a reservation at a brand-new café, so we've got to be there in ten minutes. It's fantastic, Mom, you'll love it-"

"Addison, slow yourself. We haven't even made it to your car yet."

Once we're in her well-loved Mercedes, Addison continues. "I've heard the hot chocolate has whipped cream the size of your face, with melted chocolate drizzle and cinnamon flakes..." I let her chatter on, while I lean back and gaze out of the window. It looks like it might rain. I roll down my window to smell the air, but the button gets stuck.

"Mom, I told you last time, the windows don't work."

I jam the button a few more times before I listen to her. "When are you going to get rid of this junker?"

"It's fine, Mom."

I put my hands in my lap. They're shaky this morning. "I worry about you. What if you get in an accident?"

Addison notices my slight movement. She glances over. "How have you been feeling?"

"Fine, dear. The tremors are hardly noticeable. The Benztropine helps."

“Can you tell if it’s getting worse? You know, I was reading a study online that said Omega-3 helps lower the effects of Parkinson’s. Maybe we should get you some supplements.”

“I don’t want to take any more medication, Addison. When I die, the coroners will cut me open and pills will spill out.” I laugh. She sighs.

“It’s not a medication. It’s a supplement.”

“I’ll think about it, dear.” She nods, satisfied. I stare out the window and watch the trees fly by in a blur. It’s June, the peak of summertime, and the foliage is bright and green and healthy. Nature is at its prime of life. The live oak trees mingle with the palms lining the road, and I feel, for a moment, that we are driving through a jungle.

The café is in downtown Savannah, which is about twenty minutes from the Isle of Hope. Addison parallel parks across the street from a gift shop, and we walk a block to a little café which is folded between a smoke shop and a clothing store. The café is slightly faded and outdated. There’s a box of flowers underneath the front window, the painted brick exterior seems slightly chipped, and the painted letters on the storefront window that read *Sam’s Café* are peeling away from the glass.

“I thought you said this place is new.”

Addison smiles as we walk in. “It is new, Mom. This is the style now. It’s sort of… rustic.”

Despite the café’s raggedy appearance, Addison was right to make a reservation— the restaurant is nearly full of young, happy couples who chatter and chomp on breakfast food. The waitress leads us to a table in the corner, underneath a patch of sunshine. The tablecloth doesn’t match the napkins and I whisper to Addison, “Did a colorblind person arrange this?”

She hushes me and the waitress tells us the specials, which include fried eggs with hazelnuts and a smoothie bowl that she delicately labels “acai.”

“Do you have regular food here?” I ask with a grin.

Addison kicks me under the table. The waitress gives me a wry smile and scuttles off. I put on my reading glasses and look down at the menu. It stares back at me with a superior smirk, reminding me that as aged as this café seems, it’s still too modern for my tastes.

I scour the small print. “I suppose I’ll get the... bagel. Why aren’t there any prices?”

Addison frowns. “I’m not sure. Maybe it says it on the back?” She flips the menu over.

“Nope. No clue. We’ll just order and find out at the end.”

I don’t particularly like this idea, but I abide by it. When the waitress comes, I get a bagel with cream cheese and a black coffee. I don’t ask the price. Addison orders the smoothie bowl. When the waitress leaves, my daughter leans forward.

“There’s a reason I wanted to go out for brunch today.”

“Because we do every week?”

Addison rolls her eyes. “No! I want to tell you something.”

I want to tell you something. Every parent’s stomach goes to shit whenever their child opens with this phrase. Cancer? No, nobody delivers cancer news with a smile. Is she moving? Did she get a newer, a better, a further job? Is she pregnant? I lean over and glance at her belly, but it doesn’t seem to have swollen a disproportionate amount. Of course, it could just be the beginning of her pregnancy—

“Elijah asked me to marry him, and I said yes.” Her cheeks flush.

My heart stops, then begins to thud at twice its normal pace. “You said yes?” The edges of my mouth begin to quiver into a grin.

“I said yes. We set the date for next summer.”

“Oh, Addison!” I start to laugh. “Congratulations!” She smiles and holds up her left hand. A sparkling diamond ring is wrapped around her finger— I’m surprised I didn’t notice it before. The ring seems expensive and I thank my lucky stars that Addison has Elijah to look after her. Although, unlike I did, Addison doesn’t need a wealthy boy to provide for her. She makes quite enough money herself.

“How did he ask, honey?”

“He did it first thing in the morning. First thing! Can you believe it? I woke up to breakfast in bed and a fiancé on one knee. I hadn’t even put my contacts in.”

“That’s wonderful,” I say, reaching over and grasping Addison’s hand. But, as much as I try to keep my gaze steady and focus on nothing but my daughter’s wonderful news, all I can picture is my own proposal. The butterflies in my stomach, his nervous smile, the relief that flooded over him when I said yes.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Can I see the ring again?”

She holds her hand out to me and I grasp it. The diamond sits upon a silver band and I trace over the smooth metal with the tip of my index finger. “Beautiful,” I say under my breath, and the diamond winks at me. “He did a wonderful job.” I let go of Addison’s hand and look up at her. She’s blurry— and then I realize that tears are brimming in my eyes.

Addison smiles sadly. “I want you to walk me down the aisle, Mom.” The tears are rolling down my cheeks now, and I don’t trust my voice so I just nod. “Why are you crying? Are you thinking about—“

“It’s not that,” I say. “I’m just so happy for you.”

~

The clouds look ominous as we leave the café and the air is filled with the sweet scent of rain. Addison notes that it looks like a storm is coming, and I nod.

“Do you still want to go?” I ask. She says yes. We climb into her car and she begins to drive west, towards the small cemetery that sits perfectly equidistant between Savannah and the Isle of Hope. The windows are closed, but the smell of rain lingers in the car, and I lean back and close my eyes and pray for sunshine.

Addison pulls into the gravel parking lot and the pebbles crunch and pop beneath the tires. I climb out of the car, the stones rolling underneath my feet. The rusted gate is open and we enter underneath the looming stone arch, and I note a grave which has been dug quite recently. The moist mounds of soil still have not settled into the ground and the body below is probably still preserved from the funeral. I read the gravestone: *Abby Underwood, 1942–2019. 77 years old. Younger than me. Below that, A loving wife, mother, and grandmother. “Therefore you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you.” John 16:22.* The name next to hers is *Jack Underwood. 1940– . 79 years old and still alive. A loving husband, father, and grandfather.* I imagine his tears at the funeral. I touch my cheek and on it are tears of my own.

“Mom?”

Addison is ahead of me, so I rip my eyes away from the fresh grave and wipe my face. I read the familiar inscriptions on the stones that we pass by: *Loving daughter. Dear brother. Beloved aunt. Darling–*

Addison stops at Will’s grave. *William Hill. 1939- 1985. A loving husband and father.* We didn’t give him a Bible quote. Addison and I pored through the dusty Bible that Will kept in

his drawer, but we couldn't find a single phrase to fit our situation. Even Jesus couldn't come up with something to soothe the hearts of an eight-year old girl who had just lost her father, and a forty-six-year-old woman who had just lost the love of her life.

Addison kneels down onto the soil and rearranges some of the faux flowers in a plastic green vase. The soil around the vase is dry and crumbling— maybe we do need this rain, after all— and the vase won't stand straight. Instead, it is a bit tilted to the side. I start to bend over to try to fix it, but a sharp pain assaults my lower back and I raise myself up.

“Dammit,” I mutter. Addison throws me a sympathetic glance and adjusts the vase. When she has finally fixed it, instead of getting up, she sits on the dirt and stares at the grave.

“I wish Dad could come to the wedding,” she says.

I nod. I'm not sure how to respond, so I whisper, “I'm sorry.” The top of the headstone is tickled by some dangling Spanish moss. I brush it off, completely forgetting about the dozens of chiggers that are probably nesting in the moss and itching to burrow in my skin. Tourists often lift clumps of Spanish moss and drape it across their bodies, only to realize that they're covered in little red bugs.

Addison turns and gives me a sad smile. “What are you apologizing for, Mom?”

We've gotten in this disagreement a thousand times and I've learned what not to say, so I just shrug. We sit. A hit of sunshine peeks out from a cloud and bounces off her ring and into my eye. I look down at my own empty finger.

“Should we get new flowers?” I ask. “We can bring them by next week.”

“Yeah.” She's crying. I try to bend over again to comfort her, but my body doesn't listen. So I hover over my only daughter uselessly, watching her cry over her father's death.

“I’m sorry,” I repeat. It’s barely a whisper, and she doesn’t hear. It starts to rain, the droplets leaving dark splatters on the light grey headstone. We need the rain, but I don’t want it.

Addison gets up without a word, grasps my hand, and gives it a squeeze. We begin to walk back to the car, and I glance back at my husband’s lonely grave. The rain gets harder and harder, and up ahead I can see the new grave’s wet soil turning to mush. We’re running back and I step over graves, offering a brief mental apology to the poor souls buried underneath my feet.

Finally, we’re back in the car and Addison is sobbing. I pat her back with a trembling hand. I want to help her but I don’t know how, I can’t stop her tears, I can’t stop her pain, I can’t even offer to drive the car. In fact, I haven’t driven since 1985, when I drove my car into a pole, killing my husband in the passenger seat.

3

On Monday morning, Vivian arrives later than usual, but I don’t notice because I’m still asleep. It’s not until I feel two cold fingers on my wrist and somebody begins to shake me that I realize I’m not alone in the house. I open my eyes and stare at Vivian, who is white as a sheet.

“Are you okay, Constance?” she asks.

“Were you checking my pulse?”

Her cheeks flush. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine. Can’t an old woman sleep in anymore?”

But as much as I’m acting like this is all normal, we both know it’s not, because I haven’t slept past six a.m. in at least a decade. My internal alarm always jerks me awake at dawn, but last night, I couldn’t fall asleep until four in the morning. It was another one of those nights. They’re getting worse.

Vivian tells me she'll make me a coffee. I lean back in bed and exhale. My alarm clock says it's 9:45am. Vivian was almost two hours late. Her punctuality is constant, and I can count on it as much as I can rely on the sun rising each morning.

I shuffle into the kitchen to see Vivian making a coffee, and I say hello and she jumps and spills creamer all over the floor. The thick liquid spreads across the tile, seeping into the grout and underneath the fridge.

"I'm sorry," we say at the same time. She looks as if she's about to burst into tears.

"Vivian, dear, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she says, voice cracking. She grabs a dish towel, bends down, and begins to uselessly wipe the creamer with the towel. It's too much liquid for the towel to absorb; she doesn't notice. The liquid sloshes back and forth.

"No, you're not." I try to bend down to comfort her, but my body fails me again and I settle for stroking her hair, which tangles between my fingers. At this tiny gesture, Vivian bursts into tears. "What's the matter?" I ask.

"I'm sorry," she says between sobs.

"What are you sorry for? What happened?"

"Jackson's at Georgia Regional." The hospital. "That's why I was late."

Vivian has told me about her brother a couple of times. He is disabled and lives with her parents, and Vivian tries to see him as often as they can. From what I can tell, she is devoted to him with her whole heart. To hear that he is in the hospital breaks me just a little, and I ignore the pain in my knees and back and hips and bend down to give her a hug. "Go see him," I tell her, "I'll be completely fine. I'll call Addison if I need anything." Vivian shakes her head. "I insist. I'll be fine for a couple of hours. Really, truly. I'll be okay."

Slowly, she stops shaking her head and begins to wipe her cheeks. She's silent for a moment or two until she whispers, "Are you sure?"

"Vivian," I say, "I'm going to be fine."

She nods and eventually she pulls herself together, saying, "I'll visit him for a couple of hours. He'll be okay, really, it's not anything life threatening. I just really want to be there with him. My parents are there, but I think he needs me too."

She helps me up as she stands, and I grab her hand and give it a tender squeeze. "I appreciate you coming here, Vivian. I do. But even you need days off. In the future, if anything comes up, please, tell me, and it will be fine. I'm sturdier than I look," I laugh, "and you're not going to get rid of me as easily as me dying in my sleep."

Her laugh is mingled with sadness and relief, and she pulls me into a hug. "Thank you," she says. "I'll clean the creamer and go."

"Don't worry about it. I'll clean it; it's just a puddle."

~

My body aches when I've finished mopping everything up, and I treat myself to a cold cup of coffee as a reward. Vivian never poured the creamer in the coffee, so it's black, which I don't mind. I sip at the liquid and think about Addison, and I wonder what she must be feeling now.

But when I try to imagine Addison's excitement for her wedding, my mind goes blank and all I can do is reminisce about my own engagement. How I felt. What I wanted. Will. Not Elijah. I can think only of my daughter in the context of myself.

My ring finger is empty, and it has been for a while. I hide my engagement and wedding rings from myself, in a little box on my old bedroom nightstand. I don't have to look at it since I

don't go upstairs. But this doesn't mean that, decades later, I don't still feel the phantom rings on my finger. Out of sight, but not out of mind.

I trace my finger on the rim of my mug. The coffee is creating the opposite of its intended effect— the more I drink, the drowsier I feel. The world seems to move more slowly in front of me, almost as if I'm underwater, my thoughts turn muddled, and all I can do is stare at my finger until I nod off into a deep, troubled sleep.

It's dark and I'm driving a car. Raindrops pound the windshield so fiercely I'm afraid they might crack the glass. I imagine a fissure beginning in the corner of the windshield, then spreading through the rest of the car, turning in every which way like the strings of a spiderweb, then finally the whole windshield would crack and the water would come rushing in and I'd choke on it and drown.

I grip the wheel tighter, and my knuckles burst through my skin. My skin. It's smooth. Strong. I look young. Why do I look so young? As soon as I look at my hands, I see my left ring finger, and it's wrapped in a thick wedding band and a glittering diamond. I run the tip of my right index finger over the diamond. It's sharp. When did I put my rings back on? Instinctively, I look to my right.

Sitting there, in the passenger seat, is Will. He sees me looking at him and smiles. His toothy grin warms my insides and I am calm. It's just a bit of rain. My blue eyes make contact with his warm brown ones, and I do not doubt with any part of my body that he is alive, alive and well, alive and staring at me with such love and affection and kindness that I want to cry. The corners of his eyes are crinkled. Crow's feet.

This is it. My second chance. We are going to grow old together and sit in rocking chairs and help each other do things that our bodies can't, we are going to live together and we are

going to die together, just like everything was supposed to be. I can see the rocking chairs now, creaking back and forth on a wraparound porch, him holding me and rubbing my shoulders and offering me tea, me kissing his forehead and squeezing his arm and ruffling his hair. He reaches his hand out– his wedding ring matches mine and I know everything is okay– and strokes my face, and I grab his hand and hold it and he’s there, he’s really there, in front of me, and I look back at the road–

–and a frightened deer stares back at me and I finally understand the saying a deer caught in headlights and it has brown eyes just like Will and I press on the brake and swerve the car to the left and we ram right into a telephone pole, one of those wooden poles that always have staples in it but never any flyers, my forehead is wet and I hear the sound of shattering glass and I yank out my right arm to protect Will from the shards, never mind that I can feel little pinprick pieces of glass peppering my own body, but the seat is empty and the windshield has a big hole in it and the water is coming in and I see a body on the hood of the car and I scream and I scream and I scream and I–

I wake up to the sound of my own shrieks. It’s light outside. Sunny. I look at my hands. They’re old, wrinkled. Bare. The dining table is empty. My house is empty. I am the only one here. I can hear a bird singing sweetly outside.

I reach for my mug, intending on pouring out my stale coffee and making myself a warm cup of tea. But my hand grasps air.

I look around for my cup, wondering if I imagined the whole coffee thing and maybe even Vivian’s late arrival. Maybe it’s 6 a.m. and I fell asleep here last night and I’m just now waking up. I begin to stand, but stop almost immediately because there, scattered all over the

floor, are ceramic shards. I step around them, bending down and picking up the biggest chip. I rotate it. That's my mug, alright.

I must have moved my arm in my dream and knocked over the mug. As I walk to the closet to grab a broom, I can feel the dream fading away from my mind. That's the good thing about dreams— they're ephemeral, even the nightmares, so they can never haunt you for too long. I forget the pole, first, then the rain, the feel of glass on my skin, my hands. It takes longer for me to forget my husband. But by the time I begin to sweep the debris, even his face fades from the memory of my dream. When I'm done cleaning up and I rest my feet, the only thing that still sticks in my mind is the deer's eyes— big, brown, afraid.

4

"What are you doing for dinner?" I try to sound casual, keep my voice sturdy and confident and secure.

"What are *you* doing for dinner?" Addison counters. "Isn't Vivian there?"

"She left earlier. Her brother was in the hospital."

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah. She called me an hour ago, she'll be back tomorrow. It was just a little spill."

She's silent. I can picture her biting her lip, trying to figure out the most rational way to react. After a beat: "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's fine, Addison. I'm not a toddler. I can take care of myself for a few hours." I don't mention the mug.

"I know you can, Mom. I just need to know these things." Why? Why does my daughter need me to hand over even the smallest details of my life to her? I don't answer, holding my

angry words in my mouth like a small child having a tantrum. She must feel my annoyance over the phone, because she sighs. “I’m sorry. I know it can be frustrating. It’s me, not you, Mom. I just worry about you.”

I sigh too. The conversation swells with exasperation. “I know, dear. I’m sorry, too.” And I am. I know Addison; she spirals at even the slightest scent of danger, ever since—

“Elijah and I are going to dinner. And we want you to come.”

“Oh, no. I can’t. I don’t want to intrude.”

“It’s not an intrusion. We wanted to get dinner with you sometime anyway.”

“Really, Addison, I want to let you guys celebrate.”

“Really, Mom, I insist.”

This could go on forever, and I don’t feel like arguing with Addison again. I blow air out of my mouth and shrug. “Okay.”

“Great! We’ll come get you at seven.”

“Seven,” I repeat, preparing myself to be ready at six-thirty. “Thank you, dear.”

“Don’t thank me, Mom. This’ll be so fun!”

I agree, and we exchange I-love-you’s and hang up. There is a sinking feeling in my stomach. Since when do I need my own daughter to soothe my nightmares and protect me from the ghosts in the shadows? Or, in my case, she’s shielding me from the frightened brown doe eyes that I see whenever I blink. Deer in headlights. The phrase dances in my mind.

~

I force myself to look nice for dinner, even though there’s nothing I’d rather do than wear pajamas and gorge myself on comfort food and have somebody to hug. One thing that’s difficult

about old age is the loneliness; my mother has been dead for years, and it's times like these that I crave a nurturing presence.

My hair is thin and wispy, ghostlike, and I run the strands through the comb. There's something nostalgic about taking the time out to brush my hair; I am transported to a younger time where my five-year-old legs dangled off a stool as my mother combed my hair. I can almost smell the soft floral perfume she used to wear. If I concentrate, I can hear her musical voice, telling me how beautiful I was.

If only she could see me now. My eyes are bloodshot like a hound's, with bags underneath to match. In an attempt to add some color to my face, I smear on violet eyeshadow. I feel like a clown. Just as I'm scrutinizing my reflection, the doorbell rings. Shit. It's 6:45. Why did Addison come so early? She told me she wouldn't be here until 8:00. I walk over and open the door, only to face a tired-looking Addison who is checking her watch.

"There's traffic," she says. "Hurry, we're going to miss our reservation."

"I'm not ready yet. Why are you so early?"

"What are you talking about? I told you 7:00."

"No, you didn't. You said 8:00. I haven't even finished my makeup."

"Mom, I don't have time for this. The reservation is at 7:30 and we need to go now. I told you 7:00. Maybe you misheard."

I sigh. "Yeah, maybe. Let me just get my pocketbook," I tell her.

"Hurry," she repeats.

In less than a minute or two we're sitting in her car. I'm in the backseat, fiddling with my seatbelt while Elijah and Addison bicker about what time the reservation is for.

"Is it downtown?" I interject.

“No. Georgetown.”

“Then it can’t be that busy,” I say.

“It’s busy,” Addison replies, ending the discussion.

When we get to the restaurant, we find out that we are 15 minutes early for our reservation, and Addison’s tense shoulders finally begin to relax.

“We can seat y’all now,” the freckled hostess tells us. She beams, flashing a silver set of braces. “Follow me.”

Addison sits next to me, Elijah across from us. Whatever tension that seemed to cloud their relationship in the car seems to have dissipated, and they cast each other loving glances and play footsie— I know because Elijah accidentally kicks me, and I pretend not to notice. The waiter, a young man with a silver stud glimmering in his left earlobe, arrives and briskly outlines the specials. Another man approaches us and begins to pour us some water.

“I think we’re ready to order,” says Addison. I cast her a glance; we’ve been sitting for no more than five minutes. She doesn’t notice. “I’ll get the trout, please.”

I begin flipping through the menu.

“I’ll get the same, and we’ll get a bottle of the Chardonnay as well,” says Elijah.

Aperitifs. Drinks. Soups. Charcuterie. Where are the entrées?

The waiter turns to me. I feel Addison and Elijah’s gaze rest on me, as I close the menu and attempt to look decisive. “What is the soup of the day?”

“Gazpacho, ma’am.”

“I’ll get that.”

“Excellent choice. Anything else?”

“A side of... French fries.”

He looks confused but writes down my order. “Anything to drink, ma’am?”

“Uh, I’m okay with water.”

“Wonderful.” He recites our orders back to us, nods, and leaves.

Addison is looking at me strangely, but I pretend to be enamored with my glass of water.

I trace lines into the condensation until Elijah says: “So, Constance, how has everything been?”

“It’s been great.” I smile. “I’d ask how you are, but you just got engaged to my daughter so I’m assuming you’re pretty happy right now.”

Addison beams. “We were discussing locations earlier today, and we were thinking to do it in Wormsloe.”

“That would be beautiful,” I say, because it would. “Do they do weddings?”

“I think so,” says Elijah.

“We’ll call tomorrow,” says Addison.

The waiter brings the wine. He has mistakenly brought three glasses, and I put my hand up and begin to interrupt his pouring with, “oh, no thank you” but he is distracted by what he has to say, which is: “So, I hear there is an engagement?”

Addison looks surprised, and Elijah nods and reaches over to hold his fiancé’s hands.

“Congratulations to the two of you.” He hands Addison a rose, nods, and leaves.

“Did you tell the restaurant?” Addison asks.

Elijah nods. “I paid an extra three bucks for the rose, too.” They laugh, and I think about how the last time I bought roses, they were for Will’s grave. Red velvet petals clustered at the tip on thin, spiked stems. When I came back to check on them a month later, they had shriveled inside of themselves and deepened into a dark brown. I pulled the flowers out of the vase to toss

them and saw that white mold had begun to climb up the decaying flowers. Roses smell sweet when they die. We used fake flowers after that.

“Mom, are you okay?”

I glance at my daughter in surprise. “Of course, why wouldn’t I be?”

She and Elijah exchange a glance. “You’ve been staring into space for a good three minutes.”

“I was just thinking about how happy I am for the both of you.”

They smile.

When the food comes, I’m regretting my choice of gazpacho and fries. The trout looks glazed and crispy and delectable, while my soup is brownish red and has chunks of something bobbing at the top. I don’t even remember what is in gazpacho. The French fries look all right, but when I bring one to my mouth, I find that it’s cold.

“Bon Appetit,” I tell Addison and Elijah. They nod, mouths stuffed with fish.

“Is yours good?” Addison manages to spit out.

“Fantastic,” I lie.

She seems pleased, so I’m happy. I can stuff a couple of frozen fries down my throat just to see a smile on my daughter’s face.

When I’ve devoured the fries, I can give all of my attention to the soup. It’s a daunting challenge— I don’t think I even like gazpacho very much in the first place— but I’m up for the task. I begin shoveling spoonfuls of red into my mouth. Faster, then faster. I can barely taste the bitterness of the vegetables; I’m focused only on finishing this soup. My mother would be so proud; when I was younger, she’d spoon mashed carrots into my shrieking mouth, begging me to eat, but I’d just spit them onto the floor, banging my chubby fists on the table and crying for

something edible. When my father came home, he'd sigh and sneak me a cookie, and my mother would notice and they'd fight and he'd huff and she'd cry—

“Mom?” Addison says. Her voice wavers. I look up; she's staring at me with concern.

“Was I eating too fast?” I ask, putting my spoon down, knowing the answer. “The soup is just delicious—” Addison looks at Elijah and widens her eyes, attempting to signal... something. “Do I have something in my teeth?” I bare my teeth at the couple, feeling foolish.

“Your, uh, clothes,” Elijah stammers. My clothes? What about my— I look down. The front of my top is stained in red; it's dribbling down my body and pooling into my lap. I feel the wet and cold all at once, and I shift uncomfortably.

“Whoops,” I say, trying to sound upbeat. “How silly—”

“Your hand was shaking like a leaf,” Addison says. “I said your name, like, six times before you noticed.” Her eyebrows are bunched, her forehead creased. My cheeks feel like they're on fire, as contrasted to the burning cold seeping into my skin.

“Did you?” I laugh. It's not very convincing. “I liked the soup so much, I didn't even—”

“Mom, you told me the Parkinson's was fine,” Addison says. “This is not fine. It's getting worse.” She stares in horror at my blouse.

“This happens, Addison. I'm old. I get clumsy sometimes. It's not a big deal.”

“This isn't just normal clumsiness—”

“Let's get some napkins,” Elijah says. He calls over a waitress and motions to my lap. Her eyes widen and she rushes over and grabs some paper towels and our original waiter whose eyebrows furrow when he sees the mess I've made, the soup is pooling in my lap and I remember that time in grade school when I wet myself and the whole class saw, they laughed at me with sharp teeth and squinty eyes...

During the ride back, Addison sits with me in the backseat and holds my hand, begging me to go to a doctor, I'm agreeing and making promises I know I'll have to keep, all while staring out the window at the Spanish moss clinging to the power lines.

5

The doctor's office is cold and I wish I'd brought a sweater. There are only two of us in the neurologist's waiting room. The other patient is an elderly woman who seems to be confused about where she is; she keeps getting up, glancing around, nodding to herself, and then sitting back down. Her eyes are big and buglike and they bounce around the room without ever resting on something. She sends chills down my spine and I'm not sure why, so I read a magazine that tells me that if I take the stairs every day, I'll live an extra five years. I close the magazine.

"Constance Hill?"

I stand up. An older, tired nurse with heavy bags under her eyes is waiting for me with a wooden clipboard in her hand. "That's me," I say.

"The doctor can take you early since there isn't anybody else here." She laughs. "Slow day. The rain must be scaring everybody off."

I feel miffed for the elderly woman, my only other acquaintance in this barren, sterile waiting room. Did the nurse not see her? But when I look back at where the old woman had been sitting, her seat is empty. Hm. Must have wandered off, I suppose.

"You ready?" asks the nurse. I nod. We walk past the front desk into the hallway, a linoleum ghost town. Our footsteps click in unison, and she leads me to Room C, which greets me with a vintage poster of the human brain hanging on the main wall.

“Wow,” I say, but she isn’t listening as she pulls out a blood pressure cuff. When the nurse is finished taking my vitals and is certain that I’m not facing imminent death, she nods and tells me that the doctor will be with me soon.

She’s right; the doctor comes within a minute or two. It’s a female doctor, which has become more and more common nowadays. I’ve never had her before and I’m startled by how young and beautiful she is. She shakes my hand— her palm is soft and creamy— and flashes me a kind smile. “I’m Dr. Shay. It’s wonderful to meet you, Constance.”

“Likewise.”

“So, what brings you in today?”

“Well,” I say, “my daughter is worried about my Parkinson’s. There was an incident.”

“An incident,” she repeats. No judgement, but I imagine some anyways.

“Yes. I was at dinner with my daughter and her fiancé.” I pause, not wanting to tell her the whole story. “I ordered soup and was eating it too fast, and I didn’t even notice that my hand was shaking and spilling soup all over my lap.”

She’s writing notes. What do they say? “How did you figure it out?”

“My daughter told me.”

“Was it hot soup? Did you get burned?”

I shake my head. “It was cold. Gazpacho.”

“My favorite,” she says. She finished jotting something down and leans back. “Well, my notes say that you were diagnosed with Parkinson’s a few months ago. Have you noticed your tremors getting any worse?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe a little. I spill sometimes. Usually I’m better at hiding it from other people.”

She writes something down.

“Any stiff muscles?”

“Not really.”

“Slowed movement?”

“Well, I’m pretty slow, but I don’t know if that’s just from age.”

She rattles off a list of questions that I answer as accurately as I can: “What medications are you taking? Do you have trouble with getting dressed? Has your handwriting changed? What medical conditions do you have? What’s your medical history look like?”

I’m already exhausted when she asks me to get up from a chair without using my arms for any support. “I can try,” I say. It takes a moment, but I summon the leg strength to pull my body up. My ankles wobble.

“Very good,” she says. I don’t believe her. “Now for the cognitive part. Have you noticed any symptoms of depression or anxiety?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Are you forgetting things more often?”

“No more than normal, I think.”

“How’s your sleep schedule?”

“It’s fine. It’s been a little wonky. I’ve had trouble sleeping.” She scribbles on her pad. “But it hasn’t been that bad,” I add.

“I want to order a brain scan, just to rule out a couple of other possibilities,” she says. I nod.

“What do you think?” I ask her.

“Based on that incident and how you’ve answered my questions, your Parkinson’s seems to be worsening. I’m going to prescribe you some Rasagiline. It should also help you with your sleeping. The brain scans will help me rule out any possible strokes or tumors, and I might order a blood test later on, depending on the results of the scan. But for today, we’re all done. You can head over to the receptionist’s office to schedule your brain scan and get all checked out.” She shakes my hand again. “It was wonderful to meet you, Constance.”

“You too. Thank you.”

I check out, schedule my scan. The waiting room is still empty; no sign of the elderly woman. Vivian is downstairs, car running, waiting to drive me back. “How was the appointment?” she asks on the drive home.

“It was fine,” I tell her. “Everything will be okay.”

~

Later in the evening, after Vivian leaves, I watch the sunset. The grey sky melts into a moody black, with only a streak of purple here and there to indicate that the sun has actually set, and the world hasn’t merely grown darker.

The night breeds bad thoughts. As soon as the sun dips under the horizon, I begin to wonder if the rest of my years alive are going to be plagued with less and less control of my body, until I’m nothing but a shaking shell of tremors and stiffness. I shake off the negative thoughts. Addison is getting in my head, blowing things out of proportion.

She had always been a neurotic child, even when she was a toddler. Her father always knew how to calm her down and make her feel at ease, and that’s what made the two of them get along so well. He was the yin to her yang, until he wasn’t, and then her neuroticism spiraled out of control as she searched for somebody to balance her spikes of anxiety. I often came home

from my days of errands and volunteering to an empty house, only to find that my daughter had convinced a neighbor to take her to the cemetery. The town marveled at how I was doing it all, even after Will's death. But they were wrong. I was ignoring the most important part of my life: my daughter. I should have been home with her— after all, it isn't like I had to work. Will left Addison and me all of his family's money, which totaled to quite an impressive sum. Money gave me status and the freedom to do whatever I wanted. But those things didn't amount to much when I found myself a grieving widow with a young child. I was lucky, I know— money gave me comfort and stability— but it wasn't very helpful for filling the newly dug hole in my heart.

When I'd arrive at the cemetery, I would find her kneeling by the fresh grave, telling her father of all of the worst things that she feared would happen. Of course, losing her father was never one of them, but it happened anyways.

As if on cue, my cell phone rings; it's Addison. "Hey, dear. How are you?"

"I'm good, Mom. How was your day?"

I hesitate. "I went to the doctor."

Long pause. "Who took you?"

"Vivian, of course."

"Mom, why didn't you tell me? I could have taken you."

"You don't need to miss work for it. It's so unimportant, and I have Vivian to take me."

"But I want to be there for you. What if they give you bad news and you're alone?" Her tone is getting higher and sharper, and I can imagine her pacing and grinding her teeth, preparing herself for my inevitable death. "I want to know about these things. You need to tell me these things."

“Addison, it was pretty standard. She asked me some questions, they’ll do some scans, and we’ll get this whole thing figured out. She didn’t seem very concerned.”

“Still. I wish I could’ve been there.”

“I’ll be okay, Addison. Really. I will.” Even now, all these years later, I try to imagine what Will would say. Would he soothe her worries by telling her everything will be alright? Would he tell her outright that she’s being ridiculous? Or would he let her ramble on, agreeing with her and letting her rant until it had exited her system? I close my eyes and try to remember. Try to remember him speaking, his voice, how he approached our daughter. But forty years is a long time, and my mind comes up blank.

“I don’t want to argue with you, Mom. But I wish you’d take your health more seriously.”

“Addison, I do. At my age, though, health problems aren’t as shocking.”

“I just—” I hear Elijah’s muffled voice in the background. “Oh shit. Sorry, Mom. Our show’s starting, I’ve gotta go. I love you. Please think about what I said.”

“I love you too, dear.”

She clicks off, and I stare at the telephone in my hand. I feel antsy and unsettled; I feel like I need to go for a walk, or clean the house from top to bottom, or head over to my daughter’s house and shout: I am a full-grown woman and can handle myself! Instead, I do something even more stupid. I decide to go to the third floor.

~

The stairs are taller and narrower than I remember. I lift one leg, bending my right knee and hearing the joints in my bones creak like a rusty door hinge. I grasp the railing as if it’s my lifeline, which it is, and pull my entire body up. One, two, three. I make it to the sixth stair before

I start feeling pain in my knees and back. I stand a little straighter. Seven, eight, nine. I look back— a mistake— and decide that if I fell backwards, all of the bones in my body would probably shatter into a million pieces that Vivian would have to vacuum the next day. Ten, eleven, twelve. My house is tall and Victorian, which means that to get up one flight, there are fifteen stairs. I want to go up two flights, which equals thirty stairs total. The house condenses towards the top, and the higher I go, the more my shallow breaths bounce against the walls. I can feel the staircase closing in on me, but still, I walk. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.

The second floor is irrelevant. It contains an extra living room that we never used, Will's home office, and a bathroom that always seemed to leak. I give it a cursory glance before I take a look at my next challenge: fifteen more stairs, these even steeper and narrower than the ones I just climbed. Should I sit down, and let my crumbling body rest? Or should I continue, working off the momentum that I've somehow managed to gather, not letting myself stop until I've reached the ultimate goal?

I choose the latter and keep going. Sixteen, seventeen— my heart is thudding against my ribcage, I lean against the walls and rest for a moment. I feel woozy and hold tighter onto the thin, iron railing, which wraps around the sides of the walls and curls into a graspable rod.

I run my fingernail along the smooth surface. I remember chasing Addison down these stairs, watching her stumble over her legs as her little hands skimmed over the railing. She'd run down into the living room, springing onto the couch and making herself a secret fort. I would follow, attacking the fort and holding her in my arms as Will entered and tickled her to death. Those were the most beautiful days of my life, I think.

Eighteen, nineteen, twenty. I'm picking up my pace, fueled by pleasant memories and an undeniable urge to leap back into the past, burrow my face in it and never let it go. Perhaps, had I held onto it tighter, it wouldn't have been ripped from my hands.

Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three. I ignore the dull pain in my back which has, during this journey, become a constant. Twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven. Nobody will ever see me do this, I think to myself. I am doing this for myself, and only for myself. Twenty-eight, twenty-nine. My body has stopped hurting; instead, it exhales in relief for the exercise. Or maybe I've just gone numb. Thirty.

I look up. I'm on the third floor.

6

I've stepped from the present into the past. I glance around. Straight ahead, I see my bedroom door. To the left is the entrance to the master bedroom. To the right, my daughter's childhood bedroom lies untouched, still swathed in her high school posters. Past that, all the way at the end of the hallway, is a utility closet that's filled with household cleaners, a vacuum, and old blankets. The doorknob is broken, so the closet door remains permanently ajar.

I walk up to the master bedroom. The crystal doorknob is a clouded, dirty grey, and I turn it to the left, hearing the lock unclasp itself from the hinge of the door. My movements are slow, as if I'm swimming in an invisible pool of quicksand. The door creaks. I push it.

My bedroom. Will's bedroom. Our bedroom. It's as if we never left, never banished it to the crevices of our house, tossed it aside as if it were a forgotten toy. The bedroom wraps me in its arms and greets me with a hug, elated with its owner's return after years of neglect.

The king-sized bed is neat, the corners of the comforter tucked in as if I'd made the bed this morning. There was nothing better than waking up on lazy Saturday mornings, pressing my head into the plush pillow to hide from the sun and feeling Will's arms wrap around my sides as he woke with a yawn and pulled me into his warm grasp. The grey lamps on the dual nightstands are untouched, the bulbs still brimming with unused electricity. I walk over and tug on the dangling chain. The lamp breathes out in relief and fills the room with its yellow light. At the end of the room is a tall window, draped in curtains. I pull them open and look out into my backyard, which was once bursting with roses and ferns. But now, it is overrun with dying weeds and clumps of moss. The floodlights illuminate the decaying garden underneath me.

Everything is as I left it, even down to a receipt that I left on my dresser years ago. I'm not sure what I expected— would I enter the room and find somebody sleeping in my bed? Discover my closet ruffled through, my trash taken out, the lightbulbs fully burnt? But no. Everything is the same, only covered with a fine layer of dust that looks like snow in the silver light of the moon. I run my finger across the nightstand, and it comes back grey. I feel frozen in time in this still, empty room.

When Will passed, I slept with Addison for a while, the two of us crammed in her twin-sized bed, holding each other as if we were the last beings on Earth. Then I moved back into my room when she became older, and I couldn't change a single thing in the room. Addison stayed with me during her college years, but when she moved to Atlanta for her graduate studies, I decided that I couldn't sleep upstairs alone anymore. Being trapped in a time capsule turned out to be too difficult for me. I couldn't change anything in my room, but I couldn't face it either. I wouldn't even move Will's bookmarked novel from his nightstand— *To Kill a Mockingbird*— and it's still here today, forever stuck on page 163. He adored the book, even though he never found

out how it ended. For all he knew, Atticus Finch won his trial, Tom Robinson was acquitted, and justice was restored to the quiet town of Maycomb. My husband was always a progressive man, but he died in 1985, a time where much progress was yet to be made. He never got to witness the L.A Riots; the Million Man March; our first black president. He would have been thrilled to see where the world is now— this I know for certain.

I walk over to my closet and open the door. I left many of my clothes up here, especially the pieces that I felt looked too young on me. My boxy black dress is hanging to the right; I wore it to the funeral. Below it lies a shiny red pair of pumps. One of them has a slight scuff on the tip. I pick it up. This shoe holds memories.

“It’s just frustrating,” I say, pacing our bedroom. “I feel like you put your job above our relationship sometimes.”

Will lies in the bed. He looks tired— more so than usual— and he blows air out of his cheeks. We’ve had this fight before. It’s nearly over before it has even begun. “You know how crazy it gets at the hospital. I do my best to be there for you, but I can only stretch myself so far.”

We yell in hushed whispers; Addison is in bed, sound asleep, worried only about her third-grade homework and whether or not we’ll allow her to have a playdate this weekend. “I know. I know. But I just... I don’t know if I can live like this.”

“Like what, Constance?” Exasperation leaks through his voice, which is usually sweet and smooth like honey. Tonight, our words are pointed, our cheeks flushed with anger. Tonight, we won’t hold hands as we drift into sleep. Our bodies will face the walls, and we will lay on our sides, in separate worlds.

Tears begin to drip down my cheeks. I wipe them away. I hate crying, but I can’t help it. “I don’t know. Like we’re on different teams. Like we’re separate.” I walk over to the bed and sit

on the side opposite from him, staring at my red pumps. Another late shift, another canceled dinner. I'm wearing a beautiful dress and brand-new heels. I feel like an actress in a play, dressing up but going nowhere. Resentment begins to churn in my stomach. I don't deserve this. I don't want to be a second thought to Will. I'm tired of feeling forgotten.

I kick my shoes off in anger. The left shoe flies into a pile of dirty clothing, but the right shoe hits the wall with a dull smack, leaving a black mark across the white paint. Will and I are silent, until I mutter: "Shit."

I feel the bed shift. Will's getting up. He walks over to my lonely red pump, running his long fingers over the shiny surface. He points the shoe to me. It's scuffed. I don't say anything, and he walks over and kneels down, then presses my foot back into the shoe. His puppy dog eyes are sad, mournful. The bags under them are worse than I thought. I feel pity for him. Maybe I'm not the only one hurting.

He hugs me, pressing his face into my stomach. "I'm sorry," says Will, his voice muffled by my body. "Let me take you out to dinner this Friday to make it up to you."

"You don't have to—"

"Constance. I want to."

We beam at each other. That night, we fall asleep holding hands. Four days later, we drive to dinner. It's raining. I swerve, to miss a deer, and crash into a pole. I survive. My husband doesn't.

I look at the wall to the right of my closet. It's creamy white, marred by a small black scuff. I run my fingers over it. It's smooth. My mind is taken over by what if's, the same what if's that have buzzed around my head like a swarm of wasps for the past forty years. What if I hadn't made a scene? What if we hadn't planned another dinner? What if he hadn't worked that

one night? What if I hadn't swerved? What if I hadn't been running late, and we'd left five minutes earlier?

I realize that I'm still holding the shoe and staring at the wall. I walk over to my bed and sit on the comforter, rubbing the shiny heel while I let my mind wander. There are a million different ways my life, and Will's life, could have gone, but I led us to a path that neither of us ever expected. Had just one thing gone differently, I wouldn't be here right now, in this ghostly bedroom. Will and I would be sleeping on the couch, or out at a dinner, or maybe we'd have moved to one of those elderly communities in Florida where they graze on hamburgers and sleep in the sun and play board games when the weather gets gloomy. Vivian wouldn't be stuck with me; she'd be able to spend time with people her own age. She could be with her brother. Addison wouldn't feel obligated to stay here and hover over me, either. She could've gone into the city, gotten a good job, and lived the rest of her life in a beautiful mansion overflowing with children. She's too old to have kids now, she tells me. I'm not deaf to the neighborhood gossip, either; Addison didn't get married out of college like the rest of them, and everybody claims it's because she could never find a man as good as her father. Will is a flawless man in Addison's mind, and it took her a long time to accept that no man is perfect.

My cheeks are wet, but I'm not sure when I started crying. I don't even bother to wipe my face. Instead, I let the tears flow, relishing this time that I've allowed myself to grieve. I think about going downstairs, back to my safe, sterile bedroom where I could close my eyes and pretend that this room didn't exist. But a big part of me needs to remember this stage of my life, to remind myself that it existed, that *he* existed, so I stay and let myself reminisce. I wander around the room like a phantom, touching things here and there and allowing the memories to come all at once. A bobby pin. Will took them out of my hair at the end of the day, his long

fingers gentle with my thick strands of hair. A birthday card for me, hand drawn by Addison on her very last day of Kindergarten. Will taped it to my vanity mirror and whispered in my ear that I was the best mother in the world. An Elvis record, played at every dinner we hosted and sometimes just for our own ears. Out of curiosity I place the record in its player, unsure if it still even works. But to my surprise, I am greeted with the friendly sounds of *Jailhouse Rock* and I waltz around the room alone, crying and singing and crying some more, until I can't take it and I slump down at the foot of my bed, sobbing into my arms just as the record switches to *Are You Lonesome Tonight?*

*Does your memory stray to a brighter sunny day,
When I kissed you and called you sweetheart?
Do the chairs in your parlor seem empty and bare?
Do you gaze at your doorstep and picture me there?
Is your heart filled with pain, shall I come back again?
Tell me dear, are you lonesome tonight?*

I'm gasping for air and my chest heaves up and down, up and down, as all of my pain and sadness and regret comes leaking out of my heart. The air is heavy with my tears and it seems to be pressing down on me, suffocating me. The world is collapsing into my lap and I hate myself more than I've ever hated anything in the world. I wish that my body would just fall apart already, like a shaky card house crumpling with the slightest gust of wind, but instead I'm like a tree in the autumn, losing my leaves one by one until I'm left bare and I'm nothing, nothing at all.

7

The sunlight filters through the window, but that isn't what wakes me up. What wakes me up is Vivian, hovering over me with a concerned expression. The record skips over *Hound Dog*

You ain't nothin' but a-

You ain't nothin' but a-

You ain't nothin' but a-

Vivian walks over and lifts the needle off the record. "What's going on?" she asks.

I yawn and stretch. My back is fiery with pain. "I wanted to sleep up here," I reply. I try to think back to last night, but it's hazy, like a dream.

"Then why are you on the floor?"

I look around. I'm on the ground at the foot of my bed. "I was listening to my music and I guess I fell asleep," I lie.

Vivian looks like she doesn't believe me, but she nods. "Well," she says.

"Well," I say. We are silent, looking at each other. I finally break the ice. "Addison doesn't need to know about this."

Her eyebrows furrow.

"It'll only worry her," I continue. "About my knees, that is. That's why I don't come upstairs. But I was feeling better last night. I just wanted to see my old room."

Vivian sits down next to me. I feel like a child, begging my mother to not tell my father that I'd misbehaved. But Vivian nods. "Okay."

"What time is it?" I ask.

"Eight-fifteen."

“I fell asleep late last night,” I say. Vivian nods. We stare at each other for a moment.

“Breakfast?” she finally asks. It’s my turn to nod. Vivian holds her hand out and I grasp it. She pulls me up. I wonder if I’m heavy. She walks over to the curtains and closes them, shrouding us in a depressing dusk. But before my eyes can truly adjust, Vivian is walking out of the door, holding her hand out, waiting to help me down the stairs. I follow her out. I don’t look back.

~

The scrambled eggs are a little milky. Vivian sits down next to me with her own plate.

“How is your brother doing?” I ask.

“He’s much better. He was discharged from the hospital within a day or two.”

“That’s wonderful to hear.”

We’re quiet. I stare at the food, feeling Vivian’s inquisitive gaze burning a hole in my skull. She wants me to explain what happened.

“Will loved Elvis,” I tell her.

She’s quiet, her cheeks flushing a little. She doesn’t know what happened to my husband, only knows that he isn’t in the picture. For all she knows, Will and I are divorced and he’s living on some farm in Montana. Maybe he has a new wife. Maybe they had kids.

“I saw a photo of you two, I think,” she says. “On your nightstand.”

I nod. “That’s us. He was very handsome.” I take a bite, chew slowly. “He passed,” I tell her.

“I’m sorry,” she says. Just like that, any vision that she had of a living, breathing Will disappears.

I feel the loss with her. I would give anything to be a bitter ex-wife right now. When Will passed, the local divorcées would bring over casseroles and pies and whisper, “At least you died knowing that he loved you. Believe me, honey, it’s even worse when they leave you...” I would smile and thank them, pretending that I didn’t want to smack that sympathetic smile off their faces.

“If you don’t mind me asking... when was it that...?” asks Vivian.

“It’s okay. It was many years ago. When we were forty.”

“Oh my gosh. So young. Was he... ill?”

She wants him to have been sick. I want him to have been sick. How much easier would it have been, for him to have known he was going to die a year in advance, maybe even two years... we could have prepared for his death, checked off everything on his bucket list, had time to say our goodbyes. I shake my head, and she pales.

“It was a car accident,” I say. I stab at my eggs, knowing that Vivian’s perception of me is going to change with my next sentence. “I was driving. He was in the passenger seat.”

I don’t want to hear her response just yet, so I tell her my story:

“It was dark and rainy. We were headed out to a dinner– he was making up for the fact that he’d missed a dinner a couple of days earlier. He was a doctor. Very busy. I was driving– he hated to drive, especially in the dark– and we were getting along very well. Telling jokes, laughing a lot. It was going to be a wonderful night, despite the weather. But I took my eyes off the road for one moment to smile at him, and by the time I looked back, there was... there was a deer in the road. Just looking at me. I must have been going 50, 60 miles per hour, and I swerved to miss the deer and jammed the brakes...”

Vivian lets out a little gasp. I continue:

“We hit a pole. There was this awful thud, some glass breaking, but I was okay, really. Just scrapes and bruises, a little concussion. But he wasn’t wearing a seatbelt. It was so, so stupid. He didn’t like how they felt on his body. Too restricting. I looked over but... but he wasn’t there. He wasn’t in the car. He had been thrown out of the window. I ran out into the rain. But he was... he was dead. On impact. I knew, because his eyes were open, and his body was contorted like a rag doll. I just knew.”

It’s quiet. The kitchen faucet is dripping and I look down at the patterns on the wooden table. I don’t want to see the expression on her face. “I’m sorry,” I say. “That was graphic.”

I’m surprised to feel her cold hand squeeze mine. “That’s awful,” Vivian says.

“I know. I know. If I had just—”

Vivian interrupts me: “What happened is awful and sad and heartbreaking, but it isn’t your fault.”

“Dear, I appreciate you trying to make me feel better, but it is. I was driving.”

“Terrible accidents happen. If I was driving you to the doctor and we got in an accident and you broke your leg, would you blame me?”

“Of course not. But that’s different. I made a mistake.”

“Constance, even if you hadn’t looked at Will, the deer would have still jumped in front of your car. And if you hadn’t swerved, it would have gone through the windshield and probably killed you both.”

I ponder this. If I had died, what would have become of Addison? Would she have grown up in a foster home, bounced from family to family, alone and afraid until she was tossed into the streets when she hit 18? Or would she have found a mother and father who loved her and would

have prepared her for life and all of its shortcomings? After all, what's better, two stable parents or one mourning, murderous mother—

“Constance?”

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, dear.”

We finish our breakfast. As she's clearing the plates, her hand lingers over my coffee cup. “You know,” she says, “you can't control accidents. You can only control your reaction to them.”

I chew over these words until it's time for lunch.

8

Addison convinced me to let her come to my next doctor's appointment. So here we are, at eight-thirty in the morning, driving to a new doctor's office where I will receive a DaTscan. Addison has looked it up and informed me that they are going to inject a radioactive tracer into my blood and use special imaging to scan my head. I don't like the concept of anything with the word “radioactive” entering my bloodstream, but I suppose I don't have a say in the matter.

We drive downtown. The street is flooded with trolleys, tourists, and the homeless. We stop at a red light and I look to the right and see a heavysset man draped in a raggedy jacket speaking to himself, shaking his head and waving his arms in agitation. I look straight ahead and pretend I don't see him, but pretending doesn't always work and I can't seem to get him out of my mind. He can't be more than 30 years old, yet his mind is already shattered into fragmented pieces that he can't seem to put together. I've never been so happy to see a green light in my life.

The Spanish moss bulges with rainwater from last night's storm, and clumps keep falling from the moss and splattering on the windshield. It's not raining, but Addison keeps the windshield wipers on. When we drive past the river, it smells like trash and shit. Hungry seagulls swarm around a waterlogged bread roll.

~

This waiting room is much bigger and busier than the last. The receptionist tells us that the doctor is a little behind, so Addison and I have to sit together surrounded by the elderly, the sick, and the hypochondriacs. Addison works on her laptop and I pull a paperback out from my purse.

The book makes the time go faster, but it has been a half-hour already and I'm losing feeling in my feet from sitting on the hard chair for so long. I decide to get up and make a coffee with the beat-up Keurig in the corner. As I'm pushing buttons and trying to make something work, I hear somebody clear their throat behind me. I turn and face a pretty teenager with dark eyelashes and blond hair pulled tight in a ponytail. I give her a once-over and frown. She's wearing shorts and a tee-shirt that swallows her small frame. She can't be older than 15 or 16. Why is such a young girl in a place like this?

The girl smiles, showing her slight underbite. "Do you need help working the machine?"

"That would be wonderful. Thank you."

She cracks a piece of gum and reaches over and flicks a few switches. Within a moment, hot, cheap coffee is flowing from the nozzle. We watch it fill the cup.

"How is your day?" I ask, to fill the silence. I only realize after I say it how stupid of a question it is, given where we are.

“It’s fine.” The coffee coughs out the last few bits of liquid. “It’ll be awesome if my brain scan comes back normal. They’re checking for a tumor,” she says, as if it’s nothing. “Do you want cream and sugar?”

“Oh, gosh. I’m so sorry. And yes, please. Just a little cream. But I can—”

“It’s alright.” She begins mixing in the satiny cream, swirling it together until my coffee is a chocolatey shade of brown. I watch her do it, feeling helpless.

“How is your day so far?” I ask, to fill the silence.

She gives me a funny look. “You just asked me that.”

“Oh, goodness. I’m a little tired today, I guess.”

“It’s okay.” She hands me the cup of coffee. “Here you go.”

“Thank you so much.” I don’t know what to say. “Good luck!”

“Thanks! You too.” She begins to make herself a hot tea and I walk away.

Within moments, my name is called. As Addison and I scurry behind the nurse, I think about the young girl and how her life might be over before it has truly begun. The nurse has to ask me to take my shoes off twice before I hear her, and even when I step on the scale, my mind is hazy.

“135 pounds,” the nurse says. “You can put your shoes back on, dear.” I do. “The doctor will be here in a few minutes.”

When the nurse leaves, it’s just Addison and me in the empty room. “You nervous?” asks my daughter.

“Not really,” I lie. Before Addison can question me further, the doctor knocks on the door.

“Come in,” I say.

The doctor enters, a ruddy-cheeked man with a bulbous nose. “Mrs. Hill?”

“That’s me.”

“Great to meet you. I’m Tim Ross. Let’s talk a little bit about what we’re going to do today...”

~

When Addison and I begin the drive home, the sun is already setting and just like that, the day has slipped from my fingers. I’m exhausted and I can tell Addison is too. Neither of us speak. I’ll get the results in a week or two. It’s pretty quick turnaround. In a few days my life could change for the rest of my life. It’s a dreadful feeling. I wonder what I’ll be doing in exactly one week from now. Filling up even more prescriptions at the pharmacy? Demanding a reexamination? Packing my things to be shipped to an elderly home?

“Are you okay?” I ask Addison. “I know it’s been a long day.”

“I’m fine. Just worried about you, that’s all. I wish the results were immediate.”

“Me too. But it will be alright.”

“I know,” she replies. “It’s just tough to think about any sort of health problems. It’s a cruel reminder that we’re all getting older.”

“If you think you’re old, then I don’t want to know what you think about me,” I laugh.

“It’s not that. It’s just... age makes you think about things.”

“Think about what?”

“Just things. I don’t know. Kids.”

A sharp intake of breath. It’s mine. “You want kids?”

“I don’t know. Elijah has mentioned... adoption.”

And then, I see it— a small flicker of my imagination, projecting an image of Addison clutching a young, smiling boy. Another flicker. Addison and the boy playing tag. Or maybe it's a girl, with little braided pigtails and a gap-toothed grin. I suppress my smile— I know better than to jump to conclusions. “What do you think?”

“I don't know. I've been leaning towards fostering children. Older children, who might not get a chance at a family otherwise.”

“Wow. That's amazing, Addison.”

She blushes. “It's not a big deal, Mom. I haven't even decided yet.”

“Still. I'm proud of you. For everything. You're an incredible woman.”

Her cheeks blaze an even deeper red. “Jeez, Mom. Thank you.” She's pleased. I wonder why I don't tell her how proud I am of her more often. Just for good measure, I tell Addison, “I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

We're back on the Isle of Hope. I take in the comforting, familiar surroundings. There are legends that pirates buried their treasure on our island. When I was a child, I'd dig holes in our backyard in search for gold. I never found any, but I did unearth an animal's skull. After that, I stopped looking. I heard rumors that one of my classmates found a couple of rare coins, but nobody ever clarified the classmate's identity or the worth of the coins. We all chalked it up to some little kid's exaggeration, but I know that not one of us ever looked at our backyards without wondering what was hiding underneath all the oak trees and magnolias and dirt.

The sandwich shop is five minutes from here. The sun has dipped underneath the horizon, and Addison has to turn on her high beams. It isn't raining, but the air is misty; the fog is rolling

in, blanketing the houses in its hazy glow. It's difficult to tell when the fog starts and the darkness begins, and I lean forward and squint at the road ahead—

A deer jumps in the street and looks right at me, its fearless eyes sending shivers down my spine. I grasp the door handle and shout, "Watch out!"

Addison slams on the brakes and the car jolts to a stop, our heads jerking forward, and then backward. My seatbelt strains against my body. I look up, but the deer has glided back into the darkness. My heart pounds against my ribcage, threatening to break my brittle bones. I can hear the beating echoing in my eardrums.

"What the hell was that?" asks Addison.

"A deer jumped right in front of us. Holy shit. Thank God I saw it. That was so close."

"What?"

I turn to look at my daughter. Her eyes are wide and her face is dotted with perspiration. Strands of hair escape her tight ponytail and frame her face in a halo. Her hands are shaking as she releases the brake and we begin to creep down the road. "A deer," I tell her. "Did you see it?"

"Mom," she says, but she doesn't continue. "Mom," she tries again. She opens her mouth but nothing but air comes out, like a puppet gasping for breath.

"What? What? Are you okay?"

"I think the question is, are you okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've been staring at the road this entire time. There was no deer."

9

Ever since I ventured up to the third floor for the first time last week, I've been sleeping in my old bedroom. The stairs have gotten easier— they're still a strain on my body, but I like the exercise, and I think it's good for me. I feel stronger, more self-sufficient. Last night, I didn't even cry. I was so tired from the doctor's appointment and near car accident that I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I walk into my bedroom after another exhausting trip up the stairs. Tonight, the weather is violent. It has been thundering since 4pm, and the sky keeps flashing with violent streaks of lightning. I decide to keep the hallway night on tonight. Nobody is too old to be afraid of the dark.

I flick the bedroom light on. But within seconds, it flickers off, along with the hallway light. I am shrouded in darkness and I grab onto the doorframe. I flick the light again— on, off, on, off, on, off— but the room stays dark. The power must've gone out. The curtains are closed, so not even the outside light can help me. My world has turned pitch black. I hold my hand in front of my face. I can't see a thing.

With my arms held in front of me, I begin to shuffle around the room, trying to feel my way around. First stop: the window. If I can open the curtains, I can at least try to get some moonlight to fill the room. Right foot, left foot, right foot, left. I wonder if this is what it's like to be blind. Lost in your surroundings, isolated and restricted to a world of darkness. It sounds awful. I have a flash of pity for my Aunt Margaret, who went blind in her last years. What was the last thing she ever saw?

Thunder grumbles, shaking my core. I startle and step backwards, stumbling into a wall. I slide down to sit, my knees screaming in protest, but when I touch the floor, I feel something

cold and smooth and rubbery. My hand jerks back and I scramble away from the object. My mind flashes back to my Aunt Margaret's funeral. I walked up to the open casket, a curious adolescent, and brushed my fingers across her hand. It was cold to the touch and smooth for her age, with just a hint of a rubbery sensation...

No, no. There is not a hand on my bedroom floor. This can be explained. It could be a... a... my mind blanks. I can't think of anything that has ever felt like this. I need to feel it again. But what if it's a body? What if it's my husband's body— *no, ridiculous*— come back to taunt me? What if he's upset that I'm sleeping in his bed without him? What if he pulls himself up like Frankenstein and he's standing behind me right now about to pounce and kill me just like I killed him and—

I need to feel again. I crawl over, trembling, and feel around where the hand was. I feel wood, wood, more wood, wood, then suddenly, *hand*. Cold, smooth, rubbery. My fingers explore the object. Cold, smooth, rubbery. It's long— an arm? I move my fingers to the left. Cold, smooth, rubbery... metal? I fiddle with something. A zipper. Now, with two hands, I feel the object. Left sleeve, right sleeve, zipper... it's my leather jacket.

My leather jacket. I breathe out. I'm like a little child, afraid of the nonexistent monsters under my bed. It's just a power outage. I've lived through dozens of them. *Relax*. I squint in the darkness, but still, nothing. I start crawling like a baby towards what I think is the window, tossing aside clothing I've left on the floor.

I finally feel the soft fabric of the heavy curtains. I yank them open and I'm greeted with a flash of lightning. I count the seconds between the lighting and thunder, just like I did when I was a young girl.

One, two, three, four, five—

The thunder rattles my window frame. Five miles away, or so the saying goes. I hear my pulse pounding in my eardrums, and I scramble towards my bed. Pulling myself up, I feel the pulsing pain in my knees, and I remember that I am not built for swarming around my room on my hands and knees.

Lightning briefly illuminates the room and I am able to see my surroundings. Sweater hung over a chair, closet door ajar, and my vanity straight ahead. The mirror on my vanity paints my face a starchy, frightened white, and for a moment, I wonder if I'm a ghost.

The lightning passes and I'm back in the darkness.

One, two, three, four—

A deep rumble. Four miles away. It's coming closer. I clutch the covers to my chin and pray that those goddamn lights turn back on. God isn't listening. Where is he?

When Will was alive, we loved stormy nights. The whole family would light a dozen candles all over the house and we'd bask in the glow of the flickering flames. Will and I would tell Addison stories and she'd clutch Will's leg like a little monkey and refuse to let go until we retold her favorite story, the only one that mattered to her— the one that recounted the day she was born.

It was a rainy Saturday when Will rushed me to the hospital, his forehead sticky with sweat as I cried in the passenger seat, fearful that I would be forced to have my little baby in the car. When we got to the hospital I was hyperventilating and he damn near carried me in his arms while I fluttered in and out of consciousness, until they got me in a hospital bed and pumped me up with painkillers and I gave birth to the most beautiful, plump baby girl who Will and I fell in love with immediately...

Or at least that's the story we told Addison. The truth is a little less dramatic— I was induced into labor at the same hospital where Will worked, and while I waited for the baby to come, he got a little paperwork done. Addison was born after hours and hours of painful contractions where I cursed enough to make any decent person blush. One part of our story was true— we fell in love with Addison as soon as she entered this world. Will refused to leave her side and soothed her if she cried and hugged her and kissed her nose when she was happy.

Another strike of lightning. One, two—

Two miles away.

I love Addison but she and I don't have the instantaneous connection that she had with her father. Relationships like that are once, maybe twice in a lifetime. And I took that away from her. My friends and neighbors urged me to remarry after Will's death. They told me that Addison needed a father figure in her life. But I knew she didn't need just any old father. She needed Will— and he was gone.

Lightning flashes. My room is cloaked in light, and I don't count because I'm frozen. There's a figure standing at the corner of my bed. I don't see a face, only a shadowy outline of a man's body, lean and tall. He looks like—

“Will?” I whisper. But the room slips back into darkness. I edge to the foot of my bed and feel around where the person was, but my hands touch nothing but air. “Will?” I call. My voice is swallowed by the night.

I hear the sound of shattering glass somewhere outside. Maybe a streetlight or window, but it also could be—

“Will!” I yell. “Where did you go?” I get out of bed and begin searching my room, for what I don't know, but I'm tripping over my clothing and I run my hip into the edge of my

dresser and I stub my toe about a thousand times. My mind is empty— except for the thoughts that *Will is here, Will is here, Will is here*— and I blindly grope around for him, my husband, ecstatic that he has come back to me at last.

I go up to the window and press my face into the glass, the cold sensation on my cheeks wakes me up a bit and I realize what I'm doing. Will is dead. He's gone. He hasn't come back to me. He can't.

So who was that standing at the side of my bed? I *saw* somebody, it was as real as that deer, and I know I'm not crazy so does that mean there's an intruder in my house? Has he come to rob me? To kill me? Everybody was right when they said I shouldn't live alone, it isn't dangerous, I need somebody strong to protect me, but right now I'm nothing but a frail old lady, alone and helpless in her bedroom.

I need a weapon, he could be right behind me breathing down my shoulder and ready to pounce and so I grab the nearest thing next to me, the heavy Bible that Addison and I skimmed through when we were looking for a quote to put on Will's grave, and I wield it in my hands and imagine that it's a heavy rock that I could use to bash somebody's brains in, and I creep around the room until—

The power turns back on, bathing me in artificial light. I'm standing in front of my vanity, facing the mirror. I see an old, ragged woman. Her nightgown is glued to her sweaty body, and her hair is sticking in twenty different directions. Her eyeliner is smeared underneath her eyes, creating the appearance of somebody who hasn't slept her entire life. She's clutching a Bible with shaking hands and a deranged look in her eyes. She sets the Bible down and crawls into bed. That night, she sleeps with the lights on. She doesn't dream.

10

I ask Vivian to take me to Tybee Beach the next morning. She seems surprised but she promises me that we can go after breakfast. She gives me hardboiled eggs and a banana. I've been requesting meals that I can eat with my hands. It's easier to know that the food is going into my mouth and not down my blouse when I'm gripping it with my own two hands, guiding it to my lips without any detours.

I finish my meal and go to my room to change. We're stopping by Vivian's house on the way to the beach so that she can grab a bathing suit, so I suppose this means that we're going to swim. Or maybe she'll tan. I rummage through my top drawer until I find a purple one-piece that I bought about twenty years ago. I pull the rubbery suit over my body, staring at the floor for fear that I'll catch a glimpse my naked body in the mirror. There's nothing wrong with me—no deformations or anything of the sort— but ever since my body started to shrivel up, I've preferred myself clothed.

Nowadays, my body is like chipped paint on a wall— for the most part, I try not to look at it or pay it any mind. But once in a while, it'll slip into my vision, and I'll find myself thinking about it for the rest of the day. Once I've pulled the bathing suit on, I'm forced to look in the mirror to make sure that everything is covered up. I feel exposed and embarrassed. The elastic has worn over the year so the material sags in strange areas. The suit is too tight around my stomach, accentuating every single roll of fat. I'm not a large woman, but certain things are unavoidable when you hit eighty. On the other hand, the one-piece sags around my chest, making my breasts look saggy and lopsided. I turn around and inspect my backside. My inner-thigh flesh

seems to burst out of the suit like toothpaste out of the tube. I give the suit a little tug, which only serves to expose too much cleavage.

I put a long sundress over the bathing suit. When I go back to the living room, I find Vivian waiting for me on the couch.

“You ready?” she grins.

“Yup.”

“Great. You sure it’s okay if we stop by my place?”

“Of course,” I say. “I’d let you borrow one of my suits, but I only have one and I’m positive it wouldn’t fit you.”

Vivian is a tiny little thing. She laughs and jingles her keys.

~

Vivian lives in a small apartment right in downtown Savannah. She’s within walking distance of the river, which is lovely on a sunny day like today. But on rainy days, the river often smells of trash and stale rain.

“Do you want to come in?” Vivian asks. “I’m on the tenth floor, but there’s an elevator so it isn’t too awful.”

I nod. “If you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. It might be a little messier than yours, though.”

I laugh. We get out of the car and take the shiny elevator up. At the fifth floor, a young couple with a puppy joins us. The little white dog yaps and wags his tail, staring up at me with watery eyes. I wave at him. At the tenth floor, we exit and turn left into a never-ending hallway. I realize with a start that I haven’t been in an apartment complex in years. I haven’t had any reason to.

“It’s just this one on the left.” Vivian presses her key into the lock. Before she pushes open the door, she leans over and whispers, “I have a roommate, by the way. She’s probably home. I apologize in advance if she’s still in her pajamas.” I nod.

When we enter Vivian’s apartment, I’m surprised by how cluttered it is. I expected a couple of dishes in the sink, maybe a full trashcan, and an unmade bed. But Vivian’s kitchen, to put it lightly, is a warzone. The sink is piled to the brim with grimy, slimy dishes, there are four bags of garbage lying in the middle of the dining room, and every inch of every surface is covered in something. There are magazines and half eaten bags of chips on the kitchen counter, the dining table is absolutely covered with mail and plastic bags, and even the living room couch is submerged in laundry.

Vivian blushes. “I’m sorry. I forgot it was this bad.”

“Oh dear, you have nothing to worry about,” I lie. I look at a textbook on the counter: *The Fundamentals of Nursing*. “Is your roommate studying nursing?”

“No,” she answers. “I am.”

“You are?” I look again at the textbook, and flip through a couple of the pages. They’re filled with miniature text and bolded, complex vocabulary words. “I didn’t know that.”

She shrugs and gives a tiny laugh. “I guess it never came up.”

“What university do you go to?”

“It’s an online one,” she says, embarrassed. “I don’t have time for regular college.”

“That’s still very impressive. I didn’t even go to college.”

“What did you do instead?”

I think back to my youth. What *did* I do? I worked at a diner after high school for a bit. Then I met Will, we got married, moved into one of his family’s houses, and, well, I cleaned and

cooked and fulfilled whatever wifely duties were expected of me at the time. When Will died, his family gave us his inheritance, so I continued my full-time job of parenting my daughter. I also volunteered quite a bit and ran useless errands around town. Anything to stay out of the house. “I got married, I suppose. Things were different back then.”

“They were,” she says, speaking confidently on a time that she never knew.

At this moment, Vivian’s roommate decides to come in. Whereas Vivian is petite, fresh-faced, and put-together, her roommate is almost six feet tall, with a greasy face and hair. She’s wearing ratty flannel pajama bottoms and a stained, oversized tee-shirt advertising some band that I am certain I will never listen to.

“Who’s this?” she says in greeting, her voice raspy with cigarette smoke.

“This is Constance. Constance, this is my roommate, Alex.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say. Alex nods.

“We’re just stopping by to grab my suit,” explains Vivian. “I’ll be right back,” she tells me. She walks away, leaving me with her roommate, who’s texting on her cell phone. I look on the counter and see a nursing textbook.

“So, are you studying nursing?” I ask her.

“No,” she says. “That’s Vivian.”

“Oh, so what do you do?”

She looks bored as she answers. “A little bit of this, a little bit of that. I do art.”

“Very nice. How long have you known Vivian?”

“A year.”

“Where did you meet?”

“Um,” she says, “it was this group thing we were both in.”

“Oh, like a club?”

“Not really.”

“I see,” I say. I don’t.

Vivian enters the room. She’s changed into her swimsuit and a floral coverup. “You ready?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say. “It was very nice to meet you,” I tell Alex.

“You too.”

Vivian and I don’t speak until we’re in the elevator. “So, your roommate says you met in a group?”

Vivian looks up. “Group?”

“Yes, she said– I can’t remember her name, I’m sorry– she said that you two were in a group together.”

“Oh, gosh.” The elevator stops at the fourth floor. Nobody enters. Vivian jams the close button until the doors slide shut. She sighs. “It was group therapy,” she says, barely a whisper.

“Oh, dear, I’m so sorry–”

“It’s okay. It’s sometimes... difficult to deal with my brother, Jackson. So I joined a group therapy for people who had close family with disabilities.”

“I can imagine that it’s very hard. I’m proud of you for reaching out for help.”

“Thank you.”

I never went to therapy after Will’s passing. Things were different then. People didn’t regard therapy as anything more than an utter waste of time and money. If you needed help, you sucked it up and dealt with it, or you went to the local priest and asked him to pray for you. I gathered up the courage, only once, to venture up to Father John and ask him for guidance. He

told me that everything happens for a reason, and I left. I couldn't wrap my mind around it. What could possibly be the purpose of Will's death?

11

The beach is teeming with toddlers and teenagers. Most adults are at work right now, except for the few tired parents whose children dragged them to Tybee. Vivian parks and the walk to the sand isn't more than a minute or two.

"You seem less tired than normal," Vivian notes.

"It's all those stairs I walk every night," I reply.

When we get to the shore, Vivian sets up our two beach chairs, helping me into mine. Sand is hard on my knees. It's why I don't come to the beach often, even though I always say I love Savannah because of its proximity to the water. The last time I went to Tybee was for Addison's birthday five years ago. Today, the sand is still wet and crumbling from last night's rain, which makes it a little easier to walk on.

Vivian brought us sparkling waters. I suppose it feels like a bit of a celebration. Of what, I'm not sure. Perhaps a celebration of life. I take a sip. Vivian and I are quiet, staring at the frothy blue water rise and then collapse over the sand. I close my eyes and listen. Seagulls, waves, a small baby crying. Faint pop music blasting from a speaker. A splash. The sounds of Tybee.

"Do you need sunscreen?"

"No," I reply, eyes still closed.

"Are you sure? Maybe just for your face?"

My left eye creaks open. "You really are a nurse, aren't you?"

“Not yet,” she says, squeezing creamy white sunscreen into her hands. “May I?”

I can put on my own sunscreen. But I tell her, “Okay.” As Vivian rubs the cream into my face, I tilt my head back and soak in the sun, enjoying the slow pressure of Vivian’s cold fingers on my cheekbones.

“All done,” she says.

“Thank you.”

We sit in silence for a moment. I take a sip of my sparkling water. It’s bitter.

“I can’t believe how sunny it is. Last night was awful,” Vivian says.

“Yes,” I reply, trying not to think at all of last night. Everything feels blurry and difficult to grasp.

“Were you all right with the storm? Our power went out for a moment. Thankfully, we had a flashlight.”

“I was fine. I’ve been in storms before, you know. I wasn’t born yesterday.” I stare straight into the ocean, watching the waves curl over the sand. Vivian’s gaze burns into the side of my skull.

“I know. I was just making conversation.”

I hear Vivian sigh and lean back into her chair. I still don’t look over, focusing my gaze on a single point of sparkling water. When I was a young girl, I used to think if I looked at a certain object for long enough, my vision would burn a laser beam right through it.

“Are you okay?” Vivian asks.

“I’m fine. Can’t an old woman sit in peace?”

“You don’t look like you’re very peaceful. You’re staring at the water like you want to kill it.”

I laugh, despite myself. When did I turn into such a brooding old woman? Isn't old age supposed to be used for lounging around and doing whatever you want without fear of consequences? After all, everything bad that could happen already has. I'm about to tell Vivian that I'm okay, but when I open my mouth the truth comes tumbling out: "I had a weird night and I'm not sure what to make of it."

Vivian is quiet for a moment, processing. "A weird night?"

"It feels silly talking about it in broad daylight."

"What happened?"

"The power went out and I was imagining things. I even thought..." I trail off, wondering if Vivian is going to think I'm crazy.

"Thought what?"

I run my fingers over the fabric of my dress. "I thought that I, um, saw Will."

"Will, your husband?"

"My dead husband, yes. Oh, it sounds so stupid. It was some weird dream."

"It's not stupid. When it's the middle of the night and you're alone in a giant, dark house, it's okay that your imagination got the best of you. It happens to everyone. Then you wake up and realize that everything was in your head."

"I know. It just felt so... real."

Vivian reaches over and grasps my hand. "I've never lost anybody that was *that* close to me, so I can't even pretend to know how it feels. But I'm sure that the loss never goes away. It's okay to have some days that are harder than others. Your mind might even imagine things to help you cope."

I'm quiet, thinking. Yes, I've had hard days. But I don't think I've ever imagined Will standing in front of me. Last night, I knew with every cell in my body that it *was* Will. There was no doubt in my mind. He felt as real as Vivian, who's sitting next to me right now with a very concerned look on her face.

"I feel a little... crazy," I tell her.

"Constance, you're not crazy."

"You weren't there last night."

"You've got to cut yourself some slack. Your house is spooky during the day, let alone when the power has gone out and it's the middle of the night and you're by yourself."

I'm tracing invisible patterns on my dress. A flower, a heart, a house.

Vivian squeezes my hand. "You okay?"

I squeeze back. "You think my house is spooky?"

She laughs, a pleasant jingle that makes my stomach feel warm and sweeps me out of the dark thoughts of last night, and back into the present where the sun feels warm on my cheeks and my toes nuzzle the sand. "Your house could be in a horror movie."

12

On Sunday morning, Addison tells me that she's picking me up an hour earlier than normal for our weekly brunch. When I ask her why, she says, "You'll see." I throw on a nice outfit and even go as far as to put a little mascara on.

I hear a knock as I'm putting my cell phone in my purse. When I open the door, I see my rosy-cheeked daughter grinning at me. "Guess what we're doing after brunch?"

"Getting our nails done?"

“Try again.”

“Going for a drive?”

“Nope. One more guess.”

“Shopping?”

“Yes! For what?”

“Um... clothes?”

Addison laughs. “My wedding dress, to be specific.”

“Oh my goodness!” I wrap Addison in a hug and give her a kiss on the cheek. “You want *me* to come?”

“Of course, Mom. You have great taste.”

“Oh, Addison. Thank you. I’d love to help.”

I lock up and we walk over to her car. But in lieu of her beaten-down Mercedes, stands Elijah’s Toyota. I stop in my tracks.

“What’s this?”

“Mom. I told you this already. The Mercedes is bust. I’m borrowing Elijah’s car until I can shop for a new car.” She says this impatiently, but I am almost positive she didn’t tell me anything.

“What happened?” I ask, climbing into the car. I’m surprised at how technologically savvy it is. Gone are the days of broken windows and peeling seats. Elijah even has a touch screen radio. “Did you get in an accident? Addison, I warned you—”

The car starts with a purr. “Relax, Mom. It didn’t start one day so we towed it to the mechanic. He said it’d be more expensive to fix all of its issues than it’s worth. You really don’t remember this?”

No, I don't remember. "I don't want to say I told you so..."

"Everything was fine in the end. The car lasted a whole lot longer than any of us thought it would."

I feel a pang of grief for Addison's car. I hated the damn thing, but my heart sinks thinking about it rotting away in a junkyard. I guess all things have to die at some point.

~

After a quick meal, Addison and I head to a wedding dress boutique. The shop is tucked in the corner of a busy intersection.

A stylish woman greets us as soon as we step through the boutique's glass door.

"Welcome to Anna's Closet! How can we help you today?"

"I'm Addison Hill. I have a 12pm fitting appointment for my wedding." She puts her hand on my shoulder. "And this is my mother."

"Hi," I say, holding out my hand. "I'm Constance."

The woman shakes my hand. Her fingers are soft and cold. "Well, hello you two! I'm Jennifer and I'll be helping you today. I'm so excited for us to get started!"

"Where's Anna?" I ask. We laugh.

Within minutes, Jennifer has guided us to a private changing room and has a queue of a dozen dresses for Addison to try on. The first gown is silky and long, clinging to Addison like saran wrap. She twirls and laughs.

"I can't breathe," she says.

"You look beautiful," I say.

The next dress is lacy and elaborate. Jennifer loves this one, clapping her hands and telling Addison she looks like a Disney princess. Addison blushes and giggles.

“You’re Savannah’s very own Cinderella,” I tell her.

Addison shakes her head and stares at herself in the mirror for just a little bit longer. She runs her fingers over the fabric. “It’s so soft.”

She seems reluctant to take it off, but once she sees the next dress, a creamy, poufy ball gown, she perks up. She pulls it on. The design is classic; the gown tightens at the waist, then explodes into beautiful folds of tulle.

“Wow,” says Jennifer.

“Wow,” I echo. My daughter is wearing nearly an exact replica of the dress I wore so many years ago. It takes my breath away to see my daughter look so much like I did all those years ago. “Wonderful choice, Anna.”

The two women laugh. I stare at them until I realize that I’ve mixed up Jennifer’s name. I laugh too, as if I had done it on purpose.

“I really like it,” Addison says, spinning. The bottom of the dress lifts off the ground and slices invisible circles in the air.

“I love it,” Jennifer says. “It’s so timeless.”

I nod. It is. Addison gives herself one more look in the mirror, then her hands feel for the zipper on the back of the dress. She gives it a tug, but it catches. She tries again, but the zipper doesn’t budge. “Mom, can you get this?”

“Of course, dear.” I begin to walk over, but suddenly, something is wrong. I am not moving. My legs feel as if they are cramping up. I’ve had leg cramps before, but none of them inhibited my ability to walk.

I try to take another step. Nothing. I can *feel* my leg— it isn’t as if it has fallen asleep— but it’s frozen, unwilling to move off the floor. It’s almost as if I’m in a film, and somebody has

pressed the pause button. But everybody else is moving around me. It's me that can't seem to unstick.

"Mom?" Addison says. "What are you doing?"

"I, um, I think my leg is cramping. I'm not sure. I can't really... move it." I try again. But my damn foot won't peel itself off the floor.

"What do you mean you can't move it?"

Jennifer looks between the two of us, confused. She's trying to gauge the seriousness of this moment, wondering if this is some strange joke or if something larger is at play. I try to lift my leg again. It feels like I'm stuck in this strange dream.

"I can't move it, Addison," I say, annoyed that she isn't understanding that this isn't a conscious choice. "I don't know. It's stuck or something."

"Try stretching your legs," she says. My mind sends the message to my legs to extend, but my legs aren't listening.

"How can I stretch my legs if I can't move them?"

"I don't know, Mom." Addison's voice is getting higher pitched.

Jennifer walks over to me and puts her hand on my shoulder. "Is everything okay?"

"No, everything is not okay," I say. My cheeks flush in anger and embarrassment. I don't want other people to notice, for people to flock over and cause a scene. I look around, but the dressing room is empty.

"You can't move your leg?" asks Jennifer.

"No, I can't." I tell my legs to move again. *One foot up and over, next foot lift off the floor, come on, go, move, go, go, please, just move, what's wrong with you, just please go, could*

you just pick up your damn foot you lazy old piece of— But it's as if my brain and my legs aren't connected, as if my foot is attached to some other person and my brain isn't able to control it.

"Mom, what's happening? Are you having a stroke?"

"I don't know, Addison. I'm stuck."

Recognition flashes across Jennifer's face. "Wait," she says. "I think I know what this is." She grasps my hands and looks into my eyes. "You can do this," she says. "You are in charge of your body. There is nothing wrong with your legs. It's just your brain. It's all in your head."

I jerk my hands away. "What are you doing?"

"Trust me. One of my coworker's grandparents had this issue. I think I know how to fix it."

"What issue?"

"Here. Just, um, count to five with me. And then you're going to lift up your feet and walk over to your daughter. Are you ready?"

"I don't understand how counting is going to help." I shriek at my legs to move, so I can end this and this woman can stop speaking to me like she's trying to calm down a screaming child.

"Just try it. It won't hurt."

"I think there might be something wrong with my legs. Maybe a muscle spasm."

"There's nothing wrong with your legs. I'm pretty sure it's all in your head."

"Since when are you a doctor?"

"Please," says Addison. "Just listen to her, Mom." She tugs on her hair, which had been done so nicely this morning.

“Fine.”

“Close your eyes,” says Jennifer.

I sigh, but I listen. I hear her say, “One.” Her breath smells like peppermints.

“Two.” Is this stupid leg thing some sort of punishment? Is this what I get for enjoying my morning?

“Three.” No. No. I’m being crazy.

“Four.” Ok, Constance. Just pick up your feet. You can do this. It’s all in your head. You’re just having a senior moment.

“Five. Lift up your foot and walk over.” I open my eyes. Jennifer is looking at me with nothing but reassurance and kindness in her eyes. I feel bad for being so curt with her. I look down at my legs. They look normal. I tell my foot to come up. I pretend that I am dissolving the glue that has stuck it to the floor.

It works. I walk over to Addison, and the act is so easy I can’t even imagine how I couldn’t do it seconds ago. I turn and face Jennifer.

“Wow. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. I remember one of my coworkers telling a story about this happening with her grandmother. She had Lewy too.”

“Lewy?” Addison and I say at the same time. I look at her. Her eyes are moist and foggy.

“Lewy body dementia,” Jennifer says, as if we should know at all what she’s talking about. When we’re quiet, she furrows her brows. “Don’t you have Lewy? Freezing is a common symptom.”

“I’ve never heard of this before in my life,” I tell her. My body is beginning to turn cold. Dementia? Does this woman think I have dementia?

“Well,” Jennifer says, “I don’t want to worry you, but maybe you should get it checked out. Has this happened before?”

“Never.”

“Well, it could happen again. Apparently, it started small with my coworker’s grandmother, but the freezing progressed quickly.” Again? This embarrassing, this horrifying, this awful occurrence where I am unable to walk... it could happen again?

“How is she now?” Addison asks.

“Her grandmother?”

“Yes.”

Jennifer reddens. She doesn’t make eye contact when she says: “She passed away a year ago.”

~

“Mom, are you sure you haven’t noticed any other symptoms of dementia?” Addison looks straight ahead at the road when she says this. She grips the steering wheel so hard her knuckles are bursting against her skin.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“One of the doctor’s mentioned it to me when you got the original Parkinson’s diagnosis. They said to watch out for it. But I got distracted, I wasn’t attentive enough, and now...”

Addison grows quiet. Her jaw is set in a stubborn jut as she tries to figure out what to do. I can see the gears turning in her mind. Should she schedule another doctor’s appointment for me as soon as possible? Should she hop online and try to learn more about this dementia? Or would it be best to call Vivian and compare notes to see which symptoms I’ve been showing? No matter what Addison chooses, I know that I am not part of the decision-making process. I’m just

a patient, waiting quietly to see what I need to do next. I've begun the slow and painful transformation from mother to burden.

I can feel a familiar and unwelcome thought creeping into my mind. *If Will was alive, he could take care of you, and Addison could live her life like a normal person.* No matter how upsetting this idea is, it's simple conclusion that any able-bodied person would come to. I don't have a husband, so instead, I'm dumped onto my child. This was supposed to be Addison's exciting day, but instead I've made it all about me and my broken body.

"Let's make an appointment when we get home," Addison says. There's an air of finality surrounding her words. After this appointment, my life could change forever.

13

The sunlight streaming through the window wakes me up. I don't know what time it is—my wristwatch must have fallen off some time in the night. I'm certain it's tangled up somewhere in the mountain of blankets, but I'm not going to look for it right now. I'm spread out on my bed like a starfish. I wonder if I hogged the covers last night.

Will isn't in bed, but I'm not surprised. He loves taking early showers downstairs—the water pressure is better—and this morning is likely no exception. I'm such a heavy sleeper, I never notice when he leaves the bed. I can picture him now, whistling and scrubbing the shampoo suds into his scalp, letting the scalding hot water drum against his body. He takes such hot showers, I'm not sure how they don't boil him alive.

Glimmers of sunshine seep through the window and melt across the floor, bathing me in light that begs me to get out of bed. Because the weather looks promising, the possibilities for the day are endless. Will and I could go for a walk, or head downtown for lunch. I've been

begging him to take me to a new café that has a full garden on its patio. Maybe he made a reservation there and he's planning on surprising me. My mind starts racing with possibilities (a red rose on the table, a new pair of earrings in my favorite color, a private reservation on the patio so that we can pretend we're the only two people on Earth) and I have to reel them in. Will is busy, and I'm just as capable as he is at making a reservation. If I really want us to go there, I can call them myself.

But it's *much* better to be surprised with things like dates and flowers and presents. If only men understood this. My girlfriend Margaret told me the other day that her husband won't buy her flowers unless she begs him. Well, if that's the case, I'm lucky. Will gets them for me every year on our anniversary. An explosion of red roses.

I stretch and yawn. I should whip up breakfast before Will gets out of the shower. I hope it isn't too late for breakfast. I have to find my wristwatch. Just as I start climbing out of bed and scouring the floor for my slippers, I hear a door slam downstairs. Will must be getting out of his shower. I'll go and greet him, at least. I pull myself out of bed. Strangely, my body feels sore, as if I'd recently worked out, and I trudge along to the staircase, feeling as if my body is made of lead. The stairs provide an unexpected challenge: it takes me much longer than usual to get down them. My entire body hurts, and I begin to worry if I sprained something. Or perhaps I'm coming down with a cold.

"Will?" I call. No answer. The house is silent. No whistles, no wet feet walking across the hardwood floors, none of the usual morning pitter patter. My stomach begins to turn to lead. Something is wrong. "Will?" I call again.

"Constance?" a woman's voice replies. I freeze up and look around for some sort of weapon. I don't recognize the voice and I'm unsure how this woman got into my house.

“Who’s there?”

I feel a tap on my shoulder and a young girl is standing there. I stare at her and begin to take a few steps back. “Constance?” she repeats. She gives me a strange look. I give her one right back. “Are you feeling alright?”

“Who are you? Where’s Will?”

Her eyes widen and her jaw tightens. Whatever she is going to tell me, it’s bad news. She has done something to Will, I know it.

“Where is he?” I ask again. I take more steps backwards, towards the main door. I can run out if I need to, knock on a neighbors door and tell them to call the police. I need a weapon. Anything. But there isn’t anything around me that I could grab. Can I handle this woman physically? She’s younger than me, but not by much. I’m certainly taller and heavier than she is. She’s a waif. I can take her. But first, she needs to tell me what she did to my husband.

“Constance,” she says, as I inch towards the door, “I’m Vivian.”

“Vivian,” I repeat slowly, tasting the word in my mouth. Vivian. Her name is vaguely familiar, but I can’t place it. I feel as if I’ve lost a word, and it’s lying on the tip of my tongue.

“Vivian,” she says. “I’m your caretaker. Will passed away... many years ago.”

And just like that, it clicks. My memories come flooding back, and I’m eighty again, standing in front of my caretaker like a crazed woman.

The grief hits me like a freight train.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her. “I don’t... I don’t know what got into me.” Vivian hesitates, as if I’m a wild animal waiting to bite, then she shakes off her uncertainty and holds me in a hug.

“It’s okay,” she says, rubbing my back. I begin to sob into her shoulder. I cry for myself, for her, for Will...

My husband is dead. Only minutes ago, he seemed as alive as anybody. But he is dead. He has been dead for a while. He is not taking a shower. He hasn't in years. He's not even a person. He is a pile of bones in a wooden casket. I tell myself, *Constance, he has been dead for years*. But it feels as if he died seconds ago. In my strange dream, I had remembered details about him that I thought had been long forgotten— his early awakenings, his morning showers, the heavy tread of his footsteps. I've opened some sort of Pandora's Box of my emotions, and everything that I've tried to suppress about my husband comes flooding back to me. He liked peppers, but only the red ones. He was allergic to bees. His childhood dog was hit by a car, and he cried for days. He held my hands when we watched movies and rubbed my palm with his thumb. When I cried, he kissed my forehead. He loved to play with my hair and begged me to grow it longer.

I mourn him all over again, and it's as if I'm transported back to the crash, where a kindly paramedic tends to my wounds while another checks Will's pulse and trudges back over to us, tells me that my husband is dead and that he has done everything he can but he had likely died upon impact and he is so very sorry for my loss...

"Let me make you some breakfast and you can calm down a bit," says Vivian. I nod, and she leads me to the dining room table and makes me some toast. I gnaw at the edges. "I'm going to go to the bathroom," she says.

"Okay."

She leaves. I stare at the crumbs on my plate and try very hard not to think of anything. It doesn't work. Just then, I hear mumbling coming from the bathroom. It sounds like Vivian is talking to somebody.

I creep over to the closed door and listen.

“She had no idea who I was,” Vivian whispers. I wonder if she is talking to herself. “She kept asking where Will was. I had to tell her my name and explain that he’s dead.” She snuffles.

A pause. I realize that she must be on the phone. She listens to the other person, then sighs. “I’m fine. I’m just worried about her.” Another pause. I strain to hear the other person’s voice, but I can’t.

“In the dress store?” Vivian asks. “Oh my gosh.” My heart sinks. I realize she is speaking to Addison. There is a pause while Addison speaks. Vivian lets out a little gasp in response to whatever she said.

“Lewy Body?” Vivian asks. “Yeah... I’ve heard of that in my classes. Dementia... this is going to break her heart... No, I’m okay. Are you okay?”

I walk away from the door and back to the dining table. When Vivian returns, eyes rimmed red and face plastered in a smile, I pretend that I know nothing and she asks me if I’m okay.

“I’m okay. I don’t know what got into me.”

“Good. I’m glad you’re back to normal.”

Normal. So, this is my normal. Sadness, guilt, regret. Will this be my normal forever? It’s unfair. I have spent the half of my life coping with my husband’s death. But now, it is as if all of my hard work was for nothing. He is gone again, and I cannot get him back. I had him for a moment this morning, and then he slipped from my grasp. I feel angry at Vivian. I know it isn’t rational, but I wish with everything in my body that she hadn’t brought me back to the present. I was happy this morning. Why couldn’t she have left me in the past?

“I’m worried about you,” Vivian tells me.

“I’m worried about me too,” I reply. But I don’t think we’re worried about the same things. She’s afraid of whatever is wrong with me— Parkinson’s, Dementia, or something else that we haven’t even thought of yet. Brain cancer? Alzheimer’s? A stroke? She’s preparing for my diagnosis, my deterioration, my death... but while a part of me is afraid of what lies next, I’m worried about how *much* I liked escaping from reality. Does it make me a bad mother that Addison wasn’t even in my make-believe world?

I start crying harder. Vivian comes over and grasps me in her arms. “It’s okay,” she says, rocking me back and forth. “It’s okay.”

14

Vivian helps me into the passenger seat and then walks over to the driver’s side. She climbs in. “All set?”

“Yep,” I reply. “Thanks for driving me.”

“Of course.” She blasts the air conditioning and waits for the car to cool down. It feels as if she wants to say something, almost like she’s holding her breath or has stopped mid-sentence. But she’s silent.

“How are you?” I ask, waiting for her to start the car.

“I’m good...” She won’t make eye contact with me. But after a minute of fiddling with the car’s temperature and rummaging through her purse, she blurts out: “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

My heart sinks. “What is it, dear? Is it about what happened earlier?”

She stares straight ahead. “Not really. But it’s not a very happy story. It’s kind of a secret.”

“We don’t need to leave yet,” I say. Vivian nods and keeps the car in park.

“I just feel like you need to know this. But I’m scared you’re going to think worse of me after I tell you what happened.”

“Of course I won’t.”

“It’s about my brother.”

“Your brother. What was his name? Jason? Is he okay? Did something happen?”

Vivian sighs. “His name is Jackson, and he’s fine. This story takes place a long time ago. I was in charge of watching him. He was four, I was ten. For starters, he wasn’t born with any disabilities. He was a perfectly healthy child.”

A pause. I let this new information sink in.

“One day, a boy that I had a crush on wanted to instant-message. I was so excited. I was glued to my computer. Jackson wanted to play with me, but I refused. I was so obsessed with this stupid boy, so I locked my door and told Jackson to do whatever he wanted.”

She stops talking and starts running her nails over the steering wheel. She takes a deep breath and says: “A few minutes later, I heard a shriek and a bunch of thuds. Then it was quiet. I immediately felt sick.”

Tears begin to stream down her cheeks. I hold her hand, which is warm and moist.

“I got up and peeked out of my room. I was so scared. I called my brother’s name. But he didn’t answer. When I went to the staircase, Jackson was lying at the bottom. He was unconscious. I think he cut his head, because there was blood smeared on the marble and it was beginning to seep out from under his head. I called my parents, who called the police. My parents told me I needed to put a towel underneath the cut on his head, to apply pressure. But I

was too scared to go near him. He didn't look like Jackson anymore... so by the time the paramedics arrived, he had lost a lot of blood.

They found me in the corner of the living room, sitting in shock. I wasn't even crying. I asked them if Jackson was dead. They said no. But they weren't sure what condition he would be in if he survived. He had lost so much blood. My parents got home. They barely looked at me. We rushed to the hospital. He survived. But... he didn't ever recover completely. He's disabled. Because of me."

"Oh my goodness, Vivian."

"I try to make up for my mistake every single day of my life. I spent most of my adolescence taking care of Jackson. He's my best friend. And I'm studying nursing now to help other people... people like him. He's the best thing in my life. It was hard to forgive myself for what I did to him, but I had to. So that I can focus on making things better for Jackson and other people. My parents. My future patients. You."

Vivian wipes the tears from her face. I hand her a tissue. "It wasn't your fault, dear. You were only a child. You shouldn't have been watching somebody so little."

"Thank you. I know. But you understand better than anybody, it's so easy to get trapped in that mess of 'what-ifs.' And no matter how many people tell me that it was an accident, there's always going to be a part of me that blames myself. But I'm trying to use that guilt for good. To motivate me. That group therapy I was in with my roommate, it wasn't for people with disabled family members. I lied. It was for getting over guilt and remorse. It helped a lot. Made me realize I wasn't alone."

"That's incredible." And it is. "Thank you so much for telling me. You didn't have to."

“I did. Because I want to help you realize that everybody messes up sometimes. Some of us are just unlucky enough that our mistakes have extreme consequences. But we can’t help that. It’s life. And we have to live with it.”

~

We arrive at the cemetery. I need to see Will. To talk to him. Vivian is waiting in the car—I asked her to. I don’t want her to hear what I have to say. She seems a lot calmer after her admission earlier. It’s as if a weight has been lifted from her shoulders. I know the feeling. I kneel at the grave, ignoring the pain in my knees. I touch his gravestone. A loving husband and father.

“There is something wrong with me,” I tell him. He is silent. “I’ll probably find out soon.” I look over at the car, making sure Vivian cannot hear me. She’s sitting in the driver’s seat, texting.

“I wanted to talk to you before it’s too late,” I continue. “Whatever’s wrong with me, I think it’s up here.” I tap my head. “I don’t know what will happen. I don’t want to forget you. But I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry. Before it’s too late. Oh, Will, I’m so sorry.”

I am not crying. Instead, I brush my hands over the dirt, smoothing it. I pick out a couple of weeds that have sprouted up since the last time I came here. They grow so quickly.

“Thank you for visiting me this morning. Or at least, it felt like you did. It was so nice to live in the same world as you, even for a few minutes.” A couple of rows ahead of me, there is an elderly couple crying over a faded gravestone. They’re holding each other as if they might collapse. I’ve seen them here before. Once, I walked over to see who was buried under the grave. It was a young man, sixteen years old. Likely their son. He died ten years ago, yet his parents manage to always keep fresh flowers on his tombstone.

“I hope you’re proud of me,” I say, turning my attention back to Will. “I did the best I could with Addison. She’ll be okay. Even when I’m gone. She has a wonderful job and fiancé. She’ll be just fine.” This is the first time I’ve said these words out loud. I start to believe them. “I think I did alright with her. She’s getting married, you know. Oh, Will, she’s so happy. I see it in her eyes. She loves him. She loves him so much.”

“She might adopt a child,” I continue. “She’s happy. She’s so successful, Will, so loving, so loyal. She’s been caring for me, even though it’s difficult. She can be stubborn sometimes, but that’s because she cares so much about everything, especially her family. Will, she loves me so much. She’s...”

I straighten the fake flowers, realization settling over me. “She’s just like you, Will. You’d be so proud.” And he would be. “I’ve messed up a lot of things. But not her. She’s strong.” I think about what Vivian said earlier. About forgiving yourself.

I hear the sound of soft, uncertain footsteps in the grass. I look up, expecting to see Vivian, but instead, I see a beautiful, russet deer with white, freckled spots. A fawn. It stares at me with its large brown eyes, inquisitive, unafraid. I smile at it. It tilts its head, and sprints away. Within seconds, it is as if the animal was never here. Perhaps it never was. I take this as my cue, and pull myself up, using the gravestone as leverage.

“I love you,” I tell my husband. I won’t hear it back. But I know he loves me too. Maybe I’ll hear it again someday. After all, soon my name will be etched onto the marble slab alongside his. *Constance Hill. A loving mother and wife.*

Soon. But not yet.

15

It's a beautiful day for a wedding. I feel very pretty. A very kind young lady put makeup on me and pulled my hair back. I hugged her when I saw how nice I looked. She was so small and skinny, I felt like I was hugging a child.

My daughter told me that I would walk her down the aisle. I asked her, "What about Will?" She said he could come too. It was a little difficult for me to walk so far, but I used my cane. When we stopped at the front, I turned and saw that everybody was looking at us. I didn't know who they were, but I smiled and waved and they laughed and some of them cried. The nice woman who did my makeup helped me sit back down in my chair. I sit up front with Will. My daughter labeled our chairs: Constance and William Hill. She cried a little when she saw me sitting next to my husband. I don't know why.

Now, she is standing and looking into her fiancé's eyes. Soon, they will be husband and wife. Her fiancé is very nice and caring. He sometimes takes me to the beach where I sit on the sand and watch the sun set over the waves. I always find a shell and take it home. My daughter says that I'm starting quite a collection.

The minister is standing behind them. He asks them if they will love each other forever. I look over at Will when he says this. Will smiles and winks. When we said we'd love each other forever, we were telling the truth.

The happy bride and groom kiss. Everybody claps. I clap the loudest. "That's my daughter," I tell the small woman sitting next to me.

"She's beautiful," the woman replies.

"Yes, she is."

They run out and everybody cheers. Happy music begins to play. I don't recognize the song, but it's very lovely. "Now what do we do?" I ask the lady next to me.

"Now we go to the afterparty. There will be food and dancing."

I tell Will: "There will be food and dancing." He is happy— he loves to dance.

"Are you ready to go?" the woman asks.

"Yes, I am." She helps me up. "Are you my daughter's friend?"

"Yes. I'm your friend, too. My name is Vivian."

I finally recognize her. "Vivian!" She smiles when I say her name. "I know you," I continue. "I'm ready to go now."

She helps me up and we head over to the afterparty.

~

At the afterparty, I sit at a table with a vase of red roses in the center. They're so vibrant, so beautiful. Will loves them too. He tells me that he will pick me one before we leave. I'm excited. I love when he gets me flowers.

Vivian tells me that she's going to be right back. "Do you need anything to drink before I go?"

I shake my head. "No thank you," I tell her. She gets up and leaves. Will and I are the only ones at the table. My daughter gave me a special table so that I wouldn't have to talk to anybody. I get overwhelmed if there's too many people I don't recognize, especially when they seem to know me so well.

Within minutes, I get antsy, and I decide to find Vivian. Will and I get up, and I weave between the tables, scanning for a familiar face. But I can't find her. I want to cry, to give up, but Will rubs his thumb in my palm. That always calms me down.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

I finally find Vivian speaking to my daughter. I am about to approach them when I realize that they are speaking rather urgently, and maybe I should wait off to the side until they’re finished. I don’t want to interrupt something important. I can hear them clearly. They don’t notice me yet.

“She’s not getting any worse, but her condition certainly isn’t any better,” says Vivian.

“I know,” Addison replies. “I really appreciate everything you’ve done. I know she’s a lot.”

“She’s handled this really well. I’ve heard that many Lewy patients become irritable and nasty. But she’s been nothing but kind, for the most part.”

“I just hope it stays this way,” sighs Addison.

“Me too.”

My daughter smiles. “But now that all of the wedding planning is over and Elijah and I are moving into her house, we can take care of her.”

My friend– Vivian– looks very shocked. “Are you sure? I can still come by–”

“We’ll be perfectly fine. I’m taking some time off of work, and we’ll postpone the honeymoon until... you know.”

“Oh, Addison,” says Vivian. She begins to cry. Addison holds her.

“You’ve done more than enough. It’s time for us to take over now.”

“Are you–”

“I’m positive,” says Addison. “We insist. Plus, Jackson probably needs you more than she does. She’s stable, at least for now–” My daughter sees me and smiles. “Oh. Hey Mom.”

I wave and walk over. “I was waiting for you two to finish,” I say. “I’m sorry to interrupt.” Vivian wipes some tears from her cheek.

“No worries at all,” Addison replies. “We actually had some news to tell you.”

“Some news for me?”

“Yes,” Addison replies.

I wonder what the news could be. I hope it’s good. “What is it?”

“Well, Elijah and I are going to be moving in with you.”

“Which one is Elijah again?” I ask.

“My husband.”

“Oh, yes!”

“Is that okay with you?” Addison asks.

“Yes, absolutely. You’ll be staying at my house?”

“Yes.”

I smile. “That’s so wonderful to hear. This is such a happy day.”

“And,” continues my daughter, putting her hand on Vivian’s shoulder. “Because we’ll be able to take care of you, this means Vivian won’t be coming around anymore.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“She has a little brother. Did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“His name is Jackson,” says Addison. “She’s going to be helping to take care of him now. Right, Vivian?”

“Yes,” Vivian says. “I’m sorry, Constance—” She looks like she is going to start crying again.

“Don’t be,” I say. “Why are you sorry?”

“Because I’m leaving you,” she says.

“But you need to help your brother. I understand.”

Vivian begins to sob now, and she wraps her arms around me. “Oh, thank you,” she says.

“Thank you so much, Constance.”

“You’re welcome,” I tell her.

Vivian pulls away and gives me a watery smile. “You’re going to be okay without me, right?”

“Of course,” I say, turning to Will. “Won’t we, Will?”